

INTERLUDE – NIGHT HORROR II & GRISS II

Velor ran across the rooftops. He knew that he had little time, the warden—Zacharia Gardner—was probably already running for the Warden Station to report their encounter. He had known that that was going to happen, of course. The files that both the Wardens and the Guard had on him, told him what the little warden's most probable course of action was going to be. And that was not counting his other form's observations of the man. Both personnel files were bare, not surprising for a new warden. The Guard got the files from the Wardens, with some details redacted of course, but they had files on all the wardens that were cleared to act in Emaros.

It had been simple for his other form to gain access to both files. Still, his, or rather his other form's observations were more extensive than the bare-bone files he had read. He had seen the man speak, and seen the way he thought. It was why he had pulled Velor back out for one last appearance, why he had shown him his full face. To give him an exact description of his prey. It was more fun that way, they would all be busy hunting for Velor who will never make another appearance in this city.

It had been a risk, of course, but his obsession with the warden would've never let him leave the city. He needed to look deeper, to see what made the man tick. Because he had seen something familiar in his eyes, and he needed to know. A part of him wanted to devour him, to take him, his memories and power. But he knew that he couldn't do that, he had rules, and Zacharia did not fit them. He was not wasting the opportunities given to him, he had leveled. Had gotten stronger, so strong that for a moment there his **|Perfect Danger Sense|** had blasted a warning in his head with enough intensity that he knew that the man had planned an attack that was powerful enough to kill him. It had surprised him, it was why he had used his **{Horriying Presence}** to halt him, and keep him off balance. He didn't want to have a fight with him, not yet.

Finally Velor found one of his safe spots, and then changed into one of his transitional forms, that of a human woman. His form rippled and he changed. Then she walked out of the safe spot and turned right, walking

briskly toward another safe spot. As her psyche settled into a different frame of mind, she felt her emotions and desires rear up. She nearly stumbled as everything hit her at once. It was inevitable, she didn't use this transitional form for any real amount of time. It was nothing but an empty shell, flesh arranged in a specific order to look different. It was not different in itself. Her mind was her own, the one of her original body. It made everything feel so much... more.

"*Calm...*" Illuiy warned and she tried to contain her mind. This was a form that she had taken long ago, and she had stolen none of the original person's memories. That meant that she had no framework to anchor her, nothing to keep her from slipping into her real-self.

Her cover identity was much different, it had an entire lifetime's worth of memories, both stolen and the ones that she had created on her own since taking it over. And **|Perfect Imitation|** allowed her to suppress the pressure from her real-self whenever it reared its head back up. Of course, by now, her original self was nothing like it had been before. Her real-self now, was an amalgamation of many different personalities and bodies, it was inevitable to happen once she started taking on the memories of others, with some parts of her becoming more dominant when she was in the form that that part originally came from. One could not imitate as perfectly as she did without taking on the attributes and habits of her cover for real. A facade can be seen through, even with her **|Perfect Imitation|** there were ways to tell. Both the Wardens and the Guard had rules and systems in place to combat shapeshifters, but none of them could see through her forms. Not only because each of her forms had its own fake screens, but because when she changed forms she really was the person that she changed into.

It also made things complicated. Velor and her cover identity were the ones that were the most developed, the ones that she had spent the most time in, meaning that they were the forms in which she had the most control. Even though there was always the undercurrent of the drive to grow stronger, to push and get more powerful, to take from those who are weak and undeserving, to devour them. Drain them of the power that they didn't deserve. Relish in the horror as they realized that the only reason they were beneath her blade was because they wasted their chance to get stronger to—

“*Stop,*” Illuiy’s voice spoke in her mind and she realized that she was standing in the middle of the street.

She shook her head, pushing the thoughts back and then continued walking. She needed to reach the other safe spot and change into her cover quickly. The warden would have reached the station by now.

As her thoughts turned to him, she remembered their encounter. She wondered just what he was about to do before she used **{Horriying Presence}**. How he could’ve gotten so strong that he could’ve killed her. Their last fight on the rooftop hadn’t triggered her danger sense, he hadn’t been a threat to her at all then. It made her smile beneath her hood, if someone could’ve seen inside the darkness of it, they would’ve seen her manic grin with all of her teeth showing. She was impressed, and felt validated. He was worthy, he had advanced so much in such a short time. She wanted to talk to him, to really talk to him. But she knew that she might never have a chance to do it. He haunted her dreams, the intensity in his eyes looking at her and making her shiver.

She couldn’t remember the last time she had seen someone with the eyes like his. So much hurt and pain, and still he was not beaten, not cowed. He didn’t bow in the face of those more powerful. Not even when staring death in the face. It was all so... attractive, magnetic, alluring.

“You shouldn’t think like that,” Illuiy told her.

“I can’t help it,” she responded. She knew that the smart thing would be to leave the city, start her work somewhere else again. But... how could she? She was in the game now, a hunt.

“The human is capable, and he doesn’t fit our rules,” Illuiy said. *“Will you be able to kill him if he corners us?”*

She didn’t know the answer to that question. A part of her would want nothing more than to devour him, and another was too overcome with joy at the fact that someone like him exists. Someone who was still pure and uncorrupted by the Infinite Realm, and who still advanced. Who wasn’t content to sit still and waste his power.

“I don’t know,” she admitted finally. *“He might be advancing, but he is still not a match for me.”*

“For now.”

Even with his rate of advancement, she doubted that he would be able to overcome her. For now, she put that out of her mind, and turned her thoughts to her new hunt. She already had a target picked, a merchant that hadn't advanced in a long while. She could perhaps forgive him the long stretch of years without advancing if he had at least used the Essence he earned to improve his business, but he did not. All the Essence he earned, he spent on whores and drink. He was unworthy of drawing breath, fit only to be devoured as horror took him.

This time, she managed to catch herself before her thoughts spiraled out of control. She took a deep breath as she neared her safe spot, only a few minutes left and she would change into her cover, then head home. She had to reach her house before the warden alerted the station, but if her timing was right, she was going to be just in time. She reached the safe spot and started to shift into her cover form. There was nothing more to be done. She had accomplished what she had set out to do. Now she could focus on continuing her work. She walked out of her safe spot and walked at a brisk pace toward her home.

She looked over the street around her home and then entered when she was sure that there was no one around. Immediately she dropped her cloak and Velor's clothes and put on her own. Then, finally, she settled in to wait. If what she knew about the warden was true, she should have a visitor soon.

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Griss and Nyathulla had still been at the station when Zacharia returned and told them of his encounter with the killer. He had offered to stay behind to coordinate with Relas, since Zach had a prior commitment with the archivist. He still didn't know how Zach had managed to convince the archivist to date him, but his current theory was that Zach was a romantic genius. Nothing else made sense.

Which kind of fit with everything else Griss knew about the Ranker. He seemingly excelled at everything. Even now, with Griss, Nyathulla, and Relas

all standing in the meeting room, listening to him recount the events, he could barely believe what he was hearing and seeing. Zach was composed, without even a glimmer of fear in him. There was no sign that he had nearly died. To hear him recount it, Griss had no doubt that Zach was fully prepared to fight the killer all on his own. How he could think like that was a mystery to Griss. They knew just how strong the killer was, even with their evolutions they probably weren't up to par one on one. The prudent thing would've been for him to find a way to escape. Zach had stayed, the only reason he was alive was because the killer was clearly playing games.

"How quickly can we organize a search of the area?" Zach asked, bringing Griss out of his thoughts. Before Griss or Relas could answer, Zach continued. "I know that it is unlikely that we will find anything, but we should still do it."

"We need permission from the guard if we want more people, Guard Commander has issued the permits for the four of us to work the case in the city, for more personnel we need approval."

Zach grimaced at that. "That is inconvenient."

Relas closed his eyes and then tilted his head as if he was concentrating. Then he opened his eyes.

"I just sent a message to the Guard," Relas said. "The Guard Commander isn't in the Guard House, but they've sent a runner to her home. We should hear word back soon."

"What?" Zach asked, even Nyathulla looked somewhat intrigued to learn the answer. Griss almost chuckled. Even though both of them passed their training, there were still so many things that they didn't know.

Griss cleared his throat and spoke. "A telepathy skill. If evolved enough, it has enough range to allow communication in the city. All wardens working with the Guard are required to possess it. It allows for quick communication with the Guard."

Zach blinked and glanced at Nyathulla before shaking his head. "Right," he said.

"So anything else that you can share with us as we wait?" Griss asked.

Zach took a deep breath and then spoke. "The killer seemed... unstable."

Nyathulla snorted. “They murder innocents, of course they are unstable.”

Zach shook his head. “Not in that way, more like... what I’ve read in the records in the library. The way that some people start acting once they gain high tiers in more than one way of power.”

Griss frowned. “I guess that it is possible that he had severely damaged himself.”

“I think that it is more than possible, likely even,” Zach said. “And he also seemed... interested in me. And he said that his victims were unworthy.”

“The ten years without advancing,” Relas said.

Zach nodded his head. “I think that yes, in the killer's eyes, those people aren’t worthy, so he is killing them because of it.”

“As far as reasons for murder go,” Griss sighed. “It is sadly not the worst one I’ve ever heard.”

Before anyone could respond, Relas twitched and then closed his eyes. He didn’t move for a few seconds and then his eyes opened and he spoke.

“The runner just came back,” Relas snapped his beak in agitation. “The Guard Commander has... decided that relocating Guard resources for this incident isn’t a priority.”

Griss had already known what the answer was going to be. The Guard might be cooperating with the Citadel most of the time, but sending a full force to search the area was too much of an ask. Especially for a case that was as low priority for the Guard as this one was.

Compared to other criminals, the Night Horror barely killed more people than even simple accidents did, in the purely statistical sense. Also, his choice of targets didn’t cost the city anything. And as long as that held true, they wouldn’t be getting any real support.

“Why the fuck not?” Zach said, his face darkening.

Griss winced, he knew that Zach was a bit more idealistic than normal people in the Infinite Realm, but there was really nothing to be done about it.

“Politics,” Relas said with a shrug.

“Didn’t she agree that we can pursue this case? That the Guard will cooperate?” Zach asked.

“Of course she did, but there isn’t much that she can do now,” Relas said. “The killer escaped, we hadn’t even known about him until just a few months ago and if your presentation is right then it is unlikely that he had left a clue for us to find or that he is anywhere in the area. Sending the Guard to scour several city blocks right now would be a waste of resources, at least in her eyes.”

Zach’s eyes narrowed at Relas. “You knew what her answer was going to be before you asked?”

“I did, I asked because there was always a chance that I was wrong. But this is the way things usually go between the Wardens and the Guard. In part, I asked because I want you to understand this. We will not have many resources available to us aside from us here. If we are going to catch him we will need to do it ourselves.”

“Why did I even hold that presentation then?” Zach asked.

“To get permission to operate in the city of course. The Guard still has the final say on what cases we may pursue in the city. It is mostly in order to keep us from shutting down the criminal organizations that they have their fingers in.”

Zach eyes thundered for a moment, but then he sighed. “So, what do we do now?”

“Now,” Relas snapped his beak once. “We go home, tomorrow we can meet and plan our next move. Your idea about us interviewing people you interacted with and canvassing the area you moved in is a good one. We might get some information about the killer, if they were spotted observing you. We know now exactly how he looks like, we are already leagues above where we were just a few hours ago. And we need to keep working the older murders, keep looking for any clue that might help us find the killer.”

Zach nodded his head, but Griss could see that he was disappointed.

“We shouldn’t go around the city alone anymore,” Griss added. “The killer is obviously keeping an eye on you, so he might also be keeping an eye on all of us too.”

Everyone in the room nodded at that.

Zach cleared his throat. "I'm going to Quell's house, I don't think that it is too much of a risk. If the killer has been watching me he must know about us. And I want to make sure that she is okay."

Griss grinned at Zach. The other warden had a room at his sister's inn, but he spent most of his nights at the archivist's home.

"We should probably assign someone to watch her home for a bit," Relas said.

"Do we need to ask permission again?" Zach asked pointedly.

Relas shook his head. "No, we will ask the wardens in the station, a few of them owe me favors."

"Why didn't we call them instead of the Guard?" Zach frowned.

"Scouring through the city is one thing, watching another warden's house is something completely different. We can post people in front of Warden Quell's home without asking for permission."

Griss saw Zach accept that as an answer. They started the process, with Relas calling some of the other warden's in the station and asking for a favor. Griss and Nyathulla headed home to the inn, walking in silence.

He could tell that she was shaken just as much as he was. If the killer had jumped one of them... But there was no need to think about things that hadn't happened. They had new measures in place now, with them moving in at least pairs it was unlikely that the killer would attack them. Still, Griss had a bad feeling about this case. If he wasn't certain that Zach would insist on working on it, he would've already dropped it. Nothing good could come out of hunting down a killer that had been active for more than a decade. Even one who was as mild as this one.

Most killers of this kind were far more prolific, killing hundreds if not thousands in a few months. Their killer had killed so few people that he hadn't even been noticed. Griss wasn't sure if that made him more or less dangerous.