1324 Relentless Battle

The time storm raged all around them. The current of the Great River, which had always been calm and constant, turned into a furious tide... being carried and tossed around by it, the ketch flew forward with terrible speed.

Tall waves rose and fell, and hurricane winds howled like frenzied beasts. Everything around them was drowning in a boiling fog. Blinded by it, deafened by the roaring thunderclaps, the three of them had lost all sense of time and direction.

There was only the feeling of the wet deck beneath their feet, the soaring and plummeting of the wooden boat, and the physical strain of enduring the cataclysmic fury of the storm. Faced with its inconceivable wrath, Sunny couldn't help but feel how tiny and insignificant he was in the face of the unnatural disaster.

...And that was with Ananke holding the worst of it at bay, as well.

The eerie, deeply distressing feeling of the immutable laws of the world turning vague and volatile was still there, muted but indescribably oppressive. He felt sickened, both physically and mentally. It was as if the solid foundation of his very being had suddenly been replaced by shifting quicksand, leaving him shaking and unstable.

Perhaps that was what madness felt like. 'Damnation...'

Steeling his heart, Sunny tried to ignore the appalling sensation and concentrated on his task — scooping up the water that had been thrown into the ketch by the storm and tossing it overboard. There was a lot of it, but he and Nephis could still keep up. It was just that... this simple task had turned out to be much more demanding than he expected.

Simply existing in the wildly rocking boat was already an exercise in endurance. Considering the dire speed of the current and the height of the waves, it felt as though some demented giant was playing catch with their bodies, throwing them high up and then slamming them down with ferocious power.

Keeping his balance was not only tiring, but also difficult — every muscle in his body was under strain, seemingly at all times. The movements of the jerking ketch were chaotic and impossible to predict.

However, failing to follow them was tantamount to death. If Sunny was not careful and failed to continuously adjust to the constant changes, he would be thrown down on the deck, or worse yet, tossed overboard into the seething water.

And he had to do more than simply exist... he had to move, scoop up water, and throw it back into the raging river.

...Of course, there were more efficient ways of accomplishing that task. He could do more, and do it better, with the help of Shadow Manifestation. But their struggle against the storm was going to be an arduous marathon, not a sprint.

Currently, he felt only slightly tired. That tiredness was going to turn into a crippling exhaustion sooner rather than later — then, he was going to have to burn through his essence to keep his battered body moving, hoping against all hope that his reserves were deep enough. Wasting it on frivolous things would have been a shortsighted decision.

'I was wrong...'

Before they plunged into the storm, Sunny had noted that it was not a battle. But it was. It was just as physically straining, just as violent, and just as deadly.

The difference was that he couldn't remember a battle that had lasted for many days without ever allowing the fighters to rest and breathe for even a minute. How dreadful would that be?

At least the enemy was a mindless force of nature.

An enemy like that did not require him to think too much, thus draining his mental powers. While arduous and exhausting, his task was not too far from being mechanical. Sunny still had to remain focused and actively pay attention to the motions of the ketch, but he didn't have to think, analyze the situation, and come up with lethal schemes.

Same went for Nephis. Ananke, however...

Her task was much more difficult than theirs. Not only did the priestess have to maintain the mystical protections around the ketch, she was also responsible for steering it.

The small boat would have already overturned a dozen times if not for the swift and precise judgment of their guide.

Sunny looked back, at the small figure of the young girl who was holding the steering oar firmly, peering into the mist. Her face was pale, but her eyes were brimming with focused resolve.

...He was worried about her.

He was worried about a great deal of things.

For example, about the fact that they were barely a few hours into the storm, with multiple days of this hell still remaining before the ketch escaped it. If nothing unexpected happened.

'One step at a time...'

One step at a time, one wave at a time, one thunderclap at a time. That was how they were going to survive the time storm. That was how Sunny and Nephis were going to survive the Third Nightmare, as well.

And after that...

Sunny did not have even the slightest idea what was going to happen after... if... he became a Saint. Not only to him, but also to humanity itself. The Great Clans were going to continue their war. The waking world would continue to crumble. The Nightmare Spell would continue to pull them all deeper and deeper into the mysterious machinations of the Demon of Fate.

'Let's survive the damned storm first!'

Cursing under his breath, he bent his knees to lessen the impact of the wooden deck hitting his feet, endured the ketch plummeting from the crest of a tall wave to crash violently into the water, then hurriedly threw several scoops of foaming water over the side of the boat.

A few steps away, Nephis was doing the same.

The world seemed to be coming undone all around them.

Separated from the abyss of broken time only by the thin deck of a wooden boat, they sailed through the raging mist.