1325 Lawless Abyss

Sunny had long lost the track of time... if it even existed in this furious abyss. The howling of the wind and the roar of harrowing thunderclaps had fused into a deafening cacophony, making his ears ring. His sight had been robbed by the boiling mist and the torrents of water. His lungs were on fire, and his muscles felt like they were on the verge of tearing.

It was not easy to bring an Ascend to such a sorry state through sheer physical hardship. But here he was, feeling like dying. With each passing hour... or minute, maybe... Sunny was using more and more essence to supplement his failing strength.

The ketch was still being carried by the tumultuous current, dancing between towering waves. The world was veiled by mist and darkness. He was still scooping up water, which was now sloshing around his ankles. The wooden dipper Ananke had given him had broken sometime ago, replaced by an iron bowl.

'How... much... longer?'

Sunny was not sure what he was trying to ask himself. How much longer before they escaped the storm, or before they drowned? In any case, he longed to drop on something solid... unmoving... and rest. Even if that rest would last forever.

The deck suddenly lurched upward, and he toppled, hitting it with his head. For a moment, Sunny saw stars. But even the stars were dancing wildly, tossed around by the cursed storm.

There was no answer. He had attempted to measure time by how fast his essence replenished, hoping that the Crown of Twilight would tell him when dawn and dusk came. But even the Great Memory succumbed to the vagaries of broken time. It activated and fell silent with no rhyme or reason, acting as bizarrely and chaotically as the deadly storm around them.

All that Sunny knew was that it had to be a day... two days, maybe?... since they had entered the wall of darkness, at least. Even though it felt like an eternity.

The only measure of the passage of time that Sunny and Nephis had was Ananke.Although... that, in and of itself, was one of the most frightening things.

The young priestess was still steering the ketch, now slumped and barely holding on to the oar. However, her appearance had changed. If before she looked like an adolescent girl in her late teens, now, she seemed more like a child, no more than twelve years old.

Ananke had always been a person of small stature, but at the moment, her body shrank even more. The dark mantle she wore looked almost comically large for her delicate frame, which seemed to drown in its folds.

Nevertheless, she never wavered in her duty, keeping their small boat afloat despite the harrowing fury of the Great River.

...Even knowing that the priestess was a couple of hundred years old, Sunny couldn't help but feel his heart tighten when he saw a child struggling against the same hell he and Nephis were being tortured by.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it...'

Picking himself up from the deck, Sunny gritted his teeth and continued to scoop the water up. The slower he was, the heavier the ketch would become... and the heavier it became, the more peril they would be in.

It was already a miracle that the old boat continued to withstand the ruthless cruelty of the storm.

It couldn't continue for much longer.

Not only because the wooden hull of the ketch could split apart at any moment, but also because the chaotic nature of the time storm was growing more and more eerie and violent around them.

Despite the bubble of stability created around the boat by Ananke, they could feel it. Sunny thought he saw strange shapes in the mist. At other times, he felt his own body and mind changing for a split second before reverting to their previous state.

The same was happening to Nephis. He wasn't sure if he was seeing things, but her figure and face seemed to be changing from time to time. Her silver hair always seemed to be of different lengths. Her beautiful face appeared as usual one moment...

Then, it would turn into the pale face of a drowned corpse for a fraction of a second, or become burned and charred beyond recognition.

As soon as he blinked, the changes would disappear, and Neph would turn into her usual self.

Shuddering, Sunny thought about what she saw when he looked at him.

Did she see his face become covered by countless scars, turning into a demented mask of mutilated flesh? His eyes changing to contain boundless madness?

But even that was not the scariest part of the time storm.

The scariest part... was that Sunny could hear the vague echoes whispered by a familiar voice, as if the Spell was talking to him.

Even they sounded senseless and twisted, broken beyond recognition, as though even the Nightmare Spell was not above being affected by the harrowing calamity.

He had seen it rendered powerless only once before... in the Red Colosseum, which had been created by Hope. According to Ananke, the time storms were echoes of the final battle between the daemons and the gods. Was it such a surprise, then, that the authority of the Nightmare Spell was disrupted by them?

After all, he had already known that its power was not absolute.

Pushing his exhausted body and struggling to withstand the relentless assault of the dreadful disaster, Sunny withstood a powerful blow of the hurricane wind and tossed another portion of water overboard.

'Absolute...'

A sudden thought occurred to him in the midst of the infernal tempest. He froze for a moment, desperately trying to catch his breath.

'...Was the Nightmare Spell Weaver's attempt at creating an absolute law of their own?'

He was so stunned by that idea that it even seemed like the storm disappeared for a moment. It was as though the howling of the wind subsided, and a deafening silence surrounded him.

No...

'What?'

It really did disappear.

Bright light suddenly pierced Sunny's eyes, and he hissed, covering them with a hand. The violent rocking of the deck subsided, as well.

'Did... did we escape?!'

Sunny lowered his hand and looked at the horizon.

Then, he tiredly fell onto the deck.

In front of them was a vast expanse of perfectly still water. It was not just peaceful... it was actually unmoving.

For the first time since they had entered the Third Nightmare, the Great River stood still.

Bright sunlight was pouring from the clear azure sky, illuminating the dreamlike vista. Behind them, the time storm rose like a dark wall. In front of them, far away... was the same veil of darkness. It surrounded the vast circle of calm water like an ominous barrier, seething with rage.

The circle of calm water itself, meanwhile, was like a flawlessly flat mirror. It shone with reflected sunlight, making it seem as though they were drifting one the surface of a radiant star.

Sunny closed his eyes, then covered his face with both hands. 'No. No, we didn't escape anything.'

Instead, they only reached the eye of the storm.