1328 Serene Peril

It was peaceful in the eye of the storm, if a little bit eerie. The strange lack of the sensation of time had been uncomfortable at first, but Sunny quickly found himself forgetting that time had ever existed at all.

The view of the azure sky reflecting on the perfectly cairn water was beautiful and tranquil. The silence was like a lullaby, making him feel at ease. Sunny had not felt such peace in a long, long while...

There was no need to hurry, and no possibility to do so anyway. Without telling how long their actions took, they could not know whether they were being slow or swift either. So, it was fine to just let go and remain still for a bit, enjoying the serene stillness of the world...

Which was why Sunny soon found himself feeling cold dread.

'N—not... this is not good...‘

It was just too easy to be lulled into inaction in this strange and frozen place. At some point, Sunny realized that he did not know how long he had remained sitting with his back against the side of the ketch, without a thought in his head.

His eyes widened slightly.

If they weren't careful... would they end up frozen forever in the eye storm, too, just like everything else was frozen in this tranquil haven?

Shuddering, he turned to Anaan and asked:

"How long has it been since we reached this place?"

She helplessly shook her small head.

"I don‘t know, my Lord."

He hesitated.

"How long before we dive back into the storm, then?"

The child priestess peered into the distance. Her large blue eyes darkened somewhat. Nevertheless, she said resolutely:

"We'll leave as soon as possible. Time might be frozen here, but it still flows outside. It is better not to linger... otherwise, Fallen Grace might already be destroyed when we finally escape the disaster, and I would have failed in my task."

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

'Right... it is not too bad.‘

They had not been caught in the trap of frozen time yet. Ananke was proof — she had grown a bit younger after they had entered the eye of the storm, meaning that the circle of tranquil water was moving in relation to the unceasing current of the Great River. Since he had not turned even younger yet, they couldn't have been idling in the serene silence for too long. She was like their anchor in this beautiful and insidiously dreadful place.

'Thank the gods...'

Sunny suddenly wanted to laugh. He could have never imagined that he would be so desperate to dive back into the nightmarish havoc of the deathly storm, but here it was, the desire to escape the tranquil circle of frozen time, fast.

The future was truly unknowable, and one could never say never.

Nephis stirred at the bow of the ketch and looked at them, her expression stiff.

"I've been keeping an eye on the wall of the storm. We have drawn closer to the outer boundary, somewhat... but without the current, the ketch is moving too slowly. In fact, it is not moving at all. We will have to raise the sails and summon the wind."

It seemed that she had never lost track of their goal. Sunny sighed.

The nature of time might have changed, but Neph never did... at least the deepest reaches of her heart did not. She was still just like she had been all those years ago, beneath the branches of the Soul Devouring Tree. Back then, she had also spent all her time on the shore of the Ashen Barrow, looking west — even if she couldn't quite remember why. Her single—minded determination was something to rely on, as well.

It was ironic, really... a girl whose fate it was to bring change was the most unchanging thing in Sonny's life.

As he was thinking that, Ananke's shoulders fell slightly.

"Yes, my Lady. Just give me a moment, and I..."

Nephis shook her head.

"No. I Will summon the wind, and I will steer the ketch. I will guide us out of the storm

when we enter it, as well."

The child priestess looked up at her with a startled expression.

"But, my Lady!"

Neph stared at her somberly for a few moments, her gaze heavy. Eventually, she said bluntly:

"You have grown too weak, Ananke. I am sorry. Your body is not strong enough to handle the strain. You can‘t even reach the deck with your feet while sitting on the helmsman's bench... how are you going to control the oar?"

She looked down, then sighed. Walking up to the child priestess, Nephis patted her on the shoulder and forced out a smile.

"Don't worry. Isn't that why you taught me? You taught me well. I will steer the ketch while you keep the broken time at bay. Each of the three of us will make sure that we escape the storm alive."

With that, she threw a poignant look at Sunny. He felt sorry for Ananke, but knew that Nephis was right. Their guide... was not capable of guiding the boat through a raging storm anymore. Even if it hurt her pride and went against her determination, it was time for the two of them to protect Ananke instead of being protected by her.

They had to make sure that she survived the storm. And after that... they had to make sure that she had the means of returning to Weave, too.

'How did everything become so complicated...‘

The damned storm had thoroughly destroyed their plans. Now, all they could do was finish their battle against it, and then come up with new ones.

The strain on Sunny was going to increase, considering that he would be draining the water from the ketch alone this time. But he would have to manage, somehow. If there was one consolation, it was that half of the journey was already behind them. Knowing that each minute brought them closer to safety, he wouldn't need to preserve his essence as much.

Sunny smiled, then clapped his hands.

"Alright! Let's get out of the eye of the storm first. Honestly, this beautiful place... is way too creepy. I‘ll feel better once we're drowning in raging water and being battered by devastating winds. Wouldn't you?"

Not to mention that he was still struggling against an overwhelming desire to peer into the reflections frozen in the still water, consequences be damned.

Ananke lowered her head, despondent, but there was nothing she could say. Her small frame was indeed not suitable for steering the ketch through the powerful storm anymore. Transcendent or not, she was still a child now.

Feeling a sense of urgency, the three of them struggled against the lulling tranquility of the frozen time and hurried themselves, hoping to return to the crushing embrace of the storm as soon as possible.