1367 Dream Curse

The runes shimmered in the darkness, surrounded by still silence.

Hypnotized by them, Sunny read greedily:

Shadow: Nightmare.

Shadow Rank: Ascended.

Shadow Class: Terror.

Shadow Fragments: [0/300].

He had known what to expect, but seeing the word "Ascended" still filled him with excitement. At any other time, Sunny would have lingered, enjoying the view of the changed runes, but he was much more interested in something else right now.

His gaze slid lower.

Shadow Description: [This beautiful steed was tamed by the treacherous Lost From Light in the depths of a harrowing dream. The two Shadows battled across countless nightmares, shattering them all apart; neither was willing to give up, so in the end, the nightmares did.]

Despite the excitement, memories of his dreadful battle with Nightmare made Sunny shiver.

Shadow Attributes: [ Swift], [Dark Destrier], [Dreadlord], [Dreamwalker].

The Attributes were the same as before. His steed was swift, could travel through dreams, and grew stronger when feared or surrounded by shadows. Sunny's gaze finally settled oni the string of runes that interested him the most...

Shadow Abilities: [Flowing Shadow], [Mantle of Fear], [Nightmare], [Dream Curse].

His eyes widened slightly.

The first two Abilities had not changed. [Flowing Shadow] allowed Nightmare to move through shadows with stunning speed, as well as become one of them. [Mantle of Fear] was a powerful mental attack that induced terror in those affected by it.

The second two Abilities, though... the runes describing them were different.

'It happened faster than I thought...'

The [Nightmare] Ability shared its name with the black stallion. At this moment, its description read:

[Nightmare] Ability Description: "This Shadow can create and subjugate nightmares. The more nightmares serve it, the more powerful it grows, both inside and outside dreams.

Dormant nightmares: 287

Awakened nightmares: 252

Ascended nightmares: 455

Transcendent nightmares: 6"

Sunny's eyes glinted darkly.

'It's a thousand.'

Not only had Nightmare subjugated enough dreadful dreams to unlock his Terror Ability, but due to the nature of the carriers of the Nightmare Spell, most of these dreams were also much more powerful than expected — to the point where his rise in Rank did not make them obsolete.

The black stallion had even managed to find and defeat six nightmares belonging to Saints... or maybe Corrupted abominations.

Each and every one of the subjugated nightmares added a little to his power, just like absorbing shadow fragments did.

Much more importantly...

The last few runes, which had been lightless before, were finally glowing with ethereal light.

After accumulating an army of a thousand nightmares, his Shadow was finally a true Terror once again.

Trying to calm his wildly beating heart, Sunny concentrated on the newly awakened runes and read the description:

[Dream Curse] Ability Description: "This Shadow is a master of a lesser dream domain. It is capable of lulling living beings to sleep and imprisoning their souls in a labyrinth of nightmares. The souls destroyed within the nightmare maze feed the Shadow; the more powerful the Shadow grows, the faster and further the dream curse spreads."

Sunny stared at the runes, suddenly chilled to the bone.

"How curious..."

He was shaken so much that he uttered those words aloud.

"Curious? What are you referring to, Lord Sunless? Did your horse not like the food? It smashed it with a hoof! Uh... I'm sorry to say this, my lord... but you might not know what beasts like to eat. That was a shell ornament, after all. Who would want to eat a piece of shell? You should try fish next time!"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then turned his head and stared at Cronos wordlessly. The old man trembled.

'Right. He's still here.'

Leaving the Soul Sea, he concentrated fully on the real world and said evenly:

"I was referring to how similar an Ability of my steed is... to some other things. He did like the food. It was much more preferable than fish."

Cronos looked at him with doubt, but Sunny ignored the youth and turned away.

'Maze of nightmares...'

It was truly an insidious and dreadful Ability, one worthy of a Terror. Sunny could easily imagine the Dream Curse slowly spreading to swallow this entire city... people falling asleep one after another, until there was no one left awake. All of them dying, their souls devoured by the hungry Shadow.

He could also imagine the horror of their death.

...Sunny had experienced the dream maze himself, after all. What would have happened if he had broken down and given up? His soul would have been torn apart by the torment of endless nightmares, and his body would have turned into a hollow husk.

The most frightening part of it all was the measure of control Nightmare had over the dream labyrinth... and the fact that the more his victims were terrified by it, the stronger he would be.

There was a limit to the power of the Dream Curse, of course. After all, Sunny had broken free of it by destroying each and every one of the dreadful dreams. It had not spread to all the Kingdom of Hope, either, because its reach was limited by Nightmare's own strength... as an Awakened Terror, the dreadful steed could only influence one castle and its surroundings.

As an Ascended Terror, though, that reach would have become greater. Who knew how far the Dream Curse would be able to spread in the future?

...But all of that was not why Sunny felt cold. Why would he? The power of his Shadow was his own power.

Rather, he was shaken by the words the Spell used to describe the Dream Curse.

'A lesser dream domain...'

Didn't it sound like something he had encountered before?

For example, the Dreamscape. A vast illusion maintained by the Aspect of a certain Saint, where countless people could combat each other without the risk of injury. Awakened used the public arenas for training, but there were private ones established for the government forces and the Legacy clans, as well. There was even a version for mundane humans to enjoy.

Was Dreamscape a type of lesser dream domain, as well? That would certainly make sense.

There was another similar example, though...

Sunny trembled.

There was the Spell and its Nightmares. There was the Dream Realm itself.

If there were lesser dream domains, there had to be greater ones, too... as well as those above them.

If so...

The souls destroyed within his Shadow's dream maze were consumed, making the shadow stronger.

...What happened to the souls of those who died within Nightmares? Of those who died in the Dream Realm? Of those infected by the Spell?

Was the Spell feeding on the souls of everyone who carried it, and on the souls of everything those who carried it killed?

The thought was terrifying.

But still...

'It would make sense.'

Sunny lowered his gaze and stared at the fabric of Ananke's Mantle.

When an Awakened conjured a Memory, the Memory was manifested from their soul essence. What were the worlds within Nightmares manifested from?

He turned his head and observed Fallen Grace. Finally, his gaze settled on Cronos.

...And when the Nightmare was over, where did all the souls conjured into it by the Spell go?

Sunny had never seriously considered how the Spell operated, simply because it was so powerful as to seem omnipotent. If one assumed something to be omnipotent, they would not question how it worked. Simply because its workings were beyond the realms of logic and reason.

However, now, for the first time, he was starting to question if the Spell was truly free from the laws that governed the rest of mundane things. Perhaps its scale was just so great that mere mortals like him were not capable of perceiving it.

Or maybe he was wrong, and there was nothing in common between the principles of the Dream Curse and the Spell.

In any case...

'Instead of thinking about things that are beyond my understanding, I should concentrate on what is in front of me. My Ascended Terror of a steed... and the curse he commands. It will surely be of help in this cursed tomb. Especially since there's a mad bastard around who is fond of visiting other people's dreams...'