1331 The Well of Wishes

Nephis continued to struggle against the storm, guiding them through the towering waves, but Sunny and Ananke received a moment of respite.

If it could even be called that... they were still inside the ketch, which was tossed around like a toy boat by the raging current. Sunny was using one hand and all of his tyrannical strength to keep himself in place while holding Ananke with the other.

But without the need to feverishly scoop out water, they at least could catch their breaths and remain motionless for a while — for as long as his essence lasted, that was.

Sunny leaned against the wet wood tiredly, consumed by bitter exhaustion. His chest was rising heavily.

'Not good...'

Being a Supreme Memory, the Crown of Twilight was a very powerful tool. But correspondingly, it consumed a lot of essence. It was going to take a few minutes for his tentative authority over water to drain the entire boat... after that, it would be unwise to keep sustaining the effect of the [Royal Promise].

He sighed.

What was even a minute? In this godforsaken storm, it was impossible to tell.

The effects of time being broken were still ravaging them. Sunny had already grown accustomed to seeing ghastly hallucinations impose themselves on the bodies of Nephis, Ananke, and himself. There were vague, harrowing shapes sometimes appearing from the mist, as well.

He could never discern their nature, but the glimpses of unknown figures and events filled him with a deep sense of terror.

Were they twisted fragments of the past? Of the future? Or something else entirely, that had crawled into the world through the rifts in the broken framework of the absolute law?

He did not know, and did not wish to know. 'Perhaps this is how Cassie feels...'

There were shadows, as well. They were just as twisted and perverse as the rest of things within the time storm. He had already limited the range of his shadow sense as much as it was possible, but he could still feel them... the chilling wrongness of them... and couldn't help but shudder.

Sunny felt grim and hopeless.

...At that moment, a childish voice distracted him from his dark thoughts. "M—my Lord?"

He stirred and looked down, at the small figure of the child priestess.

Ananke had grown even younger. Now, she looked like a girl of maybe seven years of age, tired and afraid. Her mind must have regressed further, too. She was still maintaining the bubble of stability around the ketch, but... it felt weaker.

She looked more like an actual child than a wise Saint trapped in the body of one, as well.

Sunny forced out a weak smile and asked, trying to keep his tone soft: "What is it?"

Ananke lingered for a while, seemingly embarrassed. Eventually, though, she whispered in a small voice:

"I'm... scared." Those words...

They cut Sunny like a knife. The proud priestess he knew would have never allowed herself to say something like that to a person she considered her ward. The fact that she had... meant that Ananke was gone further than he thought.

His heart grasped by the icy claws of anger and regret, Sunny struggled to keep his bitter emotions away from his face. His smile froze.

"There's... no need to be afraid, Ananke. We will escape this storm, the three of us. I am sure of it. See?"

He pointed to the water, which was flowing out of the ketch on its own.

What he had said to the child priestess was not a lie. Sunny desperately believed that they would, indeed, survive the time storm. Or rather... he had fooled himself into believing that.

He might not have been able to lie to others, but lying to himself? That was the easiest thing in the world.

Ananke grew quiet, seemingly calmed a little by his words. However, her small face was still sick with fear. After a few moments, she asked again, her voice tentative:

"My Lord?"

Sunny pulled her closer to him, struggling against the sudden movements of the ketch. "Yes?"

She hesitated a little.

"Might you... tell me a fairy tale?"

He froze, startled by her request. It was natural for a distressed child to want to hear a fairy tale... probably.

'Right?'

The problem was, Sunny couldn't remember any. The only one that he could think of was the strange tale of the wooden boy that Nephis had told him about. But considering its macabre ending, he didn't think it was very suitable to tell that one to Ananke.

He shifted slightly, then said softly:

"I'm sorry... I don't think I know any fairy tales."

The child priestess lowered her head.

"Oh..."

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"...How about you tell me one, instead?"

Ananke looked at him in surprise, her large azure eyes widening. "Me?"

He nodded with an encouraging smile.

"Yes. Which one is your favorite?"

The child priestess stared at him, sparks slowly igniting in her eyes. She seemed to have forgotten about the terrifying fury of the storm, at least for a moment.

A tentative smile brightened her small face.

"Oh! It is... it is about the Well of Wishes."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, acting as if he was paying rapt attention to her words. "The Well of Wishes, huh?"

Ananke nodded seriously.

"Yes. They say that the world was born from a wish. And so, a Well of Wishes is hidden at the estuary of the River... because it flows back in time, to the moment when the world was born. Anyone who reaches there will have their most dear wish come true."

Sunny tilted his head, surprised by the strange logic of the fairy tale — both by how odd it was, and that there strangely was logic to it at all.

'In the beginning, there was desire...'

Was it so wrong to say that the world was born from a wish?

As the water left the ketch and his essence burned, the child priestess continued with a smile:

"There was once a brave girl who was separated from her mother by the currents. The girl couldn't meet her mother, because she was Riverborn. But... she found a magic ship, which allowed her to sail the River just like an Outsider..."

As the storm raged around them, Ananke told him about the incredible adventures of the Riverborn girl in her small, childish voice. By the time the Riverborn girl found her Outsider mother, the mother had grown weak and frail from old age. Knowing that time would separate them again soon, forever, the girl sailed for the Estuary.

Ananke's voice had grown excited.

"...And finally, she found the Well of Wishes. The girl's wish was to be with her mom, and so, the Well made her mother Riverborn as well. She returned upstream on her magic ship, and they lived together happily, forever..."

She looked at him expectantly, all worry gone from her face.

Sunny held her close, feeling the violent forces of the storm trying to throw the battered ketch down.

"That... is a wonderful fairy tale, Ananke. I liked it a lot." The child priestess smiled.

"You are an Outsider too, my Lord. You don't even need a magic ship to reach the Estuary! Maybe... maybe you can find the Well of Wishes, too..."

He didn't have the heart to tell her that what waited in the Estuary was the source of the Defilement, and not a magical well that granted everyone their dearest wishes.

Instead, Sunny lingered for a while. Eventually, he nodded.

"Yes... wouldn't that be nice? Maybe I'll really find the Well of Wishes and have my greatest wish come true, one day. Who's to say I won't?"

He smiled.

The Well of Wishes...

Sunny tensed, feeling the approach of an impact. It was a beautiful fairy tail, indeed.