1326 Eye of the Storm

Drifting across the perfectly still surface of the water, the battered ketch slowly gained distance from the swirling wall of the dark mist. The raging winds died down, then disappeared altogether. A strange silence settled upon the world, as if they were caught in a gap between two moments.

Only the subtle ripples that spread through the radiant mirror of the frozen river's surface by the bow of the ketch showed that this hidden sanctuary was not entirely, and eternally, unchanging.

Sunny fell back and leaned tiredly on the side of the wooden boat. Breathing heavily, he looked at Nephis, then at Ananke. The silence was too sweet to break it with the sound of human voices. He was too exhausted to speak, as well... for a while, all three of them remained motionless, trying to recover from the torturous fury of the howling storm.

'We'll have to dive back into that hell, eventually.'

The thought alone made Sunny shudder. Refusing to entertain it, he closed his eyes and slumped down, intending to rest for a few minutes.

Instead, he fell into the embrace of sleep almost immediately.

Perhaps because of Nightmare, or perhaps because even the Defiled Titans could not reach into the depths of the time storm, nothing visited him in his dreams.

...Sunny woke up with a start when a shadow fell on him. For a split second, he was afraid that they were back in the ruthless grinder of the time cataclysm, but it was only Nephis — she had walked to the bow of the ketch to look ahead, her face pale and her eyes sunken.

He stared at her for a few moments, then sighed and pulled himself upright.

"How long was I asleep?" She lingered for a while. "There's no way to tell."

Sunny frowned, confused by the odd answer. However, then he felt it himself... in the place where the deep discomfort of sensing the broken nature of time had been, there was now a strange emptiness. But it was not the familiar comfort of sensing the natural flow of time, either.

Instead, it was the absolute lack of it.

He frowned, realizing that he could not feel the passage of time at all. It was a truly bizarre sensation, one that could not be properly described with words. His heart was beating, and his chest rose and fell as he breathed — however, he did not know how long each heartbeat took, and how much time passed between each breath.

It could have been a moment, a minute, or a thousand years. It could have been an eternity.

Sunny grimaced.

'Damnation.'

What was happening now?

They were alive, strangely enough... at least it seemed that way. His body ached all over, still reeling from the terrible strain of surviving the storm. Such pain was something that only the living felt.

Sunny turned to Ananke, wanting to ask the priestess a few questions, but remained silent in the end. His expression darkened.

The priestess looked even younger than she had the last time he saw her. Now, she resembled a girl of ten years of age, at most. Her ebony hair was short and unruly, and her lovely face had become round and immature, with clear blue eyes and cheeks that had yet to lose all of their baby plumpness.

Ananke was sitting on the helmsman's bench, her feet dangling above the deck. Noticing his gaze, she picked up the folds of her comically oversized mantle and jumped down.

"Greetings, my Lord."

Her pleasant voice had grown childish and awkward.

Sunny hesitated, staring at the young girl. She looked nothing short of adorable... however, he did not feel uplifted by the cute sight. Instead, his heart felt as heavy as a mountain.

If... when they broke free of the storm, would Ananke even be able to return to Weave on her own?

He glanced at Nephis, who stood with her back to them, then sighed. 'We'll think of something.'

Then, Sunny turned to the child priestess and asked:

"What is going on, exactly?"

She smiled sweetly, her azure eyes sparkling, two dimples appearing on her plump cheeks.

"We are in the eye of the storm, my Lord. Time is frozen still here. It is not dangerous... I think. It's just that..."

He was momentarily distracted from her words by a subtle movement in the water. The strange thing, though... was that he did not sense any shadows shifting.

Turning his head, Sunny glanced outside the ketch. The surface of the Great River was perfectly clear and flat, turning into a giant mirror. The azure sky reflected in it seamlessly, suffused with bright sunlight. It was as though the entire world was shining with a splendid radiance.

The sight of it was like a vision from a beautiful dream. However...

There was something beneath the radiance.

Sunny heard Ananke end the sentence as he peered through the light:

"...we shouldn't look at the water."

Her warning came a split second too late. The scream died in his throat as he saw...

A pale figure moving across the surface of the water with calamitous killing intent, shrouded in countless layers of furious darkness. That rippling darkness was boundless and unfathomable, containing within itself an infinite number of choices. The features of the harrowing figure were vague and obscured, and all he could see...

Was a pair of terrible wings, their feathers black like those of a raven. They spread, vast enough to devour the sky, and drowned the world in howling mist.

...Staggering back, Sunny fell to his knees and vomited blood. Two streams of it burst from his nose, too. Blood Weave, which would usually prevent something like this, was reeling in stupor, and so was he. It was as though his mind had suffered a tremendous shock from witnessing the dark figure... and sensing the harrowing depth of its obliterating killing intent.

Hurting and disoriented, Sunny wiped the blood off his face and spat.

"What... what the hell is that?!"

Ananke remained silent for a while, uncharacteristically solemn.

Then, she said in a low voice:

"Those... are reflections of the gods, my Lord. And of the daemons that slayed them..."