

## **Danger**

The world around the mountain top twisted and the Ethereal changed. One moment it was empty, and in the next the dragon stood there once again. Just returned from taking Ryun and Nayra away to meet with the Grand Spirit of War. Something about the way the dragon moved them through the Ethereal nagged at Naha. It was a strange sensation, and she had noticed it both times when he transported her before. What intrigued Naha the most was that she felt no willpower from the dragon when it happened, nor did she feel him activate any type of a perk.

She studied the Explorer for a long minute, trying to think of how he could've done it. The dragon noticed, and turned his head to look at her.

“You wish to ask something?”

Naha grimaced, she didn't intend to intrude. She generally preferred to stay in the shadows, observe unseen. Now the Explorer's full attention was on her. For a moment she debated just sinking into the shadows, but then decided against it. Asking couldn't hurt anything.

“How did you do that?” She asked him.

The dragon tilted his head. “How did I do what?”

“Take us from here to there and back again, I didn't feel you use any type of power, definitely no willpower. How did you teleport us?”

The dragon's eyes twinkled with amusement as he answered. “You are correct, I used no power. I simply asked.”

That made Naha frown in confusion. "Asked? You asked the Ethereal to transport us?"

The dragon nodded, his grin broadening. "Indeed. The Ethereal is the Realm of thought and change. It is a reflection of the Real Realm, a broken mirror in many ways, but the Ethereal is more than just a plane of existence; it is a living, conscious entity. Not truly alive in the same way as you and I are, but it can think in a way. When you learn to communicate with it and treat it with respect, it can grant you favors such as the one you experienced."

Naha pondered this for a moment, her curiosity piqued. "And how does one learn to communicate with the Ethereal?"

The dragon settled down, tucking his wings and tail around him, looking like a wise old sage. "It takes time and patience. One must first learn to quiet their mind and listen. The Ethereal speaks in whispers, and it is easy to miss its voice amidst the chaos of our own thoughts."

That made Naha quiet down for a few minutes. And then, after a while she spoke up again.

"Can anyone just learn how to do this?" She asked.

The dragon leaned his head down to look at her closely. "Anyone can listen and perhaps speak with the Ethereal. But to do what I can do? To ask the Ethereal to move around them? Sadly, no," he said with a grave voice. "Not even the Grand Spirits are allowed this privilege. Often times, even I am surprised at it."

"Why are you able to do it then?" Naha asked.

The dragon turned his head away. "I am unsure myself, the Ethereal doesn't provide me with an answer to that question. I had laid asleep in

this realm for countless lifetimes, dreaming of a life in the Real Realm that I can barely remember. Perhaps that is what has made me so close to it. Though, if you asked the spirits, they would give you a different answer.”

“What answer is that?”

The dragon turned around and met Naha’s eyes. “I have heard the spirits say that the Ethereal Realm loves me, and perhaps it does. I certainly love it, an infinite scape filled with wonders to explore. The Ethereal is my everything.”

Naha heard the deep emotion in the dragon’s voice and didn’t speak again.

After a while, the dragon spoke. “Have you decided where you wish to go?”

Naha raised her head and opened her mouth to speak when she felt something in the back of her head. It took her only a moment to recognize Zach’s True Link perk. Immediately, she stood up and activated her True Link. The awareness that they had of each other was muted and strangely seemed like it was shifting rapidly, but she felt his emotions.

“What is wrong?” The dragon asked.

“It’s Zach,” Naha said. “Something had to have gone wrong, he used one of our perks—” she trailed off as she suddenly felt a shift in his emotions, then the link getting cut off. “He’s in danger,” she turned to the dragon. “Take me back, we need to help him.”

The course of his emotions flashed inside of her mind, painting a picture. It had been hard to feel, something was wrong, not the distance their bond was sufficient for it to no longer matter. Time difference

perhaps? She didn't have the time to wonder. She shouldn't have left him there, in a place filled with spirits and the unknown.

The dragon frowned. "Are you certain?"

Naha nodded, stepping up to the dragon and equipping her armor and weapons, ready for a fight. "Yes. He felt betrayed, the spirits had to have turned on him. Quick, we can't waste time," she said,

The dragon hesitated, his expression a mix of concern and reluctance. "That... the Grand Spirit of Knowledge wouldn't have broken his hospitality. And Zacharia is strong enough to give even Knowledge pause."

"What you think doesn't matter, only the truth," Naha told him. "Take me, now," she said slowly, trying to contain her anger. She could feel her entire being focused on one task, protecting her loved one.

The dragon shifted, almost as if he was uncomfortable. His will trembled around him like a physical thing, Naha didn't know if she could match him, but she would force him if she had to.

"As much as I want to help, I must be cautious. My relationship with the nine Grand Spirits is delicate. If I interfere too much, it could disrupt the balance between us."

Naha's eyes flashed with anger and frustration. "Zach is in danger, and you're worried about your relationship with the Grand Spirits? They turned on him, and every moment you delay his life is further in danger. We do not know how fast time moves there."

The dragon sighed heavily, his gaze filled with a mixture of sadness and understanding. "I am truly sorry, but I cannot risk the balance. I have no way of knowing what happened, for all I know, Zacharia has done something that warranted such a response."

Naha gritted her teeth, realizing that the dragon was not their friend, only an ally of convenience. Of course, he wasn't, they barely knew him. He offered knowledge freely, but that was not the same as being an ally. She saw it now, he cared only for exploration and stopping the yeti. In his mind, the Grand Spirits were greater allies than Zach was.

“We came to you for help with an enemy we both share,” Naha said slowly. “Do you care nothing for that at least?”

“I can go and speak with Knowledge, there has to be a valid explanation for this.”

Naha shook her head. “And warn them that we are aware? They couldn't have known that Zach could be in contact with me. Whatever they had done, they did believing that they will not be discovered. I will not let you tip our hand. Perhaps I am wrong, and there is a good explanation, but I will not simply walk there and ask. I will make sure that he is safe myself.”

“I..” the Explorer started, now sounding unsure. “Even if I wanted to help, I cannot interfere with Knowledge, not there. I physically cannot enter the domains of the Grand Spirits without being invited. It is a binding oath I made with them in order to preserve the balance between us, to break it would bring consequences.”

Naha glared, barely being able to veil her true thoughts. “Can you at least bring back Ryun and Nayra? Ereclaw?”

The dragon closed his eyes and tilted his head. “The two have already crossed into War's domain, I cannot reach them there. As to Ereclaw—” the Ethereal twisted, and a moment later a humanoid wolf stood next to them.

Naha didn't waste a moment, immediately filling the wolf in, then rounded on the dragon.

"If you will not help us, then at least take us there."

The dragon gave her a long look. "I don't know why Knowledge would do anything like this," he said, his tone more believing now. She didn't know if he was coming around to trusting Naha, or if he was just considering it as a hypothetical. "If Knowledge has done something, it must be for a reason."

"I don't care about a spirit's reason," Naha added.

The dragon's nostrils flared. "Zach's arm was crafted by Ra'azel, that is the only thing that Knowledge might be interested in. Or... no," he shook his head. "I will do one thing, just in case."

Naha tilted her head. "What?"

He closed his eyes, and for a moment Naha could feel a grand weight all around her, which vanished as quickly as it appeared. "It doesn't matter, it might not be necessary at all. What is your plan?"

Naha turned to look at Ereclaw and spoke. "Do the spirits there know you?"

Ereclaw shook his head. "I have seen the Grand Spirit of Knowledge, but he did not pay me much attention. I was beneath its notice."

"From our point of view, the time Ereclaw was my visitor was ages ago. And it was for barely a moment," the dragon added.

Naha nodded. "Then this is what we are going to do."

She told them her plan and hoped that they weren't too late.

## From the Shadows

The dragon brought them to a forest, then pointed in the distance.

“The Castle is that way,” he said. “Be careful, I shall remain here if things go awry. I cannot act within the Castle, but if you can leave I will be able to.”

Naha nodded, but she didn't put much faith in the dragon, it was apparent to her that their relationship with the dragon was not that of close allies. She stepped into Ereclaw's shadow, and he made his way through the forest. She leaned on her passive senses and those that made her harder to be noticed. She could feel the shadow that the Castle cast and she wondered how that was even possible. There was no real light in the Ethereal Realm, everything, or at least most things, were made out of some type of Ethereal Essence. Yet shadows still existed, even though they didn't feel quite real to her senses.

She didn't dwell on that for too long, what mattered was that it worked.

It didn't take long for Ereclaw to reach the Castle. He walked up to the gates, and immediately the air above the arch shimmered revealing the giant snake spirit, its obsidian scales glimmering in the ethereal light.

“Who goessss there?” The Gatekeeper asked, its voice echoing through the forest.

Ereclaw bowed respectfully, “I am Ereclaw, and I seek entrance to the Castle of Knowledge.”

The Gatekeeper looked him up and down, “I do not recognize you. What businesssss do you have here?”

“I have come seeking knowledge,” Ereclaw replied. “As all that come to your gates do.”

The Gatekeeper hesitated for a moment before answering. “The Cassstle of Knowledge issss not admitting new visitorssss at the moment, return later.”

“Would you deny someone seeking knowledge the opportunity to learn?” Ereclaw asked. “I though that the gates of Castle of Knowledge are open to all?”

The snake leaned down, looking at Ereclaw intently before tilting its head. “No, I would not. However, knowledge comes with a price. What will you offer in return for entrance?”

“I offer the knowledge of who I am, the Emissary of Twilight.”

The snake paused, and then the grinding sound of the gates opening sounded. “Then enter, Ereclaw, Emissary of Twilight. Be welcome to the Castle of Knowledge.”

Ereclaw bowed and stepped in, walking down a long corridor until he stepped into a large courtyard. Naha kept her senses focused, trying to locate Zach, but there were areas that she couldn't sense within.

As he stepped into the yard, Naha noticed the spirits all around them. They were so many of them everywhere, each more different than the last. Ereclaw walked through the courtyard, marveling at the variety of spirits that inhabited the area. Some spirits appeared to be elemental in nature, taking the form of crackling flames, swirling gusts of wind, or even living



water. These spirits seemed to interact with the environment, causing small, localized phenomena such as a gentle breeze or a tiny rain shower.

Other spirits represented different aspects, like blades, growth, or nature. Blade spirits moved with fluid grace, their edges sharp and their forms ever-shifting, as if they were constantly honing themselves. Growth spirits were a fascinating sight; they seemed to be in a constant state of change, with vines and flowers blooming and withering around them, a never-ending cycle of life and decay. Nature spirits took on various forms, from majestic tree-like beings to creatures that resembled the animals of the Real Realm. These spirits appeared to be in harmony with the environment, acting as guardians and caretakers of the ethereal plants and creatures that inhabited the courtyard.

The spirits moved about, conversing with each other in ways that Naha couldn't quite understand, and observing Ereclaw with curiosity. As he continued his journey through the courtyard, Naha could sense the power these spirits held, as well as their connection to the Castle of Knowledge. There was a sense of something connecting them all together, something building up all around them that reminded her of how Zach felt when he touched the Plane of Time. It was clear that they were all part of a vast, interconnected web that was somehow bringing a connection to the Aspect of Knowledge closer into this place, making the Castle a truly awe-inspiring place.

Naha's senses caught someone approaching, and Ereclaw turned his attention to them as well. It was, to Naha's surprise, a demasi man. He reached Ereclaw and inclined his head.

"Welcome to the Castle of Knowledge, I am Lisin Bi Fal, I'll be your guide," he said, then tilted his head. "I must say that this is a rare sight, I have never seen one of your kind come to the seek Knowledge amongst us."

Ereclaw leaned his head to the side. “Is knowledge not a pursuit that all should aspire to?”

The demasi blinked. “Of course, of course, I apologize. I’ve just never seen one of your kind who appeared so... civilized.”

Ereclaw was a beast that had evolved beyond his nature. In most cases, those like him evolved by spilling blood, Naha remembered a few times she had encountered monsters like that. The demasi probably assumed that Ereclaw was like that. After all, if he could see his tag, it would be displayed to the man the same as any beast. And Ereclaw’s tier and rarity reflected that of Ryun. He was tier 12 and eternal rarity: **Ereclaw; Emissary of Twilight**. Though she doubted that the man could see it, Ereclaw’s specialty was Hunt and Oblivion. She didn’t know much about him, and what she knew was what she had observed.

He couldn’t be detected by any powers that Naha had if he didn’t want to. His presence was erased as if he wasn’t even there.

“Spirits are not Chosen,” Ereclaw said, as a way of an answer.

That made the demasi hesitate, and then he spoke, instructing Ereclaw in the rules of this place. Hurrying to tell him about the rule against violence. Then, he led them away, saying that Ereclaw had to pay the price of knowledge in order to be allowed into the Repository of Knowledge.

As they walked, Naha tried to keep watch for any signs of Zach, but found none.

“I did not think that I would find a chosen here, in this place. You serve these spirits?” Ereclaw asked the demasi as they were led deeper into the castle.

The demasi glanced in Ereclaw's direction before answering. "Chosen rarely come, but some like me do. I have offered my services in return for the knowledge I seek."

Ereclaw nodded, and didn't speak again. The demasi led them into a round room, with a strange spirit sat in the middle, appearing to hold court. The spirit of Bartering Knowledge, as the demasi had told them. Here Ereclaw had to offer a price in order to be allowed entrance to the Repository of Knowledge. From what the dragon told them, that would be the best place to start their search for Zach.

This spirit was an intriguing figure, with a form that appeared to be a blend of ancient parchment and shimmering, ever-changing symbols. The words that made up its body seemed to be drawn from a myriad of languages, some familiar and others escaping Naha's grasp. The spirit's eyes glowed with a warm, inviting light, a testament to the vast wealth of knowledge it contained.

The spirit's presence emanated an aura of wisdom and intellect, drawing those who sought enlightenment and understanding closer. Unlike other spirits in the courtyard, this spirit appeared to be engaged in a unique form of exchange, trading pieces of knowledge with those who approached it. From what Naha could overhear, the spirit was keenly aware of the value and rarity of each piece of information, always seeking to strike a balance in its transactions.

Ereclaw approached the spirit of bartering knowledge when it was his turn. Naha could clearly feel his emotions in the way his body moved, a mix of curiosity and caution. As he neared the enigmatic figure, the spirit looked up, its eyes twinkling with anticipation. "Greetings, Ereclaw, Emissary of Twilight," it said, its voice a soft rustle like pages turning in an ancient tome. "I sense you have knowledge to share. What do you seek in return?"

“I am willing to offer the knowledge of the Aspect of the Void,” Ereclaw replied, his voice steady but respectful. They had already discussed what he should offer. “In exchange, I seek admittance to the Repository of Knowledge, to seek knowledge about the Aspect of the Hunt.”

The spirit’s eyes seemed to flicker with intrigue, clearly interested in the information Ereclaw held. “The Aspect of Void is a rare and valuable piece of knowledge. However, granting you access to the Repository of Knowledge is a significant request. I must ask for memories of your knowledge of the Void in return. Will you accept these terms?”

Ereclaw considered the offer, or at least pretended to. After a moment’s hesitation, he nodded in agreement. “I accept your terms,” he said, determination in his voice.

The spirit of Bartering Knowledge produced a small, crystalline sphere from within its parchment form. The sphere seemed to hum with an inner light, almost eager to absorb the memories it was about to receive. “Place your hand upon the sphere and focus on the memories you wish to share,” instructed the spirit.

Ereclaw complied, his hand resting gently on the surface of the sphere. Naha felt something drawing from Ereclaw and into the object. The sphere glowed brighter, pulsating in time with his memories, some of them flashing across the surface of the object.

When the process was complete, Ereclaw withdrew his hand, and the spirit examined the now-glowing sphere with satisfaction. Then it placed the crystal on a scale next to him. It wavered, but eventually it settled, balanced against an empty scale. “Your offering has been accepted, Ereclaw,” it said, granting him a nod of approval. “You are now granted admittance to the Repository of Knowledge. May you find the wisdom you seek within its depths.”

The demasi led them out of the room and through the castle until they reached a large set of doors. Once they entered, Naha's perception of the inside flickered. One moment she saw a giant library, and in the next a forest filled with alcoves beneath its roots. She could feel something beneath each one, wolves sitting beneath the trees.

The room flickered a few times, until it settled on the forest.

Ereclaw looked around, then spoke. "This, it looks like the forest of my home."

The demasi nodded. "The Repository appears to you in the way you are most comfortable with to receive its knowledge."

Immediately, it made sense to Naha why it looked that way. This was what it appeared like for Ereclaw, and she was hiding in his shadow. It seemed that even the Ethereal realm had trouble sensing her.

The demasi gave Ereclaw some directions and then bid his goodbye, leaving them in the room. Ereclaw walked through the forest as spirits milled around, some flying above them, and others entering alcoves beneath the trees. Somehow, Ereclaw seemed to be able to tell what knowledge the trees contained, and he made his way to one then crouched and entered an alcove.

Within, a large wolf sat on its haunches, waiting.

"Greetings young pup," the wolf said. "Sit and listen to the story of my hunts."

Ereclaw didn't look at the wolf for a long moment. "It's been so long since I last sat and listened to an elders' story."

For a moment, his eyes grew fond, but then he shook his head. The wolf seemed to be waiting for something, just staring straight ahead, and Ereclaw moved away to the corner. The wolf didn't react—of course, it wasn't real, it was just a way to relay knowledge in a way that Ereclaw was comfortable with.

“Naha,” he whispered, too low for anyone to hear. She moved her presence closer to the surface of his shadow, just below his ear.

“I hear you,” she said.

“Do you know where he is?” He asked.

“No, my True Link perk is not telling me anything, other than that he is still alive. And I can't sense the entirety of the castle's shadows. There are areas that are somehow shielded. What about you?”

Ereclaw grimaced. “I caught his scent.”

“Really? Where is he?” Naha pressed.

“It is faint, old, but he was in this place, the Repository.”

Naha felt her heart skip. “Old?”

“Days old, I can't tell where he is now,” Ereclaw said.

Days old? That... she had feared that, with the way the Ethereal seemed to flow at different rates of time... “Can you find him?”

“Not unless I find a fresh scent,” Ereclaw answered.

Naha grimaced. In her senses she still followed the presence of the demasi walking away.

“I am not going to just sit and wait for something to fall in our laps,” Naha said slowly, anger slipping through, overtaking her fear. Zach had been gone for days, and she didn’t know what happened to him. She couldn’t let that continue.

“What are you thinking?” Ereclaw asked.

“I’m going to scour this place for clues, and if I don’t find them... Then I will take what I need from them,” Naha said slowly. “Are you with me?”

Ereclaw paused, and then nodded. “Betrayal is the worst offense one can give,” he answered.

“I’ll be right back,” with that decided, Naha took out an item out of her storage, still hidden inside of the shadow. And then she activated the **Mirror of Reality** from within the Castle of Knowledge. The world shifted around her, then pulled her in. And then she was no longer in the real Castle, but a mirror image of it.

She stepped out of Ereclaw’s shadow and glanced at him, only to see empty space. His powers interfered with him being copied. But that was fine. She walked out, searching for any signs of Zach.

## **Rescue**

As Naha ventured further into the Castle of Knowledge, she found herself in a space that seemed to be frozen in time and space, a mirror reflection of the real place she was residing in. This temporal stasis permeated the entire castle, affecting everything, from the spirits residing there, to also the very air itself. Despite the stillness, Naha pressed on, her senses attuned to any indication of Zach’s presence.

Carefully, she examined the spirits suspended in time and space, their once-fluid movements now arrested in mid-motion. These beings of the Ethereal Realm appeared as if they were captured in a moment of existence, their Essence distilled into a single, unchanging instant. Observing the various spirits, Naha tried to determine which of them might pose a threat, and how she could deal with them quickly.

As she continued her search, Naha continued to formulate strategies to confront the myriad of spirits, should it become necessary. She would spare none if it meant risking Zach. Already he had been out of contact for what was for him days. She could only assume that he was captured, placed somewhere that was shielded enough to prevent their True Link perks from linking fully.

She analyzed the spirits and assessed their potential strengths and weaknesses, mentally preparing herself for the possibility of a battle against these frozen adversaries. Each spirit offered a unique challenge, and Naha knew that she would need to be resourceful and adaptive if she were to fight her way through them all.

But she also knew her strengths, and not all spirits present were violent. There were many of them, but ultimately she would cut her way through them all if she had to. She made her way to the locations that her senses couldn't pierce, knowing that those were the most likely locations where Zach would be held.

The first one was on top of a tree, in the Repository of Knowledge. It still looked the same as when they had first entered it, the Mirror Realm didn't change after she created it. She found the door high up on a tree, nestled between the branches. She couldn't move anything inside this realm, but thankfully the door had a gap at the bottom, enough that she could feel the shadow beneath. She sunk into the shadow and lifted out of the one inside, only to find a hazy room inside.



Immediately, she grimaced, knowing that something inside was interfering with her item's ability. It was either a property of the room itself, or something very powerful was in there.

Seeing no way to progress deeper, she turned around and headed to the second area, still taking the time to study the spirits she encountered and formulating a plan on how to take them out if needed.

She reached a set of stairs leading down beneath the ground, and followed the route. She encountered a series of hallways that branched, with doors all along them. Some were opened as a spirit was in the process of entering or exiting. Some rooms were suited for chosen inhabitation, others looked more suited for the spirits. She saw one room that was just a cave filled with lava and another that was filled with water.

Then she found a room that looked strange. It was filled with chains, and slowly Naha entered. Then she stopped frozen as she saw hooks, with a person mounted on them. It was a chosen, a kreativean, long dead, their body opened up and spirits looking at what was inside. Next to them were recording devices, documenting what they were seeing. It was apparent what they were doing immediately, gathering knowledge. Naha had no way of knowing if the kreativean was dead before it was brought here, or if it was tortured. But it made her feel uneasy. Things that had nagged at her mind since she entered this place.

Knowledge was a broad term, and the morality of spirits was not the morality of the chosen. And she had seen the depravity that chosen could sink to, she had been that low herself.

She continued exploring, seeing things that made even her hesitate.

She made her way through it all until she reached another large double door. Again, she could feel shadows inside, except for what felt like the center of the room. She stepped through the shadow and entered what

looked like a large arena. There were spirits all over the room, all focused on the center of it. In the center there was a massive half-sphere that she couldn't see inside of, but she could see a ring of formations just outside of the hazy area. She didn't know much about formations, but she had lived for long enough that she could recognize the purpose of some of them. These were meant as barriers.

Naha's heart started to beat faster as she studied the room. It was obvious from the setup that there was something being kept inside. She couldn't assume that it was Zach, and she couldn't risk coming here in reality without being certain.

She took her time studying the spirits and plotting, walking through the entirety of the Castle again, making sure that she knew where everything was.

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She stepped out of the **Mirror of Reality** and back into Ereclaw's shadow. Somehow, he noticed the moment she did so and spoke in a whisper, telling her what she had seen.

Ereclaw listened without reacting, then spoke.

"Did you find him?" He asked.

"No, but I have an idea where he might be," she answered slowly. "I just want to be certain."

"And how are we going to find that out?" Ereclaw asked.

She told him.

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Lisin Bi Fal walked down the corridors of the Castle of Knowledge. His servitude to the spirits was long, and he had a way to go yet until he got what he came for, but there were days when living among the spirits weighed on him more heavily than others.

Very few spirits actually cared to converse with a chosen, or even could in any manner that Lisin could understand. What mattered to a spirit, rarely mattered to Lisin. Still, it was worth it to gain the knowledge to help him raise above his current tier. He had been stuck as an Immortal for centuries, and he had no one to help him advance. His family practiced a rarely used Path coupled with an even rarer Aspect, that of the Living Waters. There was no one who knew enough to at least put him on the right path to achieve the inspiration for the next realm. Only here, where spirits of all kinds of Aspects traded knowledge could he find what he was looking for. A few hints had made him think that understanding his Aspect was a requirement for the higher Realms. And it wasn't like servitude was such a hard time. The Grand Spirit of Knowledge only called on him when he had a task that needed to be accomplished, or when visitors more similar to him arrived—which was rarely.

Still, to have two such visitors so closely together, even if one of them was a beast, was unusual. Still, it was an interesting time in the Castle, more interesting than the last few decades had been when put together. Lisin didn't know all of the particulars, only that summoners in the Real Realm had been contacted and a messenger summoned from the Ethereal to deliver word to the Grand Spirit's ally about their prisoner.

He had already overheard the Grand Spirit complain about it taking so long, but the time difference between the Ethereal and the Real Realm could not be avoided. And the Ethereal flowed as it willed.

Lisin turned a corner as he headed back to the courtyard, when suddenly he felt something at the edge of his senses. Before he could even react something grabbed hold of him, and he felt himself sinking into the floor, everything going dark and a sense of vertigo overcoming him. A moment later his back hit something hard, and he found himself suspended against a wall.

He was inside a side corridor, just the small light on the wall next to him which faintly illuminated the surroundings to reveal nothing at all. Something was keeping him in place. He tried to break the bindings, but found that he couldn't budge. He was just about to use his powers when a low and whispering voice cut through his mind, freezing him in place.

“Where is the Chosen being held?” A voice demanded, echoing from just next to his ear.

Lisin grew very still. This shouldn't be possible, even if his companions missed him, there was no way for them to know that something was wrong inside. They should've come to the entrance, seeking him not... the bindings tightened, and Lisin saw shadows moving across his body.

At first, Lisin feigned ignorance. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he replied nervously, trying to break free from the shadowy restraints.

The bindings tightened again, and the bones of one of his limbs snapped. His jaw was shut closed and his neck squeezed before he could let out a scream. Then the shadows appeared to come alive, taking on sinister forms that rose above him and seemed ready to strike at any moment.

“Do not test me,” the voice warned. “I can make this far worse for you. Tell me where the Chosen is imprisoned, and I may spare your life.”

Lisin thought about it quickly. He was in the service to the Grand Spirit, but he was not bound to protect it. He was not here out of loyalty, only because he needed something. His life was far more important than anything else.

Lisin’s resolve crumbled under the mounting pressure and fear. “Alright, alright!” He stammered. “The Chosen is being held in a chamber beneath the Castle. We took him there and imprisoned him.”

It wasn’t like it would matter. The arena was filled with powerful spirits, going in there was suicide. Not that he would tell this person that. Besides, the chosen was already straining his prison, it wouldn’t hold for much longer. The Grand Spirit was thinking of alternatives even as they spoke.

The shadowy restraints tightened again, and Lisin spoke out, pleading for his life, his voice trembling. “Please, I’ve told you what I know! Release me, and I swear I’ll not be an issue for you!”

The presence all around him seemed to consider that, for a moment, and then it spoke in a cold voice that sent chills down his spine.

“You crossed and imprisoned my love,” the voice whispered. “He would tell me that all deserve a second chance, that mercy is a virtue. But I have lived a life filled with horrors. He is that bright light that wants to make the world a better place. I am and always have been his shadow, the one that can do things that he couldn’t, that he shouldn’t do. That you imprisoned him tells me a lot about you. He might be able to forgive, but when it comes to those I love, I never do.”

Before Lisin could say another word he felt a cold and quick sensation pass through his neck, then the world started spinning.

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Naha stepped out of the demasi's shadow as his head toppled to the ground. He might've been Immortal, but death in the Ethereal Realm was the death of the soul. There was no coming back from it.

Looking down on the body, she felt her resolve waver for a moment. Zach would not want this, but... sometimes he was wrong. Not all deserved a second chance, and the world was a cruel place. She could and would follow him, but she would make no compromises with those she loved, never for him.

As Naha stalked through the Castle of Knowledge, her resolve to save Zach had hardened into a cold, merciless determination. She moved from shadow to shadow, her presence nothing more than a whisper in the darkness.

The spirits inhabiting the castle went about their usual activities, oblivious to the doom approaching them. She remembered the promise she had made him, to not be what she had become so long ago. But sometimes, being a monster was required.

Naha's eyes narrowed as she selected her first target, a spirit of flame flickering through the corridors. With **Critical Strike** and a swift motion, she reached out from the shadows, forming a blade of darkness that impaled the spirit through its core. It let out a wail of agony before

being consumed by a burst of flames, leaving nothing behind but a cold, empty darkness.

Naha continued her path of destruction, teleporting through the shadows to strike down unsuspecting spirits. An earth spirit, its form comprised of rocks and soil, crumbled to dust as she cut fissures into its body, soil flowing from the wounds. Then she used **Life Rend** and its life force spilled out of the open cracks. She manipulated shadows and tore it apart, her mastery of the Shadow Aspect singing inside her head. A water spirit, caught off guard, was ripped apart as the shadows ensnared it, a **Shadow Stab** through its core ended it, leaving only a dissipating mist in its wake.

She created chaos everywhere she went, and soon the deaths were noticed.

Her heart rate quickened as the horror of her actions unfolded around her, but she knew there was no turning back. The wails and screams of the dying spirits echoed throughout the Castle, creating an eerie symphony of terror. The air thickened with fear as the remaining spirits began to realize the danger they were in, but none could escape Naha's relentless pursuit. Shadows trembled as her image deepened them, as her mastery over it made her that much more effective. She stepped through the shadows with **Shadow Step**, killing then disappearing from everyone's notice, resetting her combat cooldown.

An air spirit, attempting to flee, found itself ensnared by her **[Shadow Embrace]**, its ethereal form constricting and compressing until it imploded, leaving only a faint breeze behind. A spirit of growth, its form a constantly shifting mass of leaves and vines, met a grisly end as the shadows sliced through it like a scythe through wheat.

She disappeared into a shadow, shifting form into that of her **Primal Metamorphosis**, a cat-like monster that stalked in the shadows. There

was panic and confusion everywhere, and finally as she reached the courtyard, one of the stronger spirits appeared. A giant of metal and marble. An armored statue with a giant sword.

She prepared her **Shadow Paragon's Blow**, then pounced from the shadow, her claws hitting the back of the spirit and rending with **[Paragon's Strike]**. The metal parted beneath her claws and the spirit stumbled forward on its knees.

She danced to the side as it swung its sword, cutting through the air with such intensity that she felt herself being pulled into its wake. She stepped through a shadow, coming out on its shoulders. A **|Burst of Strength|** and **|Perfect Lacerate: My Strikes, Tearing Apart|** helped her tear its head from its shoulders.

It didn't die, instead it charged and hit her with an elbow as it turned its sword for another strike. Naha grimaced, then sunk into the shadow as it attacked. Her sense showed her the fatal flow in the spirit's body and she focused, using **Shadow's Judgment**. A giant fist made out of shadows appeared above the spirit and smashed into it, crushing it into nothing but rubble.

More spirits were coming, while others were fleeing in terror. Despite the carnage, Naha remained focused on her mission. She knew that only by rescuing Zach could she put an end to this nightmare. As the spirits' dying screams echoed through the Castle of Knowledge, she moved with purpose, the shadows her only ally in the grim task that lay before her.

\* \* \*



Oblivion erased Ereclaw's presence as he moved through the Castle of Knowledge. In the distance he could hear the wails of death, and he could smell the scent of terror, of fear. He was not a chosen, nor was he a spirit. So much death was... unfortunate, but he understood the laws of the wild. The spirits had imprisoned one of their own, a member of his pack, at least for this hunt. It was his duty to rescue them.

While Naha caused chaos and death, Ereclaw moved through the corridors, unseen. Even if they had paid attention, it was unlikely that he would've been noticed. His power had grown and changed with Ryun's. What was once Void, was now Oblivion, and his presence was hard to notice. Ereclaw reached his destination, an arena, just in time to see the powerful spirits guarding it leaving to go help against Naha.

He slipped inside as they left, and saw Zach. He was imprisoned in the center of the arena, a glowing sphere surrounding him and familiar symbols suspended in the air around it. Immediately Ereclaw knew that they were right in their actions, those symbols could only be the work of the yeti, or someone taught by him.

As Ereclaw entered, he saw the prison flashing, straining as Zach pushed against it from the inside. He also noticed the spirit standing in front of Zach, yelling at him.

"How did they know?" The Grand Spirit of Knowledge yelled, what Ereclaw once thought as a kind face and eyes, now turned feral.

"For someone calling himself the Grand Spirit of Knowledge, you don't know as much as you think," Zach responded.

The Grand Spirit snarled and turned to spirit next to him. "Send another word to the Real Realm, I need aid here, now!"

Ereclaw was not going to let that happen. Before the spirits could react, Ereclaw acted. A wave of Oblivion exploded out of him, hitting the runes and the prison, doing what Oblivion did so well, erasing things from existence.

For a moment, there was a shocked silence, as everyone tried to catch up to what happened. And then Zach stood, and the world around him shook.

“Now,” he said. “You’ll tell me all that you know.”