1322 Broken Time

The ominous words hung in the air, as foreboding as the wall of darkness veiling the sky far in the distance. Sunny and Nephis looked at Ananke, wary because of her somber expression.

This was the first time either of them had seen the young priestess show signs of despondence. The three of them must have made for a funny sight... two battle-hardened warriors staring at a teenage girl, waiting for her guidance.

Sunny frowned.

"A time storm?"

Ananke nodded slowly.

"...Yes, my Lord. I have told you before that time can be unpredictable on the Great River. There are places where it turns stale and unmoving, great whirlpools that nothing can ever escape, clashing currents, and deadly tides of all kinds. A time storm... is one of the most dangerous anomalies one can encounter."

Her youthful face darkened.

"It is a wandering disaster that twists and rips time apart, containing within itself absolute chaos. These storms originate from the span of the Great River that corresponds to the final days of the Doom War, when the last cataclysmic battles between the daemons and the gods were fought, and when both sides perished. They... usually don't reach that far upstream. I am sorry."

Nephis shook her head.

"You don't need to be sorry, Ananke. It is not your fault. However... how do we escape it?"

The young priestess lingered for a few moments, then said quietly:

"I am not sure that we can."

She uttered several words, easily overpowering Neph's Shaping. The wind that had been filling the sails of the ketch disappeared, and a moment later, a powerful gale crushed into the wooden boat, making it creak.

This one was not summoned by anyone. Much worse... it was blowing from downstream, pushing their hair back.

Which meant that the dark wall devouring the horizon was traveling in their direction. At least a normal storm would...

Judging by Ananke's expression, a time storm behaved the same.

Sunny uttered a silent curse.

"Can we outrun it?"

The young priestess swiftly moved to the side of the ketch and looked down, at the

clear water flowing past the polished wood. A few moments later, she gritted her teeth.

"I don't think so, my Lord. We are already caught in its outer reaches."

It was only then that Sunny noticed that the current of the Great River seemed to have grown much stronger. It was hard to tell when the ketch was flying forward at full speed, but now that it slowed down and was about to come to a halt, the changes were apparent even for an Outsider like himself.

The wind was chasing the storm in their direction, while the current was pulling them into the storm. It was like a trap.

'Damn it...'

"What do we do, then?"

Ananke stared at the approaching wall of the storm with a dark expression. A few moments later, she took a deep breath and forced out a smile.

"We will just have to brave it then, my Lord and Lady."

Sunny and Nephis stared at the teenage girl with stumped expressions. Hadn't she said that a time storm was a roving mass of chaotic time, wild and distorted enough to be absolutely deadly? The Third House had been much larger and infinitely more robust than their small ketch, but it was utterly destroyed.

How the hell were they supposed to survive something like that?

The young priestess shook her head.

"It is... it is not as bad as it sounds. I am a Transcendent, after all. We, the followers of Weaver, had to pass through the tumultuous region from where these storms originate on our way upstream, so we know a thing or two about how to endure them."

Her voice sounded confident, but the look in her eyes was anything but. Noticing their doubt, Ananke sighed.

"I am... reasonably certain that I can keep this small ketch from being torn apart. It is lucky, actually, that our vessel is not too large. However..."

She stared at the wall of darkness — that had already drawn closer in the few minutes they were talking — and grew solemn.

"It is very important that none of us touches the water, or becomes separated from the ketch. This storm front we see is only the aftereffect of the true disaster. The real horror lies beneath the waves, in the depths of water — no one can survive being pulled down by the raging currents of broken time. If you fall into the river, you will never come back."

Sunny grimaced. His hope of being able to salvage the situation by turning into the river serpent had just been crushed. Now, his only choice was to trust Ananke to see them through the disaster.

It was not that he didn't trust her... but...

Sunny suddenly remembered traversing the dark sea of the Forgotten Shore on the shoulder of the walking colossus. There had been a storm then, too... and a harrowing

creature hiding within the storm.

His expression crumbled.

"...There are no ancient abominations hiding in that wall of darkness, are there?" Ananke looked at him with surprise, then shook her head with a smile.

"No, my Lord. Even the Defiled can't survive the broken time. They avoid these storms just as we do."

Sunny sighed and looked downstream with a bleak face. After a while, he asked in a dull voice:

"We should prepare for a rocky ride, then?"

The young priestess nodded.

"Indeed. My Lord is wise..."

He was not even in the mood to celebrate getting another praise. Shaking his head, Sunny started stretching his body, then froze, realizing how senseless his actions were.

They were not preparing for a battle. Sharp swords and sturdy armor were not going to help them survive the storm, and neither would their combat skills.

Sighing again, he asked:

"What exactly do we need to do?"

With no time to waste, Ananke directed them on how to help her prepare the ketch for braving the storm. She tried to sound calm, but hints of urgency found their way into her voice.

The preparations did not take long. They lowered the sails, then folded them neatly. As it turned out, both masts of the ketch could be taken down, as well. After dismantling them, everything was either stored under the deck of the wooden boat or fastened tightly in place.

Ten minutes later, nothing that could be easily torn or broken by the wind remained. The ketch turned from a sailboat into a simple and barren vessel, seemingly too small to survive a terrible storm, but also solid enough to look like it, maybe, could.

The three of them stood on the empty deck, looking north.

The wall of darkness was approaching.