1393 Vortex

Soon, all three of them were sitting side by side, with the slate resting on the table in front of them. Cassie was tracing her fingers across the stone surface, a focused look on her face.

After a while, she slowly nodded.

"The coordinates match. It is indeed the right place."

The blind girl was much more proficient in navigating the Great River, considering how much longer she had spent here than Sunny and Nephis. She was also the one who had learned the transcript system of the sybils and pinned down where Effie and Jet were trapped, in the first place.

"Wind Flower, huh..."

Sunny looked at the slate. There were neat columns of symbols engraved on it, as well as an image of a messy circle with frayed edges. It resembled a vortex more than anything, or maybe a cyclone. After studying it for a few moments, he reached out and turned the slate over.

Familiar runes covered its reverse side. Without wasting any time, the three Masters read them.

Pretty soon, Sunny's expression darkened.

'...The currents of the River are twisted and treacherous near Wind Flower. Strong gales violently assaulted our ship, as if trying to push it back. Desperate to escape our pursuers, we persisted, entering deeper into the mist. The surrounding waters moved in the wrong direction and with unnatural speed. It was as if we had lost our way and found ourselves near the Edge.

At some point, we were not struggling against the repelling winds anymore. Instead, overcome by fear, we were battling the raging tide that pulled us deeper and deeper, toward the source of the wind...'

The first part of the text engraved into the reverse side of the slate was an excerpt from a report made by one of the Outsiders who had lived in Fallen Grace. He ventured on a long journey with a small fleet, hoping to find out the fate of a different city, one of the last with which Fallen Grace still maintained a connection... until the visitors and merchant ship from that city had stopped coming, as well.

The fleet managed to learn that the city had been destroyed, but on their way back, they were attacked by powerful Defiled abominations. After a furious battle, only three ships managed to escape. Pursued by the enemies, they were forced to enter the dangerous waters around Wind Flower.

'...For a few moments, the mist cleared, allowing me to glimpse the true nature of the tide. We were hopelessly caught inside a whirlpool of titanic proportions, which spun around a bottomless and dark abyss. There was an island hovering above the darkness, with a tall and magnificent tower rising above the misty cliffs.

Terror grasped our hearts when we realized that the tide was pulling us into the darkness. Desperate to save our lives, we tried to escape...'

In the end, only one of the three ships managed to fight its way out. The other two were swallowed by the vortex, never to be seen again.

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"So... it's a giant whirlpool."

Something like that would explain how Effie and Jet had ended up stranded. If the vessel they were traveling on had been pulled into the monstrous vortex and destroyed, they would have no way of getting out again... or rather, no way of getting out again without some great luck.

It seemed that they had reached the flying island at the center instead of being crushed in the depths, at least. The fact that Crow Crow was around to deliver messages proved that.

Cassie silently shook her head.

"Not just a giant whirlpool. Don't forget that the Great River is a river of time... any anomaly of its current is not a mundane one. There has to be something strange going on at Wind Flower, as well."

Nephis nodded.

"But what?"

Since none of them knew the answer, they turned back to the slate. The rest of the runes on its reverse side contained notes made by the priests and priestesses who had served the sybils.

The information they had recorded was not too helpful, though, due to the fact that almost no one returned from Wind Flower alive. That, however, was valuable knowledge in and of itself.

The place called Wind Flower had not always been known by that name. Its previous one, however, was long lost. The magnificent tower the Outsider from the Fallen Grace mentioned had been a stronghold of a powerful Seeker once — there had been plenty of them throughout the Tomb of Ariel before the foundation of Verge.

It was unknown whether the Seeker had left the citadel to challenge the Estuary, still resided there, or perished a long time ago. All that the sybils of Fallen Grace knew was that, at some point, no one could approach the citadel anymore.

There was only one exception that they had heard of... A familiar name.

'The Serpent King...'

It was rumored that the Serpent King — Daeron of the Twilight Sea —had reached the stronghold and spent some time there, then returned to lead his people in the war against the Defilement.

Sunny stared at the runes with a thoughtful expression.

They had not learned all the secrets of Wind Flower from the slate, exactly. But they had learned two crucial pieces of information.

First, that it was possible to brave its danger and come back in one piece — the Serpent King had proved it.

Second...

He looked at Nephis, then at Cassie, and said:

"At least we know the general nature of that place. Fighting against the whirlpool will be hard, but doable. The problem, though, is that the island is floating above its chasm. So, if we don't want to be pulled into the depths and killed... the Chain Breaker has to be able to fly by the time we reach Wind Flower. Cassie, can you repair it in time?"

The blind girl frowned and remained silent for a few long moments. Eventually, she slowly shook her head.

"No... there is not enough time, nor is there enough resources to fully restore the enchantments of the ship by then."

As Sunny's expression grew somber, she hesitated a bit, and added:

"However... I think there is something I can do."

Cassie stood up and paced for about a minute, thinking about something furiously.

"Yes... yes, that can work, too... I'll need to..."

Finally, she stopped and spoke again:

"I can't restore the connection between the sacred tree and the enchantment circle in time, but I can repair the circle itself, I think."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"What would it mean?"

The blinded girl pointed to the deck.

"It means that the sorcery that allows the ship to fly will be fully functional. It's just that it would not have a source of power. But... we can use our own essence to fuel the enchantment, limited as it is. The Chain Breaker won't stay in the air for long, nor will it be fast, but it will carry us to that island and back."

She scratched her head awkwardly, and then added in a small voice:

"...Probably."

Sunny stared at her for a while, then let out an amused chuckle.

The odds, as always, were against them. But when had it been any different?

He shrugged.

"Good enough."