

Interlude - Framework

The city around him was incredible in many ways. Ra'azel had to admit his surprise and yes, even awe. Buildings built out of metal and stone, as tall as mountains, reaching high enough to scrape the sky. Dirt covered by fine ground stone, solidified to make smooth roads. Lines of wire, pumping Essence of Lightning from stations all across the city, each holding a for its heart complicated runic devices surrounding great crystals that refilled with power. He had taken one of them apart, and had seen a new language, similar to his runes enough that he knew that this was the next iteration of them. Only like all other things in this world, it was... lesser. Or perhaps more bound, was the better description of it.

Their runes did not require pieces of their souls, it made it so that even a babe could use it, but it also made them weaker.

It was all very impressive. He had seen flying vehicles made out of metal, weapons that fired compressed Essences of Light so powerful that they burned what they touched. He had seen them using their powers to build, to patrol, to control. And he had stared in awe at the giant hole in the sky, the towering tether they had built in the center of their city, stretching far above the buildings to pierce through the sky into a violet and black darkness above. These were a people who knew much, more than he had ever imagined, more than his people ever achieved.

Ra'azel respected that knowledge, but he saw also the weakness. How all it would take for their careful distribution of power across the city to fail, was for someone powerful enough aligned with Lightning to come around and rip it from their wires. They had protections, of course they had, but in Ra'azel's experience you could never plan for such raw power.

Still, he walked their streets, obscured by a cloak and hood carved with runes to make his presence ignored by all. He watched, and he learned. He could see how the Framework changed, how it functioned now, and he had seen the benefits of it. The Class was a direct link to the

Framework, allowing one the use of it like a tool. Like the great Soul Weapons of his time. Pieces of his time were everywhere. Cultivation empowered the body, it taught one how to get closer to a single Aspect. In a way it was a lesser version of the contracts that Ra'azel once held. It was... disappointing that physical manifestations of Aspects no longer existed, his power was lessened for the lack of it. Once he had held the might of a world, and now he only had his rune mastery to depend on.

Which was why he had tried to gain access to this new Framework, and repeatedly failed. More power was never a bad thing.

It was the middle of the night as he walked down the street, the light from the posts set along the edge of the road illuminated the darkness created by the towering buildings. He glanced down at his compass, the runes he had carefully etched in it pulsed in rhythm, guiding him toward his target. The city had protections, though most of them were geared toward things that did not account for what Ra'azel was doing, still it did mean that he could not just act with no concern of others.

He was powerful, but he had learned his lesson in the Ethereal. He did not fully understand the powers that this Framework granted, nor was he immune to mistakes. He was not as powerful as he once was, not in the same way at least. His power had grown in other ways, but he had lost the largest part of his power that had been tied to the Aspects and his contracts with them.

His device pulsed in his hand, and Ra'azel glanced up, seeing a being standing in front of a building, talking with another. He knew his target immediately. Wearing a suit of armor that was impressive even by the standards of Ra'azel's craft, the other was of no consequence. A cthul, as most in this place were, Ra'azel kept his distance and watched.

He knew that the building they stood in front of was some kind of a guard station, and his target the leader of it in this sector of the city. Ra'azel knew that the being in front of him had reached the peak of his chosen profession and focus, the peak of Class. And that was what Ra'azel was after, the last one had been close to the peak, but not quite. He had

adjusted his compass since then, and was sure that this one is what he was after.

He found a dark and secluded spot, then settled in to wait. He did not want to make a scene, he would look for an opportunity where his target was alone.

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The basement that Ra'azel had turned into his base of operations was illuminated by eerie blue light, just enough of it that his eyes could see clearly. He studied his target, long since dead, their body cut open for Ra'azel to inspect. He grimaced as the soul withered and finally dissipated, breaking into nothingness beneath his gaze. He lamented the fact that he no longer had the contract with the Aspect of Souls, that would've made things much easier. Instead, he had been forced to alter his own eyes, to brand runes on them to let him see.

It had been a surprisingly difficult fight for him, the pain in his shoulder reminded him of that. His great armor shoulder plate was turned to slag, and the wound beneath it sent burning sensation radiating outward. It was... annoying, but Ra'azel had prevailed in the end. He had miscalculated, his device searched for the highest connection to the Framework in a particular way which he had come to associate with Class. What he didn't account for was Skill. His target was a powerful Skill user as well, and he had not quite understood that focus before now. It was contrary to all that he knew from his world. One did not just bend the world to their thoughts through will. You had to pay the price with your soul, you had to brand the world with your word.

Still, he had learned much, even about Skills. So, in a way this was a boon. He could see it now, the idea behind the design of this Framework. Each focus had a price to be paid that was different to what he was used to. They had physical costs, draining the stamina both mental and

physical. But there was more on top of that. The price of the Class was an extra cost of stamina along with a cooldown, it was based on the management of those cooldowns. Cultivation had its own currency, and the price was the management of it.

Skill, well now that was more interesting. It used the willpower of the person as a currency. It allowed the Skill users to impose their will on the world directly. It was an amazing power, that was for certain. And Ra'azel had seen what it could do in his conflict with the dragon in the Ethereal.

He could see what it used to be now. They had removed the physical manifestations of Aspects, allowed only free Essence. And they had stripped the power of those Aspects and gave it to people. Skill, was the innate ability of old Aspects to command what was theirs. Only these people had no true connection to the Aspects, so their will commanded everything unless opposed by an equal or greater will.

He saw why they had created it, why there were no Aspects. He laughed, thinking back on what he had done, on his final plan, the idea he had before he was betrayed. How he wanted to show them that he was worthy. It was never going to work, they wanted something else. It was genius, and he wanted that power.

And now he saw what he was lacking. His soul was connected to the Framework, it was why his runes and power still worked. His body was what was lacking, if what he had learned was right. The Essence that made his body was old, from his iteration, it didn't quite mesh with that of this reality. He needed to find a way to circumvent that.

But for now, he needed to learn more about Skills, he could mimic other focuses with his runes, but Skill was beyond him. He turned and left the room, triggering the runes on the walls as he walked out, making sure that any evidence inside would not survive his departure for long.

A plan shaped in his mind, but first he had to seek out new targets—the most powerful Skill users he could find.

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It took him almost a week to properly attune his device. Making it search for the high resonance of Skill was harder than he had anticipated. He had been forced to find another victim that had access to skills. He had interrogated all of his targets, of course, and from that he knew that there were passive skills that constantly impacted a person. That was what had eventually helped him tune the device properly. It had required adding pieces of bone and flesh from the people he found to the device, but in the end it had worked. His compass pulsed, and in Ra'azel's mind's eye they appeared, new targets.

He could tell only their distance, and power. There were many of them, but few shone as brightly as what he wanted. And there seemed to be two different kinds. Ones that shone brightly but were small, and others that were both large and bright. It didn't take him long to realize that the ones that were small were those who had great willpower but were not far on their Skill path.

He disregarded them, he needed the most powerful for his experiments. Skills seemed most promising to aid in his goal of finding a way to access the Framework. There were two good choices, both very far away from him. One was far North of him, not the largest one but certainly one of the brightest. With how far it was Ra'azel immediately had a suspicion of who it was. He had already met that one, the one who sat in the land of frost under the blue-white moon.

He turned away from that one, he didn't understand that power. Next one was across the lands that these people called the Core, on the opposite side of where he was now. Distance was nothing to Ra'azel, but the Skill user was both bright and large. It seemed very promising.

With an effort of his own will, he carved a rune, lamenting the fact that he couldn't just command reality directly. His will just didn't find purchase on reality unless he carved a rune. His soul flowed through his

hand and a glowing rune appeared in front of him, he continued, writing several more connected runes.

Ka—Lio—Saviu—Nem—Om—Wior

The space in front of him split open then bent as he forced it to connect to a point far away. Without hesitation, Ra'azel stepped through. He had chosen a location near his target, but far away enough to ensure that he wouldn't be seen or detected.

He stepped into a forest, then consulted his compass and started walking. It didn't take long for him to find signs of people. Carefully, he found a secluded place on top of a hill to observe.

Before him stretched a massive city, not as large as the one he had just left, but impressive in a different way. It did not have buildings that scratched the sky, and the manner in which it was built reminded him of home. Built predominantly with stone, it was clearly in the midst of a vast construction undertaking. Its walls were made in the image of concentric rings, with the outer walls still being built, while some others were finished already.

Immediately the runes in his armor sensory runes alerted him to the defenses of those walls. He could tell that his target was in the center, and that the defenses there were... strange. They were made with this reality's version of runes, so he could tell some of what they did. It was going to be hard to pass through unnoticed. It seemed like they had runes that watched out for the amount of power the people that passed through the walls had. It was unlike the measures that he had encountered so far.

He didn't know how that would read him, but he did not want to find out. There were a lot of people down there from what he could see. He felt an echo of pain from the wound in his shoulder, he didn't know the

strength that they held but he was reminded that while he was very powerful, ignorance was a great weakness.

He continued to watch, using his devices to scout out the city and wait for his target to leave. Only they never did. Days later, and the target remained in the center of the city, the most defensible area, filled with guards at every step from what he could see.

Ra'azel was starting to lose his patience, and he had to remind himself to be careful. But then an idea occurred to him. He pulled out an orb and looked inside his storage, it was filled with pieces of the spirits he had harvested, bodies too, of those that he hadn't used or that hadn't been exactly what he had been searching for.

He looked at the city then back at his storage. Perhaps a distraction might be what he needed. With a grin on his face, he turned away, heading into the wilderness to search for a secluded place where he could plan.