

Offer

How long had he been here? Trapped in the open, a forest and a waterfall. Running and always coming back to the same place. He couldn't escape this trap, either because something influenced his mind and always turned him around, or because this place was some separate piece of land that curved back on itself. Or perhaps, this was just the reality of this piece of the Ethereal Realm. What worried him was that he couldn't tell the passage of time, it was a sensation unlike any other. And without knowing how much time had passed... he worried that he would slip and become a shade. His protections wouldn't last forever.

A moment or a year later, he still sat at the edge of the waterfall, thinking and worrying about his situation, paralyzed by the very nature of this place. Then, something changed. The world snapped into focus, and footsteps alerted him. Kael turned and saw him. Tall, wrapped in a silver armor covered with symbols that emitted an eerie light blue glow. A yeti, a monster with white fur of the purest snow and gray ringed eyes. So many rings that just looking at them sent chills down Kael's bones. An old shade, a powerful shade.

"What?" The yeti grinned at him. "No attempts to ambush me? To fight and escape?"

Kael had already witnessed this being's power, and knew that there was nothing that he could do. He was at the shade's mercy. He didn't respond.

The yeti's grin widened, turning almost unnaturally wide. "Smart, perhaps you will be useful after all. But first..."

He pulled out the same orb as one that he had before when he took him from the dungeon. This time it wasn't glowing, though. The yeti approached, and Kael forced himself to remain calm, Tranquility flowed through his conduits. The yeti was now close enough to touch, and the orb was pressed against Kael's chest.

The yeti frowned and then pulled back, he knocked on the orb in what looked like confusion. "I hoped that it was just a temporary issue,

but... something is changed,” the yeti whispered. Then he raised his eyes from the orb and looked at Kael. “Do you know what changed?”

Kael shook his head. “No,” he answered, hoping that he didn’t trigger the clearly insane shade somehow.

The yeti nodded, then he gestured at the orb. “I created this from the Essence of a Spirit I killed, a spirit tied to time. It could... point me in the direction of the things that I need, things that I could use to bring about the most favorable outcome for myself. It led me to you,” the yeti said. “But now, it is silent.”

The yeti tilted his head, then his left arm blurred and he carved a symbol in the air next to them. It shone with a green glow, and pulsed rhythmically. “Something is wrong, I can... feel moments, seconds, minutes, hours or days if I push... but there are no mirrors to look at, no far off possibilities. Only what is just ahead. And it... rumbles, it burbles, and it roars. Something moving ahead, pushed by a great weight...”

Kael remained still as the yeti lost himself in his own little world. He wondered if he should try and take advantage, if should attack and hope that he could catch the shade off-guard.

“It is unlikely that we would win,” the voice of his awakened object, Rem, said.

“I know,” Kael responded. It was a fool’s hope anyway.

The yeti turned back and looked at Kael again.

“Well, regardless,” he threw the orb to the side, where it landed in the pool of water with a big splash. “What to do now?”

Kael didn’t understand what was happening, most likely the shade was just completely insane and nothing he did would change anything. And yet, he couldn’t just resign himself to death. He had people who waited for him, who depended on him. He had a purpose, to fulfill, and his work had only just started. Their plan had caused chaos in the core, but... they needed to capitalize on it. To tear down those who oppress, those who stand above and guide the world in the directions they wanted them to go.

“Why did you take me?” Kael asked slowly. “What do you want with me?”

The yeti blinked. “What? Ah, I needed a... agent, someone who could do something for me. It had to be someone from the other side, someone who was still... whole. You were one of the few that had not yet succumbed and became a shade after the way was barred. You were the most promising choice.”

“Am I not still?” There was hope then, if the shade wanted Kael for a purpose, then perhaps a chance to escape would present itself.

The yeti smiled, and then laughed. “Already planning your escape? Ha,” he shook his head.

Kael froze. *Am I that transparent*—he wondered.

“Would the change impact what you could’ve been? Or... hm... this is new, not something I know. The Framework changes, and yet again I am left behind,” the yeti sighed, and then met Kael’s eyes.

“You were the best choice for a reason...” the yeti started. “Perhaps we still can make this work. How about... a deal?”

Kael blinked. “A deal?”

“Of course,” the yeti spread his arms, that wide and unnatural grin blossoming on his face. “I am not a monster, did you think that I was going to force you? Ah, yes, these rings on my eyes make you think that I am untrustworthy and mad? Perhaps I am mad, slightly. Still, how about an exchange? A service for a service. Tell me, is there anything that you want? What is your greatest wish? Your goal? I am old, and I am powerful. I can grant you many things, simply ask.”

Kael narrowed his eyes, he wasn’t fool enough to actually tell the shade what his desires were, but... He had to think realistically. The Ethereal Realm was somehow sealed away, and the more time he spent here the greater the risk that he turned into a shade. He couldn’t escape, neither from the Ethereal or the yeti.

“Can you keep me from turning into a shade?” Kael asked.

The yeti nodded seriously. “Of course, already did. Can’t you feel it,” he gestured around. “I’ve curved this space, cut it off from the rest of the Ethereal. It is still in it, of course. But you will not turn as long as you are here. But that is not the kind of exchange I was thinking about. I can do great things, but... balance is important, equality of service. I see it in your

eyes, you don't really want to honor the agreement, you just want to escape. But we have time, I will convince you. Agree to a contract, to do one thing for me, and I will let you out of this realm, and I will fulfill one service for you in return."

Kael wondered what he could ask. For a secret weapon that could kill High Rankers? For treasures of the Ethereal Realm? He remembered the past, the things that they had done to him... and... a mercy of someone who gave him the tools to change things. His teacher, she had taught him how to control his madness, given him the tools to keep it in balance. Taught him how to keep his class from killing him. There was only one thing that he had always lacked.

"Can you... give me power? Help me become stronger, to advance?"

The yeti tilted his head, and studied Kael. His eyes bored into him, almost physically affecting him.

"This thing around you, around all of us. The Framework... ah, how it limits you all," the yeti whispered. "Cultivation? Improving one's body to gain strength, ah... You want power? You need to take it into yourself, to sacrifice. Are you willing to do that? I can give you more power than you have ever dreamed of, I can teach you. But you will have to step away from the paths that the Framework laid down before you. All you have to do is say the word."

A chill bore into Kael's soul, and something stirred. An old pain, the hate and the anger at the world, the Framework. Was this madness? Or was it an opportunity? He looked deep into the eyes of the shade, the many rings filling them spoke of age and power. He gave the yeti an answer.

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Kael sat on the surface of the water, glowing symbols rotating around him. He had been here for so long, hundreds of years, more perhaps. Learning, mastering a craft unlike anything that he had ever known. He had ignored the Framework's warnings, and had been rewarded for it. He sighed and sent out a thread of his will, the symbols trembled and then shattered, their pieces flowed back into Kael.

He looked at the tree line and saw the space twist as Ra'azel, his teacher, returned. He had done something to this place, this space carved away from everything else. Time was already fluid in the Ethereal Realm, but here, it... Even with all the lessons Kael got, he still didn't quite understand it. From what Ra'azel told him, it was a place where Time was bound into a loop, continuously passing while the rest stood still, at least from Kael's perspective. Once he left this place, it would be as if he had just been captured by Ra'azel.

And while the solitude was great, he had advanced beyond anything he could've dreamed about. His teacher had provided him with spirits of Tranquility, taught him how to consume them and take their Essence, how to cycle it. A few decades later, he had advanced to the Ascended Realm, and chosen Fury as his second Aspect, on Ra'azel's advice. Ra'azel didn't want him to mix them, telling him that they were only temporary, tools to prepare him for the future. Half a century later he had reached the Eternal Realm. He knew that this was just a preparation, strengthening of his soul. Ra'azel said that the Framework limited a lot, but he had to admit that the advancement of the soul was streamlined and faster than what he had to go through.

And Kael knew just how necessary a powerful soul and will were for Ra'azel's way of using power.

He walked over the water to greet his teacher. He would often leave and deal with matters outside. Kael didn't know what he was doing, but his teacher had enemies. Aside from learning how to enforce his understanding on the world through soul and will, Kael had learned a lot about the world that his teacher grew up in. The previous version of the Framework. The cruelty of it knew no bounds.

"Teacher," Kael bowed his head as the yeti grinned at him.

"Ah, Kael, it is time," Ra'azel said.

Kael blinked. "Already?"

"You've reached the end of your path, your soul is strong enough now," Ra'azel said. Then he gestured.

Two cages appeared next to him, each containing a powerful spirit inside. He could tell that they were old, it was a thing he had learned before

he met Ra'azel. The old spirits tended to have an effect on the Ethereal, and while this place was separate, he could feel an echo of it. None of the spirits that his teacher had brought before had been powerful enough to manifest such an effect in this place. One was an antlered spirit, with feathers made of purest white covering its entire body, and with antlers of dimly glowing pale light. Its blue eyes looked at him with calm that penetrated all of his protections, it made him want to sleep and dream of peace.

He wrenched his eyes away and looked at the other. A spirit resembling a winged and scaled wolf only far more monstrous. With a narrow snout and wicked fangs, covered in orange scales and scars of deep red trailing over its limbs. Its eyes were burning with hate, with a fury that could turn the entire world to ash. Its mere presence stirred Kael's own anger and fury. It promised the end of all in his path, if only he succumbed and let everything go.

**Spirit of the Moon's Tranquil Dream:
Lapareu, Dream Weaver** (Tier 25)

**Spirit of the Sun's Flaming Fury: Infaarg,
Ashen Trail** (Tier 25)

"These ones are..?" Kael asked slowly.

Ra'azel nodded with a grin. "Yes, it had taken me a while to find the right material, but they will do. Are you ready?"

It seemed like his teacher wasn't going to delay at all.

"I am," Kael said, his decision made.

"And so, our agreement is made. I will remake you, give you power, and in return you need only find someone in the Real Realm for me, and activate what I left behind," Ra'azel extended a thread of soul from his chest to Kael's.

A Framework window appeared, words muddled and incomprehensible, it had no direct ways of establishing a soul contract, not

in the way that Ra'azel could. It enforced things through its own ways, ridding them all of personal choices and consequence. Kael accepted and felt the agreement between them settle.

“Good,” Ra'azel said. “Now, I’ll need your little soulbound friend to act as an anchor, sadly that might destroy the thing residing inside, but... Sacrifices. Oh, and this might hurt.”

Before Kael could say anything the world exploded into light. And, he was right, it did hurt.