

## Clash of the Titans

Ereclaw ran through the deep familiar forest. He was afraid, and his emotion reflected on the Ethereal Realm, the world changed, and he was back in his home, the Twilight Woods. Or at least a place that resembled it. The Ethereal Realm changed on a whim or was influenced by spirits. The fact that this had happened only confirmed his theory that he was something akin to a spirit now. Though he did not have the time to experiment and try to control the effect. He was being hunted, and the only reason he hadn't been caught yet was because of this effect that he was having on the environment. He was running through his home, the forest that he knew intimately. The yeti was... persistent and terrifying, and based on his insults fully intent on catching him.

Ereclaw had feared that the yeti would be able to catch him easily, he seemed so much more powerful than him, but... something was strange about him. He wasn't able to influence the Ethereal the same way that Ereclaw could, he was at its mercy, yet he was able to somehow brute force his way through it. It seemed that either shades were unable to influence the Ethereal Realm, or at least just this shade couldn't.

He hadn't seen any type of power use from the yeti either, he only used the devices that were cluttering his being. Other shades had access to the powers they had in life, so Ereclaw assumed that whatever the yeti was doing with the items and flashing symbols was its power, though he had never seen anything like it. On his own, the yeti was fast, and while he couldn't quite see through Ereclaw's stealth, he could track him somehow. The item that he had crafted seemed to work based on proximity, as a few times the yeti had managed to get close enough to be able exactly where Ereclaw was, and other times he seemed to only know the general area.

There was no chance of Ereclaw staying and fighting, even though he had considered it. Any such ideas disappeared once he saw

yeti fight. A couple of days ago Ereclaw encountered a powerful spirit, he drew the yeti to it, hoping that it would stop or at least slow down the yeti. It didn't go according to plan. The yeti demolished the spirit in a few seconds, Ereclaw had observed from a distance, his eyes allowing him to see from safety. The yeti dismantled and rearranged components, creating a contraption that looked like an empty tube that fired something that made the space itself twist and groan.

Ereclaw didn't stay to see what happened after that attack hit the spirit, he immediately ran, and the yeti remained on his track. Nothing that he did seemed to be able to shake him, though Ereclaw had figured out how the yeti was tracking him. Not that it was doing him any good now. At first, the yeti had been tracking the Essence of the Void that leaked through when Ereclaw used his stealth. Once that occurred to Ereclaw he stopped using stealth and just ran. He nearly lost the yeti then, but he figured out what Ereclaw had done and got back on his trail. Ereclaw assumed that he was tracking him through other types of Essence that Ereclaw possessed and that he couldn't so easily remove, like that of the **Hunt**.

That stunt with the spirit had made the yeti angry. He had used something that sent a wave of fire ahead of him, straight at Ereclaw. The only reason Ereclaw survived was because he realized that he was about to die, because he felt fear and in what he believed to be his last moments, he thought of home. And then the world changed, and he was in the Twilight Woods.

For a moment he had thought that perhaps he had died and somehow managed to reach the afterlife. But he knew that his immortality didn't work that way. Then he considered that all that he had lived the last few years was a dream, that he was still just a wolf leading a pack. One look at his body shattered that fantasy and made him realize what had happened. The Ethereal had changed, it had either twisted itself into another shape, or transported him to an area that was the mirror of the Twilight Forest in the Ethereal. He wasn't certain which one was true; he didn't know enough about the Ethereal to make a guess. But in the end, it didn't matter, the Ethereal was a

place filled with mysteries and he wasn't going to divine its secrets no matter how much he tried.

For a day he believed that he had escaped the yeti, there was no sign of his pursuer. And then it all changed. The ground shook and the trees groaned as the yeti arrived in the forest in a pillar of space rending light. Ereclaw had resigned himself to running again, he had already looked in the face of his death and had faced his fear. He was afraid still, but it wasn't as strong, his hope had been restored and so he ran.

Hoping that the Ethereal would grant him another reprieve, or perhaps even a real way out. He stayed one step ahead because he knew the forest, but whatever had changed the world around him also made the Twilight Woods... strange. They were... it almost felt like the wood was what he needed it to be, what he remembered instead of what it really had been. Trees were in wrong spots, places where they would help him and hinder his hunter. Ereclaw didn't complain, it kept him alive.

But this was a run that he was never going to win. As he ran through a small grove, the ground shook and he missed his step. He tumbled and rolled as something behind him crackled in a way that made his ears hurt.

“Ah, I finally managed it.”

Ereclaw raised his head and saw the yeti standing across from him at the entrance to the grove. He held a black and green cube in his hand, sections of it twisting and clicking into place.

“This is much harder without contracts you know,” the yeti said as he took a step forward. “It is such a shame that they decided to do away with embodiments of Aspects. The Aspects are so... thin now, aimless, they don't have that substance that they used to before. It makes it harder for me to create things that can influence them, you know, without having a contract with an Aspect to base the blueprints on.”

Ereclaw didn't know what the yeti was talking about, and he didn't particularly care. But if he was going to talk instead of attacking, that bought him time. He looked around, looking for any way out. The

yeti seemed lost in his own thoughts, he looked down at the cube in his hand and he pulled out several other item parts from his belt, or rather they floated up. With a gesture symbols flashed, and the items broke apart.

The yeti grimaced and shook his head. “Even these items are all so weak. Everything is limited, restrictions put on everything that I touch. It is all such a pain...”

Ereclaw saw his way out, between two trees, a big stone that would give him some cover once he reached it. He prepared to jump, to run again, when the yeti spoke.

“Don’t.”

Ereclaw froze, the yeti was still looking at his items, gesturing in the air above him as they floated and rearranged themselves.

He turned his head in Ereclaw’s direction, his multi-ringed eyes boring into him. “I’ll make it far more painful if you try to run again. It was already embarrassing enough that I took this long to catch you,” he sighed and turned back to what he was doing. “Sadly, I am handicapped in this realm. I have none of my equipment and this realm has only the thinnest of connections to other aspects. Not to mention how much these new rules and restrictions are making everything far more frustrating than it should be. And they’ve made this Ethereal Realm far too malleable, every little thing can change it.”

The frustration in the yeti’s voice was palpable, as was his disgust. Ereclaw didn’t understand what he was talking about, but he could understand that much at least. Enough to know that he was right to be afraid.

“Now,” the yeti spoke. “Let us end this, that little touch of the Void will be useful for one of my projects.”

As the yeti took a step forward Ereclaw realized that there was no way out. He was about to die, there was nothing that he could do about it. And yet, he wanted to live. He moved, all of his power as the Emissary of Twilight focused on that single goal. He activated his abilities; his stats surged his stealth activated and he launched himself away.

He didn't take more than three steps before his entire body froze and he came to a stop.

"Really?" The yeti asked, one of the items floating around him glowed with bright yellow light. Ereclaw couldn't even respond, something was holding his entire body frozen.

"I guess that I shouldn't have expected anything else, it is in the nature of the weak to run even when there is no point."

Those words pierced through Ereclaw's fear. The yeti called him weak, but he knew nothing about him. Ereclaw had pulled himself from being a simple monster bound by the Framework to something more. He made choices that had taken him away from who he used to be and forged him into who he was now. He had grown stronger, and he would've grown stronger still, if he hadn't stumbled upon the yeti. It was... it wasn't fair, it was also the reality of this world.

But... Ereclaw had escaped once by forcing the Ethereal to change, and he wasn't about to give up. As the yeti walked closer, Ereclaw focused himself and thought only on one thing—*safety*. He didn't need his home, he didn't need freedom, he needed someplace where he would be safe. Someplace where the yeti would not be able to do what he wanted to do to him.

The yeti stopped and frowned. "What are you—"

His words faded as Ereclaw felt something pulling on him. Before, when the Ethereal Realm had changed around him, he felt as if he was pushing on it. Now it felt the opposite, as if the Ethereal Realm was pulling on him instead. The world around him blurred and he felt himself stretching and then everything snapped together.

The grove was gone, as was the yeti. Instead, he was lying on the cold stone. He raised his head and realized that he was on the edge of a cliff. One glance over told him that he was somewhere high above the ground, so far into the sky that for a moment he didn't even comprehend it. The mountain's side stretched beneath him, then in the distance were floating islands, with forests made up out of colors that Ereclaw had never seen before growing on top of them. He couldn't see the ground, only a rainbow-colored waving carpet that to him looked

like it was actually just thick clouds. Light broke in the air, shattering into dozens of different colors that hit each island at a different angle and so much more. The sights that he was seeing were... impossible.

He pushed up away from the cliff, stood up and then turned around. The moment he turned he froze, again. His spirits fell, for a moment he thought that he had managed to get away. Now it seemed like he had just traded the yeti for something else.

A being stood in front of him, with green scales and towering presence. It rose high above him, its foot almost taller than Ereclaw standing up. Ereclaw had never seen this type of monster before, but he knew what it was—a dragon. Something about it didn't quite feel right. It didn't feel like a monster, nor did it feel like a spirit. It didn't have the eyes of a shade, which meant that it wasn't one of those either. Ereclaw could usually tell what the beings he encountered were. His senses were sharp enough that he could tell the difference. Whatever this being was, it was not something that he had ever encountered before, but it did feel... familiar.

Ereclaw reached through his screens and removed the filters on it that he usually always kept on, in order to prevent something distracting him at a wrong moment. Then he looked above the being's head, hoping to see something, and he did.

The Explorer's Soul — ???

It had a name like a monster, but it wasn't. Ereclaw was certain about that. It was... a soul? At least its name said so.

The dragon leaned down, and its slitted eyes narrowed on him. "What do we have here? A visitor? Here?" It asked, then its nostrils flared as it took in a deep breath. "Ah, a hunter's soul, and... you are familiar. Do we know each other hunter?"

Before Ereclaw could answer the ground shook, and the same sound that he heard before echoed around them. Ereclaw turned just in time to see the yeti come through a crack in the space. He floated in

the air away from the cliff, wings made out of metal on his back with symbols glowing covering them.

“What did I say about running, little pest?” The yeti said, then raised a hand and pointed a rod with a glowing horn tied to its tip at him. Ereclaw felt the power of the weapon and despaired once more, but then before the weapon could fire a great weight filled the air and it shattered in the yeti’s hand.

The shade looked at it and frowned, then he raised his eyes and looked at the dragon behind Ereclaw as if noticing him just then. The yeti was clearly insane, no sane person could’ve missed the massive being standing behind Ereclaw.

“That was... inconvenient,” the yeti said.

“What are you?” The dragon asked. “Those things on your body, they scream, you took things that didn’t belong to you, bound them to your will.”

“Of course, I did, all things are mine to play with,” the yeti said, and several items floated from places on his body, turning in the direction of the dragon.

“We’ll have none of that,” the dragon spoke and then Ereclaw felt the weight again, only this time he recognized it as raw willpower, the power of a skill. It felt as if an entire mountain was focused on the yeti, even Ereclaw who wasn’t the focus could barely stand from the power of it. A sphere flashed around the yeti, glowing and pulsing with power. The yeti’s eyes widened, and he raised his hands gesturing and drawing symbols in the air. He didn’t get to finish whatever it was that he was trying to do before the sphere cracked and the yeti was smashed out of the sky and sent tumbling down the side of the mountain.

The dragon leaned down again and looked Ereclaw in the eyes. “That thing is dangerous and powerful. Far too powerful. I took it by surprise, otherwise... Tell me, little hunter, who are you? And who is that thing that seeks you? Why have you come to my mountain?”

Ereclaw opened his mouth to respond but found that he didn’t even know how to begin. He didn’t even know who or what this being was, if he could trust it or if it was about to kill him. It had given him a

reprieve from the yeti, and... the Ethereal Realm had brought him here, perhaps for a reason. Finally, he decided that he should start at the beginning.