1485 Traveresing the Vortex

Traveling through the twisting underwater tunnel was a constant struggle... but, strangely enough, it was mostly safe. Just as Wind Flower had said, as long as the Chain Breaker did not touch the water, there was little inside the vortex that could threaten them.

If the flying ship did touch the spinning walls of the tunnel, though, death was all but guaranteed — not only because of the terrible current and the obliterating pressure, but also because causing even the smallest ripple was going to alert the harrowing beings dwelling in the unfathomable depth of the Great River of their presence.

Staying away from the walls was not challenging at first, but the deeper they descended, the more perilous that situation became. The tunnel grew narrower, while its twists became more frequent and steep with each passing day. Sometimes, it bent so much that the Chain Breaker flew forward for a while instead of continuously descending.

It was as though they were really traveling through the intestines of an unimaginable beast.

Worse of all was the fact that the tunnel was not static. It constantly moved, undulating, making it seem as though the walls of spinning water were pursuing the graceful ship.

Perhaps they were.

Sometimes, the water was shrouded in abyssal darkness. Sometimes, it shone with blinding light.

Nephis steered the ship in the darkness, but when the depths of the Great River ignited with beautiful radiance, Cassie had to take the oars. The rest of them were forced to escape to the interior of the flying vessel, leaving her to face the harrowing shapes moving through the radiant water alone.

Anyone would have been shaken and mentally strained by having to endure the horror and pressure of those terrible creatures in solitude. Despite that, Cassie remained calm and seemingly unperturbed... Sunny did not know if that was a good sign or not.

What he did know, however, was that they would have never survived the journey through the vortex without the Chain Breaker. They would have been long swallowed by the Great River if Cassie had not repaired the enchantment circuit, as well.

As it was... Sunny felt that they would, perhaps, make it to the other side of the vortex unscathed.

Days passed in tense silence. The deeper they descended, the more palpable the pressure assaulting their minds was. The abyssal darkness was suffocating, and the radiant light was dreadful. More than that... at some point, the world itself became strange, playing tricks with their minds.

Time was growing convoluted and elusive, as if it, too, was being crushed by the oppressive weight of the water surrounding them. Sunny and Nephis, who had already experienced something similar in the time storm, were less affected by this strangeness than the other members of the cohort. However, eventually, they too grew accustomed to the eerie unstableness of time.

With time, space had also become unreliable.

At first, Sunny thought that it was the Chain Breaker's flight that had lost its smoothness, making the flying ship shake and shudder from time to time. Sometimes, it would jerk, and sometimes, it would sway.

But then, he realized that it was the fabric of reality itself that had become twisted.

He understood it while carrying a cup of tea, brewed with the invigorating water of the Endless Spring, to Nephis. Usually, a walk from the lower deck entrance to the stern would have taken him less than a minute, and a few dozen steps. However, this time, Sunny counted at least several hundred steps before reaching the runic circle.

The tea he was carrying was still hot and steaming, though. 'That is... not good.'

He stared at the tea cup in his hand, then at Nephis, who was steering the ship without seemingly having noticed anything strange.

'What if it was not the deck that had been stretched like a rubber band, but one of us?'

What if the space between the ship and the walls of the tunnel suddenly contracted?

Suddenly, the surrounding darkness seemed much more terrifying.

But there was nothing any of them could do about it. Worrying about being torn apart by fractured space was not going to do him any good,

either.

So, Sunny distracted himself by concentrating on weaving.

After around seven cycles of darkness and light — he couldn't tell exactly how many because of how strange time had become — he successfully altered the [Capacious Chest] enchantment of the Covetous Coffer to allow it to store living beings. He had not copied the weave of a Supreme Memory, but rather borrowed a few elements from it.

Sadly, it was a futile effort. Sunny might have changed the weave of the enchantment to remove the limitation on inanimate objects, but he was nowhere near knowing how to integrate a livable space into the chest's storage space. There was no meadow, no forest, and no river inside of it.

Which meant that there was also no light, no water, and no air there. There was nothing at all. So, unless he wanted a living being to suffocate to death, placing them inside was out of the question.

Theoretically, he was able to hide his shadows in the Covetous Coffer now, since they did not need to breathe. However, Sunny struggled to imagine why he would want to do such a thing. Maybe to punish them for misbehaving...

He did not share these thoughts with the shadows, but they still started to avoid the toothy chest, for some reason.

Time slowly passed.

Or, maybe, it was passing quickly.

All Sunny knew was that the depths of the Great River seemed more and more dreadful each time he looked into the abyssal darkness. Even Cassie was starting to look unnerved.

The tunnel was not getting narrower anymore. However, its twists and turns were becoming wilder.

And then, one day...

The Chain Breaker seemed to stop.

Sunny was startled as the familiar feeling of motion completely disappeared. Standing up from where he was sitting, he noticed the other members of the cohort looking perplexed.

Then, he heard Neph's stifled yelp.

Looking at the stern, he saw her gripping the steering oars so hard that

her hands had turned white. She was moving both oars in a strange manner... not slowly and smoothly, like usual, but instead forcefully and with a sense of urgency.

'What the hell?'

Why was Nephis even moving the oars if they were standing still? Looking at the walls of the tunnel, Sunny flinched.

The walls... had turned into a blur.

The Chain Breaker was frozen in place, but the tunnel itself was flying past it at tremendous speed. The twists and turns that Nephis had been cautiously navigating were now flashing past them, forcing her to steer the ship as fast as she could... and much faster than that, even, if they wanted to survive.

'Doesn't make any sense...'

Sunny was confused for a moment.

How could the flying ship both remain in place and be steered around the bends of the tunnel?

It was as if the world itself was being spun and moved by Neph's hands. But then again, when was the last time the world made any sense?

Perhaps the static position of the Chain Breaker was simply a matter of perspective. Perhaps, they were simply being carried by some unfathomable, eerie force.

What did it matter?

The only thing that mattered was for Nephis to guide them through the swiftly moving tunnel.

And she did. Completely focused, she guided the Chain Breaker, not allowing the water to swallow it. A minute past, then another, then another...

Then, an eternity.

Suddenly, the tunnel disappeared.

Something flashed, blinding Sunny, and was then replaced by darkness. He could feel motion once again.

...In fact, he could feel a lot of motion!

It was as if the Chain Breaker had been shot from a catapult. Their speed was so dreadful that he was instantly blown back a dozen meters, and only managed to remain on the ship by clutching at the railing.

'D—damn!'

Sunny felt a tremendous force pushing him back, and a hurricane wind crashing into him with primal fury. All he could do was grit his teeth and hold on for his dear life.

Slowly, their speed decreased. Nephis, who had been pressed into the aplustre, pushed one of the oars and rolled the ship.

It was only then that Sunny realized that the Chain Breaker had been flying upside down.

As the flying ship revolved around its axis, Sunny fell on the deck and weakly picked himself up.

It seemed that they had escaped the vortex.