1398 Braving the Barrier

Soon, they were deep into the barrier surrounding Wind Rose. There was nothing but blinding mist, hurricane winds, and violent currents in this dreadful and deadly place. Sunny could easily imagine countless ships being drowned by the inconceivable whirlpool... powerful Nightmare Creatures, as well.

No wonder almost no one returned after being swallowed by the mist.

And yet...

The fury of the wind was terrible — but not terrible enough to sway them. Nephis had invoked the True Name of the wind, lessening the pressure on the graceful ship. The Chain Breaker stubbornly cut through the mist, refusing to be pushed back.

The violence of the raging currents was daunting — but not daunting enough to stop them. Guided by Cassie's steady hand, the Chain Breaker broke through the fortress wall of the towering waves, never straying off course.

By then, the natural flow of the Great River was replaced entirely by a terrifying tide that was pulling them deeper and deeper into the mist. The deck beneath their feet was tilted downward, indicating that they were sliding into the giant, insatiable maw of the colossal whirlpool.

Instead of allowing the ship to be carried by the current, Cassie kept its bow pointed perpendicular to the rush of seething water, cutting as short a line to the center of the vortex as possible. It took a lot of effort to keep the Chain Breaker under control, but she managed it splendidly.

It was still too early to take to the sky.

Sunny and Nephis had long joined Cassie at the stern. Fiend and Crow Crow were hiding under the sacred tree, both soaked in water and miserable, while Nightmare had dissolved into shadows and hid in their dark embrace. Only Saint remained on the bow of the ship, standing there like an immovable onyx statue. The plume of her helmet danced in the wind.

It was easy to get lost in the mist, but the radiance of the Guiding Light was showing them the way.

Straining against the howling wind, Sunny yelled:

"How much longer?!"

His shout was swallowed by the mist.

At almost the same time, though, the veil of fog was torn apart for a few brief moments.

When Sunny saw the scale and magnitude of the vortex they were trying to brave, his face turned ashen. The whirlpool was indeed colossal, stretching as far as the eye could see. The raging tide moved in a vast circle, forming a revolving crater. They were currently sliding recklessly down its slope.

Far away and below them, a harrowing darkness devoured the world. The depths of the Great River lay naked and revealed, but his human eyes were not capable of discerning what dwelled below.

Or maybe there was nothing there at all. Just an endless, bottomless abyss.

However, there was an island hovering in the air above the darkness. Flowing mist shrouded its dark cliffs, and a magnificent tower rose from somewhere far inland, obscured by fog.

The sight of the island was both austere and sinister, like a stark omen of ill fate.

"Hurry!"

Cassie let go of the steering oar and stepped out of the circle, allowing Nephis to take her place. Neph was there a split second later. She took both steering oars and looked ahead, white flames dancing in her eyes.

Then, her radiant essence poured into the runic circle, flooding the enchantments of the ancient vessel with incinerating power.

Sunny yelped and grabbed a railing. In the next moment, the Chain Breaker shook slightly... and soared into the air.

'It... it's working!'

The graceful vessel was not flying nearly as fast as it had been able to before, and its flight was not nearly as smooth. But they were indeed in the air, moving toward the distant island.

When Cassie and the Fire Keepers had restored the ancient flying ship to a shadow of its former glory, it had already been an incredible feat. But that had taken them almost a year, with dozens of people lending a hand.

The fact that the blind girl now managed to achieve so much alone and in the span of a few weeks was truly remarkable.

And it gave them the chance to accomplish their goal.

Of course, it was still unclear if the Chain Breaker would be able to maintain its flight for long enough. Would they reach Wind Flower island?

Or would they plummet into the darkness and be crushed by the dreadful vortex?

'Only one way to find out...'

Sunny turned his head and looked at Nephis, who was holding the steering oars, her eyes shining with a brilliant white radiance. He could sense a flood of essence pouring out of her soul like a shining torrent... that essence was absorbed by the runic circle and flowed through the enchanted lines stretching throughout the ship, feeding its enchantments with power.

There was no hint of doubt on Neph's face, and so, he decided to throw away his doubts away, as well.

A few moments later, the shroud of mist obscured everything once again. Only the glow of the Guiding Light was there to show them the way... the Chain Breaker sailed through the blinding fog, with only the rustle of countless leaves proving that the sacred tree still existed somewhere out there, near them, hidden from sight.

'Come on, come on...'

They didn't have to struggle against the current anymore, but the hurricane winds were still raging. They slammed into the hull of the ship with vicious force, trying to push it back.

Because of it, the speed of the Chain Breaker fell even more.

'Damn it!'

Sunny had been counting the seconds. It had already been a full minute since the moment Nephis stepped into the circle... more than they had been able to fly in the tentative test the day before.

The radiance of her eyes was dimming.

And yet...

Suddenly, Nephis moved and smoothly raised one of the oars. At the same time, the Chain Breaker began to descend.

Gradually, the fury of the winds was extinguished.

The mist was still obscuring the world...

But then, the ancient vessel finally fell onto soft, white sand.

There was a violent crash, but the hull of the Chain Breaker withstood the impact. The runic circle fell dormant once again, and the enchantments lost all power. There was nothing but mist around them... and silence.

They had reached Wind Flower.