1400 Footprints in the Sand

As Sunny's shadows climbed the cliffs, he and his companions cautiously advanced up the beach. Even the crow, who had been anxious and impatient to find its master all this time, seemed wary and subdued. The black bird was sitting on Sunny's shoulder, its feathers raised, and kept silent.

The mist swirled silently around them. Saint and Fiend were in the rear, both ready to defend against an unexpected attack at any moment. Sunny and Nephis were in the middle. Cassie rode Nightmare at the front of the group, her back straight. The radiance of the Guiding Light that she held up illuminated the way.

At some point, the shadow steed suddenly stopped. Sunny gripped the hilt of the Sin of Solace tighter and said in a low voice:

"What is it?"

Cassie remained motionless for a moment, then pointed the sacred staff down, at the ground. When Sunny and Nephis approached, they immediately understood why.

Out there in the white sand, hidden in the mist, was a line of lonesome footprints. Sunny kneeled to study them, a frown appearing on his face.

"Those were left by a human."

Neph's voice echoed in the fog. He nodded slightly.

Indeed, the shallow prints left in the sand belonged to a human. From the look of it, someone had walked across the beach, barefoot... it was hard to tell the gender of the person just from these traces, but they could not have been of a very large stature — both the size and the depths of the footprints proved otherwise.

The traces also looked fresh. They could not have been left more than a few hours ago.

Sunny felt a cold chill creeping up his spine.

...Who was talking barefoot walks in this harrowing place?

There was another strange detail about the footprints. Contrary to what Sunny would have expected, the line of them came from the direction of the cliffs and disappeared in the mist, heading toward the edge of the island.

And yet, they had not met or heard anyone on their way here.

He hesitated for a few moments, then looked at Nephis and said:

"Wait here."

Leaving one shadow behind to step out of it should the need arise, Sunny stood up and followed the footprints into the fog. Soon, his companions disappeared from view, and he was left alone in the swirling mist.

'Ah... I don't like it.'

If not for the fact that he could still see them through the shadow, Sunny would have been tempted to turn back.

A few minutes later, he reached the end of the beach. The edge of the island opened into an abyssal chasm, the view of the colossal whirlpool and the darkness hiding below obscured by the fog. Sunny felt something he had not felt for a long time... a sense of vertigo.

'Come now, really... I can turn into a bird. Is it really necessary to be afraid of heights?'

He sighed and shook his head.

The footprints led to the very end of the island. There, the lonesome line of them disappeared, as if the person who had left it behind leaped off the edge into the misty abyss.

Sunny was suddenly overcome by strange melancholy. "Why don't you try jumping, too?"

He slowly looked at the Sin of Solace, who was standing at the very edge, looking into the fog with a distant expression.

"No thanks."

The sword wraith smiled.

"Why not? You said it yourself, you can turn into a bird. Hey, maybe this person knew how to fly, too."

Sunny sighed and nodded.

"Right. I should watch the sky... well, watch the fog above. Aerial attacks are some of the most nasty."

As he was walking back to Nephis and Cassie, Sunny was thinking about the footprints in the sand. Who had left them behind? Had that person really jumped off the edge? If so, why? Were they swallowed by the dark abyss?

It seemed like... such a shame.

If the Chain Breaker arrived at Wind Flower a few hours earlier, they could have met this person. How bitter would it be, to arrive at an island from where no one could return on the same day that its inhabitant had decided to take their own life?

Maybe they had not, though. Maybe they really had soared into the sky and escaped this forlorn place... he could not be sure.

One thing he was sure about, though, was that the footprints did not belong to Effie or Jet. Effie was too tall to have left them behind, while Jet... Jet would have never chosen to end her life, after everything she had done to preserve it. She had literally climbed out of a grave and endured being dead, all to continue living. Would a person like that ever give up?

Sunny had no doubt that she would not.

By the time he reunited with Nephis and Cassie, his shadows had already scaled the cliffs. In front of them was a dark forest of tall pine trees, mist swirling between the ancient trunks. One shadow cautiously glided to the left, another to the right, while the last one continued to advance

forward, in the direction of the distant tower.

The island was large — much larger than the islands of the Chained Isles were — so exploring it was going to take a lot of time. Especially because Sunny wanted to be careful and not expose his shadows to any danger.

'It's going to take days... weeks, maybe. Damn it.'

There was no sign of Effie and Jet.

"The footprints lead to the edge of the island. I didn't find anything else, so... let's trace them in the other direction."

Cassie raised the Guiding Light again, and they moved along the line of footprints toward the cliffs. They advanced slowly and cautiously, never letting their guard down. Although nothing had attacked them yet, the quiet feeling of danger was growing more dire and terrifying with each step.

Eventually, they arrived in front of a vertical wall of black rock. The footprints disappeared once again, this time in front of narrow stairs cut into the cliffside. The steps led all the way to the forest, by the looks of it.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other. The stone stairs were too narrow to maintain their formation... if something attacked them while they were ascending the steps, they would have to fight in a very awkward position.

"Fiend, take the lead."

The steel ogre was the most resilient out of them, so he was going to serve as the shield of the cohort. The Shadow did not seem too concerned with his task, either — with dark flames burning in his eyes, he moved to the front of the formation and stepped onto the first step.

As they climbed the stairs, Sunny walked behind Nephis. At some point, he noticed that she was paying a lot of attention to the stone steps disappearing beneath their feet.

"What are you thinking about?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said evenly:

"These are man-made."

Sunny nodded. After a short pause, Neph added:

"Which means that they must have been cut from stone by the Seeker who lived on this island."

It was a logical conclusion. Sunny glanced at the stone steps, thinking about how ancient they were.

Then, he scowled.

"You noticed it, too?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then answered Neph's question with another nod.

These stairs were strange. They were supposed to be ancient, and yet, there was no sign of corrosion on them. The steps were not weathered and ground down by the endless assault of the elements... instead, they were perfectly preserved and sharp, as if someone had cut them just yesterday.

'Is this rock indestructible, or are there strange things happening to time on this island?'

Sunny wanted to examine this question further, but at that moment...

He froze.

Out there, far ahead, the shadow he had sent toward the tower heard a sound. Although it was muffled by the mist, Sunny would never fail to recognize it.

It was the sound of steel clashing against steel, followed by a scream of pain.

At the same moment, the crow that had been sitting silently on his shoulder suddenly jumped into the air and shot forward, instantly disappearing into the fog.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Jet!'