

Precision

Accomplishing one's goals required patience, and Ra'azel had plenty of it. He also had learned his lessons well, he knew that being careful was the way to survive and avoid a fate like the one that befell him the last time. He had not seen the knife that stabbed him in his back, oh so long ago, which consigned him to a prison he had no hope of escaping.

That he had was luck, and perhaps fate. But he always learned, always grew. In the Ethereal Realm he had learned that there were beings out there with great powers that could match him and some even surpass him. In this Real Realm, he had seen that even those weaker could hurt him, if what they wielded was something that he wasn't familiar with.

Ultimately, Ra'azel understood that he could only know what he knew, and that retreating in the face of the unknown was not a weakness. He was not in a rush, he had the time to learn.

So, he sat in the small clearing in the mountains, far away from the city that was his target, and he prepared. A small bird sat in his lap, blue of feathers and the size of his palm, it was common in these parts from what Ra'azel had observed. It was perfect for his needs. He turned his head this way and that, looking it over, making sure that the deception was perfect. For the bird was no bird at all, just an outer shell he pulled over his own puppet.

Beneath the feathers and skin, gears turned, small Essence crystals glowed, and runes etched onto metal glowed. Ra'azel made sure that all was perfectly aligned, then raised his hand. The bird took to the air, flying away, and Ra'azel's eyes flashed as he activated the rune that linked its eyes with his.

The perspective of the world shifted, and he saw the world from above. The sea of green passed beneath him, a wild growth of the forest, until he reached a road and a new kind of growth, a forest that looked wrong.

Trees too evenly spaced to have been grown by nature, nothing to say about the lines of energy that flowed evenly beneath the ground. They were clear to the eyes of his creation, and so they were clear to him.

The bird continued on, reaching the city where a massive construction effort was taking place. Ra'azel grimaced as he saw a net spreading around the city in a dome shape, covering it all. It was not visible to the naked eye, but it was to him. It was only a sensory net of some kind, but Ra'azel had hoped that it wouldn't be up. It hadn't been always, though Ra'azel hadn't been able to discern any kind of a pattern. He assumed that they were still testing it, so turned on every once in a while for such purposes.

His bird flew through it, Ra'azel trusted that his creation was protected enough. The net passed over the bird, and detected nothing beneath the skin. He smiled behind the bird's eyes and continued on. He looked at the city beneath him, noting the places where the energy was most dense. Some of that were powerful individuals, some of it was defenses. Either way, Ra'azel would avoid it. It was not his goal to cause as much damage as possible. He simply needed to draw out his target.

The bird flew over the inner part of the city, where the defenses were fully operational. Ra'azel had it fly over the protective dome, he did not know what those protections did and didn't want to risk it. But he could see that his target was inside the building, not moving at all.

He had hoped that the target would leave, but in all the time he had been here it hadn't moved from the inner parts of the city. It was no matter, he would draw them out and grab them before they could do anything. He needed them trapped but alive, to study them and discover what skills truly were and how he could replicate it.

There was one way that he had devised that he thought would work. It would mean him losing on a lot that he had gained over his life, but it would open to him the path to this version of the Framework. It would free him and grant him unlimited potential. If it worked.

He observed the city, looking for the right place to strike. He was not after causing destruction and death, in fact, that would probably make his life harder.

No, precision was what was required here.

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Kri walked down the street of Consequence's new merchant district. It was mostly empty, only a few have actually set up shop so far. They hadn't yet moved everyone back in from the temporary city outside, as the district was only recently finished. Many of the merchants outside had credit which would allow them to pick their shops from among the newly built buildings based on what they had owned prior. But the process was slow and orderly, they didn't want to overwhelm the few open gates and streets with everyone trying to get back into the city at the same time. Her mother had explained it all to her before, and it did make sense to Kri.

As she walked, she couldn't help but turn to her companion.

"Again, I'm so sorry," she said, trying to convey her regret.

Hiro shook his head. "It's fine, you don't have to do this you know. I'm sure that I'll be able to find something on my own."

"I was responsible, it is only fair," Kri said.

The two of them had been training in the courtyard, using live weapons, of course. Both of them were immortal, training with limits wasn't appealing to either of them. She had heard some from him about what Ryun and Tali put him through, which had made her feel a little better about her own instructions under their tutelage. Though if she was honest, she preferred the way master Zacharia taught.

During their spar she had her power too much. He was a wily opponent, hard to catch, especially when they used the combat arenas

instead of just an empty ring. He could just disappear or appear from a shadow, or just use it to play tricks and harry her as she searched for him.

During their last battle she had flash frozen the area around her when she couldn't catch him, catching his weapon which resulted in it shattering. She felt bad about it, especially after she learned that it was a gift from his teachers, the wardens. She had offered to replace it, insisted really. Though the issue now was that they were having trouble finding anything similar to it. His weapon was a sword type called a messer, which the Twilight Melody Sect didn't use.

She had found a few on the Framework auction, but they were either too expensive or too cheap. Hiro's sword was an epic weapon. So she had dragged him out into the city to look for a replacement either from the few merchants that had opened shop, or if not then as a commission from some of the crafters.

"There really is no need," Hiro said, for the fifth time. "I have replacements."

"It is about the principle of the thing," Kri said. "It was a gift, yes?"

Hiro sighed and nodded. "Yes, I should not have used it in our sparring in the first place. I've outgrown it a while ago, it was a mistake."

"Maybe, but I cannot just forget it," Kri added. "There was no need to go that far."

She had grown... frustrated in their spar. She hadn't been able to catch him, so she lashed out. They weren't supposed to be fighting anywhere close to serious.

Hiro didn't respond. They reached the shop, one of the few that was open and that she knew sold weapons imported from other factions. It was their best bet on finding something similar to what he had lost.

"Here it is, let's see if they have—"

There was a sound of a crack, then came a surge of air, fluttering their clothes. Both of them turned as a crash was heard somewhere beyond the

row of buildings in front of them. Both of them moved, jumping up to the nearby roof, and looked out in the distance. They saw it immediately, the monster rose beyond the buildings around it.

It was on the edge of the district, near the construction areas. Kri saw the builders jumping from their platforms as the monster barreled into the building they stood on. It swiped its massive arm ending in claws as long as Kri was tall, cutting through stone as if it wasn't there. Kri saw the formations being laid into the building flare, and then something exploded, the monster roared and stumbled back, the fire started to spread. It didn't seem that affected, more surprised.

Hiro jumped forward, then dimmed and disappeared into a shadow. Kri jumped after him. She looked at the monster, taking its large frame, it was a mismatch of different monsters. She could see a turtle shell on its back, then fur on its torso, its arms were hairless and long enough that they almost trailed across the ground. Its legs were thick and powerful looking, though shorter. But its head was the most disturbing. It had three faces, the one looking forward appeared to be a face of a bear, then it was as if someone had stitched two more faces to its sides, one the face of a lizard, and the other a fawn.

Kri didn't know what it was, or how it had managed to get into the city, but she hurried, her armor appearing around her and a spear in her hand. Below her on the streets she saw sect warriors running in the same direction. Bells started to ring as someone sounded the alarm.

She watched as the builders raised walls, trying to contain the monster, but it crashed through them with ease, that made Kri narrow her eyes. The monster was strong. She reached the roof just next to it, and as it turned its attention on a group of builders trying to jump from their workplaces, she moved to attack.

As it attacked, a hand made out of shadow reached from beneath the monster and grabbed hold of its arm. The arm of shadow tore apart, but it slowed it enough to give the builders enough time to jump away before claws descended.

With her **{Absolute Mantle}** spreading through her body, she launched off the roof and she layered in **{Cold Expansion}** in her spear. A slash appeared out of the air just next to the monster's neck, it hit hard making the monster stumble, but she saw that it didn't penetrate the skin.

Kri stabbed with her spear at the monster's exposed neck from behind. She heard and saw the fawn head screech, its turtle shell flashed green, and then Kri was flying back. A wave of force smashed into her strong enough to make her lose her breath. She crashed into something hard, heard the stone cracking and her vision blackened for a moment.

She blinked her eyes and looked ahead, seeing the monster was now turned in her direction. It started walking her way, and she pushed herself out of the hole in the wall. Kri hefted her spear and got ready.