Monster Manual Update: Nightmare

By Logan Bonner

Illustration by Stephen Crowe

Blazing steeds charge through the darkest night to haunt dreams and serve the cause of evil.

“Visions had haunted me night after night: a jet-black horse with a mane of fire trampling me, its hooves scalding my flesh. One evening these apparitions finally abated. I felt safe once again and proceeded with my journey to Histaven.

“Then I saw the beast in the flesh! Even now it pursues me. I dearly hope these will not be the last words I write.”

—Unsigned note

Nightmares might look like horses, but their malign intelligence and cruel hearts make them capable of evil no mere beasts would dare. Their flaming manes, tails, nostrils, and hooves make their gaunt black bodies seem to disappear into the blackness of night, giving them a hellish appearance. Common rumor claims that nightmares run so swiftly they can’t be seen. Those who have observed the creatures (and lived to tell of it) speculate that the beasts actually walk through shadows, or perhaps gallop through a space between spaces.

Certainly the beasts move differently from true horses. Its gait looks much the same, but a nightmare can go from a stop to a gallop in the blink of an eye, or appear out of nowhere though standing perfectly still. Scouts who follow the smoldering hoof prints of a nightmare find strange patterns and gaps that don’t resemble anything a mundane creature would leave behind.

In most parts of the world, nightmares travel alone; each terrorizes one target or a small group at a time. In the Shadowfell, packs of nightmares haunt old roads, charging through the bleak night in search of victims. Residents of the Shadowfell call the most dangerous passages the “ember ways,” named after the smoking tracks left by the nightmares’ flaming hooves. Even during the day, the ember ways can be dangerous. The vicious deaths that nightmares deal sometimes create vengeful apparitions that are furious about the grisly manner in which they died.

Haunting and Fear: To encounter a nightmare is to know terror. The beast never goes for a quick kill. It stalks its victims, appearing before them just long enough to make them fear for their lives, then teleporting away. A nightmare doesn’t strike down its quarry until the creature is nearly helpless with terror. Victims might believe they have escaped from the pursuit of a nightmare, right up to the moment it delivers the killing blow with its burning hooves.

The nightmare’s ability to invade the world of dreams is even more fearsome than its physical form. The creatures and the dreams both called nightmares can become the same. Anyone who does manage to
flee one of these blazing horses suffers through nights plagued by visions of the beast, and some experience foreboding dreams before encountering the real terror.

As a mount, a nightmare is a swift steed as well as a fearsome combatant, and it can transport itself and its rider to and from the Shadowfell. However, no nightmare submits to such service unless its prospective rider can best it in single combat. If the only alternative is death, and the nightmare senses the presence of another who is truly evil, it allows itself to be ridden. Nevertheless, nightmares are never truly tamed. The beasts follow their own instincts, sometimes at the expense of their riders. Both a nightmare and its rider aspire to sow evil, but the two might have different ideas on how to do so.

**Striders among Fiends:** Though nightmares are associated closely with the Shadowfell, some also gallop through the Abyss and the Nine Hells. The members of these herds have closer bonds between them and specific social structures. The nightmares of the Nine Hells submit to a stallion named Sin’s Reward. He is armored in black iron barding covered in spikes, and a cloud of black smoke and white embers surrounds him at all times. In the Abyss, the mare Thunder of Hooves rules over her band with brute force and threats of death. All the nightmares of the Abyss became mutated and demonic over time, but Thunder of Hooves has grown to enormous size and developed another pair of legs.

The two rulers hate each other, but they meet on neutral ground in the Shadowfell once a year to breed. Each time, they produce three foals of great speed and strength. One returns to the Abyss, one to the Hells, and one stays to roam the Shadowfell. Some say that Sin’s Reward and Thunder of Hooves were sent long ago by Vecna to spy on the devils and demons, and that their meetings also serve to bring what secrets they have found back to their god. Rumors say they have been corrupted by the planes that they now call home, and that Vecna wants them slaughtered and their hooves returned to him.

**The Gloom Meet:** On rare nights, dark creatures from the Shadowfell, the Nine Hells, and the Abyss gather to settle disputes and forge wicked alliances. When a suitable night draws near, nightmares rush far and wide to spread the word that the Gloom Meet will soon begin. The scattered firsthand accounts of nightmare appearances become more prevalent for a few weeks as the beasts course across the planes. The few known accounts of the Gloom Meet that reach the civilized world come from scholars or adventurers who have followed a trail of scorched hoof prints to find its location.

---

**Evil Steeds:** Undead such as death knights, vampires, liches, and even specters ride nightmares. Outside the Shadowfell and other realms of the dead, vile warriors and spellcasters seek nightmares as mounts to show their dedication to evil and the strength of their domination. Demons, devils, and night hags make sojourns to the Shadowfell to capture and subjugate nightmare mounts.