

## Castle of Knowledge

“There it is,” the Explorer’s Soul said. “The Castle of Knowledge, the home to all who wish to learn in the Ethereal Realm. You will find the Grand Spirit there.”

Zach turned his head to look up at where the dragon was pointing. They were standing at the edge of a dark forest, and in front of them, on top of a large hill, rose walls of blue stone. Above the walls, Zach could see a castle, with round towers and pointed spires rising in the middle. The tips of the spires were crystals, shining brightly in shades of blue that flickered every now and then.

“You are not coming with us?” Zach asked.

The dragon shook his head. “I’ve tried to reason with the Grand Spirits before, it did not end well. They suffer my presence because they know I am their equal in power, but they do not accept me as their peer. The Grand Spirits have their own agendas, you will need to appeal to that. But, I shall come with you to the gates, provide an introduction at least.”

Zach glanced at Naha, and then all three of them started walking up the hill.

The castle’s gate was large, big enough that even the Explorer could walk through easily. It looked like it was made out of wood, with elaborate lines carved into it. The top of the gate was framed by a big arch made out of marble, with gemstones inlaid in it that pulsed with all the colors of the rainbow.

They stopped before the gate, and Zach tilted his head.

“Do we knock?” He asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” the dragon said.

Before Zach could ask him to elaborate, he heard a new voice speak.

“Vissssitorsssss,” the voice came from above them, from the direction of the gate. “For what purposssse, do you come to the library of knowledge?”

Naha immediately bent her knees and got ready, as Zach turned his eyes in the direction of where the voice came from. His skill alerted him to the presence, but he hadn’t noticed it before it started to speak. The light flickered above the gate, and a giant snake became visible as its camouflage dispelled. Zach was impressed that it could even fool his skill.

The snake was giant, and it was resting on top of the gate’s arch, curled up on itself. It raised its head, which was as long as Zach was tall, and looked in their direction. Its eyes were pure emeralds, and its scales were as the color of obsidian. It was a spirit, that much was clear. He removed his filters and took a look.

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The snake turned its head to look at Zach, its unblinking eyes focusing on him. “That wassss rude,” the snake said in an even tone. “You sssseek, knowledge without payment.”

Zach immediately bowed his head. He didn’t expect it to be able to notice. He decided that he didn’t want to use his ring to try and see through it. “I apologize,” he said. “Insult was not my intent.”

The snake flicked its forked tongue at him, and then the Explorer’s Soul took a step forward and took the spirit’s attention.

“I greet you, Gatekeeper,” the dragon said.

“You are not welcome here, Explorer’ssss Ssssoul,” the snake said. “Or, ssss, have you changed your mind? Sssshall you ssshare knowledge of landsss none but you have sssseen?”

“What I explored is my own,” the dragon said. “I will not rob future explorers of accomplishments they shall have. I have come only to introduce them,” he nodded down at Zach and Naha standing next to him. “They are visitors from the Real Realm, they seek an audience with the Grand Spirit of Knowledge.”

“For what purposssse?” the snake spirit asked.

“That knowledge is theirs to give,” the dragon responded.

The snake pulled back slightly, then turned to look at Zach and Naha.

“Why do you sssseek entrance to the Castle of Knowledge?”

Zach glanced at the dragon, who didn’t say anything. On a hunch, he spoke to the snake. “Our purpose is for the Grand Spirit to know.”

The snake tilted its head then hissed. “Ssss, but I am the one that guardssss the gate? What sssshall you offer me to allow you entrance?”

So, it looked like they had to pay to enter. He wondered why the dragon hadn’t told them that.

“What do you want?” Zach asked.

“Knowledge, of course,” the spirit said.

Zach frowned, wondering what he could offer. Then, something occurred to him.

“Would our names, and origin suffice?” Zach asked.

The spirit flicked its forked tongue and then nodded. “Namessss hold power, yesss.”

Zach stepped forward. “I am Zacharia Gardner, Ranker of the Seventh Iteration,” he said, then gestured at Naha who followed him.

“I am Nahamassa Plainrunner, Ranker of the Fifth Iteration,” she said.

The spirit tilted its head, then hissed. “Ssss, that will ssssuffice, you may enter, Zacharia Gardner. But sssshe may not.”

Zach frowned. “Why?”

“You are here to sssseek knowledge, I can taste it on you. Sssshe is not, there is no dessssire for knowledge in her heart.”

Zach narrowed his eyes, he started getting angry. Denying them was fine, but just excluding Naha...

Before Zach could say anything, Naha put her hand on his shoulder. “It’s fine Zach,” she said. “He is right. I only came along because of you. But... others are all searching for best ways forward for themselves. I should do the same. I can’t be your shadow forever,” she smiled at him.

Zach grimaced. She thought herself as if she was a burden on him, but it was the opposite, he knew. He was the one that needed her.

“Are you certain?” He asked.

Naha nodded her head. “Yes, I am.”

“Do not worry,” the dragon interjected. “I shall transport her back to my mountain, and anywhere else she wishes to go.”

Zach took a deep breath, then nodded.

“It issss decided then,” the spirit said, and the gate started to open, releasing a loud rumbling sound, revealing a dark hallway leading into the castle. “Enter, and wait in the courtyard at the end. Ssssome one will be along to guide you to the Grand Sssspirit.”

Zach kissed and hugged Naha, then whispered in her ear. “Be safe.”

“You too,” she whispered in return, then stepped back.

With one last look at the two of them, he stepped into the hallway. The door rumbled, closing behind him and leaving him in the dark.

Ahead, he could see light shining from the end of the hallway. The length of the hallway suggested that the walls were very thick. His skill told him that there were hidden holes in the walls all around him. It was actually surprising. He didn’t expect a kill-corridor in a place like this. If he was being honest, he didn’t even expect that the spirits would have a

castle. But then again, he didn't actually know that much about spirits. He had known more long ago, but that knowledge was obscured in a fog.

He reached the end and found himself in a courtyard. Blue grass covered the ground, a fountain made out of white marble was in the center, trees grew at the edges of the yard, spreading up along the walls. But what really caught his attention were the spirits. They were everywhere, and all kinds. Some were floating in groups above, strange animalistic ones. Others were more humanoid, sitting on the grass with books spread around them.

Some of them glanced at him as he walked in, but didn't pay much attention at him beyond bare curiosity.

Zach looked stopped next to the fountain, just taking in the sights and waiting.

It didn't take long for someone to approach him. A small robed figure ran out of the entrance on the other side of the yard, and headed straight for him.

Zach blinked as he saw an elderly looking demasi man approach him.

"Greetings," the man came to a stop before him, then bowed. "Welcome to the Castle of Knowledge, I am Lisin Bi Fal, I'll be your guide."

Zach tilted his head. "You are not a spirit."

"The Castle of Knowledge is open to all who seek knowledge. Though spirits visit more often. There are, sadly, few chosen who care for the Ethereal Realm, or have enough power to visit."

Zach nodded, that he could understand. "I am Zacharia Gardner, it is a pleasure."

The demasi blinked. "I know that name," he said slowly. "Oh, you are one of the people who defeated the dome! It is an honor, great master!" He bowed again, now more deeply.

Zach shifted his weight, slightly uncomfortable with the praise. "So, you are supposed to guide me?" He asked, trying to change the topic.

"Yes, yes, of course," the man said and gestured for Zach to follow. "This way, please."

As they left the yard and entered a corridor leading deeper into the castle, Zach asked a question. "How have you found yourself here, serving in a spirit, if I may ask?"

"Oh," the man glanced at Zach. "I have come for knowledge, the same as most who come here. I was offered a great deal, two hundred years of service in return for the answers that I seek. I only have twenty years left! Won't be long now before I can finally return home."

Zach blinked. Two hundred years was not that long for him, but he understood that it was a long time for most. "How did you survive in the Ethereal for so long?"

"The Grand Spirit offers protection against the harmful effects of the Ethereal for all in its service," the demasi guide answered.

"And what do you think of this place?"

"It is a place where all knowledge can be found, and if not, it is the best place to start looking," he said.

"There are a lot of spirits around," Zach commented. "I saw some that looked... dangerous," he said, hoping that the word he chose wasn't too

aggressive, he didn't want to insult anyone. He didn't know the dynamics of this place.

The demasi nodded. "There are," he said. "The Castle is neutral ground. Violence is forbidden. Ah, here we are."

They reached a large set of ornate doors, and the demasi walked up and pushed one side open. Zach followed behind, entering the room beyond.

He stepped into a giant library, stretching far into the sky, the center was hollow, and he could look up and see each floor filled with bookcases. If he was right, the inside seemed to be a lot larger than what the outside suggested it could be.

The guide led him up the stairs, and they ascended several floors, until they reached one where he led him deeper through the rows of bookcases. He saw spirits milling about, some looking like the books themselves, flying around from shelf to shelf.

Finally, they reached another door, and the demasi let him in.

The inside was a large room, cosy and dimly lit, though he didn't get to see much of the room. His attention was grabbed by the being sitting in the center of the room. The Grand Spirit, and that was the only thing that the being could be, sat on the floor, a giant book in his paws. It was a bear, as large as the Explorer's Soul, towering over Zach and everything else in the room. The Grand Spirit's fur was gray and weathered, but still somehow giving off a sense of grandness.

The Grand Spirit raised his eyes from the book and looked at Zach. Two eyes filled with infinite depths met Zach's own and made him pause.

"Ah, be welcome to my home, chosen."