1321 Drowning Island

Sunny and Nephis had learned a few things about navigating the endlessly flowing waters of the Great River, but they were still unsure what distance separated each of the Seven Houses from each other. Nevertheless, they quickly understood that something was wrong by looking at Ananke's face.

The young priestess was almost always either calm or smiling. At some point, however, a deep frown twisted her soft adolescent face, and a dark shadow was cast onto her vibrant azure eyes.

Sunny was the first to notice. He studied the teenage girl in front of them, then asked: "What's wrong?"

Ananke lingered for a few moments.

"We should have reached the Third House by now, my Lord."

There were seven artificial islands where the children of Weave spent their childhood, and although the swift ketch was supposed to reach the fifth one, they were actually numbered in reverse order — starting with the House of Birth far downstream and ending with the House of Youth.

So, the Third House would have been the fifth they saw. However... It seemed to have disappeared.

The young priestess studied the vast expanse of the Great River, then mumbled with uncertainty:

"I guess... the mechanisms of the island could have broken down, sending it adrift. I haven't visited here in a long while. Still, the deterioration shouldn't have reached that stage already..."

Sunny and Nephis exchanged glances. Rising to her feet, Nephis looked north. "Could it have been destroyed by an abomination?"

Ananke did not answer for a while. Eventually, she sighed.

"It's unlikely, but not impossible. Maybe that is what happened, indeed."

The ketch continued to fly downstream, but the mood of its three passengers had changed. Not only was there a threat of a powerful Nightmare Creature stalking the waters somewhere nearby, but the disappearance of one of the islands also meant that the rest of them could be gone, as well.

'Damnation...'

Sunny did not particularly care about the remaining two of the Seven Houses, but he was concerned about the lower House of Parting — the point where Ananke was supposed to say farewell to them.

The young priestess was intending to gift them her ketch, so she needed another vessel in order to return to Weave. There were supposed to be other boats moored at the House of Parting, but if the island had been destroyed... they were going to have a problem.

'It's not too bad...'

The furthest island-ship of Weave might not have been destroyed. Even if it was... Sunny could assume the form of the river serpent again, continuing to travel downstream without the ketch. With the Crown of Twilight, he would be able to sustain that form for longer.

But not long enough to reach Fallen Grace. There were less powerful abominations in the past, though... perhaps he and Nephis would be able to come up with a method to stay safe while he replenished his essence.

There was nothing to do for now. First, they needed to reach the House of Parting and see whether it was still in one piece or not.

They continued sailing downstream in grim silence. The seven suns had already plunged into the Great River, suffusing it with a soft glow, when Sunny suddenly stirred and peered into the distance.

A few moments later, he pointed forward and said, his voice somber: "I see something. There."

Ananke silently moved the steering oar, guiding the ketch in that direction.

A dozen minutes later, a dark shape became visible in the iridescent glow of the flowing water. It was massive and strangely shaped, rising above the surface of the river like a mountain.

Without having to say anything, Nephis and Sunny summoned their weapons. Ananke called upon her harpoon, as well.

However, they weren't in danger.

As the ketch drew closer to the ominous shape, they saw it for what it was.

A shattered platform built upon the frame of some leviathan's bones was sticking out of the water, tilted and half-drowned. They first saw one of its sides, overgrown by seaweed and barnacles. It took Sunny some time to realize that he was looking at the bottom of an island-ship.

Soon, enormous water wheels came into sight, motionless and broken, hanging high in the air. Finally, they went around the edge of the drowning island and saw the side of it that was supposed to be the surface.

The bright buildings, those of them that remained above the water, had mostly collapsed into piles of rubble. The gardens had been destroyed, and the tidy streets had turned into a labyrinth of ruins. The tall windcatchers had been shattered, their blades sticking out of the river like torn sails.

It was what remained of the Third House.

Looking at the scene of violent devastation, Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"...What could have destroyed it so thoroughly?"

It seemed as though a frenzied titan had been let loose on the floating island.

Nephis gripped the hilt of her sword tighter. Her face was motionless,but white sparks were dancing in her eyes.

"An abomination?"

Ananke remained silent, studying the ruins with a dark expression. Eventually, she shook her head.

"I don't know, my Lady. Let's leave this place as soon as possible."

Despite her true age and her youthful appearance, the priestess was not a very good liar. Sunny could tell that she was keeping some suspicion to herself... but since Ananke did not want to speak of it, he decided not to press the issue, for now.

He trusted her that much, at least.

The young priestess let Nephis take the steering oar and went to the bow of the ketch, still holding her harpoon. The ketch sailed past the ruins of the devastated House, giving them an opportunity to study how utter its destruction had been. None of them said anything, but all three looked somber and uneasy.

Finally, they left the drowning island behind and continued moving with the current of the Great River. An hour passed in tense silence, then another. Despite Sunny's fears, no monstrous dweller of the depths attacked the small ketch.

After a while, the first of the seven suns appeared from beneath the waters. The impenetrable darkness released its hold upon the sky, and a new day came, as bright and beautiful as all the rest of them.

However, there was something different about this one.

When all seven suns had risen from the water, Sunny noticed that far ahead of them, in the distance, the darkness still remained. It veiled the northern horizon like a wall, connecting the surface of the Great River to the sky.

Ananke was staring at the distant wall of darkness, too, her youthful face pale. He scowled.

"What is it? Some ancient abomination manifesting its power? A Defiled?" The young priestess pursed her lips, then slowly shook her head.

"No, my Lord. It's much worse. It is... a storm."

Her melodious voice sounded solemn.

"A time storm..."