

## Act II - Zach

Zach and Griss stayed at the crime scene for more than two hours, looking for any kind of a clue that could help them catch the murderer. Zach and Griss couldn't contribute as much, they were what was referred to as combat wardens. Wardens like Griss and Zach were generally more focused on fighting and hunting down bounties. They knew the basics of investigating a crime scene, but they didn't have powers that could help them find more clues. Relas on the other hand was an investigator warden, with Skills and a Class that allowed him to look through the crime scene and see more than either Griss or Zach could.

The problem was that even with his help, there wasn't much to see. Most of the new information they got about the case came from the fact that Griss and Zach had interrupted the killer while he was setting up the scene.

"How long has the killer been active?" Zach asked a while later as the three of them walked toward the warden station in the city.

"A couple of months, we don't know for sure. There had been eighteen murders over the span of at least eight months," Relas answered.

Eighteen in eight months, a serial killer that had been killing under the noses of the wardens. Zach could see it in their eyes. They were frustrated by their inability to catch him.

"And you've been looking at an occult angle for all that time?" Zach asked.

"Yes," Relas sighed, his beak snapping sharply in a clicking sound. Zach wasn't familiar with the Karura enough to know what that meant for certain, but he was leaning toward frustration. "All the signs were there, the carvings in the bodies, the targets chosen. Every victim had been someone who wouldn't really be missed, prostitutes, low level workers, people who were alone, without family. We never could find a link between them, other than the fact that they wouldn't be missed. Which was a problem in itself, we had few leads to go on. The ritualistic carvings at least gave us something to do, there are a few cults in the city and we've been monitoring them."

"We know now," Griss chimed in. "We'll catch him."

"This will only flame the rumors more," Relas shook his head.

“Rumors?” Zach asked.

“A rumor about a person going around killing people at night has been circulating over the last few months. Every person that disappears or has an accident with no witnesses is attributed to them. There’s never been any evidence to support it, but now... If it gets out that the occult murders are in fact the work of a single killer, the people will start believing that he is this ‘Night Horror’. Everything bad that happens they will attribute to him. It’s going to be a nightmare to question anyone.”

“I’ve been wondering about something,” Zach said, and the two turned their attention to him. “Why was this even allowed to get this far? Don’t the wardens have some higher level people that could’ve been brought in and handled the case?”

The two grimaced at his question. Relas was a bit lower leveled than Zach and Griss, but above level 60 at least. But Zach had seen people with at least two evolutions in the Citadel.

“It’s complicated, but it mostly boils down to the fact that these deaths aren’t important enough to warrant the time of someone more powerful,” Griss answered with a bowed head.

“What? People are being murdered and that isn’t important enough?” Zach asked.

“There are only so many wardens available,” Relas started. “And the truth is, that there are far more dangerous individuals out there, people who can and do kill far more people than this killer did. Dozens of people every day in the city, more sometimes. One additional death once in a while isn’t even a blip worth mentioning compared to people that wipe out entire towns.”

Zach blinked, he turned from the Karura to look at Griss. “So, there are people that could catch this killer, but they just... don’t?”

“It’s not like that,” Griss shook his head. “The wardens are always moving around, dealing with problems in the core. There are wars going on constantly, and the more powerful people are needed to mediate between the warring factions. Sending a more powerful warden here, would mean letting some other incident go unattended. And there is more to it than that. We are independent, but we still obey laws and customs of the places we operate in. Even here in Emeros, with the Citadel nearby, we need to act carefully.”

“But the Warden Commander stays in the Citadel doesn’t she? Couldn’t she find this criminal? Prevent more deaths?” Zach asked.

“What would you have her do? Go after every criminal in the territory? Or just the city? There are too many things she needs to take care of, too many fires she needs to keep an eye on. The wardens and Emaros are the ones that are mostly preventing the core from dissolving into an all out war. Her hands are full just with entertaining ambassadors from the city,” Griss answered.

Relas snapped his beak. “Yes, and sending a High Ranker after a low level criminal is like using a scorching tongs to pull out a splinter stuck in your finger. Sure, you might get it out, but you would lose the entire finger in the process. High Rankers are not suited to delicate work, they are too powerful. The Warden Commander could stomp on the ground and collapse the entire city block. We are the ones who are going to have to deal with this, only wardens up to gold rank are allowed to work in the city without permission. We work with the Elder’s Guard to pursue criminals, but bringing more powerful people to scour the city? We would need permission from the Guard, and I doubt that they would allow something like that. It would make the Elder King look bad, for someone outside of his kingdom to act in the city. The people allowed to police the populace are generally only slightly stronger than the average person in the city, with only a few exceptions. This is to prevent a large power disparity between the enforcers and the population, which can lead to... abuses of that power.”

Griss was a gold rank warden, and Zach was a silver one, just one rank lower. He knew that the rank didn’t necessarily mean power, but it was still a pretty big limitation. But he did understand what Relas meant. He had seen too many people with power abuse it, and push down those who were weaker than them. “So, you are saying that the reason why someone stronger hasn’t been brought in is because of politics and optics?” Zach asked.

“The truth is that until tonight, none of us knew exactly what we were dealing with. It hadn’t been a really big concern, as far as things go, this is a minor case,” Relas said. “There are far more prolific killers out there, with far larger body counts. But you are partially right, it is about politics.”

“Everything in the Infinite Realm is about that,” Griss snorted. “We like to joke that the only ones who care for appearances are the people in the sects, but the truth is that everyone else is the same. Perhaps not to the same extent, but still it matters.”

Zach sighed, he couldn't help but feel that everything was so familiar. Limitations, politics, perception, the things that had caused Earth to devolve into chaos as people tore each other apart. But he had learned long ago that no matter how much he wanted to change that he was helpless to do it. “How many people are on this case anyway?”

“Just me,” Relas said.

Zach blinked. “You are the only one investigating this?”

“I can call on the Guard for help, but yes.”

He hadn't realized that they had so little resources to spend on something that seemed so important. People were being murdered, and only one man was looking for the killer. It was insane.

“But now that you have more information you can get more help, right?” Zach asked.

Relas' eyes blinked several times in quick succession as he looked from Griss to Zach. “I was planning to ask if the two of you would be willing to help. You've already added more to the investigation than I did since I started looking into it,” the Karura shook his head.

Before Zach could answer Griss sighed and spoke. “I was hoping on getting Zach attached to some easier cases, once he finished with his training and we went through our dungeon run. This is... maybe a bit too dangerous for someone just starting their service for the Citadel.”

The Karura blinked at Zach surprised. “You are a new recruit?”

Zach nodded his head. “I am,” then he turned to Griss. “But I am not as inexperienced as you think Griss, merely ignorant of all the rules. I have hunted murderers before.”

Griss sighed. “I know,” he said. He did know most of Zach's past, but Zach could see that the Drake wasn't yet sure. “I still think that we should go through the dungeon, the killer is powerful. We will need all the advantages we can get.”

Zach grimaced, he didn't like that. The killer could kill someone else while they were basically just training.

Relas spoke up before Zach could voice his thoughts. "Griss is right, if you have a key to the dungeon, you should go. There isn't much that you can help me with now anyway. I will need to look into clues, start interrogating people surrounding the previous victims. Everything about the case is changed, I can't use anything that I had gathered by now. It will take me a while to go through all the contacts, and let's face it, the two of you are not investigators." The Karura snapped his beak a few times, and Zach realized that it was meant to be taken as mirth.

Griss nodded his head. "You are right, of course. We will be here to support you once you catch the killer's trail, until then we should focus on getting stronger," Griss finished as he turned to look at Zach, his eyebrow raised inquisitively.

Finally, Zach nodded his head, agreeing. "I would still like to look through what you have about the case," Zach added.

"All of my records are at the station, and you are welcome to look through them. I'm always glad to get a new set of eyes on my work, but I don't know how useful it will be for you," Relas told him.

"I've looked through them before," Griss added. "Most of it is concerning cultist organizations in the city."

"I know, but perhaps there is something there that both of you missed," Zach said.

When they got to the station, Griss and Zach went to the recording room to write down their experiences. It was just a place that had paper on hand for people to write on, and they compiled their observations of their encounter with the killer. Relas brought over his reports for Zach to look through, and Zach settled in a corner to read while Griss and Relas worked to gather all their information in a more official report to send to the Citadel.

He looked at the paper in his hand and saw letter in English, his native tongue. But, it almost looked like the letters were floating slightly over the paper. If he focused on trying to see through, the English letters would disappear and he could see the strange symbols on the paper that he was unfamiliar with, the language that had been used to write it. The Framework

translating was incredibly powerful. If he didn't try to look through and didn't dwell on that fact the paper's contents would look like they were written in English. It was the same for everything around him. But as part of his lessons he had been starting to learn the written language of the Infinite Realm, as well as the tongue. It was a bit hard to do, because he had to actively focus on hearing the exact words someone was saying or to look at what was really written. It made lessons a bit confusing, but also somewhat easier.

By the time Zach finished reading, he had to concur with Relas. There wasn't much to go on in his notes and reports. The kills all appeared occult in nature, with every single person murdered being isolated and alone. That told Zach that the killer was targeting these people intentionally. He had to be scouting them out prior to attacking, tracking them probably. Relas' notes told him that he had reached the same conclusion, only he had been working on the assumption that the surveillance was being done by a group of cult members. He had been working on trying to identify people that came into contact with the victims and anyone suspicious hanging around them prior to the murders, and then link them to some of the cults in the city.

Now they knew that the killer was a Ravzor, which meant that they had to look through all the statements taken before again. Then Zach remembered what Relas and Griss said about the Night Horror and the rumors.

"Hey Relas?" Zach called out.

The black feathered Karura raised his head from the table across the room where he was sitting with Griss and met Zach's eyes. "Yes?"

"Are there any records of deaths in the city? Statistics and so on?" Zach asked.

"Yes, we keep them down in the Archive. Why?" Relas asked.

"I mean, we know that this killer has been using occult methods to hide what he was doing. But... that doesn't mean that he only used this method to hide his kills. Some of these kills you've been looking at might not even be related to him, they could be real occult killings. Maybe he has more than one method of hiding what he is doing."

Karura blinked, and then his eyes widened. “By the Dealmaker, we don’t even know for how long he has been active.”

“Where is this Archive? I’d like to check on a few things.”

Griss and Relas gave him directions, and he made his way to the basement to the Archive while they stayed to finish their report. It was mostly curiosity that drove him, he knew that he wasn’t going to solve the case in a couple of hours, but it wasn’t like he had anything better to do at the moment.

He found the large doors labeled as the Archive and entered. It was a large room, with a somewhat low ceiling and filled with shelves and binders. Looking around, he didn’t see anyone present, so he made his way to the shelves looking at the labels. He didn’t find what he was looking for on the first row, so he made his way to the second.

He rounded a corner and nearly walked into someone. He froze as he saw a woman, a Demasi, her horns small and pointing upwards from the top of her forehead, with blond hair and piercing dark green eyes. She was carrying a small book in her hand and yelped as she saw him then took a step back. Her eyes met his and widened, her arms coming up protectively.

Quickly, Zach raised his arms and tried to look non-threatening. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I didn’t know that there was anyone here.”

She blinked, several emotions flashing over her face too fast for Zach to recognize. She was short, almost a head shorter than he was, and very petite. Her tail was curled around one of her legs and she wore a simple brown robe, with a wooden warden’s badge attached to her waist. She didn’t respond immediately, but then she turned her eyes down, her bangs falling across her eyes.

“I don’t know you,” she said shyly, almost too low for Zach to hear, but his new bond perk carried the sound to his ears.

“Ah, I’m new to the city,” Zach said and then pulled out his own badge to show her.

She peered down at it, then raised her head to look at him again, her eyes narrowing. She looked ready to run, so Zach tried to smile again as he extended his hand.

“I’m Zacharia.”

She glanced down at his hand and then slowly reached out with her own hand. “Quell,” she said and then shook his hand quickly. Once she dropped it, she prepared to walk away, but Zach spoke up again.

“Uh, sorry to bother you, but could you help me out a bit?”

She looked at him suspiciously, and Zach continued when she didn’t answer.

“I need to find the records of all the deaths and disappearances in the city over the past few years. Unnatural deaths, of course.”

The woman, Quell, tilted her head, clearly thinking about it. Finally, she nodded. “I am the archivist, it is my job to help.”

She turned and walked away, leaving Zach wondering if he should wait or follow. Finally, he decided to follow. She made her way through the Archive with a certainty of someone who knew exactly what they were looking for. Then, she started pulling out binders of the shelves and placing them in Zach’s hands. It took nearly ten minutes, and after she was done, Zach was holding a pile of binders that nearly prevented him to look forward.

“No, taking the binders out of the Archive, you can read them here,” Quell said in her soft tone of voice. “No food or fire allowed.”

Zach nodded his understanding, but then realized that with her height she probably couldn’t see his head over the pile of binders. “Of course, archivist.”

“Just Quell,” she said and then walked away faster than Zach could fathom.

Zach shook his head and found a table where he set his material and started to read.

Before he had a chance to go through even half of the material, Griss walked into the Archive and found him.

“Well, you really threw yourself into this, huh?” Griss asked with a somber smile.

Zach blinked, startled to see the Drake standing in front of his table. “How long was I down here?”



“Hours, Relas and I went over some of his files upstairs. Did you find what you were looking for?” Griss said.

“I found something,” Zach grimaced. “Here, take a look at this.”

He showed him a piece of paper where he had been taking notes. Griss looked at it and quickly saw what Zach had underlined. “Are you certain that this is correct?”

Zach nodded his head. “I looked at the amount of unnatural deaths and disappearances over the last five years, the numbers doubled two years ago. Most of the extra disappearances for the first year have been in this area here of the town, but I can’t really see why it would be so.” Zach pointed to a map of the city next to him. “There doesn’t seem anything special about that area. But the disappearances have shifted for this year to the outskirts of the city here.”

Griss grimaced and flared his nostrils. “I do, that part of the city was built two years ago. At the time of those disappearances, it had been under construction. The disappearances for this year are all in the new construction zones.”

Zach blinked. “That makes more sense. All of the disappearances were among the low level workers. But why didn’t anyone notice the pattern?”

“It might not be a pattern,” Griss said. “The workers are brought in from other territories, low leveled people who are basically just cheap labor. Not all can handle the work, so a lot of them just leave to go back home.”

Zach knew that he would need to investigate further to see if it was actually connected, so he switched to another set of notes. “Here are the records of unnatural deaths. There has been a spike in the deaths of low leveled people, mostly in poor neighborhoods, prostitutes, workers, homeless. The ones that you’ve been looking at, the occult appearing ones are just one part of the increase. There are some disappearances here too, but there were also dead bodies found with body parts missing, a limb here or there, a head sometimes. It might not look suspicious, but if this killer was responsible, then removing the wound along with the body part would still hide the effect of his dagger. He only needs to stab the dagger and leave it inside the body until a person dies for it to be counted as a killing blow, he

doesn't actually need to kill with it. Bleed a victim and then stab them in the shoulder as they died out of blood loss would work too."

Griss winced and looked away, and Zach remembered that Griss knew how Zach had this kind of knowledge. He closed his eyes, images flashing in front of his eyes. He didn't try to push them away, it was his penance, his burden to remember them all.

The Drake coughed, and Zach turned his attention back to him. "We should let Relas know about that. This is good work, Zach. I'm sure that he can use this, but we really should head back to the Citadel if you are to be ready for your training session tomorrow."

Zach grimaced, he had nearly forgotten. He stood and took his notes to pass on to Relas, but then he paused looking at the table and the piles of binders.

Griss noticed his look and slapped his shoulder. "Don't worry, the archivist can keep the table reserved for you if you want to come back and work more on it."

Zach nodded, he did have free time every few days and he did feel like this was something he could do to help.

The two of them headed out of the Archive, and Zach saw the archivist shelving binders on a shelf nearby.

"Quell," Zach called.

The woman snapped around and looked at him, startled. "Yes?" She whispered.

"Can you keep my table reserved? I'd like to come back in a few days and work some more."

The woman gave him a nearly undetectable nod and then turned back to her work.

"Thanks Quell!" He said as he caught up to Griss.

"Oh, already on the first name basis with the archivist?" Griss grinned at him. "I can see how you are making friends everywhere you go."

Zach rolled his eyes. "She told me to call her that."

Griss raised an eyebrow. "Really? She insists that everyone call her archivist. You must've caught her eye then," the Drake winked at him.

Zach just shook his head. She was cute, but he wasn't really looking for anything like that at the moment. And then there was the fact that she wasn't even human. Zach had seen many couples in the city that were cross-species, but he didn't know how to really feel about that. It was all so new to him, everything was. He needed to have something to focus on, to prevent himself from getting overwhelmed with all the new things he was learning and experiencing.

And it looked like investigating a serial killer was it. He was aware of the irony, that the first thing he felt comfortable with was to hunt for a murderer, but it was what he knew how to do. The two of them walked up the stairs and back to Relas' office. Then, the two of them headed back to the Citadel.