1366 Terror of the Earth

The crow hopped on Sunny's shoulder, and they headed toward where Nightmare was hiding. Cronos, annoyingly, followed them with an excited smile.

That said, Sunny couldn't remain annoyed for long because of the worshipful gaze the old man was giving him.

"Lord Sunless... if I may ask..."

He rolled his eyes and sighed.

"What?"

Cronos hesitated for a moment.

"...What is a horse?"

That almost caused Sunny to stumble.

'What the hell... why does it sound like something I would say?'

He shrugged.

"It's a large animal that runs really well. People used to ride them to get around. Of course, my horse is no ordinary horse... he's a real menace, that beast."

The old man frowned in contemplation.

"But why wouldn't they just use a boat?"

Sunny suppressed the desire to grind his teeth and answered in an even tone:

"The world outside the Tomb is not all water, remember? Most people live on land. Horses are land animals."

Cronos looked into the distance, confusion written all over his face.

"Ah... I see, I see. Are there no land boats? That seems strange!"

The barrage of questions continued.

By the time they reached the deep shadows where Nightmare was hiding, Sunny felt a bit tired.

"...yes, earth does sometimes shake, spew fire, and swallow entire towns. Not too often, though. Mostly when a volcano erupts... oh, a volcano is just a fire-breathing mountain. And a mountain is basically a big sharp rock, tall enough to reach the clouds. There's ice and snow on top, but not enough air to breathe... well, rather there's plenty of air, but you can't breathe it without dying..."

The old man's eyes grew wide.

"How bizarre! I would never want to live on land... it sounds terrifying..."

Sunny stared at him wildly.

'What the hell do you mean, terrifying?! You live on an endless river that falls into a bottomless abyss, plagued by roving time storms and Defiled monsters from the future!'

He shook his head, then said in a stifled voice:

"Nightmare, come out."

Two scarlet flames ignited in the darkness, and the shadows surged, forming into the shape of a dreadful black steed. Light glistened on Nightmare's steel fangs and sharp horns, tinted red by the blazing sunset.

Cronos yelped.

"Ah! A... a horse!"

His wrinkly face grew pale, and he took a couple steps back.

"M—my Lord... you didn't tell me that horses are such terrifying beasts! Do land dwellers really r—ride them?"

Sunny looked at the youth vindictively, then felt bad about it. The kid was very old, after all... what if seeing Nightmare gave him a heart attack?

He hesitated for a moment, then patted Cronos on the shoulder.

"Yes. But as I said, Nightmare is not your usual horse. He is an ancient shadow creature that used to serve an immortal Transcendent before becoming mine. Now... let's feed him."

As Sunny threw an excited glance at the black steed and summoned the nacre ornament, the old man asked in a shaking voice:

"But... what does this dreadful beast even eat? You... you don't seem to have any meat with you?"

Consumed by thoughts of Nightmare's Ascension, Sunny smiled absentmindedly.

"Oh, don't worry... I have what I need to satiate his hunger right here, with me..."

Surprised that Cronos suddenly took a few more steps back, he gave the old man a strange look and offered the ornament to the dark destrier.

"Here, buddy. Sorry it took me so long."

Nightmare snorted quietly, then brought his snout to his hand and pushed it, throwing the Memory to the ground. Then, he crushed it with one strike of his adamantine hoof.

A whirlwind of sparks rose from the crushed ornament and separated into six streams, each flowing into one of the dark embers burning within the shadow that served Nightmare as a soul.

'Here we go... finally!'

Sunny had always been preoccupied with raising the power of Saint — his primary battle Shadow — as much as possible, so he had neglected the black steed a little. It was not without a reason, of course. Nightmare's main purpose was not to be a destructive force in combat. He was a loyal steed first and a fighter second. The utility he offered Sunny was much more valuable than an additional combatant would be.

Still... this moment had been a long time coming.

As the streams of sparks were absorbed into the darkness hiding inside Nightmare, his silhouette suddenly grew vague. Then, the destrier disappeared.

Already expecting that to happen, Sunny dove into his Soul Sea. Appearing in the lightless silence, he saw his Shadow standing on the surface of the still water. Nightmare had lowered his head, his body trembling slightly.

'Yes!'

Within the Shadow, the glow of the six dim embers was growing more and more intense. The water suddenly surged, as if assaulted by an invisible wind. Wisps of black flame rose from Nightmare's sable coat, soon shrouding his figure completely.

Sunny had already seen a Shadow rise to a new Rank several times. He knew that the transformation would not take long — unlike evolving to a new Class, this change was only going to take several minutes.

He waited patiently.

As if feeling the importance of what was happening somewhere near, but away from their eyes, both Crow Crow and Cronos remained silent.

...Soon, the transformation was over.

The restless waters grew still once again, and the black flames receded. Nightmare was revealed from within their veil, as fearsome as ever. His outward appearance did not change much. Only the red glow of his ferocious eyes seemed brighter.

Despite that...

His tenebrous silhouette brimmed with a new kind of power. Sunny grinned.

'An Ascended Terror...'

His steed was as powerful as the creature that Nephis had slain at the top of the Crimson Spire now.

In fact, even Sunny, who possessed an extremely high level of mental resistance, felt a hint of dread grasping his heart when looking at the dark destrier.

'Wait... doesn't... doesn't his aura of fear seem too strong?'

Trying to suppress his excitement, Sunny forced himself to continue looking at Nightmare and summoned the runes.

In the next moment, his expression changed.

'What?! When... when did this happen?!'

The counter of the shadow fragments had been filled and emptied. Sunny knew that, of course.

However, what he had not expected to see...

Was that the counter of subjugated nightmares had been filled, as well.

The [Dream Curse], Nightmare's Terror Ability, was unlocked.

...Standing near Sunny, Cronos and the crow Echo exchanged a confused look. Why did Lord Sunless seem so excited?

The small bird tilted its head knowingly and cawed with a sense of superiority:

"Horse!"