

Spirits

The Ethereal Realm was madness, it was harmony and discord, it was chaos, and it was peace. It was all things, and more. Sometimes it was a twisted reflection of the Real Realm, other times it was incomprehensible. Its landscapes as varied as the denizens that lived there and those who simply visited. The Ethereal Realm had its own rules, often rules that were strange and illogical to those who were used to the Real Realm, but the same could be said in reverse. The Ethereal Realm moved at its own pace, sometimes faster, sometimes slower. Time was not constant, a part of the Ethereal Realm could move in sync with the Time in the Real Realm, while all the surrounding areas moved both faster and slower at the same time.

A forest could grow and burn in Ethereal Fire in the time it took someone to blink in the Real Realm. Or an entire generation of people could be born, grow old and die in the Real Realm while barely a moment passed in the Ethereal. The Ethereal was also malleable in a way that the Real was not. Thoughts and wills changed it, influenced it. In a way, the Ethereal Realm was the realm of dreams and emotions. It was shaped by those who lived in it and those who visited.

Or at least, that was what most people believed. The truth, however, was very different.

Ereclaw knew the secret, he knew the truth, and knowledge was power.

He felt himself seep into the Aspect of the Hunt and Void, the unending hunger that sought to consume everything tempered by the need to honor the prey, to stalk and find something that was worthy. He had learned a lot about himself and his power. He was tied to the Framework just as much as any chosen. He might have started as a monster, but he had transcended through his contract. Even the monsters had ways of advancing through the Framework. Once he had believed that his focus was a mix of Class and Cultivation, he had something similar to abilities and techniques, and he had perks. Now he knew that his focus was a mix of all three. In the Ethereal Realm, in this... spirit-like form, he had learned what his skills were.

His focus was in some ways more primitive than that of the chosen, or at least that was how it appeared to be. A skill was an action, usually something that a being was already capable of doing, only... improved. For him, skills were his natural capabilities. His sight, his smell, his hearing, his strength and speed. With willpower, he could improve them all.

He did so now, as he skulked in the shadows of the trees that filled everything above him, that cast an eerie blue light down on the forest floor. He carefully moved, avoiding fallen branches of bone-white trees, stepping gently on orange and green grass.

He was hidden by his perk, a void part of his powers, a perk that gave him his stealth, that devoured all of his presence. He stalked through the forest, following the scent that he had been tracking for days now. His immortality required him to hunt, and he was getting closer and closer to fulfilling it and being granted a choice.

The prey was a worthy one, they all were, so he did not underestimate it. Finally, after days of stalking he reached a clearing. A circle of trees with no branches to cover the sky. For the first time in a long time, Ereclaw could see the sky. He saw another forest above them, a mirror of the one he was in. In the center of the clearing above, just like in the one in front of him, was a lake. He saw a waterfall on his side, water falling upward to spill into the other lake. His prey was at the edge of the lake, drinking from the sparkling silver water.

A majestic stag, with pure white antlers and a coat of gold streaked with green.

There were many different types of spirits. Some were elemental spirits, others were spirits that embodied ideas, or spirits of emotion, spirits that were amalgamations of many different aspects. Some were capable of speech, spirits that had their own drives and desires, but could also be reasoned with. Others were fully consumed by their natures.

The stag was a wild spirit, in-tune with its nature and the forest around it. Ereclaw had been tracking it for a long time.

Now, he waited for the right moment. And just as the stag dipped its head down to drink again, Ereclaw pounced. His body burned with power, and he flashed across the clearing, hunt filling him and void eating the space

between them. He reached the spirit before it had the chance to react. His void claws sunk into its neck and his teeth into its throat. He felt the blood hit his tongue, the heat and the power of it was intoxicating. He pulled the stag to the ground, held it close as its life left its body. It deserved that at least.

It had been a difficult opponent to catch, Ereclaw had spent months trying to keep up with it, always close, but always just barely out of reach. He felt it die and something pass from it to him, another piece to feed his immortality. Soon, one or two hunts more and Ereclaw would be able to become something more or return to the Real Realm.

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The trip back wasn't long at all. The Ethereal changed by the wills of those living in it. All Ereclaw had to do was wish to be somewhere else, and the Ethereal warped around him. True, it only worked for spirits and those whose will was great, and Ereclaw didn't fulfill either of those requirements. But he had something far better, he had a will greater than anything in the Ethereal Realm looking out for him. He felt the attention, and then the pulling as the Ethereal obeyed and pushed him all to the peak of the great mountain.

Ereclaw landed on gray stone, a bit away from the center of the summit. And he immediately saw why he was placed there.

In the center, nine spirits stood in a circle facing a green and yellow scaled dragon.

Each of the nine spirits was different, and each was grand in its own right. Nine Grand Spirits, each a pillar of the Ethereal Realm, each representing one facet of it. Ereclaw had learned a lot in the last few years, but seeing them, learning about them... They terrified and inspired him in equal measure. The nine Grand Spirits were in many ways the Ethereal Realm. The territories and the shifting of the Ethereal were tied to their nature, without them, there was no Ethereal Realm.

The closest to Ereclaw was The Elemental Spirit—As tall as a mountain, he was a giant made out of rock, with molten cracks streaked through one

side, one of his hands was water and wind twisted around his squat domed head.

Next Grand Spirit was... just looking at it turned Ereclaw's stomach. It was a spirit made out of twisted flesh, gnarled limbs growing at odd angles out of a mass of fat and hanging flesh, metal hooks and chains pierced the flesh creating oozing wounds that let puss and blood trail and drip onto the stone below it in a constant stream—The Spirit of Horror was not a kind being.

Next was a spirit that resembled a hunched figure wearing a cloak that obscured its entire being. The cloak was made out of strands of purest moonlight woven together, beautiful and without a mark. The Grand Spirit of Mysteries was its name, and Ereclaw knew little about it.

The Grand Spirit of Nature and Nurture sat on the ground, a spirit with a female body and a head of a doe. She wore a dress of leaves, with adornments made out of nuts attached to long strings.

Next to her was constantly changing ball of shadows, the Grand Spirit of Change who changed form what seemed like every other moment. Ereclaw had never seen it settle on one shape, but he had glimpsed it in the shapes of animals before.

The Grand Spirit of War was as tall as The Elemental Spirit, and Ereclaw had seen it manifested as a different race every time he had seen him. Today, War was a drake of black scales with a red glow beneath them. Adorned in armor and carrying a great axe on one shoulder, a tubular weapon of some kind was strapped to his waist and thigh—resembling a rifle.

A pillar of golden light was the Grand Spirit of Light, so bright that Ereclaw couldn't even tell how it looked like.

Next to the light spirit was a tiny shape, a bird of white and black feathers, no larger than Ereclaw himself, compared to the others, the The Grand Spirit of Transition was not very intimidating, but she was one of the most powerful. She, along with Change governed over the nature of the Ethereal Realm.

Last of the Grand Spirits looked old, a bear as large as the dragon, its fur gray and weathered. The Grand Spirit of Knowledge was the wisest of them, and Ereclaw had found the kindest.

The last being in the circle was the Dragon—the Explorer’s Soul. A being that was not a spirit or a shade, a soul that was somehow bound in the Ethereal Realm. A soul of an explorer. Ereclaw knew that the dragon was equal in strength to each of the Grand Spirits, perhaps even greater. The Ethereal Realm loved the Explorer’s Soul, in a way that Ereclaw couldn’t quite grasp. The Grand Spirits were the pillars of the Ethereal Realm, they were parts of it, and could influence the Ethereal in ways that other spirits couldn’t, and yet... The Explorer’s Soul was just as great, and the Ethereal itself loved him. The dragon was like a Grand Spirit himself.

Ereclaw stood patiently, not able to hear a word of what was being said, nor would he understand it if he somehow could. The spirits did not talk in any language or manner that he could comprehend, though they were capable of it. Some of them at least.

Not long after, Ereclaw saw the Grand Spirit of War wave his axe about angrily, and then the other spirits stirred, something was said, War cut down with his axe, and then they stared at each other until finally War turned around and left, a blood red and black gash opening in the world and swallowing him. The other Grand Spirits followed not long after. Each departing in their own way, a flash of the elements, a beam of light, a few more portals.

After they were all gone and only the Dragon remained, Ereclaw approached.

“How was your hunt?” The Explorer’s Soul asked.

“Fruitful, Master,” Ereclaw answered.

“Good,” the dragon said. “How many more do you think?”

“One, or two, perhaps.”

“So, soon you will have a choice to make.”

“It is already made,” Ereclaw told him.

“Do not worry about me and what I want, it is your choice and no others.”

Ereclaw shrugged, and kept his eyes at the shifting sky around them. They were on the dragon’s mountain, a peak that towered over anything that existed in the Real Realm. A domain of the Explorer’s Soul, with areas that were imprints of the territories that its other half had explored in life. The

dragon did not remember his life in the Infinite Realm, nothing since the moment he was split. One half, a soul, sent to the Ethereal to slumber, dreaming of a life in the Real Realm, waiting to awaken.

Ereclaw did not quite understand what the dragon was, but he was his teacher, his protector.

“Did something happen?” Ereclaw asked, indicating the places where the Grand Spirits used to be.

The Dragon tapped the ground with his claws. “No, they don’t fear the ancient one, but they don’t want to fight him. I understand their misgivings, but he is only getting stronger. And eventually he will find a way to reach out through my block and leave the Ethereal Realm.”

Ereclaw shivered at the mention of the yeti, the being that had nearly killed him to harvest his aspects. The yeti was a terrifying force, a shade that was more monstrous than anything that Ereclaw had ever encountered. It butchered spirits and other shades, taking only parts of them that he thought were useful.

“Surely they can see the danger?”

“They are spirits young wolf, and the yeti is trying to escape the Ethereal. They care nothing for what the yeti could do in the Real Realm,” the dragon bowed his head and shook it. “They want me to allow travel between the Ethereal and other planes again. War... War is the only one that wants to fight him, but his reasons are not those of the rest of them. And fighting him alone... War could lose. And no one knew what that would mean for the Ethereal Realm. They are frightened.”

The Explorer’s Soul was just as strong, Ereclaw knew that he could win. But he also knew that they were so evenly matched that victory was not guaranteed. And that made all the difference. Still, the Explorer’s Soul was opposing the yeti as much as he could.

“He moved again,” the dragon said after a few minutes of silence. “Not alone this time.”

Ereclaw tilted his head, the dragon closed his eyes.

“I can’t sense where he went, but... he is with a... not a shade or a spirit. A being from the Real Realm.”

Ereclaw blinked, the Ethereal Realm had been closed from other planes for years, but... Time didn't move at the same pace in it, so it was possible. "He still looking for a way out."

"He is always looking," the dragon said. "I have power, I have will, but I lack the knowledge of such things. The spirits are hardly any better. We need something, a way to trap him, imprison him forever. He is far too dangerous to be left alone."

Imprison, not kill, Ereclaw understood why. Beings like them, the dragon and the spirits, even the yeti, they didn't fight others who were close to them in power. Not when the outcome wasn't assured. Why risk true death?

"I find it," Ereclaw said, it was his plan ever since the Explorer's Soul voiced his concern. He knew the power and the danger of the yeti. He had been hunted by him before.

"Perhaps you are right, perhaps you have no choice at all," the dragon said.

Ereclaw nodded. Becoming something more than what he was, a true spirit perhaps, would mean nothing if the yeti did whatever it wanted to do. It escaping the Ethereal will not save them, this place was the only thing that was keeping him contained.

No, Ereclaw had to finish his hunts, had to return to the Real Realm, and find a way to defeat the yeti. It was using the Ethereal as its own playground, hunting and killing anything in its way, spirits, shades, and souls on their way to the afterlife. Only a few pockets of safety existed, the lands held by the Grand Spirits that were too afraid to fight him, and the Explorer's Mountain.

The yeti had to be dealt with, otherwise... It was all that mattered now.