1300 Riverborn

When Sunny and Nephis first met Ananke, both were concerned about the frail old woman. She just looked too ancient and weak, ready to snap like a twig. Her tan skin was thin and transparent like oil paper, her cloudy eyes teary and dull, her gaunt figure so small that it seemed to be drowning in the black folds of her dark mantle.

They were not sure that the old woman could survive another peaceful day, let alone a long and perilous journey across the Great River.

However, as the days went by, their worries were proven wrong. Old Ananke continued to cling to life... in fact, her condition seemed to be improving little by little. She had more energy now, could remain fully lucid for longer periods of time, and even regained some of her appetite.

At first, Sunny thought that it was simply the result of finally having hope again after waiting for the two of them for gods knew how long, as well as eating better. But as more time passed, the difference became too obvious to be explained by mere inspiration.

Ananke... was definitely changing.

Her hands gradually stopped shaking, and her grip on the steering oar became firmer. Her cloudy eyes regained some of their former sharpness. She wasn't hunching as much anymore, and her voice was not as weak and creaky as before.

She did not grow tired as quickly as she had at the start, and the long periods of silence where she seemed to doze off with her eyes open happened less and less frequently, until ceasing altogether.

It was as though Ananke was slowly growing younger.

Sunny had to admit that he was not just imagining things when he opened his eyes one day to notice that there were suddenly a few black strands in her long, snow-white hair.

'What is going on?'

He looked at Ananke for a few moments, then lowered his gaze to the powerful current of the Great River. Which flowed into the past...

Nephis, who had been practicing the Names the old woman taught her — to no result, for now — noticed that he was awake and carefully pulled on the sleeve of his tunic. Then, she silently glanced at Ananke and back.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

'Me? Why do I have to ask? Asking a woman about her age, does she think I like courting death?!'

Well, to be honest... his track record indeed suggested that he did.

He sighed, threw an indignant glance at Nephis, and approached the old woman while secretly studying her face and thin frame. There was no denying it — Ananke looked much more hale than she had before. She could not be called young by any means, still, but neither could she be called decrepit or ancient.

Sunny lingered for a second or two, then asked politely:

"Grandmother... can I ask you something?"

The old woman smiled at him kindly.

"Of course, my Lord."

'Now what am I supposed to say?'

Sunny took a deep breath, then just came clean with it.

"It might sound weird, but... are you, by any chance... getting younger?" Ananke looked at him with a startled expression.

Sunny coughed in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, it's just that... I noticed that you look better... ah, I don't mean that you didn't look well before..."

The old woman suddenly chuckled.

"No, no. It is me who needs to apologize, my Lord. I just... have never met someone entirely from outside the Tomb of Ariel before. That is why it is not easy for me to account for the fact that you might not know some things that are common sense here."

She shook her head, and then said gently:

"Yes, this body of mine is indeed getting younger. It is because we are moving downstream."

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, perplexed. After a few moments of silence, he furtively studied her slender figure, while she openly studied his.

Eventually, Nephis said:

"But... it doesn't seem like Sunny and I changed?" Wouldn't they have become toddlers by now? Ananke nodded, her expression slightly sad.

"Of course not. It is because you are Outsiders, while I am Riverborn. The Outsiders are not beholden to the flow of the Great River, since they have come from outside it. They are free to roam it as they wish, traveling any distance. That is why they are also called Pilgrims."

She smiled.

"But we, Riverborn, are different. Since we were born inside the Tomb of Ariel, we are beholden to the flow of time within it. We can only travel as far as our lifespans allow... and even then, the only direction that is allowed to us is upstream. We are chained to the stretch of the Great River where we come from."

Sunny looked at her in bewilderment, struggling to imagine what such a life would look like.

"Wait, wait... how does it even work?" At the same time, Nephis asked:

"So, you grow older when you move upstream, and grow younger when you move downstream? That is... in relation to the place where you were born?"

Ananke looked between the two of them helplessly, then finally decided to answer Neph's question first and nodded.

"Indeed."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then suddenly opened his eyes wide.

"Wait, does that mean that as long as you stay in place, you are... immortal?" Ananke sighed softly.

"Our bodies will not age, my Lord. That is not the same as being immortal." She looked at the sparking expanse of the Great River wistfully.

"...Actually, we Riverborn don't usually live that long. At least not in Weave. Life here is full of hardship, and the waters are dangerous. Since we live close to the desolate future, there are many Corrupted coming from upstream... all of them immune to the flow of time. Things were fine when we had many Outsiders among us — our elders — but as their number dwindled, it grew harder and harder to provide for ourselves and defend the city."

The old woman's face grew dark.

"After all, it is not easy to fight an enemy that can attack and retreat freely while you lack the ability to pursue it. Still... we managed. Life in Weave might not have been easy or opulent, but it was blissful. At least mine was."

Ananke fell silent, a faint smile on her lips.

'Now wait a minute...'

Sunny tilted his head and, unable to control himself, blurted out:

"Then, Grandmother... no, Ananke... how old are you, really?"

'Ah! What am I doing!'

The old woman looked at him and chuckled.

"Me? Actually... among the River People, I am considered to be quite a young woman." He froze.

Nephis froze, too.

"Y—young?"

Ananke nodded earnestly.

"Of course! I am barely two hundred years old..."