

Sinister Plots

Lisin escorted Zach back through the library, walking in between the bookshelves and slowly making their way down the floors. The demasi was filling him in about the rules of the Castle.

“The rules are simple,” Lisin said. “There is no violence within the Castle. If anyone breaks this rule, all other visitors are required to interfere and end the violence as fast as possible.”

Zach nodded his understanding and acceptance.

“You have free reign of the Castle, all knowledge you can find is free to take provided that you have paid the initial price. Which is a donation of knowledge, weighed against what you can obtain here.”

“A donation?” Zach asked.

“You don’t need to worry,” the demasi smiled as he answered. “The spirits have little knowledge of the Real Realm, any knowledge of it is weighed heavily. Visitors like us have little issues meeting the quota.”

Zach wasn’t sure what knowledge he could offer, but he had time to think about it.

“There are locked doors,” Lisin continued. “You are not to attempt to get behind them, all knowledge that is locked is not free, if you wish for a glimpse of it, you need to trade for it. Likewise, trade of knowledge amongst the visitors of the Castle is allowed. You set your own terms, but any terms set within the confines of the Castle will be enforced by us.”

A spirit flew above their heads, one that looked like a flying fish. It swooped toward one of the shelves and touched a book. The moment it came in contact it disappeared.

That made Zach stop and frown. His skill flared with flaws when the spirit touched the book, but quickly it settled again as if nothing was wrong.

Lisin noticed his expression and spoke. “This isn’t really a library, not how it appears to you at least.”

Zach turned to look at him. “What?”

Lisin gestured with both hands. “This is the Repository of Knowledge. It appears in the manner it is easiest for you to understand. Half of our visitors are spirits that do not read, some can’t even understand spoken languages. The books on the shelves are not really books, they are the actual pearls of knowledge. If you touched any of the books you would experience the knowledge they contain rather than read it.”

That sounded interesting, he really wanted to try it out, but he remembered the rules. First he had to offer knowledge for it. Still, he looked at the books, trying to focus his skills and discern the secret behind the way the room worked.

“Let’s get you to your quarters first,” Lisin said snapping him out of his focus. He gestured with his hand, a smile on his face, urging him forward.

With a last glance at the bookshelf, Zach took a step to follow. As they walked, something else caught his attention. There were a lot of spirits in the library, more than there were when he first entered it. And if he was not mistaken, Zach was the center of attention, though it didn’t appear that way. There were flaws in the ways they stood, the spirits that floated

above in patterns that were to his sense clearly intended to watch him. They didn't want him to know that he was being watched.

That worried him, so he looked back at Lisin. Zach had come a long way from when he had first escaped the mind prison, but he still often struggled with facial expressions. He couldn't ever be sure that he was reading a person correctly. Lisin was smiling at him, he seemed at ease and inviting. But Zach knew that he couldn't trust his own insight.

"We are almost at full capacity, so unfortunately, we'll need to place you in the lower levels. I hope that it isn't going to be a problem?" Lisin asked, looking over his shoulder at Zach.

He shook his head. "I do not need special treatment," he answered. He required little to be content.

They reached the ground floor, then left the library. Lisin led them down another corridor, leading deeper into the castle.

"Are there any high tiered spirits of the Mind currently in the Castle?" Zach asked as they walked. He would much rather start on making deals for knowledge with other spirits, instead of sitting around waiting for the Grand Spirit's decision.

"Mind Spirits?" Lisin repeated. "I am not sure, there are thousands of spirits around. I shall ask and find out."

"I would appreciate it," Zach said.

He tilted his head as they entered a new corridor. There were flaws in the way the Air moved, he realized that there were spirits following the two of them, that there were some in the walls around them.

Again, Zach didn't know if this was normal. This place was a home of the spirits, he couldn't assign customs he was familiar with to it. He shook his head, he was imagining things. The Explorer's Soul had vouched for this place as a neutral ground for any who came to seek knowledge. And Zach had no ulterior motives.

They reached a set of stairs, leading to the lower levels. Lisin paused, glancing at him, then smiling again. "It's not far from here," he said. "We'll get you settled in, then I'll guide you to the exchange room where you can offer knowledge. After that you will be free to seek out knowledge in the Repository or to make deals with other visitors."

Zach nodded, his thumb rolled over the ring on his finger. He tried to keep his mind from wandering as they walked down the stairs. But he was having trouble. His skill was weighing on him. He had taken a great deal of time to learn how to manage his passive sense skill. Seeing the flaws in everything could quickly overwhelm him if he was not careful. Now though, he found his attention constantly pulled away.

Zach frowned, then decided to trust his instincts. He activated **True Link—Nahamassa Plainrunner**. The bond between the two of them had deepened a lot over the years, and with it so had their perk. They couldn't talk through it, but they could not only feel each other's presence but also feel their emotions.

There was a strange, muffled feeling, over the perk, which Zach immediately recognized as the effect of both distance and Time. They were not moving at the same pace, meaning that this place and the dragon's mountain didn't move at the same rate. That was fine, the perk still worked. He tried to push his feelings through the bond, sending her the unease he was feeling. Eventually, he got a response. Naha was panicked at first, then slowly it turned to worry and confusion.

He knew that she would worry, that she would realize that something wasn't quite right. He also still half believed that he was being unnecessarily paranoid, so he sent reassurance along as well.

Lisin led him through the dark corridors deeper beneath the ground. He did see living quarters as they passed. Each different than the last, made to accommodate different spirits, from those made of Fire to ones that dwelled in the water. That assuaged his worry somewhat. But he still couldn't shake the strange feeling. Spirits were still following them from a distance, their passage interrupting the natural flow of air through the building.

Lisin kept giving Zach looks over his shoulder, and smiling.

“Here we are,” he finally said as they reached a room. He pushed the door open and showed him the inside.

Immediately, Zach relaxed, it was a furnished room. It was simple, with just a bed and a desk, and not very large, but it made him feel somewhat silly for being paranoid.

“Thank you,” Zach said and stepped inside, inspecting the quarters more closely. “Where can I donate knowledge?”

“I can escort you, we just need to key this room to you so that no other visitor can enter,” Lisin answered and stepped outside, his hand reaching for the wall next to the entrance.

Zach's eyes narrowed on the bed, it felt somehow familiar. Lisin's hand touched the wall, and everything clicked into place, memories from the prison and a world that was fake. But it was too late for Zach to react as the illusion fell apart. Light sprung into existence and the furniture melted away, a force slammed into Zach, driving him to his knees. The room expanded, flowing away into a massive round chamber with spirits

standing all around him. Lines grew over the ground expanding from four points around him. He pushed all his will into his skills, tried to activate his **Grand Step Upon the River** perk, one of his newest perks, and failed. He tried to use the ring on his finger and found that it too was blocked. As if it couldn't reach beyond him. Something was pressing on him from all sides, preventing him from doing anything with his powers that required him to reach beyond the confines of his own body. He activated all of his boosting perks, making himself stronger. He raised his eyes and saw a glowing symbol in the air above one of the glowing points on the ground.

He recognized it immediately; it was the same as what Ra'azel had used. A giant bear stood just outside of the boundary that held him trapped. Zach gritted his teeth, fighting against the force that was trying to crush him. He could touch his power, but... it was as if he was restricted to just his body. As if his power couldn't reach anything beyond it.

“Why?” He managed to say. “You are breaking your own rules.”

The Grand Spirit tilted his head. “The only rule I follow is the pursuit of knowledge, in the face of knowledge all else pales in comparison. And Ra'azel holds an entire universe worth of knowledge and secrets. More than anyone else can offer.”

The glowing symbol indicated that he had already shared some of that knowledge. “You could've refused me,” Zach said, his mind already analyzing the bonds around him. “Why do this?”

“Because I know what Ra'azel wants,” the Grand Spirit of Knowledge said. “And providing that to him will gain me much.”

Zach narrowed his eyes. He saw the flaws in the power that held him captive, and slowly he sharpened his will and pushed at those flaws. “Me?” Zach asked. Ra'azel had attacked him, and while perhaps Zach hadn't

been who Ra'azel had been looking for precisely, there was a reason why he had attacked. The shade had tried to capture him too. There was something that Zach had that Ra'azel was seeking.

The Grand Spirit didn't answer.

Through his connection with Naha, Zach felt her emotions, knew that she understood that something had gone wrong. The connection was fraying, the power around him stifling it. Zach focused his mind and will and then pushed with everything he had. He drew on Time and took power from the plane. The flaws in the prison shook and widened, Zach was pushing it back, but it was a slow process.

The Grand Spirit grimaced, showing his teeth, then he turned to look at Lisin.

“Send the word out, I need spirits summoned into the Real Realm to deliver a message. The prison will not hold him for long.”

Lisin bowed and left the chamber. Zach focused on fighting back as the spirits around him added their power to whatever it was that held him, slowing his efforts down.

His link with Naha snapped, and he was alone with his thoughts. But he remembered the last thing he felt from her—anger and determination.

They couldn't know about that, and they didn't know Naha. He only had to hold out until she arrived.

“You don't need to do this. It is not too late to change your mind,” Zach spoke truthfully, everyone deserved a second chance, even those that wronged him.

The Grand Spirit shook his head. “Seeking knowledge is in my nature. And compared to the knowledge of a universe that came before, nothing you have to offer matters.”

Zach glared at the spirit, but he could no longer speak. The pressure around him was increasing as the spirits aided the glowing symbols. But his will poked at the flaws, widening them. He knew that it was only a matter of time before he pushed through and broke what was keeping him imprisoned and preventing him from using his powers. He only hoped that he would not be too tired afterward, the spirits around him stood guard, vigilant and waiting. He would need to fight them all once free.

He held on, knowing that Naha would not fail him.