

Side Story – Prisoner of Ages

Ra'azel took a deep breath, allowing himself a moment to feel the wind on his skin. It passed through his white fur gently, almost caressing him. And then the wind stilled and he opened his eyes.

A small whirlwind stood just off the edge of the cliff, and Ra'azel smiled.

“Thank you for coming, East Wind,” he said to the whirlwind.

“It was not like I could refuse,” the words came with the whispers of the wind as the Aspect of the East Wind answered.

Ra'azel's smile faltered. “I've never abused my power, nor will I ever.”

“It matters not,” the wind told him. *“You bound the World Aspect, all others are bound to answer to you.”*

“It was... necessary. You must see that,” Ra'azel said.

“What you are attempting is foolish,” the wind said. *“You cannot defy the Dealmaker.”*

“I just want to show him that he is wrong! That we deserve to be chosen! How is that defiance? Look at me East Wind! See the power that I have achieved, is this not what the Dealmaker is looking for?” Ra'azel asked, his voice getting louder.

The wind moved, a gust hitting Ra'azel. He did not know if it was meant as a rebuke, he barely felt it. Runes carved into his armor protected him from all harm.

“It is not for you to decide,” the wind said after a moment. *“And there will be a chance for you to prove yourselves, after.”*

“Two thousand years, East Wind, two thousand years since the Framework arrived. Since we were given this test. And in that time I have achieved all that there was to achieve! I am worthy! My people are worthy! Why should we be forced to suffer more? We are not toys to be played with! I will not stand by and let this happen,” Ra'azel bellowed.

The wind shuddered, showing nervousness. *“You want to defy a power much greater than yourself. Your actions will reflect on your entire race, you must know that.”*

Ra'azel narrowed his eyes at the Aspect. “Will you help me?”

“Are you ordering me to?” The wind said.

Ra'azel closed his eyes. He had done many terrible things in his life, but deep down, he still believed that he was a good person. And the only thing that he wanted was to make sure that his people were safe, that they had a chance. But now, all it took was a single word. For him to reach to the Aspect Bond with the world and bend it to his will. And he could have the wind do his bidding.

"No," Ra'azel said at last. "I am many things, but that I am not."

"Then there is nothing more for us to talk about," the wind said and then it blew away, across the mountain peaks. Continuing with its infinite route.

Ra'azel bowed his head, but then steeled himself. There were other Aspects that he had to speak with.

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"Father?" A voice said as Ra'azel focused on carving a rune into the stone at the base of the mountain. He finished the last part and then turned, his tools still in his hands.

"Da'azal, what are you doing here? You were supposed to be with your mother," Ra'azel looked at her as she approached. The runes she had carved into her armor glowing faintly. He was proud of her, at just 30 years of age, she had achieved much. But his eyes couldn't help but see the spots where her runes were lacking, the weakness that he could exploit in an instant.

"I.. I needed to see you," she said, her weight shifting from one foot to the other. "Mother is... she is gathering people. They mean to stop you."

Ra'azel closed his eyes. "There is little that they can do, I am stronger than them all put together."

For a moment she didn't say anything, and then as if she was gathering her strength she took a deep breath and started walking until she stood in front of him. "Father, they are saying that you've gone mad. That you are attempting something that would doom us all. I.. none of them want to tell me what exactly you want to do, or how. Just that you need to be stopped."

Ra'azel looked away from her ice blue eyes. None of them understood, but he was doing this for her, for his other children, grandchildren and their

children. He had lived for over two thousand years, had gained as much power as anyone could, and had learned the truth.

“What I am doing is going to save us all,” Ra’azel said as he turned and met his daughter’s eyes. “I am going to break from this place and show the Dealmaker how worthy I am, he will have no choice but to accept us then.”

“Mother says that we will all have a chance to become worthy. That we should trust the Dealmaker and the Aspects,” Da’azel hesitated. “That to go against the Dealmaker will doom us for certain.”

He closed his eyes, he knew that they didn’t understand, that they didn’t want to see. They trusted the Dealmaker and that was their biggest mistake. “Daughter, what the Dealmaker will offer will be the death of our people. We will be asked to pay a price in blood, because he had already decided that we are unworthy. Only a few will have a chance to prove otherwise, only a fraction of our people will survive. I cannot allow that to happen.”

“How do you alone know this?” Da’azel asked him.

Ra’azel turned his eyes to the sky. He had kept the confidence of the one who told him close, not willing to reveal and have them suffer for the trust they had given him. He could not say. Instead, he took his daughter’s hands in his own.

“What do you see when you look around us?” Ra’azel asked.

She frowned at his question. “I don’t understand what you mean?”

“I mean literally, what is around us?” Ra’azel asked.

“A mountain, a forest, a river. Why are you ignoring my question father?”

Ra’azel shook his head. “A mountain, that has an Aspect that lords over it. Smaller Aspects serve beneath it, Aspect of the Mountain Forest, of the Animals, of the River that flows down its slopes. Each unique, as powerful as their domain, bound in various ways so that they shared power in places where they met. The Aspect of this River is bound to serve the Aspect of the Mountain here, but not further downriver, there it comes into its own and serves only itself. It shares domains with other Aspects, of the plains it passes through, the forests and then finally the Aspect of the Sea. The Aspects around us are all bound to each other, linked in ways that give them power.”

“I know this dad,” Da’azel said, her voice impatient. “You’ve bonded the Aspect of Severius, the world itself. Everyone knows this, what does it have to do with what you are trying to do?”

Ra’azel smiled. “Yes, I have a... bond with Severius, the Aspect of the World. It makes me powerful, and yet it is as if everyone has forgotten, Aspects are all linked. Severius is not at the top. There are other Aspects that it in turn must serve.”

“But... it is the Aspect of the World, what could it possibly serve?” His daughter asked.

Ra’azel looked to the sky. “Our World is but one beneath the infinite sky, there are more beyond it. There are Aspect that are so large that even I struggle to imagine them. Aspects of laws that govern everything. We are... small, daughter. Once I believed that we were unique, but we are not. We are not special, there are countless like us, on other worlds. We... the Dealmaker has found us unworthy, that means that he has found others who are. I fear daughter, I fear what will happen to us once the time runs out. The Dealmaker is not a kind being, and I fear what I do not know. We cannot follow this path, we cannot allow this to come to pass. We must change the Dealmaker’s mind.”

Da’azel looked to the sky, her face scrunched up in concentration, but Ra’azel could see that she didn’t understand, not really. He sighed and turned around.

“Go home to your mother, daughter. Tell her that they will not stop me, that I will show the Dealmaker our worth.”

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“I greet you, Great Ocean,” Ra’azel bowed before the large mound of water that had risen to the level of the cliff he was standing on. “And I thank you for answering my call.”

“*What is it that you want, Runesmith, Enslaver, Bondsmith, Corrupter, Worldsmith,*” the ocean asked as bubbles of air burst and freed the words. “*Is it my time now?*”

Ra'azel closed his eyes in pain. "I only want to protect us all, can't you see that? The time is running out, five more years before the Dealmaker ends everything. You must know by now that the Aspects themselves will not be saved. The True Death reaps across the World, and other Aspects are dying."

"All things have an end, young smith. I have known since the moment I was born that eventually my water will evaporate, that my basins will dry up and that I would die. I will not run from True Death, as some others plan."

"But it doesn't need to be this way!" Ra'azel bellowed. "We can show them that we can still serve a purpose, that we can be more! We are not failures, we should be given more than a slim chance that some could survive!"

"It is ever the need of your kind to believe yourself special, to think that you are worth more than you are. In the end, it is not you who decides. The Dealmaker has made the choice, ours is only to obey."

"Well, I refuse!" Ra'azel said. "I will not go meekly, I will fight for my right to live freely with my own choices!"

"It is your right to speak and to act, but you will not change the Dealmaker's mind."

"Regardless, will you help me?" Ra'azel asked.

"How many have you asked, how many had agreed?" The Great Ocean asked.

"The mountains are behind me, as are the great deserts in the south, the Aspects of Ice and of Fire. Join me, Great Ocean, and your death will not be in vain."

"Yet the winds howl no more, you've bound them with your runes, taken their freedom. I would rather die at the hands of the True Death, than to feel your bindings," the Great Ocean said.

"The winds refused me, and I bound them, out of necessity. Do not make me do the same to you. I would much rather have you serve my goal willingly."

"I am not a gathering of scattered winds, I am one, an ocean which all water serves, where all water ends. You will not bind me, try, and I will bury you beneath my depths."

“So be it, then, rejoice Great Ocean, you are about to feel the power that will change the mind of the Dealmaker himself,” Ra’azel said and gestured. Runes flashed into the air around him. His pick and hammer appeared in his hands and the runecarving on his armor flashed with power. The aspects around him twisted on his command and he stepped forward as the ocean rose, a wave that covered the sun.

It fell down, threatening to smash him into the cliffs. But he was Ra’azel Equinar, the Runesmith, the most powerful being that had ever walked this world.

The fight was not long.

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Ra’azel stood in the courtyard of his home, standing on a rune that covered it all. Etched into the stone that connected to the largest mountain, the spine of the world itself. His power soared, all Aspects still living were his to command. And now it was time. Two more years until the time the Dealmaker announced, the moment when they would be given a choice, a chance to survive. They deserved more, they deserved to live without having to prove themselves again.

Had they not done what the Dealmaker had asked? Had he not achieved all that there was to achieve? They did not deserve to be cast aside. And Ra’azel was going to prove it.

In a moment he was going to sacrifice every aspect in the world, he was going to harness their power and rip open a path through reality itself. Connect to another world. A feat that would surely show how worthy they all were. A willingness to sacrifice, a willingness to persevere. Perhaps that was the test, perhaps the Dealmaker was watching to see if he succeeded.

His people had abandoned him, but he still loved them. He still worked for them. Even after they’ve tried to kill him, even after they’ve tried to destroy his greatest work.

He was about to begin when one of his runes triggered, someone was approaching. Immediately he realized who it was and relaxed. He waited

until she reached the courtyard before turning and watching his daughter approach.

“Da’azel,” he smiled at her. “Did you change your mind?”

She returned his smile. “Yes, father,” she said. “I will see this through to the end.”

He allowed himself to relax. He had feared that none of his family would see the necessity of what he wanted to do. That they would try to oppose him even when he had shown them that it was impossible for them to win against him. “Thank you, daughter,” he said as he embraced her. He hadn’t realized just how much it meant to him, to have at least one of his blood here at the end. “I’m glad that you changed your mind. I love you dearly, my daughter.”

“And I love you, dad,” she said slowly, sadly.

A warning flashed in his mind, but he was too late. Something clicked on the back of his armor and she stepped back.

“What di—” before he could even activate his runes, whatever she did triggered.

The world flipped, and he was torn from the place he stood. A moment after he fell to the ground, somewhere else. *A teleportation runecarving...* He thought to himself.

Ra’azel raised his head and found himself inside a large building, black stone surrounded him and runes were etched all over the walls. Around him stood others of his kind, the most powerful ones. He saw his family, his wife and children, his grandchildren. His friends and enemies, all were looking at him. He raised his hands, and runes flashed, but they weren’t fast enough.

Everyone attacked, blasts of fire, of ice, boulders carved as hammers, flew toward him. His runes triggered and shields protected him from the initial blast, but it was not enough. Disoriented from the teleportation, he was unable to respond. His shield failed, and then he took the attacks on his armor. It held for a moment, and then he felt the attacks rend his body, breaking him until there was nothing left. Then there was only darkness.

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Ra'azel woke in chains. Disoriented and confused, he reached for his power to break them, but there was something blocking it. He couldn't reach it.

"It is useless," a voice said.

Ra'azel raised his head and saw a monster, a spirit, standing above him. A quadruped, with the lower body of an animal, and upper body that was more person-like. It had a torso and two sets of arms. Its head was carved out of stone and it had three faces. Each facing in one direction, one forward and two to the sides.

"I'm dead," he concluded. He knew that spirits resided in the realm of the dead. "I've failed."

"You have not failed, Prisoner," the spirit said. "Simply, there was never anything for you to succeed at."

"My people betrayed me," Ra'azel said. "My daughter..."

"They just did as the Dealmaker ordered, they will gain... consideration for what they had done."

Ra'azel bowed his head, all of his planning, all of his power, it was all for nothing. "I..." he trailed off, there was nothing that he could say that would change things. "Will you end me? Send me to oblivion?"

The spirit laughed. "The Dealmaker does not throw away useful tools, and you are useful, Runesmith. In a way, you have achieved what you wanted. You made the Dealmaker consider something more. He created this place for you. And then expanded it for others like you. Those few who are unique, who may serve a purpose in the next cycle, but are unwilling to work within his bounds. Rejoice, for you have shown him that you are worthy of special consideration. You will be my guest, and you will survive, suffer, and grow in power. Until a time when you will be needed again."

Ra'azel didn't respond, he couldn't. The only thing that he could feel was pain and rage. At his people that betrayed him, at the Dealmaker for playing with them. At everything about this world.

He remained silent as he was dragged away, deep beneath the ground, and when he was thrown into a hole, chained to the walls. He glared up at the Great Spirit as the runes on the walls turned on and his mind slowly grew heavy, and he went to sleep.

The last thing he thought about was that one day he was going to be free again, and how he was going to make them all regret what they had done.