1452 Path to Salvation

Wind Flower walked along the path in the forest, with Sunny following behind. Although he was certain that there was a long way to go, they arrived at the hidden bay in mere minutes.

It looked... different without the gloomy mist obscuring everything in sight. The white sand sparkled in the bright daylight, and the black cliffs cast deep shadows on the beach. For the first time, Sunny noticed how similar to the Nightmare Desert this place looked.

The Chain Breaker was nowhere to be seen in Wind Flower's dream, but the line of lonesome footprints was still there, leading to the edge of the island.

Sunny stared at it for a moment, then asked out of idle curiosity: "Whose footprints are these?"

The charming Saint smiled.

"Whose else? Aletheia's. That is where she left the island. It happened countless years ago, of course... but because of how twisted time is here, it also just happened yesterday."

He scratched the back of his head. "I... see."

So, the footprints belonged to the First Seeker. Sunny honestly did not know what to think of that.

Hiding his unease, he pointed to a particular spot on the beach.

"This is where our ship crashed. Right... it's a flying ship. But currently, it can only fly during dusk and dawn. As soon as I find a way to get the fifth member of our cohort back, we'll wait for the right time and fly away."

His expression darkened.

"Of course, there's also that... thing in the sky above the island. I'll need to find a way to escape from it, as well."

Wind Flower looked at him and remained silent for a while. Then, she sighed.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Sunless... but even if you get your companion back, you won't be able to escape the island."

His heart skipped a beat.

Staring at the beautiful Saint incredulously, Sunny lingered for a few moments before opening his mouth.

Eventually, though, he asked grimly: "Oh? And why is that?"

Wind Flower shrugged.

"It's just how it is. Nothing can escape Aletheia's Island the way it came. The whirlpool simply does not release anything once it's caught in its maw... no one is powerful enough to defeat its current. At least no one in the Tomb of Ariel. Flying won't help, either — the winds will throw you down."

Sunny was not amused.

He stared at her some more, then sighed.

"That's a bit contradictory, don't you think, my lady? You said it yourself. Your father, the Serpent King, did escape this island."

She nodded.

"He did. However, I never said that he was strong enough to overcome the pull of the vortex."

Sunny's expression dimmed.

If the monstrous sea serpent he had fought was not powerful enough to swim out of the colossal whirlpool, then who was?

"So how did he leave?"

Wind Flower simply pointed down. 'What is that supposed to mean...'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, staring at the white sand beneath her feet. Then, his eyes slowly widened.

"Do you mean... that the only way to escape the island is to dive into the vortex?"

She smiled.

"Indeed. Granted, surviving what is hidden below the island is not much

easier than braving the whirlpool... but your flying ship should be sturdy

enough to make it through. And you have the Guiding Light to show you the way."

He frowned.

"What is hidden below the island?" Wind Flower lingered for a bit.

"Nothing much, really. Just the depths of the Great River, and all the horrors that dwell in them. Usually, diving that deep would mean certain death, but the vortex... it creates a tunnel, of sorts. As long as you don't plunge into the water, you'll be fine."

Sunny was not at all happy about how nonchalant she sounded. Falling into a mystical tunnel that led to the depths of the bottomless Great River? Staying clear of the water? What about these obviously lethal things, exactly, told her that they would be fine?

He sighed.

"And what's on the other side of the tunnel?" The beautiful Saint hesitated.

"Should be... the inner wall of the pyramid. You'll have to be careful once you reach it, because there are bound to be dangers there. But the important point is that one can make their way back to the Great River by following the inner wall. At least that was what my father believed... and since he did make it back to Twilight alive, he must have been correct."

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Should be? You are not certain?" Wind Flower chuckled.

"How can I be certain? I never left this island myself. However, others, like my father, did."

'Others...'

So, there was someone else who had come to Aletheia's Island and left, not just the Serpent King. Sunny did not miss that detail.

...He hadn't missed the fact that Wind Flower mentioned the Guiding Light, either. He had never told her about the sacred staff of the sybils, or that it was in their possession. So how did the beautiful Saint know about it?

More and more things about her seemed strange. The wariness he had felt before suddenly returned. Sunny remained silent for a while, then said evenly:

"Even if I am willing to try diving into the vortex, the problem remains. I need to get Effie... the fifth member of my cohort... back to the ship before the loop ends, first. And currently, I see no way to do it."

He grimaced.

"There are too many powerful Nightmare Creatures on the island. There are two Defiled horrors that are even more dangerous than them, as well. There is that thing in the sky. I can't deal with all that in a single day."

Wind Flower looked at him with a curious smile.

"What if you had more time?"

Sunny contemplated her question seriously, then shrugged.

"It would be hard, but not impossible. The problem is not that the enemies are too powerful — if I can't kill them, I can at least run and hide. I can come up with countermeasures and make use of their weaknesses. I can make them fight each other and escape while they do. The problem is that all of this requires time... and there is no time. Even though it loops endlessly on this island, there's not enough time for me to achieve my goals."

The beautiful Saint studied him for a while, then nodded.

Her next words sent a shiver running down Sunny's spine. Smiling pleasantly, Wind Flower said:

"Well... then you just need to destroy the loop."