

Interlude - The Terror in the Stormlands

Knight Mage Herim of Fleetwoods walked behind his escorts, a pair of **Royal Guardsmen**, as they led him through the corridors of the Stormgarden Fortress. The vibrant moss on the gray stone walls shone with light, illuminating their path. The way the moss was grown and tended was exquisite, but Herim could not bring himself to admire it in the way that it deserved. His mind was on his task, and his failure. Two more villages had been struck by calamity, their people murdered. They—**he**—had failed in stopping the monster, or whatever it was. It had gotten smarter, there was less evidence than there had been the first time. Only one thing linked the villages now, all the dead were found with their bodies drained of blood.

As they came to stop next to a large stone door covered in elaborate carvings, Herim took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. It would not be courteous of him to show his irritation before the Storm King. He had been called to Stormgarden abruptly, and with little reason given. Though Herim suspected that it was because of his failure. Perhaps the Storm King wished to chastise him in person, or perhaps he simply wanted to hear what excuses Herim had.

He would've gladly submitted to any punishment, he deserved it. Four dozen of the people were dead, and worse than all, a child. The Stormlands were howling for justice, and Herim had been unable to provide it. Yet, he burned with the need to be out there, to finish what he started. The summons only served to delay his hunt.

Still, Herim knew that he had no choice in the matter. His escorts instructed him to wait as one of them entered the room, then came back a minute after, bidding him to follow. Herim entered the throne room behind the **Royal Guardsman**. The first step into the Storm King's throne room, took his breath away. The domed room was built out of gray stone, with six pillars leading up to the tall staircase that contained on the top a white throne, carved out of quartz. A glass dome was above them, showing the raging storm outside, the majesty of the sky. The Stormlands were a reminder that even in the harshest of places, nature still could still thrive. The Storm Kingdom might not have the great forests of the Forest Kingdoms, but it embodied the Way of Nature just the same. With its sprawling fields of lush grass, with mighty rivers and great stone hollows. The storm outside flashed, lightning illuminating the sky. The sight of it from beneath the dome was... it was an awe inspiring room, made to impress, and to oppress in equal measure.

Herim entered through a side door, and as he was led forward he saw people being led out of the room through the main entrance. That left only five people in the room, Herim and his two guards, with the three people on top of the staircase.

Two women stood on either side of the throne, their face-paint as thunderous as the storm raging outside marked them as Lightning Warriors. Oath bound women in service to the Storm King. Herim had never had the honor of meeting one before, they rarely left Stromgarden, but he had heard tales of their might. They said that only those women who knew the loss of a child were allowed into their order. Herim didn't know the truth, but that would explain why their numbers were so few.

Their armor was slim, and at a glance immediately recognizable. It was made out of the white wood of a stormcatcher tree, the only trees that grew in the Stormlands. The towering and solitary pillars that drew the lightning to them. Flash counting was a game that Herim used to play when he was young. Sitting beneath the cover of a storm shelter and gazing out in the distance, counting the lightning as it crashed against the trees near his village.

They each held a klek-ur in their hands, the tall weapon with what resembled three blades at the end which looked like claws of a bird of prey. Their eyes followed him as he was led before the stairs to stare up at the throne.

Herim knelt, one knee on the ground and both hands on top of the other, his head bowed and eyes closed.

“My King,” he addressed the monarch.

“Knight Mage,” the king spoke in a slow but firm voice. “May you always weather the storms.”

Herim raised his head and met the eyes of the monarch. “Only to welcome the one that comes after,” he finished the saying.

“Rise,” the Storm King said, and Herim did as he was told.

Jaun El Annur, the Storm King, was wearing the elaborate robe of his office, black and yellow in color, like a storm cloud in the night. His crown was made out of stone, with seven uneven prongs tipped with different crystals. Each crystal representing one of the provinces in the Stormlands. It was not a comfortable looking thing, which was by design. Life in the Stormlands was not soft, it was as hard as the stone they built their houses with, as hard as the life that weathered the storms.

His hair was fair, his gaze golden, he had the bearing of the ancient rulers that held the Elven race together as they faced the calamity, who kept them alive through their arrival to Kirios. None of it changed what anyone who looked at him could see. The King was young, his eyes gave him away.

Barely three hundred years old, he took the throne upon the untimely death of his father. Herim did not envy the young king, surrounded by kingdoms whose monarchs were thousands of years his senior.

“We are told that your search did not produce results,” the King said.

Herim suppressed the desire to grimace and bowed his head. It was his failure.

“Yes, my King,” he responded.

“Three of our villages,” the King continued. “A child.”

The words were uttered in a calm and measured tone, but Herim heard only condemnation. He raised his head, bearing the responsibility as befit a member of the Knight Order.

“It is my failure, my King,” Herim said.

The King’s golden eyes bore into him, the power of his investment heavy in his gaze. Herim knew that he was not as highly invested as his father was. Perhaps, he wasn’t even as invested as Herim himself was. It didn’t matter, his Mask was that of a King, it was a heavy thing.

“Matters have come to our attention that you are unaware of. We wish to make them known to you.”

“My King?” Herim blinked. That was not what he had expected.

“A new age is upon us all,” the Storm King said. “A new Great Interval is here. The Great Mistake has found another suitable world to bring across the ocean of stars.”

The words struck Herim. Hearing them from anybody else would have him dismiss it as the ramblings of a madman. But

the King held no madness in his gaze. Herim was a Knight Mage, one of the higher ranking members of the Stormpeak Keep Knight Order, and the Stormlands in general. That position was not one entrusted to him lightly. It was his job to seek out and deal with threats to the people of the kingdom, be they from within or without. For the King to share that information with Herim meant many things. First, the King had undeniable proof of his words, second, he believed that the information was relevant to Herim's quest.

And that meant that... the threat he was hunting could be something none of them had ever encountered before. Herim had not been alive during the last Great Interval, he did not know more than what he had read in the scrolls in the Stormpeak Keep libraries. Each event was described as world shaking, but the actual arrival of another world was meant to be something that no one could miss. The records said that the sky would change color and that Source would wash over the world. Herim didn't remember anything like that happening, which meant—

“Exemplars,” he whispered, mostly to himself.

“It is so,” the King said, his voice bringing Herim's attention back to the throne.

“Pardon my question, my King. But any Exemplar that arrived, they would be of low Investment. Even if they had unparalleled talent and managed to advance rapidly,” Herim shook his head. “The dead include two individuals of high

Investment, both in their Fourth. No Exemplar should be capable of that.”

The King’s expression didn’t change as he nodded his head. “We have one of the Exemplars here. Through a lapse in judgment, the Exemplar has overheard of the events you are investigating. He believes that he might be of service. This new world might prove a great threat to the tenuous peace we now enjoy,” the King suddenly sagged, almost as if holding some incredible weight on his back. He raised a hand and covered his eyes, rubbing at them gently for a moment.

Then, he raised his head again, and locked his eyes with Herim’s. “You will be allowed to speak with the Exemplar. You will not speak of this to anyone, you will not repeat what you learn from him nor will you even suggest to anyone the existence of the Exemplars or the coming of the Interval. The Crown has plans and we do not need any disruptions.”

“Of course, my King, you have my word,” Herim bowed his head.

The King looked at him for a long moment, and then he stood. “Leave us,” he said to his guard.

Herim saw their confusion, but they obeyed instantly. Soon, everyone left the room, leaving Herim alone with the King. It was highly irregular, but it also warmed Herim’s heart to know that his King held such trust in him to allow him in his presence alone.

The King walked down the steps from his throne, to stand before Herim.

“There is one more thing,” the King said slowly. This close, Herim could see the tiredness in the King’s eyes. “This will not leave your mouth, ever, you will take this to your grave. I speak only to inform you of certain signs you should watch for.”

Herim was confused, but he nodded his head and waited.

“We have been made aware of something peculiar happening. Two weeks ago, just before the arrival of Exemplars, a prophecy was spoken.”

Herim blinked. “A prophecy? But, there are no—” he paused at the look in the King’s eyes.

“The crown must look for advantages everywhere, even storms that are not easily navigated,” the King said. “We’ve been trying to learn more about Seer Masks. One of these, attempts, bore some fruit. The Seer is mad, as all of them are. But for the first time in years, his ravings changed. Two weeks ago, he spoke something new. It is as follows:

Howl in agony, blood bathed comes, the Deceiver will take all that we’ve built. Howl in suffering, blood will rain, the Conqueror walks the land. Howl in despair, the Seeker soars and all quake beneath the shadow of dark wings.”

It was nonsense, as all prophecies were.

“My King...”

He raised his hand. “It will make more sense once you hear what the Exemplar has to say. We do not know if this is related, but we must be vigilant. Something is changed.”

“I understand,” Herim said, bowing his head.

“Good,” the King said, then waved his hand. “My Guardsmen outside will lead you to your meeting, you have until the end of the day.”

Herim knelt again. “I will not fail you, my King.”

“May you weather the storm,” the King said, then after a moment, “may we all.”

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“You will enter, the conversation will end once you leave the room,” the Guardsman explained. “You will keep yourself from making inquiring questions into the Exemplar’s world, only matters concerning your task may be explored. Be thorough, you will not be allowed to speak with him again.”

Herim nodded his head. “I understand.”

He looked at the simple wooden door in front of him, collecting his wits. This was not what he had imagined when he was summoned before the Storm King. He marshaled his thoughts and took a deep breath. The Guardsman opened the door and led him in.

The inside was a small room, occupied by a single person sitting at a table. Two goblets and two pitchers were placed on a tray next to them. Herim paused as he beheld the Exemplar, noting immediately both the similarities and the differences to his own people. The Guardsman had mentioned that the Exemplar was a man, and that his people were called human, but little else beyond that. At a first glance one might confuse the Exemplar with an elf, but it was an impression easily dispelled.

The Exemplar's skin was rougher, more weathered it looked like, with a lighter tawny skin tone the color of the fallen leaves often found on the trees in the far North where the desert heat dried them so. It was so unlike any elven skin tone that Herim was struck for a moment—his people's skin tended to be in the ranges of pale green for the people of the Forests, and shades of gray for those like him who lived in the Stormlands. The ears, likewise, were different, smaller and without the narrowed points extending upward. His face was covered in hair as well, in a manner that resembled what one might expect of a dwarf—a beard. An elf had no hair on their face aside from eyebrows. He was taller than a dwarf, not quite as tall as Herim himself at a glance, though it was hard to tell with him sitting.

The clothes he wore were all black, and robe-like, though made of what looked like quality materials of expensive make. He saw no traces of stitching done, and the threads were exquisite and fine. His arms were on the table, elbows resting on it with his hands closed in a fist. A golden chain with black beads was wrapped around his fingers and a strange symbol hung from the end, resting on top of the knuckles of one hand. The symbol was gold in color as well, though it looked painted. It was two lines, one horizontal one vertical that crossed, with some elaborate carvings on the ends of the lines.

The man's eyes were closed and his head bowed over his hands, seemingly unaware of their intrusion. The door closed behind Herim, and the man raised his head and opened his eyes to reveal strikingly blue gems staring back.

“Ah, pardon, I was praying,” the man said in a rough and deep voice. So much so that Herim almost heard it in his chest. It reverberated strangely. *Curious*, Herim thought to himself. Elven voices were higher pitched, and more musical in nature. This sounded more like grinding of stone.

The Guardsman approached and spoke to the human as he stood up. “This is the man I told you about, he will hear what you have to say.”

Herim stepped forward and introduced himself. “I am Knight Mage Herim of Roughrock, in service to the Stormpeak Keep of the Storm Kingdom's Knightly Order.”

The human, inclined his head. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Knight Mage. My name is Khalil Abd al-Nur, Knight Priest of the Order of the Dragon, based in Constantinople, at your service.”

Herim tilted his head. Many of the words the man said had meaning, but they were not spoken in a way that he understood their gathered intention. Still, a few did stroke his curiosity.

“A fellow Knight? Your world has them as well?” Herim asked, intrigued.

The man’s lips curved into a smile. “The meaning of the world is similar enough that the Great Mistake translates it in that way, or so I am told at least. I have not been allowed to learn much about what it means to be a Knight among your people.”

Herim opened his mouth to speak, but the Guardsman cleared his throat from behind the human. His glare was enough to tell Herim that he should follow closely the instructions given to him.

“Right,” Herim said, then gestured for the man, Khalil, to sit. Herim walked over to the table and took a seat opposite the man. “How much do you know about why I am here.”

Herim wondered how the man could help, he still didn’t believe that an Exemplar could be responsible, especially not now when he had met a human. He didn’t have a [Inspect] skill, but highly Invested people had... an aura about them that he

could recognize. He felt nothing like that from the man. Nor did he think that the human was particularly strong without a Mask. Still, he had been summoned here by the Storm King, there had to be more that he did not know.

The human took a deep breath and placed the chain in his hands over his head so that the strange symbol rested on his chest, then he spoke. "I've overheard a few of my... minders, talking about massacres in your lands. I am filled with sorrow to hear that, no people deserve such deaths, especially a child, I pray that God will shelter their souls," he inclined his head, in what Herim assumed was respect, then made a strange gesture with one of his hands, touching his forehead, his stomach, then each breast before touching the symbol on his beaded chain.

Herim nodded in return. It was a good sign for the human people that he felt that way. Herim knew that a YoKai-ni or a Naga-shan would not have cared. The mention of a God was interesting, but the warning look from the Guardsman behind the human warned Herim not to deviate from his task again.

"Thank you for your words," Herim said. "Yes, it is a tragedy, a threat that is my responsibility to find and punish."

The human met his eyes. "Tragedy, yes. I do not know much of what had happened. The only thing that caught my attention was hearing that all the victims were drained of blood, is that correct?"

“It is,” Herim answered. “The first village had more carnage, people torn apart. But the attacks that followed were far cleaner in a way. With little signs of fighting, only people found dead with wounds on their necks and missing blood. There is no beast in these lands or any that I am familiar with that attacks in such a way.”

The human closed his eyes and grimaced, almost as if in pain. “My understanding of Masks and the power that they grant is not complete, I am learning, but I am told that races on this world have different natural gifts, yes?”

“That is so,” Herim tilted his head.

“My world has more than just people like me,” the human pointed at his chest.

“Several races?” Herim asked, intrigued. “Like the YoKai-ni?”

“From what I understand, no, not like them,” Khalil responded. “I guess variants, or sub-races, is the right term. Cursed as well, perhaps. The most numerous are those like me, human, but there are two more variants that we call shifters and vampires.”

Herim frowned. The word *shifters* he understood, though he did not know its meaning within the context of the human knowledge. The second word was unfamiliar to him. He waited a bit to see if the Grand Spell would show him impressions to better understand. When nothing happened, it became

apparent that it was just a name and not a word that conveyed meaning or idea. “And you think that one of them might be responsible?”

Khalil nodded his head, in agreement. “The vampires of my world feed on blood, they need it to survive.”

Herim leaned forward across the table. “How strong is a *vampire*,” he said slowly, testing the unfamiliar word on his tongue.

“That is a more difficult question than you realize,” Khalil said, then he stood slowly and reached over the table for the pitchers. He gestured, asking Herim which one he would like. From the look of it, one of it was filled with blue liquid, probably *lipis*—a spirit, the other was clear, filled with water. Herim pointed at the one filled with *lipis* and the man poured him a glass, then put the pitcher down and poured water for himself. His movements were slow, and Herim could see the slight shiver in his hands. The man was scared. From the way he moved, Herim could also tell that the human wasn’t particularly strong, no stronger than a Maskless elf at least, and far less coordinated judging by the spilled water. Perhaps as strong as a *Kitsu-oi*.

“Vampires are a delicate issue on my world. They are very secretive, but very powerful. My order’s guiding principles are to stand in the light and curtail the vampires more savage instincts. All vampires are stronger than humans, a lot stronger. Enough to do the things you describe, to rip people apart, yes. Though the degree of their strength varies.”

Herim subdued his instinct to interrogate, the Exemplar was clearly a *guest* of the crown, but he saw no signs of mistreatment. He did not know the plans of the King, and did not wish to overstep. He could also see that the human was willing to share, perhaps even felt compelled to.

Khalil took a sip of water, then licked his lips before meeting Herim's eyes again. "I've had the opportunity to see a demonstration of one of your high Investment people. A Knight in his Third Investment," the human said. "The feats of strength that he demonstrated for me were beyond what most vampires would be capable of."

Herim grimaced, that did not bode well. The gulf between a Third Investment Mask and a Fourth was wide. It was the breaking point in power.

"There were two people that were in their Fourth Investment among the victims," Herim explained. "They had been a lot stronger than a Third Investment Knight."

"I don't know if a vampire could defeat someone like that," the human said. "Perhaps with the help of their own Mask."

Herim doubted that any of the Exemplars would've been able to advance their Masks even to the First Investment, not at the time of the first attack. From what he had been told the Exemplars arrived barely a day before the massacre. "What can you tell me about them?" Herim asked. "Their strengths and weaknesses, how do I find them?"

“There are several different types of vampires,” the human reached for his water again, and Herim waited patiently for him to finish. Struggling not to rush the human and aware of the watcher in the corner who was able to end this meeting at any point. “They are several times stronger than a human like me, their senses are better in every way, and their wounds regenerate faster. They are immune to disease and most poison. They don’t age. A vampire is not born, but made from humans by another vampire, turned. At the time of their turning, they become Fledgling Vampires. At this time, they are not in control of their emotions and need blood constantly. From what you had said, I would’ve expected it to be an out of control Fledgling. But I do not think that Fledgling would’ve been able to kill a Masked with as much power as your people seem to wield. They are erratic, not in full control of themselves. Prone to violent outbursts.”

“The first village was—” Herim trailed off as he remembered the carnage. “No, even though it was violent, it was not mindless, not even there.”

The human nodded. “An Adult Vampire is more in control of themselves, they are all usually more than a century old, more accustomed to their power. Though some could get arrogant, entitled. Still, even with their experience, I don’t think that they would be able to kill an entire village of people, especially if there was someone that strong among them.”

Khalil glanced at his cup, saw that it was empty. “The attack, it happened at night?”

Herim tilted his head. “As far as I am aware, all of them seem to have.”

Khalil nodded. “Vampire’s can’t stand in direct sunlight, it is death for them,” he said. “Or at least they can’t on Earth. With Masks and this new world, I don’t know if that changes things.”

Herim blinked, that was actually very important. It helped a lot, it changed his entire tracking process. He had kept the range wide, but if his target couldn’t move during the day, that narrowed the circle significantly.

“I,” Khalil started. “It would have to be an Elder Vampire. They get stronger with age. And Elders are their oldest, thousands of years old. I don’t know why one of them would do this though. They are very careful with their actions, preferring to act out of shadows, behind the scenes. And no Elder Vampire would lose their control and go on a killing spree. They police their own, an insane Elder Vampire would’ve been killed a long time ago.”

Herim reached over and poured more water for the man. “You think that one of these Elders would be able to match someone as strong as the Knight you met?”

Khalil grimaced. “Maybe? I don’t know. I’ve never faced an Elder Vampire myself, I only know the stories. We have records of some being killed, but it is usually in fights against other Elders. Once, it took an army to take one down, and still they couldn’t kill him until they ambushed him during the day.”

Herim had already gotten more than he had expected out of this. He had a new direction for his investigation. “Tell me, how long or far can these vampires fly?”

Khalil’s head swung up from the cup to lock onto Herim’s eyes. “What?”

“Fly? The victims, most were dropped from high altitude. We believe after they were picked off and their blood drained.”

The human’s hand moved to his chest where it grasped the symbol on the chain tightly. “That’s impossible,” he shook his head. “This can’t be a vampire then.”

Herim frowned. “You said that they drink blood, and that they can only act in the night. That fits with all the events.”

He shook his head again, and stood up. “No, you don’t understand. A vampire looks exactly like a human, like me. They don’t have wings.”

Herim stood as well then made a step toward the man. “What is it?”

“It’s not possible. Only thirty Exemplars were sent here from my world, thirty! There is less than a handful of them, the chances that even an Elder Vampire was chosen are astronomical!”

“So there are vampires that can fly?” Herim asked.

“I don’t know, they are so rare that I’ve only heard stories. Some do mention that they can change into different forms, appear as demons with great wings.”

“Would a vampire like that be strong enough to kill a Masked Knight?”

Khalil didn’t answer immediately. He took a deep breath, then walked back to take a seat. “Listen to me, you need to find him and put him down immediately. You need to gather an army, the strongest people you have.”

Herim’s eyes narrowed. “You are afraid.”

“Yes,” the human said. “If what you said is true, then you are dealing with an Ancient Vampire. The oldest of their kind, so old that no one knows their origin. Some think that they are a myth, the progenitors of their race. The few records we have of them speak of calamities when they appear, great floods, volcanoes erupting, empires falling. They are so powerful that the stories say they can’t stay awake for long. That they sleep in a kind of stasis. And that when they wake they are often so hungry that they lose themselves. There have been no stories of one in thousands of years, most people think that they are nothing but a fairytale. But if those stories are true, then the Ancient Vampires are the most powerful beings on my world. And I don’t think that your Masked can match their power, not from what I have seen. If one of them was brought here while asleep?”

That did not sound good. The human bowed his head. “May God preserve us and shelter us, if they got a Mask of their own,” he whispered, then met Herim’s eyes. “If the Great Mistake pulled a sleeping Ancient Vampire, then they would wake up hungry. Hungry and in a strange place, a new world. They would be confused and feel threatened. They would not be in their right mind. God, they wouldn’t have the frame of reference for so many things. Coming here was strange for me, but the current culture of Earth at least is filled with things that give me the ability to understand. We had postulated about the existence of other races, other worlds. We have stories about magic and...” He shook his head. “An Ancient Vampire who had been asleep for thousands of years would have none of it. If they woke up without any sense of self but the hunger? Then it is an Ancient vampire controlled just by their **thirst**. Pure instinct and predator, with no human emotion to temper it, no compassion, no guilt, nothing.”

“How do I stop them?” Herim asked.

“Gather as many powerful people as you can,” Khalil said. “And silver, all the silver you can get.”

Herim narrowed his eyes. He didn’t know if he trusted the words that the human spoke. He couldn’t quite imagine any Exemplar could be that powerful. The response he was asking was equal to what would be required for the strongest Masked in the world. The world shakers who might as well be gods. But, he looked into the human’s eyes and saw true fear. And that, that he believed.