1486 Colorful Ribbon

The Chain Breaker was still flying at high speed in the direction it had been expelled from the vortex. Thankfully, Nephis had rolled the ship in time, preventing the members of the cohort from plummeting down... but Sunny was still pressed into the deck, struggling to stand up.

The world was dark, with only the soft glow of the sacred tree illuminating it.

Finally, he rose to his feet, swayed slightly, and called out in a stifled voice:

"Is... is everyone alive?"

He could see Nephis nearby... she was safe. Looking across the deck, he noticed Effie leaning on the sacred tree, a startled expression on her face. Luckily, the huntress did not look injured.

Jet was a bit further away. It seemed that she had used the fifth form of her mist blade, the scythe, as a hook to keep herself in place. Her icy blue eyes were alert and focused.

Cassie had been sleeping in her cabin when the strange event happened, so she was definitely fine — the blind girl might have suffered a few bruises, but she wouldn't have been thrown overboard.

"I'm fine!"

"Alive is a strong word..."

Hearing Effie and Jet answer his question, Sunny let out a relieved sigh. Almost at the same time, Cassie appeared from below the deck, looking a bit haggard.

With each member of the cohort accounted for, he relaxed a little.

They seemed to have escaped the dreadful whirlpool. At least it looked that way.

The twisting tunnel was gone, replaced by a vast empty space. The oppressive feeling Sunny had felt in the depths of the Great River was gone, too, and time seemed to be flowing naturally as well.

Space, however...

Space was a bit strange.

Sunny struggled to describe the wrongness he felt, but it was definitely there. Humans, after all, were not meant to perceive the fabric of space —why would they, considering that it was meant to be constant and immutable?

But many immutable concepts had become vague with the descent of the Spell. Especially here in the Tomb of Ariel, many things that he had considered absolute had proven to be less than reliable. The existence of the Tomb was in and of itself a paradox, considering that it contained an entire world.

Nevertheless, even though Sunny could not perceive the fabric of space, he could still sense that something was wrong with it. He just could not explain what.

'What is going on? No, first... where are we?'

There was no sound of the water splashing against the hull of the Chain Breaker, no sunlight, no glow that suffused the Great River at night. There was only darkness, silence, and wind.

Frowning, Sunny glanced at Nephis. She was still holding the steering oars, but at the moment, there was nothing for her to do. The ship was still flying... rising?... due to inertia, and it was impossible to control it until that inertia dissipated.

He studied her face, making sure that Nephis was alright, and then looked behind her. There was nothing there... only a vast, boundless darkness.

The wind played with her beautiful silver hair.

Neph looked at him, too. She hesitated for a few moments, then said cautiously:

"I think... we have left the vortex."

That was self-evident. No, actually... it was not. Nobody knew what was at the heart of the Great River, so there could very well be a vast empty space inside it. However, somehow, Sunny did not feel as if they were buried under an inconceivable mass of flowing water.

So, what then? Had they reached the bottom of the Great River?

If so, then why had they been thrown up instead of being thrown down? In fact... the Chain Breaker was still rising, even though the speed of its ascent was growing slower and slower with each second.

"What the hell happened?"

Nephis looked uncertain. She frowned, struggling to find an answer, and eventually said with no confidence in her tone:

"I'm not sure. It felt... as if we had crossed a boundary of some sort. You saw what happened next yourself."

She wanted to say something else, but then suddenly froze. A few moments later, her eyes widened a little.

Nephis raised a hand and pointed at something.

"Sunny... behind you..."

Sunny knew that there was nothing immediately behind him —otherwise, he would have felt it through shadow sense. Frowning, he turned around and looked into the darkness beyond.

It was just as empty as what he had seen before, but when he shifted his gaze lower...

Sunny grew still.

'What... am I looking at?'

There was nothing behind Nephis. But in the direction where he was currently looking, something floated in the darkness. It was like a colorful ribbon painted in lilac, azure, and crimson, with parts of it drowning in shadows. Seven small motes of light slowly moved through the darkness around it, making for a beautiful sight.

The ribbon created a circle, its surface twisted on itself like a Mobius strip.

It took Sunny a few moments to realize what the ribbon was. 'It's... it's... the Great River...'

His eyes widened, as well.

Because there was nothing but emptiness between the Chain Breaker and the colorful ribbon, it was all but impossible to determine distance, and therefore scale. However, he knew...

Lilac, azure, and crimson were the three regions of the Great River —dawn, day, and dusk. The seven little motes of light were the seven suns. The areas of the ribbon where the light of the suns did not reach were shrouded in shadows... however, at least one sun was always on the

opposite side of the ribbon, its light penetrating the mass of water and making the water glow.

The Chain Breaker was... far, far away from the Great River.

And the empty darkness around them was the interior of the Tomb of Ariel.

However, Sunny forgot all about the black pyramid and its creator.

His eyes were locked on the beautiful ribbon... which twisted on itself... like a Mobius strip...

His whole body shuddered, and his face turned deathly pale. His heart was suddenly consumed by dread.

His mind was deathly still.

His lips trembled.

Sunny felt like he was suffocating.

'...It's a loop.'

The Great River twisted on itself, flowing endlessly, its surface never interrupted.

The Great River... the entirety of it... was an infinite loop.