1403 Deja Vu

Because of Sunny, they spent more time near the Chain Breaker than they had planned. However, he simply couldn't tell what it was that had made him feel so uncomfortable. After a while, there was no choice but to head for the cliffs.

Cassie rode Nightmare at the front of the group, Sunny and Nephis followed, while Saint and Fiend were defending the rear. As they walked, Sunny remained silent, a deep frown on his face.

'I just... I feel strange.'

It was as if he had taken these steps before. The white sand, the swirling mist, the black edifices of the tall cliffs... it all felt eerily familiar.

'What is going on?'

Eventually, they discovered a line of footprints in the sand. Sunny should have felt surprised and curious, but he barely paid the mysterious discovery any attention. As if it was only natural for the footprints to be there.

"Those were left by a human."

He shivered slightly and looked at Nephis. How had he known that she would say these exact words?

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then said quietly:

"Wait here."

Why did he feel almost... obligated to respond that way?

Deeply disturbed, Sunny left one of his shadows behind and followed the line of footprints to the edge of the island. There were so many questions he should have been asking himself... like who had left these traces? Had that person really jumped into the abyssal chasm? Or had they survived and escaped the suffocating mist?

But instead, Sunny was mostly thinking about why it felt as if he had already visited the edge of the island before.

The Sin of Solace was there, as well, glaring at him silently.

'Why is he not saying anything? I feel like he should have said something already. Like encourage me to jump, too.'

Scowling, Sunny returned to Nephis and Cassie.

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

When they nodded and prepared to set out, he suddenly added:

"Wait, don't you... don't you feel that something is strange?"

Nephis looked at him with her usual impassive expression.

"Everything here is strange."

Sunny had no choice but to agree. It was a stupid question, to begin with... of course, everything felt strange on a mystical island hidden behind a barrier of a colossal whirlpool.

They continued forward and eventually reached stone steps leading up the hills. Fiend took the lead, and the group cautiously started the ascent. As they walked, Sunny couldn't shake off the feeling that these steps looked eerily familiar.

'Just what the hell is going on with me... am I under some kind of mind hex again?'

By now, Sunny's resistance to mental attack was rather high. Even the Sin of Solace, a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, was having trouble driving him truly and utterly insane. He did not doubt that there were beings in the Tomb of Ariel that could shatter his defenses... but he did doubt that there was something here that could do so without him noticing.

'Then what is it?'

Looking up, he noticed that Nephis was staring intently at the stone steps.

'She must have noticed that they are not weathered at all, as if the Seeker who had lived on the island created them just yesterday.'

Wait... when had he come to these conclusions himself? It just seemed so obvious.

As Sunny froze, feeling very confused, one of the scouting shadows suddenly heard the sound of steel clashing against steel, followed by a pained scream. He didn't feel surprised at all, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

The black crow that had been sitting on his shoulder suddenly dashed into the fog.

'Was that Jet's voice?'

Why did thinking about Jet fill him with a cold sense of dread?

"Sunny?"

Cassie and Nephis had noticed his dazed state.

He lingered for a moment.

"Someone is fighting in the forest, about four kilometers from the top of the stairs. It should be Jet. I'm going."

The words left his mouth as if he had rehearsed them. Nephis nodded.

"We'll be right..."

Without listening to her response, Sunny dove into the shadows. 'Something is wrong... something is wrong...'

He knew that he was taking a dire risk by rushing blindly into the forest. Wind Flower was too dangerous of a place to behave rashly... Sunny had no idea what enemy he was going to face, was diving into battle without having made any preparations, and did not hold any initiative at all.

But Jet was going to die if he delayed even for a moment. Somehow, he was sure of it.

Stepping out of the shadow deep within the forest, Sunny gritted his teeth and dashed forward.

'It's just one of those situations where I only have bad choices. It's going to be alright, though... I've survived all the previous gambles, so I'll pull through this time, as well!'

But then, he felt a chilling terror grasp his heart.

...Would he really pull through?

Or would he die miserable after finally losing a gamble?

Bursting onto a wide clearing, Sunny slid on the moss and came to halt close to its middle. The smell of blood permeated the air here, both frightening and familiar.

'Where is she, where is she...'

Looking around, he noticed someone laying on the ground, their motionless figure buried in the mist. Dashing there, Sunny fell to his knees and stared down with wide eyes.

Jet... it was Jet. Her black leather armor seemed unbroken, but her beautiful face was contorted in a grimace of terrible agony. The moss was greedily drinking blood that flowed from the terrible wound where her arm had been viciously severed.

'Curse it all!'

Sensing his presence, Jet slowly opened her eyes. Her lips moved weakly:

"Sunny... be..."

'Behind me, in the fog!'

Before Jet finished her warning, he was already jumping to his feet and spinning around. There was a vague shape moving in the mist. Because of how quickly Sunny had reacted, he had no trouble dodging its strike.

The Sin of Solace hissed, slicing the figure apart.

'That won't do anything.'

Why did he think that?

Right... seemingly woven out of mist, ethereal, elusive. It had to be a wraith of some kind, meaning that physical attacks would be ineffective against it. It seemed that Sunny's subconscious had discerned the insidious nature of the enemy faster than his conscious mind did.

For this battle, he had to discard the jade jian and summon the Cruel Sight instead.

A split second later, the mist wraith seemed to dissipate into the swirling fog. Sunny could not sense its presence at all, which meant that the abomination could attack at any moment, from any direction.

Letting go of the Sin of Solace, he called upon the somber spear. Now... he just had to survive until it was summoned...

'No... I'm missing something...'

Sunny froze in place, torn between the dire need to be absolutely focused and the gnawing feeling that he was forgetting something terribly, terribly important.

'What... what is it?'

He couldn't allow himself to get distracted. A moment of inattention could mean death.

'Focus!'

His other two scouting shadows — gloomy and happy — were going to reach the clearing in a few seconds. Only when his body was augmented by all five shadows would he have the luxury of sparing some thought to the gnawing feeling.

Jet's hoarse voice resounded from below, faltering and weak:

"Sunny... careful... she's..."

He looked down, and then...

Sunny was suddenly inexplicably calm. His lips moved:

"...She's you."

The Cruel Sight finally manifested itself into existence.

The happy shadow flew into the clearing.

The mist wraith... Undying Slaughter... was already there, waiting for it.

A terrible agony tore Sunny's soul apart.

Falling to his knees, he heard the Spell whispers and thought:

'Your shadow has been destroyed.'

[Your shadow has been destroyed.]

'Your shadow core has been destroyed.'

[Your shadow core has been destroyed.]

'Now, Gloomy...'

Another flash of indescribable torment pierced his existence, throwing Sunny to the ground.

Wreathing in pain, he struggled to stand up.

'I... I knew this would happen. How did I know?'

Finally, he managed to rise to one knee. The mist was suddenly unbearably cold, casing his body to shiver.

Sunny raised his head and saw two icy blue eyes looking down at him.

'I am going to die now.'

The ghostly blade pierced his chest.

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Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around. The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly...

The forest clearing was gone. The bleeding, broken figure of Jet was gone. The corpses of his shadows were gone, too.

...But he remembered it all clearly.

The misty shore, the black cliffs, the cold twilight of the pine forest, the dread of dying on his knees.

'I died.'

But he had not. Otherwise, how would he be standing here, on the deck of the Chain Breaker?

'Neph and Cassie must have saved me, somehow, and retreated back to the ship.'

It was at that moment that he heard Neph's voice:

"I'm fine. I can still put up a fight."

Sunny flinched and stared at her with a deadpan expression.

"What... what did you just say?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"I said I can still fight."

Sunny continued to stare at her silently.

His mind was utterly empty.

'These are the exact words she said when we first landed on the island. No, not just her words. Everything is exactly the same.'

He looked around again, noting every small detail of their surroundings. He was right — it was as if the last hour had never happened.

As if Sunny had returned to the past.

He slowly raised a hand and ran it across his face.

'...What the hell is going on?'