1309 Mad Prince

Soon, they slowed down and entered one of the canals. Ananke whispered a few words, and the sails lowered themselves. Summoning her long harpoon, she stood up and used it as a pole to push the ketch forward.

As it traveled deeper into the heart of the city, Sunny and Nephis silently watched the districts that floated past. Indeed, there were no living beings here — at least none that they could see.

Nephis shifted slightly.

"You said that Weave was devastated by a Defiled. Is that cxyckerKy still here?" Ananke slowly shook her head.

"No. But... I've been absent for a long time. An abomination or two could have crawled out of the River to make a nest among the ruins. It is better to be careful."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other and silently summoned their weapons. 'Just what the hell... has happened here?'

Eventually, the ketch reached an intersection of two wide canals. Ananke allowed it to drift for a dozen meters, then stopped at a small platform. There were stone steps leading from the platform to one of the central districts of the city, and after roping the ketch to a post, she lightly jumped down.

Together, the three of them ascended the stairs and entered a wide plaza. It was desolate and partially submerged in water, with scars on the collapsed buildings hinting at a fearsome battle that must have taken place here a long time ago.

Ananke, who had been strangely reluctant to answer their questions before, finally sighed and turned to face them.

"The Defiled that destroyed Weave... visited us almost half a century ago. However, the city did not die until a few decades after that."

Both Sunny and Nephis looked at her in confusion. How could a city be destroyed decades after it was attacked?

The young priestess remained silent for a while, then gestured to the drowned plaza.

"This is where the battle ended, and the slaughter started. I've told you before that Outsiders are vital to the existence of the River People. They are the oldest and most powerful among us. They are also the only ones who can travel unimpeded across the River. Without them, the cities would become completely isolated from each other... well, that doesn't really apply to this city of exiles, since we were always on our own."

She looked down.

"But since Weave is located close to the desolate future, we had to constantly defend ourselves from powerful Corrupted. The elders were the only ones who could pursue and eradicate them — otherwise, those horrid creatures could come and go as they pleased, retreating when wounded to attack again... and again, and again. So, that was how the Defiled destroyed our city."

Ananke gazed at the drowned plaza with a grim expression.

"He simply killed every Outsider in Weave. After the elders were gone, the rest of us were slowly driven to extinction. Some died fighting the Corrupted, some succumbed to sorrow and despair. The less of us there were, the harder it was to keep those who remained alive. A blow after blow... a disaster after disaster... eventually, despite all my efforts, Weave was no more."

The young priestess took a deep breath and turned to them with a sad smile.

"The ships and the buildings remain, but without the people, they are just an empty shell."

She took a deep breath.

"My Lord, my Lady. I told you that we must come here to gather supplies, but that was not entirely true. To be honest... I just wanted you to see Weave, at least once. So that someone would remember it — remember us — even when the ships and the buildings are gone, too."

Sunny felt his chest becoming heavy, but Nephis seemed to be affected more. Her face was motionless as usual, but there was a hint of darkness in her eyes. Taking a step forward, she placed her hand on Ananke's shoulder and gently squeezed it.

She must have seen herself in the young priestess.

The Priestess of the Nightmare Spell... in a city built by the followers of Weaver, that title must have carried incredible weight. It was very likely that Ananke had suddenly become the ruler of the decimated Weave after all the elders were slaughtered by the Defiled.

Only to see it wither and die, no matter how hard she fought to save it... just like Nephis had watched the village she built be swallowed by the darkness in the Second Nightmare. Until she was the only one left alive, just like Nephis had been the only one to survive.

Ananke patted Neph's hand and smiled.

"It is alright, my Lady. Ah... it happened a long time ago, anyway."

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched. Looking away, he asked in a perfectly even tone:

"That Defiled... he must have been strong. If the Outsiders were the most powerful among you, then not just any creature could have killed them all. Still... just in case I get a chance to meet him one day... is there a way I can recognize him?"

'I'm going to kill that bastard.'

The young woman lingered for a while, then sighed.

"Yes, my Lord. It was not just any Defiled, indeed. The one who came to Weave is infamous enough that even we had heard of him. It was the Mad Prince."

He frowned.

"The Mad Prince?"

Ananke nodded.

"He is called Mad Prince, or the Prince of Madness. That fiend is one of the Six Plagues."

She shivered and looked away, as if suddenly uneasy.

"The Six Plagues are not the most powerful of the Defiled, and neither are they the most ancient. However, they are the most feared and loathsome. Mad Prince, Soul Stealer, Undying Slaughter, Torment, Devouring Beast, and the most harrowing of them all... the Dread Lord. Everyone on the Great River has heard their names. They are also called the Heralds of the Estuary, sometimes."

The young priestess frowned.

"Some even say that the Dread Lord is the true ruler of Verge, and that all Defiled submit to his commands. If so... maybe he was the one who sent the Mad Prince to Weave. I doubt it, though. I am not sure if that thing can be controlled by anyone, so he must have come of his own accord."

Nephis, who had been listening silently for a while, suddenly asked in a steady tone:

"The... Dread Lord is said to be the ruler of Defilement? What about the First Seeker? What power do he and the other five Plagues possess? What Rank and Class are they?"

Ananke smiled helplessly.

"I am sorry, my Lady. Weave is far away from the other human cities, so whatever news used to reach us was vague and fragmentary. The First Seeker... no one had seen him in a long, long time. Some say that he has turned into a mindless mass of rotting flesh because of the Defilement. Some say that he was severely wounded by the Serpent King and is yet to recover. Some say that the Dread Lord has subjugated and imprisoned him."

She lingered.

"As for the Six Plagues, we knew very little of them. The Soul Stealer is said to possess the ability to wear the skin of those he kills. The Devouring Beast is immensely ferocious and feeds on human flesh. Torment is known for subjecting her victims to harrowing torture. Undying Slaughter is eternally consumed by insatiable bloodlust. The Dread Lord... no one has ever survived facing him, so his powers are unknown."

The young priestess smiled bitterly.

"I can tell you about the Mad Prince, though. He is a raving lunatic who seems to be as murderous as he is tormented by his own madness. He looks human, or at least human-shaped. His clothes are tattered, and his face is a mass of scars, which look to have been inflicted by his own nails. He is said to wear a tarnished crown, but I haven't seen it myself. At first glance, he appears rather pitiful... however, beneath that ragged surface hides a vile and hateful monster."

She gritted her teeth and looked at the scarred buildings surrounding the plaza. "His powers... are that of a sword saint. But his swordsmanship is as mad as he is

himself. It is violent and utterly chaotic, yet cruel and savagely lethal. He finds joy in tormenting his victims, then grows indifferent to their pain the next moment. The most terrifying thing about him, though, is that his madness spreads like a disease. Other than that... perhaps I did not even get to see his true power. He tore our elders apart with just his blade, as if they were weak children."

Nephis glanced at her own sword, then asked somberly: "What about his Rank and Class?"

Ananke lowered her head.

"It was... hard to tell. He is of the Corrupted Rank, I think. As for his Class... I am almost certain that he is a Titan."