1330 Floodgates

The time storm seemed even more violent the second time around. The deafening howling of the wind had grown deeper and louder, sounding more like a monstrous roar now. It was as if an enormous beast was struggling to break free of its chains somewhere below the waves, its voice reverberating across the entire world and shaking the heavens.

The sky itself seemed like it had been torn asunder and collapsed. A flood of boiling mist poured through its broken dam, devouring the seething surface of the Great River. The tiny speck of the wooden ketch flew through the howling abyss, surrounded by frenzied darkness. Sometimes, a thunderous crack would drown out the fury of the storm, as if the pillars of the world were fracturing and crumbling apart.

Then, a blinding flash of lightning would momentarily illuminate the turbulent expanse of dark water. Hidden by the mist, colossal waves rose and fell like black mountains, carrying with them an obliterating weight.

And those were only the outward manifestations of the harrowing storm. Sunny did not know what kind of destructive forces were clashing in the depths of the river below the ketch, but he could feel the nature of time turning more and more twisted around them.

Even protected by Ananke, he could feel his body and mind twist and crack with it. 'Argh...'

He failed to contend with the furious power of the wild current and was sent tumbling, colliding with the side of the ketch. Blinded by pain and ignoring it, Sunny reached out and caught the child priestess before she was washed overboard.

The ropes connecting them to the ketch became entangled, but it was the least of his problems right now.

The wooden boat was creaking and groaning around them, seemingly on the verge of breaking apart. Nephis had firmly planted herself at the stern, holding onto the steering oar with all her might. White flames were dancing in her eyes, and soft radiance rose from her skin, made vague and unclear by the veil of mist.

The ketch was falling from a towering wave, and Sunny felt weightless for a moment. His body was actually separated from the deck, drifting upward — he had to activate the Feather of Truth and make himself heavier in order to not be tossed into the air.

Placing himself between the wooden deck and Ananke, Sunny gritted his teeth. A moment later, the crushing impact of the fall came, knocking the wind out of him.

Hurt, suffocating, he whispered a quiet curse.

The ketch was filling up with water. How was he supposed to drain it if he couldn't even remain standing?

They had done well up until now... it was impossible to tell how long their dreadful journey through the storm had lasted, but judging by how tired and battered his body was, it couldn't have been a small amount of time. Despite that, there was no sign of the furious disaster growing any weaker.

In fact, it was only becoming more violent and dire. And now, his strength was failing him.

'I can't resist it with just my body anymore...'

Sunny knew that he had to conserve his essence as much as possible, yet the situation had become too desperate. Even if it was too soon, there was no other choice but to burn the bridges and open the floodgates, hoping that the storm would subside sooner than his reserves ran dry.

If not...

"It's going to be alright, Ananke... we'll just have to hold on for a little bit more..."

His whisper was too quiet for the child priestess to hear through the deafening roaring of the storm, but it made him feel stronger.

Pushing himself off the deck, Sunny threw a somber glance at Nephis.

Changing Star was standing at the stern of a ketch like a beautiful statue, surrounded by a white halo. Her slender figure, silhouetted by the fluttering fabric of the windswept tunic, was the only source of light in the ocean of seething darkness. Her face was pale and motionless, turned into a porcelain mask by the torment of her torturous Flaw.

Neph's eyes were grim and radiant, burning with furious resolve and cold determination.

She was struggling just as much as he was.

She was also just as stubborn and relentless as he was.

Together... they were going to overcome this terrible storm, despite it all.

Sunny pushed air into his burning lungs.

"And then for a little bit more... and a little bit more..."

Sparks of light ignited in the mist around him, coalescing into several Memories.

First, a serpentine crown of black metal appeared on his head. Then, a flute carved out of emerald bone appeared in his hand.

Sunny took a deep breath and activated the [Royal Promise] enchantment of the Crown of Twilight. Immediately, he felt a subtle connection form between him and the seething waters of the Great River. That connection was weak and insignificant... but it was strong enough for his goals.

Commanding the water like he did shadows, Sunny willed it to move.

The foaming water that filled the insides of the ketch, already reaching above his shins, suddenly stirred. Flowing in reverse, it tentatively crawled up the sides of the boat and spilled into the turbulent darkness beyond. One second passed, then another... a few heartbeats later, the remaining water was already not as deep as it had been before.

This method was certainly much more convenient than draining it one scoop of the iron bowl at a time. On the downside, he could feel his essence disappearing with a frightening speed, as well as a heavy strain pressing down on his already reeling mind.

'Heavy... it's heavy...'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny persisted. At the same time, he brought Bone Singer to his lips and blew into it. The next moment, a dome of blessed silence enveloped the ketch, sparing their ears from the staggering cacophony of the storm.

The sudden lack of deafening noise left him stunned.

Swaying, Sunny fell heavily to the deck and grabbed onto the side of the ketch, holding himself in place.

Outside, the havoc of the time cataclysm was the same. The small boat was still being tossed around by the raging current, flying up the towering waves and then plummeting down.

But inside, at least for a little while, there was silence and peace.

Taking a shaky breath, Sunny lowered his head and wondered how long he would be able to keep this peace in existence.

'Not long... it won't be long at all...'