1319 House of Youth

The next morning, they reached the first of the remote island-ships Ananke had told them about. It slowly appeared from beyond the horizon, illuminated by the dreamlike sunlight.

This one was different from the House of Parting. The artificial island was much larger, and instead of a solemn and solitary building, it encompassed a whole district. There were many houses, gardens, and water features, all of them bright and colorful. Despite the same desolation that reigned Weave, this place seemed strangely festive.

It was easy to imagine how full of vitality it had once been.

Ananke's eyes glistened with nostalgia. She smiled softly and said, her voice melodious:

"This... is the House of Youth."

Sunny and Nephis looked at the bright island-ship, wondering what its purpose was. The sight of it was a little uplifting, and a little sad. Contrasted against the beautiful atmosphere, the emptiness seemed even more poignant.

The young priestess sighed.

"This is one of the seven Houses that Riverborn spent their childhood and adolescence at."

She lingered for a moment, and then explained:

"As you can imagine, children grow up differently here on the Great River. From the moment they are born, their bodies are beholden to the currents of its time. If brought upstream, they will swiftly reach adulthood... at the same time, their parents will have to grow older if they wish to remain with their child. In a span of a few generations, families will be torn apart, and a city will be broken into pieces."

Ananke shook her head.

"Of course, it is also cruel to thrust a child into adulthood while their mind remains immature. So, the Seven Houses exist. Actually... it is a bit strange for me to explain these things, since that is just how life in the Tomb of Ariel is. To me, it is the manner in which Outsiders grow up that seems odd."

She laughed.

"I couldn't believe my mother when she told me that kids outside just grow up inevitably, while remaining in the same place, and have no choice on when to become adults. How scary! Can you imagine?"

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, befuddled. After a while, he cleared his throat.

"Yeah, I can easily imagine. But, wait... what is the exact purpose of these Seven Houses?"

Fallen Grace was most likely built in the same way, so it would be good to know. Plus, he was simply curious.

The young priestess smiled:

"It is simple, really. When a man and a woman decide to have a child, they travel downstream, to the House of Birth. The children are born and spend the first months of their lives there."

She looked at the waters of the Great River and added, her voice wistful:

"As the mind of the child matures, they and their parents travel upstream to the next House, where the kids become toddlers. After a year or two, the family travels to the third House, and so forth. This way, kids have a chance to have proper childhoods. It is a happy time for the families, and moving on to the next House is a big event for the children, akin to the Birthday Ceremony you Outsiders have."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then nodded. The River People did not have the same perception of time as the rest of humans. They still counted time in months and years, but these measurements were simply traditions brought into the Tomb of Ariel by those who had come from the outside.

Although there were something akin to seasonal changes within the Tomb of Ariel, the idea of a solar year was meaningless here. So, the children growing up on the Great River would put much more meaning into traveling upstream and getting an older body than into an empty thing like getting older by an imaginary year.

Especially since their lives were not limited by the dwindling number of years that remained before they grew old and died.

Ananke noticed his contemplative expression and added:

"This last House, the House of Youth, is where our bodies reach the stage of the cusp of adulthood. The parents usually leave for the main city and leave the kids with other youths. Yet different kids reach mental maturity at different paces. Some spend just a few years here before moving on to reunite with their families. Some stay longer.

Some lazy rascals even refuse to become adults for decades."

Her cheeks turned slightly pink.

"Uh... I might have been one of those rascals myself..."

Sunny smiled, imagining the dignified and wise elderly woman he knew avoiding the responsibilities of adulthood for as long as she could, getting into all kinds of mischief with the other young Riverborn.

Had Ananke really been such an unruly troublemaker once? He shook her head.

"But wait. If that is true, then how would these youths have families of their own? They would turn into infants by traveling to the House of Birth, no?"

Ananke nodded.

"Indeed. That is why the whole city migrates some distance upstream each generation. That gives the young ones a chance to have children of their own. Of course, it also means that their parents grow a little older with each migration. But our lifespans are long... the future is more forgiving than the past. The eldest ones assume guidance roles in the Seven Houses, as well."

She remained silent for a few moments.

"Nevertheless, a city might reach a point where the older part of its population would not be able to migrate anymore. That never happened to Weave, since many died in the battles against the Corrupted, and those who survived too long usually chose to leave from the House of Parting. Our history also does not stretch that far. But downstream, where the great cities of sybils used to be, that was how new settlements were created. The young split off to start life anew."

Sunny and Nephis remained silent, thinking about how bizarre the civilization of the Great River was, after all. The way of life of the River People was indeed completely different from the outside world. Even simple things like parenthood, childhood, and growing up were entirely unlike what they knew.

'Life always finds a way...'

Which was why it was even sadder to see it destroyed, how it had been here in Weave. Ananke sighed.

"There had been a single migration after I left the House of Youth. So, I will be able to guide you past all the Seven Houses, to the House of Parting far downstream. It should not take us more than a few days."

With that, she turned to Nephis and smiled.

"In the meantime, my Lady, I will help you grow accustomed to controlling the ketch."

As she and Neph talked, Sunny looked at the bright buildings of the House of Youth, which were drawing closer and closer... and then slowly drifting past.

He was thinking about what Ananke's childhood must have looked like, as well as about the bleak and cold childhood of his own.

Wasn't it funny? The young priestess, who had been born in a tomb built by the Demon of Dread from the corpse of an Unholy Titan, clung desperately to her childhood, not wanting to become an adult. While he, who had been born in the waking world, couldn't wait to leave that bitter page of his life behind.

...And in the end, they had both ended up in this ketch together. Sunny sighed.

'It would be nice if the kids of the future... the waking world's future... could live like her, and not like me.'

That was such a strange thought.