1333 Farewells, The Storm

As Sunny was struggling to keep both himself and Ananke whole in the furious grinder of the storm, he could feel her small body trembling. His own body was soaked in cold water and chilled to the bone. At the same time, he could feel the Neph's radiance breathing warmth into it.

It was more than just warmth, too.

Knowing that it was his shadows that were keeping them safe, Nephis sent her flames to engulf Sunny, strengthening both his body and soul. Most of her light was transferred to him, while the last wisp gently caressed the child priestess.

As the white flame surrounded Ananke, the numerous scrapes and bruises covering her small figure instantly healed. She seemed to relax a little.

...Nephis herself, though, was left devoid of any protection.

The two of them were very close, their arms wrapped around each other, with only the trembling child between them. Resting his head on the wet wood of the deck, Sunny silently looked into Neph's eyes.

They were lightless and tired, numbed by torment and pain. There was nothing to say.

There was nothing to do, either. The three of them just had to suffer, endure, and pray that Sunny's essence lasted longer than the storm did.

It was more easily said than done.

The shadow ark was being shaken and tossed around by the raging elements like a ball. Even though the harness he had created held them in place, it was still a torturous experience. Sunny had to strain all his muscles to lessen the shock of the terrible impacts, holding on to the mast fittings with all his might.

That task was not in any way easier than the draining and laborious process of scooping up water with an iron bowl. In fact, it was much harder, because he couldn't even stand. He had to protect Ananke, as well.

Being lost in the depths of a cataclysmic storm was not much different from the few moments of destructive havoc he had experienced when the explosives beneath Falcon Scott were detonated. Only, this time, the havoc was going to last much, much longer... hours, most likely, or even days.

Not that these words held any meaning anymore.

The volatile currents of broken time that surrounded them were only growing more wild and unstable. Sunny could feel their sickening influence through the protective bubble that Ananke was still maintaining around the ketch. His thoughts had become tangled, and it was hard to maintain focus.

But he had to... he had to keep the manifested shadows intact, continuously willing their shapes into existence and repairing any damage done to the improvised ark. If Sunny lost concentration, all three of them were going to die.

'Come on... we have already reached so far! Just a little bit more! Just a little!' It was just that he struggled to remain concentrated more and more.

The ravages of broken time were growing fiercer, but the protections conjured by Ananke were growing weaker.

Soon, Sunny found himself unable to tell when was before and when was after. All that remained was the current moment, the pain in his battered body, the cold mist that stuck to his skin, the warmth of Neph's flame burning softly in the depths of his being, and the tactile sensations of her and Ananke's bodies pressed against his own.

All he could do was cling to these sensations, to his connection to the shadows, and find strength in their silent presence.

'I have to hold on... I have to...'

But then, slowly, even these feelings grew vague and chaotic.

The storm of broken time invaded his mind completely, extinguishing Sunny's ability to be aware of the world. He was left in a torturous state that was not consciousness, but also not the merciful oblivion of losing it.

'Have... to... hold...'

And then, the torture dissipated, as well. There was no time.

There was no world.

There was only the storm.

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A moment passed.

Or maybe an eternity.

He did not know, nor was he able to know.

The world was swaying gently. Its swaying was like a lullaby.

The world smelled of wet wood... and emptiness. The world was dark.

Sunny was lost comfortably in a sea of darkness.

But then, bright sunlight shone through his eyelids, painting the darkness red. '...Sunlight?'

Torn from the embrace of comfort by sudden panic, Sunny opened his eyes and sat up with a start.

'No, no, no...'

His aching body screamed from the sudden motion.

His first thought was that his shadow barrier had dissipated. Otherwise, it wouldn't have let sunlight into the ketch... meaning that they were going to be drowned by the storm in a few moments.

But then, Sunny froze.

Why was there sunlight? How could there be, in the roaring darkness of the storm? It was then that he finally saw the world.

...The beautiful azure sky was clear, with not a cloud in sight. The seven suns hung in its vast expanse, shining softly.

The surface of the Great River was calm and tranquil, its current as steady as it was supposed to be. The flowing water sparkled as it reflected the sunlight.

The shadow barrier had indeed disappeared, but the ketch... was intact.

Sunny took a shaky breath.

They had cleared the storm. They escaped. "We... we did it."

His whisper was hoarse and quiet.

For a moment, his heart was drowned by a wave of joy and exhilaration.

"We did it!"

...But then, a nameless emotion enveloped him in a cold embrace.

Sunny shivered.

'What... why...'

"Nephis? Ananke?"

He rose to his knees and looked around, searching for their familiar figures.

Neph was there, sitting tiredly with her back against the side of the ketch. But...

A dull, tearing pain suddenly pierced his heart.

'No...'

Sunny's shoulders fell.

'No...'

Ananke... was nowhere to be seen.

The child priestess had disappeared, leaving behind no trace.

All that remained was an empty black mantle that lay on the deck, orphaned and forlorn.

Crawling a step forward, Sunny clutched the mantle and raised it, staring at the dark fabric with hollow eyes.

He remained kneeling for a few moments, unable to move... or think... or feel.

Sunny's soul felt cold, cold... colder even than he had felt in the snowy field outside Falcon Scott.

As he looked at the black mantle, frozen, two hands wrapped themselves around his shoulders, and Nephis hugged him from behind.

"She's gone."

The warmth of her body and the softness of her voice... were like execution's axe. Sunny trembled.

Neph held him tighter, as if unwilling to let go.

"The storm must have carried us too deep into the past, far beyond where she was born. And so... she's gone. I'm sorry, Sunny."

The black mantle slipped from his fingers. Looking down, Sunny gasped for breath.

'But we survived... we survived the storm! Why...'

His vision blurred.

After a while, consumed by pain, he whispered:

"...I am sorry, too."