1335 After the Storm

The Great River was like it had always been — vast, dreamlike, and ceaseless. Its current gently carried the ketch forward, as if the harrowing storm had never happened. The seven suns slowly traveled across the azure sky, which was painted lilac in the east and vibrant crimson in the west.

For a while, Nephis and Sunny remained idle. Their bodies were still reeling from the terrible battle against the raging elements, and so were their minds. The invasive violence of broken time had left them drained and fragile.

Their hearts felt hollow, too.

Sunny silently lay on the wooden deck, staring at the sky. His head was empty, full of nothing but the sensation of a dull ache that radiated from all across his battered body.

It was good to hurt. Pain reminded him that he was alive.

There was the smell of wet wood, the peaceful sound of waves splashing against the sides of the ketch, and the warm sunlight. Most noteworthy of all, there was time.

He had never been aware of just how important the sense of time was before experiencing its absence. And why would he? People did not usually pay attention to immutable things, simply taking them for granted. But as it turned out, those things were not as absolute when higher beings were involved.

Now that they had escaped the storm, the natural flow of time returned in all its glory. Its reliable presence felt... reassuring. Time was at peace once again.

Time flowed.

Eventually, the dull ache permeating his body subsided. The pain in his heart grew duller, as well. New sensations took their place.

Thirst, hunger... caution, determination.

Sunny still felt numb, but his mind was slowly recovering. He lingered for a while longer, then sat up with a quiet sigh.

The vista of the Great River around them was exactly as before the storm... which posed a bit of a problem.

Some time later, Sunny and Nephis were sitting at the bow of the ketch, looking soberly at several strange tools laying on the deck in front of them. One looked like a bronze astrolabe, another was akin to a sextant, and the third resembled a strange compass. All these had been gifted to them by Ananke, and were meant for navigating the Great River.

Of course, the first one was not really an astrolabe, since there were no stars in the Tomb of Ariel. The second one could be considered a sextant, but the set of principles it was supposed to work on was entirely different from the waking world. The third one could indeed show direction, but it was between past, future, dawn, and dusk instead of north, south, east, and west.

Sunny and Nephis had learned a fair deal about how to use these tools, but not about why they worked. The Great River was not a sphere, like Earth was, and it didn't revolve around a star. Instead, seven artificial suns revolved around the river. Nevertheless, there seemed to be some sort of curvature to it, which neither of them could explain.

It was all a mystery.

Before, Ananke had been their navigator, but now that she was gone, Sunny and Nephis had to chart the course themselves.

Hence, the somber expressions. Nephis sighed.

"It doesn't make sense. According to this, we are much further downstream than we were supposed to be... weeks worth of sailing away from the Lower House."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"There was still a current when we were inside the storm. Sure, it was wild and chaotic... but the water still flowed in a single direction. Much faster than usual, at that. So, maybe the storm carried us all the way here."

She frowned.

"But we didn't spend weeks inside it. Did we?"

He hesitated, not knowing what to say. Time had been broken within the storm, so it was impossible to tell how long they had been fighting against it. It could have been days, or hours... or months. Especially considering the insidious nature of the frozen time in the eye of the storm.

Distance was equally hard to measure. They had to have been not too far from Weave up until the point when Ananke's protections failed. After that, both Sunny and Nephis had been completely out of their minds for Spell knew how long, losing all awareness of the world.

He grimaced.

"I have no idea, but the fact remains. We are much further downstream than anticipated. So what? It's good news, really. It means that we are already halfway to Fallen Grace."

And its sybil, Dusk.

Fallen Grace was situated in the distant past — not that far from the span of the Great River that corresponded to when the sybils had entered the Tomb of Ariel at the height of the Doom War. A long journey still awaited Sunny and Nephis if they wanted to reach the last human city, but half of it seemed to already be behind them.

Which was indeed a piece of great news, since the battered ketch did not look like it would be able to survive the perils of the Great River for much longer.

Nephis lingered for a while, then nodded.

"You're right. If everything goes well, we might reach our destination in a couple of weeks."

Her face darkened.

"However, what are the chances that it will? Even though this region of the Great River should be safer than the one we come from, it is by no means safe."

Without Ananke, they were not going to be able to mask the presence of the ketch from the dwellers of the depths as efficiently. There were battles ahead of them, without a doubt... and while the abominations were supposed to be less powerful downstream, the chances of stumbling onto the Defiled increased.

Sunny looked at the wooden deck beneath him with a complicated expression. The ketch had endured a lot in the storm. Too much, really. The fact that it was still in one piece spoke volumes about the craftsmanship of the person who had built it.

But would it survive a clash with a frenzied Nightmare Creature? What about one after that, and one after that?

His face turned grim.

'...I don't think it will.'

Nephis seemed to be thinking the same. They were both worried. However, there was nothing they could do.

Their only choice was to set sail, and pray to the dead gods.

Full of somber apprehension, Sunny and Nephis got to work without delay.

They raised the two masts back into position and fastened the sails to them. The steering oar was gone, so they fashioned a new one from the repair materials stored inside the Covetous Coffer, affixing it at the stern of the ketch with the help of one of Neph's Memories, the Dark Shaper.

Then, she spoke the Names taught to her by Ananke and summoned the winds. The ketch flew downstream once again, cutting the clear waters with its bow. ...Only now, there were two people inside of it instead of three.

Sunny's heart ached.

The Great River glistened as the seven suns shone brightly on its vast expanse. Time slowly passed, the interior of the boat full of tense silence. While Nephis struggled to sustain the forward momentum of the ketch, Sunny stood at the bow and peered into the water, hoping to sense a potential attack before it was too late.

However, they had not seen any Nightmare Creatures that day.

Instead... they saw something that made both Sunny and Nephis freeze, paralyzed by shock.

Looking at the dark silhouette that appeared in the distance, floating aimlessly on the waves, they felt an eerie sense of rejection. As if the world surrounding them was nothing but a dream...

Eventually, Sunny flinched and asked, his voice full of disbelief:

"What... what the hell is it doing here?"