1581 Shadows and Dust

The Nightmare was over.

The illusory world that Spell had conjured had collapsed, expelling the surviving challengers.

They were supposed to find themselves in the empty void between dream and reality, where countless stars shimmered in the darkness, forming a vast and inconceivable pattern. There, the Spell was supposed to appraise their performance and let them go through the process of rising to a new Rank in peace.

However, that was not what happened to Sunny.

He had no time to comprehend the consequences of having his very existence pierced by the talons of the Cursed Terror when the Nightmare Collapsed, sending him into a world of darkness. There was no appraisal, and no pattern of stars shimmering in the void.

Instead, still reeling from the inconceivable and frightening turn of events, he was thrown out of the void, entering another, much smaller, but similarly dark space. In fact, he was violently catapulted into that space, crashing into a jagged piece of scorched concrete, shattering it, and colliding with a deformed alloy wall behind it.

The force of the impact was terrible enough to make the alloy crack, and for Sunny to lose consciousness.

And that…

Was how he became possibly the first human in history to Transcend while passed out..

The six shadows gathered around his reforged body, perplexed and dumbfounded.

After a while, one of them sighed, and then shook its head in utter dejection.

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The first thing Sunny felt was pain.

Not the terrible kind of pain he was sadly used to experiencing from time to time, but a more mundane pain. He was laying on a rough surface, something sharp biting into his back through the fabric of Ananke's Mantle.

The air was full of dust. The world was silent.

He was cold.

Groaning, he opened his eyes and sat up, feeling strangely refreshed and revitalized. Looking down, he saw jagged pieces of concrete littering the floor. No wonder he had been uncomfortable.

He stretched his hand, wishing to sweep a few of them away.

'However, he must have misjudged his strength, because the concrete pieces simply turned to dust from his irritated swipe. More than that, the floor cracked under his palm, and the world shook, more dust spilling from somewhere above.'

Come to think of it…

Where the hell was he?

Sunny shielded his eyes from the dust and looked around, trying to assess his surroundings.

It was rather strange.

At first, he thought that he had found himself in a small cave. It was a few meters in diameter, the ceiling just tall enough for him to stand up. There did not seem to be an entrance to the cave, and therefore, no exit.

But after a few moments of contemplation, Sunny realized that the dusty pocket of space he had come to his senses in was not a natural cave. It looked more like the result of a cave-in.

The walls and the ceiling were a chaotic mess of cracked concrete and torn alloy, as if some building had collapsed on itself, forming a few pockets of empty space in the compressed ruin.

'Wait… alloy?'

As Sunny's eyes widened slightly, he concentrated on the details of his surroundings. Alloy and concrete, pieces of broken machinery, a torn piece of a sign written in human language.

His heart was beating wildly.

'I am… back in the waking world?'

Indeed, he was. The Nightmare had ended while the horrid bird was tearing his soul with its talons, and the Spell must have sent him back.

Not to the Nightmare Desert, but instead back to the point in the waking world where his tether had been placed.

…Which was supposed to be Valor's stronghold in one of the siege capitals of East Antarctica.

Sunny observed the scene of devastation around him for a while, his expression somber.

'Has the siege capital been destroyed?'

If so, it would explain why he was in a random pocket of empty space inside a ruin instead of his quarters in the comfortably furnished stronghold of a great clan.

Then, he was distracted by the feeling of cold air brushing against his chest. Looking down, at himself, Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What… the hell. Why am I naked?'

He was still covered by the nebulous folds of Ananke's Mantle, but the Shroud of Graceless Dusk was gone. Here and there, his pale skin was revealed, covered in dust.

Frowning, Sunny summoned the Shroud of Dusk.

However, nothing happened.

'What…'

Sunny called upon his Memory again, and yet there was no response. It was as if it did not exist anymore.

'Do I not have enough essence to summon even a single Memory?'

Sunny turned his attention to his soul, planning to assess how much essence he had left…

And froze.

'What, what the hell?!'

It was only then that he realized how vastly different his soul, his body, and the world itself were.

His body was suffused with power… such terrifying power that even Sunny himself felt a chill. It was already scary enough now, while he did not have his six shadows wrapped around him.

What would happen when he layered six consecutive augmentations on top of it?

His soul was filled with a cold ocean of essence, and that essence… it had already grown more potent after he had acquired Soul Weave. But now, it had become qualitatively different, possessing such depths and density as to appear inexhaustible. The intensity of power contained within it was frightening.

That was not the most shocking change, however.

The most shocking change… was that he could vaguely feel a different kind of energy all around him, cool and flowing, that was similar, but also different from the essence he was familiar with. That ambient essence seemed to belong to the world itself.

Or rather, to the shadows that surrounded him.

And since he was currently in total darkness, it was everywhere.

What really amazed him, though, was that the spirit essence flowed freely through him, wisps of it replenishing the missing shadow essence in his six cores. It was as if he was able to replenish his reserves of essence by borrowing the power of the world itself, as long as he was in his element.

'A stronger body, a qualitative change of essence, and an entirely new relationship between myself and the world…'

Sunny flinched.

"Wait. Have I… Transcended? I must have!"

His voice sounded hoarse in the utter silence.

Of course, he should have. He had conquered a Third Nightmare, after all.

Was he a Saint now?

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then feverishly summoned the runes.

But, just like the Shroud of Dusk…

The runes did not appear.

There was no response at all.

The Spell... was silent.