1610 Land of Shadows

They crossed most of the remaining distance to the edge of the breastbone plain that day. Night never graced Godgrave with its presence, but anywhere else, the sun would have already been rolling toward the horizon.

It was never dark in this strange and terrible place. The grey sky shone with diffused light, and white bone was colored here and there by fields of vibrant vermilion grass...

Or rather, it was never supposed to be dark.

Nephis slowed her steed as she peered into the distance, a complicated expression appearing on her face.

'What is that?‘

Out there, far away, it was as though someone had dropped a can of black paint on the world.

The darkness, which was not supposed to exist in Godgrave, swallowed the plain, and the scattered light of the stormy sky was powerless against it. The deep shadows persisted, unperturbed by the bright daylight around them.

'How is this possible?‘

Soon, they drew closer to the wall of darkness. Strangely enough, there were much fewer abominations in this area of the titanic skeleton, and even the scarlet flora seemed scarcer-

It was as though even the Nightmare Creatures were wary of the land of shadows. Nephis frowned slightly, not showing her hesitation to the Fire Keepers.

"Advance slowly."

As they proceeded further, the light slowly dimmed, and the growths of red grass became smaller and smaller, until they disappeared entirely. Soon, they were surrounded by nothing but impenetrable darkness, with only Neph's eyes shining in it like small stars. "Stop."

She remained silent for a moment, listening to the silence, then said evenly: "Dismount."

The Fire Keepers jumped down from their Echoes, dismissing them into a rain of sparks. Their surroundings were illuminated for a few moments, and by the time the sparks dissipated into nothingness, they had already summoned enchanted lanterns.

A flood of stark white light flooded the dark land. However, it seemed weak and faltering, barely able to force the deep, dark shadows to recede a little.

Nevertheless, Nephis did see something now that the luminous Memories pushed the darkness back.

A few meters away from them, a massive carcass was laying on the ground, its grotesque bones towering above the plain. The creature must have been enormous once, but now it was broken and dead.

What killed it?

Nephis walked over to the carcass and studied it for a few moments, spending a bit more time looking at the clean cut where the monster's head had been severed.

"Lady Nephis... what do you think?"

She lingered for a while, then shook her head.

"The head was severed by a sword, but something had gnawed on the bones. There are teeth marks everywhere, and by the look of it, the creature's flesh was devoured by something large. Most importantly..."

Her expression grew a little somber.

"Considering where we are, this carcass must belong to a Great Nightmare Creature." Had it been killed by the Lord of Shadows? If so, the rumors of his power might not be exaggerated. Many Saints were capable of slaying Great Beasts, but very few could finish such a powerful abomination with one strike.

Nephis was about to say something else, but at that moment, a terrifying roar tore apart the silence. Something was rushing toward them from the darkness.

The Fire Keepers instantly assumed a battle formation. Shim and Sid moved forward, raising their shields, Gantry and Gorn took positions a step behind and to the side of them, while Shakti and Erlas hid behind the melee fighters while summoning their arrows. Lastly, Kaor moved to the rear of the cohort, ready to defend his comrades in case of an unexpected attack.

Nephis remained where she stood, calmly looking into the darkness. Her lance had changed form once again, turning back into a longsword.

"Be ready."

They heard the sound of massive claws scraping against bone as the Nightmare Creature approached at high speed. Judging by that speed, the abomination was powerful.

It was going to reach the Fire Keepers in a matter of seconds.

...Before it Did, however, something rustled in the air, and they heard the familiar, gruesome sound of flesh being severed by sharp steel. Something crashed heavily onto the ground, and a moment later, a monstrous head rolled into the light, a river of blood spilling from its cut neck.

'One strike.‘

Nephis looked at the abomination's severed head for a split second, then turned to face the darkness.

There, two crimson flames ignited, staring down at her.

Then, something walked out of the darkness and stopped at the edge of light, making the Fire Keepers tremble.

'What in the world…’

The graceful creature looked like a beautiful onyx statue that had come to life.

Her fearsome black armor seemed to be carved from polished stone, and forged according to an intricate, elegant design. The dark sword she was holding was smeared in blood, radiating a sense of chilling, inescapable lethality.

The demonic statue towered above Nephis and the Fire Keepers, much higher than even Effie was, observing them with cold indifference. There was no hostility in her gaze, but also no benevolence.

She was clearly not human.

However, the living statue did not seem like a Nightmare Creature, either. She was more like... a Transcendent Echo? A Saint?

However, Nephis had never met an Echo... or a Saint, really... who exerted so much pressure on her. The graceful knight's onyx body radiated a sense of vast, dreadful power, and the menacing crimson flames dancing in her ruby eyes were full of strange, inhuman will.

She was strong.

In fact, if Nephis was not here and the strange creature decided to attack the Fire Keepers, they would most likely all perish under her blade.

The question was... would the living statue attack them, or not?

As Nephis looked at the demonic knight calmly, ready for both outcomes...

The beautiful onyx statue lowered her sword and turned away, then beckoned for them to follow her with indifferent grace.