

## Act II - Zach

Zach looked at the yeti, seeing him staring back at him with his ringed eyes. Everything he knew about shades said that they were people that got stuck in the Ethereal Realm, and that all of them were malevolent and mad. But the monsters were not supposed to be able to become shades, and yet the yeti in front of him challenged that supposition.

At least the yeti hadn't tried to kill him, although... Zach realized that the yeti's chains would prevent him from reaching Zach. So perhaps it wasn't that he didn't want to kill Zach, but couldn't.

*"Mistral, did the yeti try something while I was asleep?"* Zach asked his awakened weapon.

*"No,"* Mistral answered. *"He just kept staring at you, and occasionally whispered to himself."*

So, perhaps he was mad after all.

Still, Zach knew that he would be hard pressed to survive in this place for two more weeks, not if more of those spirits found him. He wondered why no-one had found him here, but he didn't have the time to worry about that. Still, the least he could do was be cordial with the shade. He had after all told him how to get out of the dream.

Zach opened his mouth to speak, but the shade chose that moment to do the same.

*"You know, it has been a long, long time since I broke out of the dream. So long that I cannot even remember most of it,"* the yeti nodded to himself. *"It is impressive that you have managed it so quickly. Or have you? How long have you been here little thing? Or are you even here?"*

The yeti leaned forward until his chains got tight and his limbs were extended back. Zach could hear the chains groaning and he feared that they would snap.

*"Are you a figment of my imagination little thing? Am I still in the dream? Was this all just the same torture?"*

Zach swallowed, the yeti's eyes were glowing and were filled with malice. He had no idea how powerful this thing was, but it was surely more

powerful than even Gemheart. More powerful than anyone Zach had ever met.

“I am real,” Zach answered.

“Ah,” the yeti relaxed immediately. “That’s what I thought, I was quite sure that I broke the dream. Yes, I did.”

“I wanted to thank you, for telling me how to break the dream,” Zach said slowly.

The yeti moved back and sat down on the stone floor. He tilted his head and grinned at Zach, showing his wickedly sharp teeth. “No problem little thing,” he said.

“You are a shade, aren’t you?” Zach asked.

Yeti tilted his head. “A shade? I guess that I am.”

“My understanding of shades is that they are all mad, you don’t seem like that,” Zach commented, he did seem somewhat mad but at least not how Zach had imagined.

The yeti grinned at him. “Mad? Oh, I have been mad, quite a few times actually. But I’ve been here for such a long time. I went mad, my mind betraying me. Madness filled me. But as with all things, even madness must pass. I was mad and then I came out on the other side, sane again. Or perhaps not! A cycle, sane then mad, then sane again. I wonder which one I am now? Sane or mad?”

Zach swallowed. *Definitely mad.*

The yeti’s eyes narrowed on Zach. “What are you? I have never before seen your ilk. Are you an aspect, perhaps?”

Zach blinked, not really understanding how one could be an aspect.

“No, no, no,” the yeti shook his head. “Too weak, not an aspect. And you are clearly not a spirit... Hm... Most peculiar...”

“I’m human,” Zach said since he didn’t have any better answer.

“A huu-man,” the yeti said slowly. “Hm... Never heard of whatever that is. Some new invention of the Framework perhaps? Or... no, no, no... I remember something... There was a change, yes, long ago. How long, how long... We are not where we used to be. I think. This place is different. Ah...”

The yeti’s eyes sharpened and locked onto Zach’s. “You are one of the chosen then.”

Zach frowned, but then he remembered. He had heard monsters like this yeti call him that before. “I guess, I have been referred as that before.”

The yeti clapped his hands and a loud echoing noise filled the room as he raised his head and laughed.

“Ha! Ha! HAHAHAHAHahahahahahaha...” A cackling and mad laughter filled Zach’s ears, making him put his hands over them in response.

And then suddenly the yeti stopped the laughter and turned his eyes back to Zach.

“A long time indeed then! I was right, and all of them were wrong. I should feel vindicated! But somehow all I feel is empty,” the yeti’s expression turned somber.

“What are you? I’ve always believed your kind to be monsters, but monsters can’t become shades,” Zach asked.

The yeti grinned again. “What am I? I am the greatest of my kind! My name is Ra—” the yeti frowned, his voice trailing off.

“Hm... I forgot. No matter!” The Yeti yelled, then continued as if he never stopped. “I am the great Runelord! Master of Framework and all of my world! I reached the peak of what the Framework offered and I saw behind the curtain!”

The yeti paused, and Zach opened his mouth to ask a question, but then the yeti moved. He lowered himself so that he was on an eye level with Zach and he whispered.

“I told my people the truth, that we are but the first test. That none of us would matter. I had a plan,” the yeti nodded his head and closed his eyes. “A grand plan. But they betrayed me. They killed me, and sent me to this place. No, no, not this place here and now, but the here that was then and there! They conspired! They imprisoned my soul! And left me here to rot!”

The hate in the yeti’s voice was almost a physical thing, it made Zach recoil back in fear. The yeti’s eyes blazed but he could tell that he wasn’t seeing Zach.

“Then what I warned about came to pass! And we were cast aside! I felt it when we moved. This entire prison, only recycled trash that they wanted to use for the others. The Chosen! Ah... yes, just like you,” the yeti narrowed his eyes on Zach.

“I’m sorry that you had to go through that,” Zach said. “But I don’t understand what being a Chosen means.”

The yeti tilted his head to the left. “Do you really think that the Framework you were given was the first iteration of it? It was not, we were there before you. We were supposed to reach an Infinite Realm! But at the end, they were unsatisfied, they decided that we were unworthy, and so we were not Chosen. I remember... I remember a choice, even here, in this hole it flashed before my eyes... I chose to go... Or had it, had I? Was it before or after the dream...” the yeti trailed off, but Zach was shocked by what he heard.

If he had understood right, then the yetis had been a race just like humans. One that had been given a previous version of the Framework and had then been refused access to the Infinite Realm, at least not in the same fashion that the other nine races were given. The yeti’s had been turned into monsters, to serve as foils for the nine races. Zach couldn’t imagine how a betrayal like that would even feel. The Framework was cruel, and unforgiving. He had always known it, but now...

“Ah!” The yeti exclaimed. “What was I saying?”

Zach looked at the yeti and felt pity. Imprisoned for who knew how long. Before the Infinite Realm? Certainly, but was it even before Earth. Had there been another reality before the universe that gave birth to humanity?

“How long have you been here?” Zach asked.

“How long indeed,” the yeti nodded resolutely. “An age, and more ages since. An eon in the dream, and countless more outside of it. More than you can imagine, or perhaps not... What is time anyways, it matters not when every moment is the same.”

*Time enough to go mad. Zach thought to himself—And perhaps enough to gain some of his sanity back.* Zach had no idea what this shade had gone through, but it had suffered for more time than Zach would’ve had anyone suffer.

“I owe you a debt, for helping me with the dream. Is there anything that I can do for you?” Zach asked. He was aware that the shade could be playing him. And yet, he was not one to forsake his debts. Who knew how long he would’ve been stuck in that dream if he hadn’t known exactly what he had to do in order to get out.

“A debt? Ah,” the yeti mused as he scratched his chin. “Could you perhaps set me free?”

Zach had assumed that the yeti would ask that. There was still a chance that he was wrong about the shade. That it was here for a good reason, and that every word out of its mouth was a lie. That this was just a monster generated by the Framework, that its words were designed to make him feel pity. And yet, Zach did not think so. The emotion in its eyes and voice was real.

“I do not think that I am strong enough to do that,” Zach told him.

The yeti studied him for a second. “Hm... perhaps not. But perhaps yes, you are strong enough. You see, this room suppresses my power. And these chains drain anything that remains, preventing me from accumulating enough to break free,” the yeti pulled on the chains, making them taut and Zach heard them groan. “But they are old, and I have only grown more powerful. Perhaps in time I will escape on my own. So you see, you need not break the chains. You need only weaken them for a moment and I could break myself out.”

Zach blinked at that. The chains were big, tough looking, but otherwise they didn’t look like anything special.

“I don’t know if releasing you is a smart thing to do,” Zach said finally.

The yeti grinned at him. “Ah, so you fear me killing you?”

“And unleashing you on the world,” Zach added.

“And what if I made you a promise, that I would not harm you in any way and that I would not cause mayhem and destruction on a scale never seen before?”

Zach narrowed his eyes at the yeti, trying to think if the debt he owed was worth enough for him to try and set the yeti free.

“How about this, I would owe you a favor as well. I know much, have many powers. I could make you stronger than you could even imagine.”

Zach was tempted, but it still felt like making a deal with the devil. He had to admit though, it was more than tempting. This was what he had come into this place to search for. A source of power that no one else could have. Something unique and powerful. “Could you help me survive in this place? Or escape it?”

“Of course,” the yeti said. “Although the head warden is a powerful spirit that I would not wish to meet again in my weakened state. Still, escaping is easy enough if you know how.”

Zach debated with himself. The spirits hadn’t found him since he fell. So he probably killed the spirit up above. He froze, and remembered his notifications. He checked his Essence and saw that he had indeed gained some for killing the spirit. Then he pulled out his notifications.

**You are being affected by the Ward of Ages.  
-99% to all stats.  
-99% to all Aspect Bonds.  
  
Error—incompatible systems**

Zach frowned at the notification. Zach checked his stats and saw that his stats were untouched. There were a few more ones that were filled with errors. He looked around, and realized that it had to be the room he was in. If he was incompatible with this ward then perhaps what yeti had said was true. His power could work differently than what Zach himself had.

He pushed the errors away and then looked another notification.

**Congratulations! You have gone through a Crucible!  
  
New title available—Crucible of the Mind**

Crucible of the Mind	Go through a harrowing experience to improve your mind by forging it in the harshest conditions possible based on your mind state.	+500 to intelligence and wisdom, +2% to all stats, Enlightened (Mind Perk), 50 000 Greater Essence
----------------------	--	--

Zach blinked at the new title and he looked through his perks seeing something new.

Enlightened (Unique Perk)	Your mind is highly resistant to mind effects and can function at peak condition in all states, even after it was damaged beyond the point where most would falter.
---------------------------	---

It had to be something he had gained after going through the dream. He closed his screens and looked at the yeti who had been studying him in silence.

It was a hard decision, but ultimately Zach owed a debt. And as far as he knew, shades couldn't leave the Ethereal Realm. It wasn't like he could do that much damage to people in the Real Realm. And after all this world was Infinite. There was room here for him to disappear and never be seen again.

"Ah, so you made your decision?" The yeti asked.

"Do I have your word that you will not harm me or anyone else that has done you no harm first? That you will help me escape this place?"

The yeti put his hand over his chest and bowed his head. "Of course, you have my word. If you set me free I will owe you, and I promise that I will give you a gift worthy of your deed."

Zach took a deep breath and stood up. The yeti pulled on the chains that bound one of his hands and made them taut, offering them to Zach.

Zach summoned his **Ethereal Sword**, a large two handed sword. Hoping that perhaps that would be more useful in the Ethereal Realm. He raised the sword and focused on his perks and technique. Lightning Qi surged through him, and he activated **Phantom Avatar**, then he activated his **Double Ethereal Strike**. He swung the sword down, bringing it onto the chains. The impact smashed his Ethereal sword as lightning discharged into it. And then the Ethereal blade came a moment later, it hit the chains and light blossomed. A force sent Zach flying back and he smashed into the wall on the other side of the room.

Then something filled the room, a pressure that made him feel as if he was underwater. Zach blinked and opened his eyes, and there across the

room he saw the shade standing tall his hands stretched to the ceiling and chains shattered on the floor.

The walls were shaking and flashing with light, and the yeti grinned. He gestured with one hand and something appeared in the air in front of his fingers. It looked like a letter, a symbol, or rather a rune. It flashed and then the walls dimmed and stopped shaking.

“Ah, free at last,” the yeti said.

Zach groaned and got up to his feet. The yeti glanced at him in surprise, almost as if he had forgotten that Zach was even there.

“Right, right,” the yeti chuckled. “Now I owe a debt, and let it not be said that the Runelord doesn’t pay back his debts!”

The yeti walked over to Zach and before he could even open his mouth he gestured. A red rune flashed in the air and Zach felt his body freeze. The yeti grinned and leaned down looking at Zach intently.

*Fuck, I made a mistake*—Zach cursed at himself. He had known that shades were malevolent, and yet he thought that he knew better. That some could be good. He allowed himself to be deceived by a prisoner. He had felt bad for the yeti, had allowed his compassion to make the decision.

Runes flashed in the yeti’s eyes and then he blinked.

“Aha, I see. Your version of the Framework is different... They refined it, but made it so much less than it could be. Put in the limiters.” The yeti clicked with his tongue. “Such a disappointment. But I guess that I should see what I can do to repay you for setting me free.”

Zach felt dread spread through him at the look in the yeti’s eyes as his hands moved over his body, exploring. He pulled Zach’s arms apart, then grabbed his hand and uncurled his fingers.

“Oh, what do we have here,” the yeti said as he touched Zach and Kishua’s storage rings. He pulled them off, then his hand dropped to Zach’s belt and his dagger. He took the dagger out of its sheath and looked it over. “Hm... this could work, but we are going to need so much more.”

Two runes flashed next to the hand that held Zach’s rings and then items started popping out of the two storage rings. Weapons, potions, Essence Crystals, Zach’s armor, and everything else that he had. Every item



floated around the yeti and he looked at them. The items filled the room, floating around and above the two of them filling the space.

“Yes, there is enough here for me to make something special, for both our purposes,” the yeti smiled as he turned to look at Zach.

Zach tried to fight whatever it was that was holding him, but not only couldn't he move, he couldn't do anything else.

The yeti then frowned, his eyes focused on Zach's chest. “Oh, what is this?”

He reached down and placed one finger on Zach's chest, a rune flashed into existence over it. A moment later a pain unlike anything Zach had ever felt filled him. And screaming filled his mind. For a moment he thought that it was his own screaming, but then the screams and the pain abruptly ended and the yeti was holding Mistral.

“*Mistral?*” Zach called, but there was no answer.

“Oh, so interesting,” the yeti said as he studied the long curved sword. “This is what they made to replace soul weapons. I see, they limited the power, made it dependent on... Ah, this gives me an idea, yes, yes, yes! This will be a fitting gift for setting me free.”

The yeti looked back at Zach, his wicked teeth showing and his ringed eyes glowing.

“But what should I make it be? Hm... you are a Phantom Slayer? This... hunting shades? Hahahahahahah YES! That is perfect, a shade hunter, it will fit nicely.”

The yeti then turned away, holding Mistral in one hand and Zach's **Great Dagger of Essence Siphoning** in the other. He opened his hands and the dagger and the sword floated in front of him. And then he started moving his hands. Runes flashed into existence too fast for Zach to follow, and items around them moved. They flowed down, breaking apart, pieces combining as runes etched themselves onto them. In a few moments all of the weapons that had been in Kishua's storage ring had been broken apart to make a small tube etched with runes.

Then the Runelord gestured and healing and boosting potions broke apart, the glass turning to dust that fell to the ground while the liquid moved through the tube. The combined liquid changed color and became pure white,

glowing and filling the room with light. And then he reached for the dagger and the awakened sword.

He gestured and six runes appeared over each weapon. And then in an instant the weapons shattered. Zach tried to scream at the yeti, but he was powerless, he had no control over his body at all.

The pieces flowed toward the yeti and settled between his hands. He moved the liquid over them, engulfed the shards of the two weapons and then two runes flashed over the palms of his hands. A moment later energy flashed between his hands vaporizing the liquid and melting the shards. A hundred runes flashed into existence, etching themselves into the melted material that was turning from silver to a pale green color.

Then the yeti stopped and turned to Zach. He gestured and Zach's right hand moved of its own accord, presenting itself to the yeti. His sleeve turned to dust and the yeti moved his hands over Zach's hand and poured the molten liquid on it.

Pain filled Zach's existence and his vision went white. He couldn't think, he couldn't see, or hear. There was nothing but the whiteness and the pain. After a time beyond what Zach was capable of counting, the world came back into being and Zach's vision returned. His arm was pulsing in pain.

He saw his hand, runes covering the skin that now looked as if it was made out of pale green metal. The runes pulsed with light and then dimmed, until finally they were gone and only the metallic hand remained. It went from his elbow all the way to the tips of his fingers. A notification was blazing in the corner of his eye, but Zach couldn't pull it up.

The yeti gestured again and a rune flashed above his hand, then smashed into it and Zach felt something shift inside of him. A presence filled him, feeling almost familiar.

"*Mistral?*" Zach asked again, but there was no response, only a sense of... something.

"A personality was not really necessary, more of a hindrance than a boon. This is much better. New things are not always better, but then, this is not a new thing, but an old one! Hahaha," the yeti laughed. "But what should we name it... A shade hunter you are so... yes, yes... **Shade Reaver**, yes, that sounds good. Ha!"

He turned away and gestured, more of Zach's items flew into his hands and runes started appearing all over. In less than ten seconds he had dismantled some of the items that Zach had been keeping in storage as well as most of what Kishua had held in his. And then he was holding a small box in his hand, etched with runes all over and what looked like a button on top.

He waved his hand and the items that were left moved toward the two rings and disappeared back into storage, then flew over and went back on Zach's fingers. The yeti glanced at Zach, and then waved his hand. Zach fell to the ground, his body shuddering. He cradled his hand as he stared at the yeti.

"What did you do?" Zach asked, his hand was killing him.

"I gave you a gift! A reward!" The yeti said. "And now I bid you farewell!"

The yeti turned around raising his hand to the box in his other hand, but Zach spoke.

"You gave me your word," Zach said.

The yeti turned and blinked. "Huh, I did... well, I didn't hurt you much, and it is a reward! What did I also promise? Hm... ah! To help you escape, right?" The yeti looked at Zach expectantly.

"Yes," Zach managed to say through his teeth.

"Ah, well. I lied," the yeti grinned. He pressed the button on his box and the space ripped open. For a moment Zach froze, but then he saw that the other side of the portal looked like it was still in the Ethereal Realm. The shades couldn't leave, and Zach hoped that this one couldn't leave the Ethereal Realm either.

The yeti stepped toward the rift and then paused and glanced back at Zach. "Oh, and you might want to move," the yeti pointed up with one of his fingers. "They'll know once I'm gone. Be well little Chosen!"

With that, he stepped through the rift and it closed behind him.

A moment later, howling screams echoed up above him. Zach cursed and reached for his storage, looking to see what was still there. Thankfully the **Soul Restoration Potion** was still there. He pulled it out and drank it. Immediately he felt better, and he pulled his armor on with equip.

He activated his **Last Heir of Terra** and his **Old Heritage**, his **Phantom Avatar** was still on. He focused on his legs and then jumped up,

pushing himself up as far as possible. He soared and he reached for his wind. Only it didn't answer. He panicked for a moment, he didn't have the chance to check his notifications and screens, but if his **Wind's Favorite** no longer worked then whatever the yeti had done had broken the bond between Zach and Mistral. If Mistral had even survived, the yeti's words made Zach think of the worst.

He summoned his **Ethereal Sword** and stabbed it into the wall as he reached his the peak. He had reached almost halfway to the top. He placed his hands on the wall beneath him and then pushed, jumping back and up. He reached the other side of the wall and stabbed his sword again. Then repeated the process until he reached the top.

He heard howling and movement through the doorway that had stairs and he turned around running into one of the doorways from which he didn't hear anything. He entered the dark and hoped that he could find a hiding space somewhere.

He needed time to figure out what the shade had done to him, and make a plan about what he should do.

No matter what, he had to survive for two weeks in a prison filled with hostile spirits and shades. If he got out of this, he was never going to enter the Ethereal Realm again.