1492 Back to the River

The Chain Breaker escaped from the slumbering legion of the monstrous butterflies, traveling further and further away from the endless black surface of the pyramid's wall. Sunny counted the seconds, afraid that a dark cloud would rise into the air and chase them.

Tense silence permeated the air, and none of the cohort members spoke.

Powerful winds wandered the hollow darkness around them. The space itself was acting strangely, making it feel as if the world was not quite right. The distant ribbon of the Great River was drawing nearer at tremendous speed.

After a while, he took a deep breath.

'We should be safe now... right?'

He wasn't sure. Sunny had thought that he knew a lot about the Tomb of Ariel, but now, he felt that the unassuming daemon was far more sinister and mysterious than it seemed.

And why wouldn't he have been? Ariel did not leave that strong of an impression, true, but that was only in comparison to his three harrowing siblings — Weaver, Nether, and Hope. The Demon of Dread was still a true deity, though... a being capable of challenging the gods and tearing down the heavens.

Of course, this pyramid of his would be just as dreadful. In fact, it was a testament to how adaptable people were that Sunny had learned to take this terrible place for granted — a tomb built from the body of an Unholy Titan, containing a mystical river created from the Titan's blood.

Was he insane to hope that they could escape its boundary unscathed?

...But in the end, they did escape. None of the Dark Butterfly had awakened or rushed to pursue them, allowing the Chain Breaker to freely dive into the darkness. The space itself rippled and flowed, streaming past the flying ship like liquid.

It was a strange feeling.

They were descending toward the Great River much faster than it should have been possible. Eventually, Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

"We are safe... I think."

Hearing him, Cassie allowed the sacred tree to shine once again, and its soft light enveloped the deck.

The members of the cohort glanced at each other, their faces full of weariness and fatigue. The last few days had not been easy on them... and the days before that had been even more dire.

Jet looked back with a bleak expression.

"What the hell was there, in the darkness?"

The others looked at Sunny, as well. He remained silent for a moment, then shrugged.

"The wall of the pyramid. And on that wall... countless Great Monsters, crowding its surface like horrid mold. Thankfully, they seemed to be slumbering, and none noticed us."

The members of the cohort were dismayed, and he could easily understand why. The words "countless" and "Great Monsters" were not supposed to ever appear next to each other. And yet, here in the Tomb of Ariel, they did.

'Seriously... now, I understand why there are only a few dozen Saints in the world.'

Surely, this particular Third Nightmare was more dreadful than the rest. But not by much, most likely. Saint Tyris, Beastmaster, Bloodwave, Wake of Ruin, and the other Transcendents... all of them had survived harrowing trials similar to this one.

Sunny had never underestimated the Saints, but he found a new sense of admiration for them.

'No wonder most of them seem so... distant.'

Shaking his head, Sunny gazed at the Great River and let out a sigh.

"Anyway... I don't think that there is anyone between us and the river. So, we should be safe for now."

Without saying anything, they stood together in silence and looked at the colorful ribbon that floated in the darkness far, far away.

Eventually, Nephis spoke:

"Then, we need to decide what to do next."

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The Chain Breaker hovered in the emptiness, illuminated by the soft radiance of the sacred tree. Saint stood guard on its bow, while Fiend crouched near the runic circle at its stern. A motionless figure in red garments could be seen under the glowing branches — it was the Echo of the sybil that Cassie had summoned, finally restored after sustaining severe damage on Aletheia's Island.

However, there were no humans in sight. All five of them were below the deck, sharing a meal.

They were too exhausted to come up with plans, but had no other choice. It was necessary to decide where to land, now that they were returning to the Great River.

After everyone had satiated themselves, there were a few minutes of silence. Eventually, Sunny spoke:

"Well... our primary goal remains the same. We need to find Kai and the other guy in Twilight. Hopefully, there will be other fighters there to help us take on Verge."

Jet gave him a curious look.

"Other fighters? I thought that Twilight was destroyed."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"No one really knows what happened to Twilight. Technically, it was not destroyed... just lost. Whatever that means. We had the idea that there might be survivors there simply because, otherwise, this Nightmare seems to be impossible."

His expression dimmed.

"...That was before, though. Now, any preconceived notions we had about the Nightmare are meaningless. We don't even know if the remaining Plagues are still alive, or how many Defiled are left in Verge. Perhaps their power has dwindled enough for the Spell to decide that we can handle it all ourselves. No, even that is an fundamentally false assumption, because the balance of forces within the Nightmare has been tempered with."

As he finished speaking, Cassie added:

"Our plan was to explore Wind Flower... Aletheia's Island... to find you two, then return to Fallen Grace, regroup, and sail for Twilight. However, the situation is a bit different now, because we can reach both cities from up here. We can even travel directly to Verge, not that it's a good idea."

Nephis nodded:

"So, what we need to decide today is whether we want to go directly to Twilight, or recuperate at Fallen Grace first."

Effie and Jet glanced at each other. Neither of them had been to Fallen Grace or knew a lot about Twilight. At the same time, due to the difference in how the members of the cohort had experienced time in the Nightmare, they were the most exhausted of the five.

Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had spent more time inside the Tomb of Ariel, but they at least had plenty of downtime between the many harrowing ordeals. Effie and Jet, however, never had an opportunity to rest.

After a few moments of silence, Effie smiled:

"What's the point of delaying the inevitable? Let's go directly to where Night and that Valor princeling are. Wait, or is he a Song princeling now? Anyway... the sooner we get them, the sooner we can escape this damned Nightmare."

Jet grinned.

"I agree. I consider myself a very patient woman, you know... I waited for a long, long time to get a chance at Transcendence. But now, my patience is running thin. Let's conquer this Nightmare as soon as possible."

She secretly threw a glance at Effie's belly, but did not add anything else. Sunny sighed.

"Well, then..."

He looked at Nephis, remained silent for a moment, and nodded.

"It's unanimous. We are going to Twilight, I guess."