1304 Fishing in the Great River

Hearing his question, the old woman smiled.

"This close to Weave? Huh... I hope it's a Bigmaw. Their meat is very tender."

Before they could ask what a Bigmaw was, she grunted and threw the dead abomination, as well as the stone weights, over the side of the ketch. As the bundle of rope swiftly unfolded, Ananke swiftly tied its end to a wooden post at the stern of the ketch with a sophisticated knot.

Soon, the bleeding carcass of the Nightmare Creature was being dragged a fair distance behind the boat, slowly sinking into the Great River. The old woman took up her harpoon again, this time gripping it with some tension. Her weathered face, however, was calm.

After waiting for a few minutes, she sighed.

"Usually, it would be an entire fishing party challenging the depths. But... I am the only one left, so..."

Ananke remained silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"Do not worry, my Lord and Lady. My harpoon has yet to miss. The fishes I catch never managed to swallow me up, either, and they won't today."

Sunny and Nephis silently looked at each other, then summoned their weapons. However, there was no need.

When something massive finally rose from the depths, attracted by the scent of blood and the fragrance of soul essence, Ananke swiftly readied her harpoon, gazed at the water, and sent it flying with one decisive motion.

...Soon, they were roasting the meat of a Corrupted Monster over a bronze brazier. The "fish" the old woman had caught turned out to be a giant shark-like creature whose body was covered in tough bone armor. However, the harpoon had slid past the bone plates in the only spot where it was possible — above the creature's hidden gills.

Sunny did not know what enchantments Ananke's weapon possessed, but after striking the abomination in its the weak spot, the harpoon killed the Bigmaw in one blow. The monster was then dressed down, its succulent meat filling the wooden box, as well as the much larger storage space of the Covetous Coffer.

As she seasoned the roasting meat with salt, the old woman sighed.

"In the past, we would have harvested much more. Skin, scales, bones, swim bladder, fangs... nothing would have gone to waste. There are very few building materials to be found in the vast waters of the Great River, so maintaining a city is not an easy task. We River People have learned to use every resource available."

She placed a long strip of meat on the grill and shook her head.

"There's no need to be so frugal now, though. I am already thankful to the River for this sustenance. With it, I can feed Lord and Lady... that is enough."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"But isn't it very dangerous, to hunt the Corrupted this way? You never know what will come from the depths, after all. This time, it was a Corrupted Monster. Next time, it could be a Great one, or something even more dreadful."

Ananke nodded, still concentrating on preparing a meal for them.

"Of course... it is very dangerous. Many fishermen die. Remember, though, that we were much stronger before. There were elders leading us, as well. The truly harrowing creatures very rarely come down the river, too... when they did, we usually learned in advance, and the whole city assembled to battle them. That is how Weave survived."

...Until it didn't.

Sunny sighed, thinking about the dying civilization of the Great River. There was presumably only one human city left in the Tomb of Ariel — Fallen Grace. How were they supposed to turn the tide of history and save it?

His somber thoughts were interrupted by Ananke, who placed a juicy piece of meat on a plate and offered it to him with a smile.

Her teeth had turned sturdy and white at some point. "My Lord! Please, enjoy."

She seemed to be in a good mood.

Looking at the smiling old woman, Sunny couldn't remain sullen, either. \*\*\*

Two days later, something finally appeared on the horizon. It was a shining dot at the start, but as the ketch drew closer, the shape of a distant lighthouse could be seen, with sunlight reflecting from its polished bronze spire.

This was the first human-made structure that Sunny and Nephis had seen in the Nightmare. Looking at it filled their hearts with emotions... Nephis, especially, looked at the lighthouse with a distant expression. Its radiance reflected in her eyes, illuminating their ineffable depths.

Sunny shifted and turned to Ananke, who was still holding the steering oar. "Have we reached Weave?"

She lingered for a few moments.

"A boundary of it, yes."

The old woman fell silent after that, and Sunny returned to Nephis. Noticing her distant, almost forlorn expression, he asked:

"Are you thinking about your First Nightmare?" She nodded slowly.

With a sigh, Sunny placed a hand on Neph's shoulder and pulled her closer, allowing her to lean on him slightly. He didn't say anything, and neither did she. Together, they watched the lighthouse draw nearer.

Soon, the ketch moved close enough for them to see the details.

The lighthouse stood on a small island. That island, however, was not a natural one —instead, it seemed to have been crafted from the carapace of a sea monster and floated on water, supporting a large and solemn hall built of dark stone. The lighthouse rose from the hall, serving as its tower.

There was a long wooden pier protruding into the flowing waters of the Great River, as well. The strangest part, however, was that the island did not seem to be drifting with the current. Instead, it remained firmly in place.

Another startling detail was that the dark lighthouse with its shining spire... was not a lighthouse at all. Instead, it was a windmill.

Its long blades rotated slowly, pushed by the wind, white fabric rippling slightly as it circled between land and sky.

The island looked quite surreal, especially after weeks spent seeing nothing but flowing water. But it must have been really beautiful at night, illuminated from below by the opalescent radiance of the river.

Ananke finally spoke, her voice a little low: "This... is the House of Parting."