1332 Splinters

The ketch was thrown into the air by the powerful current, like it had been a thousand times already, and then plummeted down. Bruised and battered, Sunny gritted his teeth and prepared to endure the violent shock of the impact — just like he had endured a thousand of them already.

The seething water seemed as hard as stone when the bottom of the wooden boat hit it. He held on to the side of the ketch, feeling a grim sense of fatigue and hopelessness overwhelm his mind. The darkness was as oppressive as it had been before, the mist was as blinding as it had been before, and the fury of the storm was as chillingly dreadful as it had been before.

However, this impact was different from all the previous ones.

...Sunny failed to see the moment the wood split, but he heard it. Even through the howling of the hurricane wind and the roaring of the falling waves, the cracking sound seemed clear and deafening.

By the time he turned, Nephis was already falling. She hit the deck with a dull thump, leaving a streak of blood on it, and tumbled forward. A split second later, her back hit the protruding fittings of the dismantled mast, violently arresting her fall.

A stifled groan escaped from her lips. 'What... what happened?!'

It took Sunny a moment to notice a jagged piece of broken wood that she was gripping with both hands, still, her knuckles white. Then, he hurriedly glanced at the stern of the ketch.

His pupils narrowed.

The steering oar... was gone. There was only the piece Nephis was holding and a scattering of wet splinters on the deck. The rest of it had shattered, and was washed away by the raging current.

Sunny froze for a moment, both terrified and relieved — relieved because it was not the deck itself that had cracked, terrified because the ketch had become completely uncontrollable now.

The next wave was already approaching, and with no one to steer the boat to face it directly, it was going to hit them from the side. Which meant that the ketch would most likely roll.

Even if it didn't immediately, there would be the next wave, and the next, and the next... and a thousand more after that.

Without a helmsman leading the ketch through the storm, they were doomed. 'Curse it!'

There was no time to think, so he just acted on instinct.

Releasing the enchantments of the Crown of Twilight and the Bone Singer, Sunny called upon the shadows instead.

A tide of them poured out of the small stone lantern that hung on his belt, filling the ketch. There had already been shadows there, but all of them were twisted and broken, turned wrong and eerie by the ravages of broken time. Sunny wasn't sure that he could communicate with these shadows, and so, he summoned more reliable helpers from within the Shadow Lantern.

The cacophony of the storm returned with a deafening vengeance, hitting Sunny like a physical force.

The rolling wave reached their small boat and dove underneath it, sending the ketch rising into the dark vastness of the raging mist. The deck tilted dangerously underneath him, threatening to send Sunny and Ananke overboard.

Nephis slid in their direction before grabbing onto the fitting of the mast.

As they were being simultaneously thrown into the air and pulled into the water, the shadows surged forward. They flowed over the sides of the wooden boat, enveloping it like a black shroud.

Then, the shadows solidified, turning the ketch into an improvised ark. The opening above the deck was closed completely, cutting off the streaming water and the crushing blows of the wind.

All that remained inside were wisps of swirling mist and the darkness, pierced by the soft radiance emanating from Neph's skin.

...However, the ketch was still tilting as it climbed higher and higher. Soon, it was going to crest the wave and either overturn, or plummet back down into the raging waters.

Sunny let out a low growl, then pushed himself and Ananke off the side of the boat and scaled the tilting deck, grabbing the fittings of the mast next to Nephis. A moment later, shadows wrapped themselves around the three of them like bonds, pressing them into the wet wood.

The shadows were like a firm, but elastic harness that would prevent them from flying around the dark interior of the ketch when it inevitably rolled.

Which happened a few seconds later.

Sunny experienced a few moments of weightlessness, his body pressing against the harness, then the familiar trauma of the crash. The cold water — what little of it remained after he had drained it with the help of the Crown of Twilight — flowed across the closed interior of the shadow-veiled boat, pouring into his mouth and nose.

But at least the cocoon of shadows he had created held. It protected the ketch from being turned into splinters, and them from being thrown overboard or drowned.

For now.

But how long could Sunny keep shielding their vessel from the rage of the storm?

His reserves of essence were already breached, a lot of it spent by the Crown of Twilight.

Well... one way or another, they were going to find out.

As the ark of shadows was being carried by the raging current, Sunny, Nephis, and Ananke tried desperately to endure the arduous strain of being tossed around by the harrowing cataclysm.

Sunny and Nephis were laying on the wet deck, secured to it by the bonds of shadows, keeping Ananke's small body between them. Pressed tightly against each other, the three of them had no other choice but to suffer the painful impacts of the waves and cling to the last, desperate vestiges of hope.

The violence of the storm, the bone-chilling cold of the mist, and the muffled roars of the wind filled their hearts with dread.

'We will survive this... we will...'

Sunny kept repeating these words inside his head, as if trying to will them into existence.

His reserve of essence was diminishing slightly with each minute. And so were their chances of making it out of the storm alive.