

## Act II - Zach

Zach looked over the papers on the table in front of him. The reports and statistics about crime in Emaros city dating back to last twelve years. His original research had shown that the number of murders in the city had doubled two years ago, but since then he had found some... interesting things dating back almost twelve years back. He wasn't certain, but perhaps this particular killer had been active for far longer than they thought. What Zach and Quell had found was that every three years, there was a spike in certain types of murders. The last two years it had been ritual killings, before that it was an increase in bodies washing up on shore with so mangled by the fish living in the lake that it was impossible to find the cause of death—most of those deaths had been labeled as drownings, and Zach was sure that some of them were. But it was unlikely that such a spike would happen so suddenly and last for precisely three years before the numbers returned to the usual amount before the spike. Quell and he had found at least four distinct spikes in causes of death, that lasted for exactly three years and then stopped, with another type suddenly spiking at around the same time.

It was too orderly to be just chance. They had worked on their findings and were in the process of compiling all of their information in files to present to Relas and the Guard. Zach, Griss, and Nyathulla had officially asked Relas to join the investigation, and the Karura had accepted. Zach knew that Griss didn't really think that they would catch the killer, he just thought that it was a good opportunity for Zach and Nyathulla to learn more about how wardens worked. Both Zach and Nyathulla had finished their training, and were now full-fledged wardens. Zach was wearing his badge tied to his waist, in plain view.

Finally, he finished assembling his report, putting it in a binder and then raised his head. He saw Quell looking at him with a strange look in her eyes and he raised an eyebrow at her. She startled for a moment as he caught her looking and then a smile spread over her face. She raised her hand and slowly tucked her hair behind her ear.

The two of them had been dating now for almost two months, although Zach hadn't had much time to spend with her as he spent a lot of his time

training. The only time they were together was when she was helping him to gather information for the case. Hopefully they will have some more time now that Zach was no longer living in the Citadel. He and Nyathulla had moved into rooms in Griss's sister's inn.

"Do you think that it's ready?" Zach asked.

Quell glanced at the binders on the table and nodded her head. "Yes, there is enough evidence here to push the investigation forward, I think."

Zach hoped so, ever since their encounter with the killer, Zach couldn't help but feel the need to catch them.

"Do you think that we can stop the killer?" Zach met Quell's eyes.

She tilted her head and shrugged. "I know that you want to stop the murders, but the reality is that the core is filled with these kind of things," she pointed at one of the binders. "Unexplained deaths and killers that are never caught, for all you know this killer already left the city. There's been no new bodies that fit our parameters. You might never catch them."

Zach grimaced, he knew that she was right. But this was the first real quest that he had given himself in the Infinite Realm, he felt like he needed to catch the killer. To prove to himself that he was capable of it.

"I need to try," Zach whispered, more for himself than to Quell.

She gave him a sad smile and reached over the table to put her hand on his. "I hope that you find what you are looking for Zach."

Zach turned his hand and grasped hers, squeezing it once before standing up and gathering all the binders.

"Are you sure that you don't want to come to the meeting?" Zach asked.

Quell shook her head. "I'm not that good with people," she answered.

Zach tilted his head. "You are good with me."

Quell rolled her eyes at him. "I meant more than one person at once. I don't like crowds."

Zach didn't press, he knew about her discomfort with people. She appeared standoffish to others, but in fact she was just a bit of a reserved person. It took Zach weeks of bothering her to help him with the archives for her to open up.

She walked over and gave him a quick kiss. "Good luck, don't forget to come over tonight. We need to celebrate your level up properly," she gave

him a mischievous look and then walked away, her hips and tail swinging from side to side.

Zach watched her go, but if he was being honest, he couldn't wait for their *celebration*.

He walked out of the Archives and headed up into the Warden station to set up for his meeting. Now he needed to convince the others that this case was much bigger than they had even suspected.

Zach was in a briefing room, with Griss and Nyathulla sitting behind a table and him standing in front of a board on the wall. Zach had a small table next to him where he kept his binders and his personal notes, and he looked them over one last time as they waited for the rest to arrive.

Not even a minute later, the doors opened and three people walked in. Relas, the Karura warden, was first. He wore a Karura style garments, a sleeveless tunic that let the feathers of the wings on his hands free, and something resembling cargo pants. Behind him came two people, both dressed in similar garments a white uniform with a blue cloak and a symbol of a city on their breast. One of them was Xallar, the other one Zach didn't know, but she was an elf variant human just like Xallar.

"Zach," Relas greeted him. "I'm sorry for being late, here this is Guard Commander Evela Retax and her subordinate Major Xallar Venti."

Zach nodded in greetings. Evela looked to be a little older than Xallar, but that didn't really mean much in the Infinite Realm. Still, he was pretty sure that she was strong, at least a full Class evolution above Zach, if not more. There was a strange kind of air around her, but Zach didn't have any real skill that could tell him exactly what he was sensing, only his own intuiting.

"Commander," Relas continued. "This is warden Zacharia Gardner."

The Guard Commander met Zach's eyes and Zach was struck by just how intense they were. She was definitely not someone to mess with. Zach put out his hand and the Guard Commander shook it after only a moment of hesitation.

Zach coughed to hide his discomfort and then spoke. “Thank you for coming.”

“Warden Relas informed me that you have some new information concerning his case and that you would like permission to pursue the case aggressively in my city.” Her tone seemed to say that permission for something like that would not be forthcoming, but Zach wasn’t cowed.

“More like old information, but please, take a seat and then we can begin,” Zach said.

Evela and Xallar walked over to their seats, greeting Griss and Nyathulla as they took seats next to them. Relas stayed behind next to Zach. He was the lead on the case and he had been working on it after their encounter with the killer, interviewing past witnesses and people leaving near areas where the bodies were found.

“Well, now that we are all here, we can start,” Zach said, he glanced at Relas, and once the senior warden nodded, he walked over to the table and picked up his binders. Technically, Zach was now the more senior warden, with him higher leveled, but Relas was still the lead on the case.

Zach distributed the binders to everyone, seeing the piercing look that Evela was giving him. It made him shiver, she hadn’t taken her eyes off of him since she entered the room. He tried to push the weirdness away, and focus on his presentation.

“First, as I am sure you all are aware, Relas, Griss, and myself had come face to face with the killer that the public has dubbed the Night Horror,” Zach saw Evela’s eyes narrow but she didn’t interrupt, so he continued. “We’ve managed to identify the killer as a Ravzor, and we believe that we have discovered the real reason for his crimes.”

It was times like these that Zach missed the technology available on Earth before the Framework arrived. He could’ve just showed them all a picture of the stab wound, but thankfully there were things in the Framework that could replicate such things.

Zach glanced at Relas and the man stepped forward, raising a hand and the air in front of it twisted, showing an illusion. A moving picture of his memory, it was one of his perks, and it showed everything as if it was being

looked at from his eyes. The others all saw the dead body on the ground and Zach walked over and pointed at the wound.

“This here, is the true killing blow. The ritual markings had been made in order to hide it. We’ve interrupted the killer before he managed to finish his work and hide the wound completely. Based on prior experience, that has been verified by the Citadel, we now believe that the killer is using a dagger that steals something from its victims.”

Evela frowned at that, her expression darkening. “You are saying that we have a Pilferer on our hands?”

Zach had heard of the term before, it was what people the Wardens called those who utilized powers or items that stole something from their target, whether it was Essence like his dagger, stats, or something else. People like that were always watched, and from what he had learned in the Archives most of them had a tendency to go mad with power and try to gain too much power too quickly. Inevitably, they draw attention of powerful people and then get put down. In most cases, Pilferers were considered a danger, although they weren’t executed immediately upon discovery. Zach was technically a Pilferer, although since he hadn’t used his dagger against unwilling targets, and had limited his use to monsters in the Infinite Realm, he was allowed to go free.

He was still not sure why the Warden Commander allowed him to keep the dagger, but he had an idea. Ryun, the monster that had killed everyone on Earth would most definitely be considered a Pilferer by the Wardens. Zach was certain that he had a way of extracting more Essence from his targets. It had been Zach’s hope to turn the wardens against Ryun once he found that out, but sadly as the Warden Commander told him, the crimes on Earth didn’t matter. Ryun would need to use his power on innocents in the Infinite Realm for the Wardens to consider him a threat.

Zach shook his head and returned to the presentation.

“We believe so, and we also believe that he has been active in the city for more than a decade.”

Zach could see the disbelieving look in the eyes of his audience, the Guard Commander blinked at him as if she had heard him wrong. Relas agreed with Zach, since Zach showed him all his information before, and his

own investigation had come up with some strange things. Like the fact that none of the witnesses or people living in the area where the bodies had been found had seen a Ravzor matching the killer's description around. Which was unlikely, with that many kills there should've been at least one or two sightings of someone matching the description.

Which meant that the killer had some pretty high level stealth abilities and that he had been doing this for such a long time that he knew how to avoid capture.

"If you all would please open your binders, you will find pertinent information inside," Zach said, and then as they started reading he continued, focusing on the switches of death types every three years, then all the other tiny details that he and Quell had uncovered in the Archives. The fact that there seemed to be more than one type of murders being implemented at a time, with one being the focus. The increase in disappearances and bodies missing body parts. To be honest, the total amount of dead that Zach and Quell had even tangentially tied to the Night Horror over the last twelve years hadn't been that large, it was less than a hundred.

By the time Zach finished his presentation he could see that the Guard Commander had a strange look on her face. "This is all conjecture, it fits, but the explanation could be a hundred other things."

Zach resisted the urge to frown, so he turned to his notes. "We believe that it is all connected, but there is also one more piece of evidence that we think ties all these murders together," Zach glanced at Relas and motioned for him to present it, he was the one who had discovered it after all. His interviews of the old witnesses had been a lot more in depth than the ones he had conducted before. And he discovered new information that Zach and Quell had then verified in the archives.

Relas cleared his throat and then started speaking. "So far, we've managed to confirm that most of the victims that we believe were killed by... Night Horror, had one thing in common."

"And what is that?" Evela asked.

"None of them had advanced in the last ten years," Relas said.

The Guard Commander's face cleared and she then looked down at the file in her hand again. "That is... unlikely to be a coincidence," she said, but

Zach could see how it pained her to admit that. The city was filled with people, some didn't advance a lot of course. But finding people who hadn't advanced in ten years? Randomly? It was extremely unlikely, they had to have been targeted.

Zach and Relas waited as the Guard Commander thought in silence. The evidence was too much for her to refuse them to continue their investigation, even if she was unwilling.

Finally she sighed and then nodded. "Very well," Evela said. "You may continue your investigation, the Guard will be informed and will cooperate. I want daily updates, reports sent to my office at the Guard House."

"Of course, Guard Commander," Relas said and bowed his head. Zach followed suit.

"Xallar will be assigned to your team to help with the investigation," She said and then walked out of the room. Xallar stayed for a few minutes, and they agreed to meet the next day for a planning session.

Zach let himself relax, they were moving in the right direction, finally.

Zach walked through the lit streets of Emaros, the moon shining up above him. The meeting had run a bit longer than he had expected, and then Zach, Griss, Nyathulla, and Relas had stayed behind for another hour to clean up the briefing room and store the information that they had used back in the Archive, which was a lot harder when they didn't have Quell there to help them. She had gone home for the night, and Zach just hoped that she was still waiting for him. He walked in the direction of her home, hurrying down the empty streets. His mind was preoccupied with thoughts about the case, which was why when the wind brought a whistling sound to his ears, it took him a moment to recognize it as something moving quickly through the air.

Mistral appeared in his arms and he twisted around swinging, but he was just a moment too slow. He felt a something body-slam into him, sending him flying into a small alleyway and making him lose Mistral in the process.

He rolled on the ground and then came up to his feet, **Last Heir of Terra** surging through him. The cloaked form was taller and more massive than him, and Zach recognized the golden eyes looking at him immediately. He dismissed Mistral and summoned him again, then got ready.

The killer, Night Horror didn't move, instead he pulled his hood back and revealed a feline face, like that of a lion along with the golden mane surrounding it.

"Little warden," the Night Horror said. "You've gotten stronger, I can tell. Not enough yet, not yet, not yet—"

The Night Horror's voice turned almost to singing by the end before it abruptly stopped and his ear twitched as if he was listening to something.

Zach frowned, wondering why the monster wasn't attacking him, but he would take it. He tried to think of a plan, to decide if he wanted to fight or try and find help. The killer was definitely strong, but Zach had gotten stronger as well. All of his abilities were improved, all had gotten more powerful. Perhaps he could take him.

The voices inside his head were singing a singular note, remembering the last fight against the killer, how he moved. Already Zach had a plan of attack, he just needed to jump forward.

The killer tilted his head. "You are not like the rest, little warden. Why is that?"

Zach didn't know what the killer meant. "You should surrender," Zach said. "Come in peacefully and you will live, I cannot promise you your life if you resist."

The feline face split into a wide grin that showed all of his teeth, making Zach shiver at the sight. "It's been a long time since I've had a proper hunt, with worthy adversaries, they are all so weak, weak, weak, weak, but you..."

Zach waited to see if the killer would say anything else, but instead he just watched Zach with his golden eyes. Zach decided to fill in the silence, perhaps bait more information out of him. "Of course you did not find a worthy adversary among your victims, you only go against the weak and the innocents, like a coward."

The Night Horror's claws extended, a dagger appearing in his hand. "Innocents? Perhaps they are, that does not make them worthy... Are you



worthy little warden? I said that you are didn't I? Or was it... Should I let you live? Or should I kill you now? It... it might be easier that way."

The Night Horror's eyes almost glazed over, and Zach was about to attack when the killer shook his head and then his eyes met Zach's with an intensity that made him hesitate. Suddenly the monster seemed to almost increase in size, the darkness around them deepened and Zach felt fear seep inside his mind. He froze, from it, and could only look up at the looming Night Horror. For a moment Zach thought that the killer was going to attack, but then he smiled at Zach. And Zach something in them that was familiar. It was madness, the same that he had seen in Ryun so long ago, before everything started.

"I know that I should devour you little warden, but you've done well. You grow strong, and in your eyes I see it..." Night Horror shook his head, and then showed Zach his teeth. "You will never catch me little warden, but you are welcome to try."

A moment later he jumped and grabbed hold of the roof, disappearing over the edge. As soon as the Night Horror was out of view, the darkness around Zach returned to normal and he felt himself exhale a breath that he hadn't known he was holding. He realized that he had been under the effect of a power, a perk or... *A technique*, Zach said to himself, he could still feel a trace of Qi in the air. Whatever that technique was, it had frozen him, the killer could've killed him.

Zach looked up at the roof, wondering if he should go after the murder, but knowing that he was most certainly already gone without a trace. He decided to go back to the Warden station, the Night Horror had made a mistake, he had revealed that he had been watching him, had shown him more of his power. Every piece of information that Zach saw made his encounter with the killer lean more in his favor. The **Last Heir of Terra** was learning it all, adjusting the avenues of attack. Most importantly, he had revealed that he was still in the city, even with the lack of bodies that suggested that the killer had left, now they knew that he was still here.

Zach rushed back to the station, glad that he hadn't attacked the killer alone. The killer was strong, a team will be required. He needed to get Relas and then convince him to help him interview all the people that Zach had

interacted with in the last few weeks, to canvas the areas where he had walked. The killer had watched him, perhaps he had made a mistake that would be enough to catch him.

It was almost two hours later when Zach finally came to Quell's house. He had debated not going, but he had promised and he didn't want to leave her hanging in case that she was still waiting for him. He motioned to the wardens that had come with him as protection and they took positions around Quell's house. He entered her home with the key that she had given him earlier in the day so that he could enter in case he came a bit later. He found her in the bed, fast asleep.

Zach sighed, and then pulled his clothes off and got in bed next to her, trying not to wake her. He knew that he should be telling her about the killer but he just wanted some peace. The next day would come soon enough, and then the hunt for the Night Horror would begin.