

## Chapter 1

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“We stick our nose into your business?” asked Rosa in a dangerous tone.

Cherry nodded with a small, self-indulgent smile. “Yup” she said “We need a slogan. All the TV detectives have slogans”

Her smile slipped as Rosa failed to reflect her enthusiasm. She suspected her sister might be concerned about the cost and while Cherry had been surprised at just how expensive the door had proved, it was sorely needed. She doubted anyone could tell that they were private investigators just from looking at the shop.

“I don’t think anyone knows we’re detectives” she said after a moment “This will help us get some business, I’m sure of it”

Rosa didn’t respond right away. The office had been open for a little over a week and despite planning for a rough first six months, a series of unexpected expenses had left them with barely enough cash to last two.

“Putting our names on the door is a good idea” said Rosa folding her arms “The problem is, we can’t afford it and the slogan is terrible”

Cherry looked back to the door with a small frown. She had put a lot of thought into the design and had been rather pleased with herself when she had come up with the idea.

Rosa and Cherry Hazelwood, Supernatural Investigators  
We stick our nose into your business

Cherry moved gently from foot to foot. Perhaps Rosa didn’t get it. The slogan was a joke, poking fun at the fact the sisters were shifters, supernatural beings more often referred to as werewolves or lycanthropes. Not all shifters were wolves however and both sisters were foxes.

Cherry knew Rosa was smart but she might still have missed the joke. She had been under a lot of pressure recently and had taken the financial situation personally, blaming herself for each missed expense. She had put a lot of faith into this plan after confirming the detective licence required no actual qualifications, something both Rosa and Cherry lacked. Rosa hadn’t attended school at all, having left their home in Den Sealga at the age of seventeen. Cherry had been several years younger and had attended a comprehensive for two years, but going straight into school at that age had meant catch-up classes that had hardly prepared her for anything.

“It’s because we are shifters” she said, pressing a finger to her nose “I thought it was clever”

Rosa sighed and shook her head “I get the joke, it just reads weird. People usually want you to put your nose in someone else’s business. I’m also not convinced drawing attention to the fact we are shifters is a good idea.”

Cherry frowned. People had a lot of misconceptions about shifters, including the idea that their condition was infectious. This had led to more than one uncomfortable conversation with both those frightened by the concept and others who were intrigued. In fairness, the existence of magic and the supernatural had been a closely guarded secret, only becoming public knowledge roughly ten years ago. Even then, Rosa and Cherry were unusual amongst shifters in choosing to embrace human society and so misconceptions were to be expected.

“If that’s what you’re worried about why aren’t you hiding your ears? I mean, people would work it out pretty quickly. Anyway! I thought that was half the point. We could use our gifts to compensate for our lack of training”

Rosa scratched her ears almost subconsciously. All shifters had a tell and it tended to be different depending on their species. Both Rosa and Cherry had elongated, almost elven shaped ears, dusted with a coating of red and black fur. They could hide them beneath their crimson hair if they wished but the same could not be said for their elongated cat-like pupils. They could choose to appear completely human with an active and ongoing effort, but it was like clenching a fist. Easy, but annoying to do for long periods.

Rosa paused before releasing a small sigh “You’re right. I need to stop worrying about every little thing. I’m just starting to think we made a mistake. We can’t keep relying on Dad, he doesn’t have much of an income either, not to mention we don’t actually know when he will be back”

Cherry nodded, her enthusiasm fading slightly “Things will work out, you’ll see, and if you don’t like the slogan that’s okay. You don’t have to use the business cards”

“You got business cards too?” she said, her ears visibly twitching beneath her hair “You know what? Doesn’t matter. I think I need a drink”

Cherry ran her fingers lightly through her hair as she followed Rosa through to the office. Her nose picked up the scent of spiced rum as Rosa poured a small glass from the crystal decanter that sat atop a dark oak bookshelf. It wasn’t actually crystal of course but Cherry had insisted that their detective’s office have a decanter and so Rosa had sourced a cheap glass imitation from the internet. Rosa had complained it was a waste of money but she made use of it quite a bit. Cherry was sure she would soon realise her wisdom regarding the door too.

Cherry let herself sink into the office couch taking care not to catch her long hair awkwardly. Rosa had been pressuring her to cut it for a while but she liked it long. “Don’t worry” she said kicking her shoes on to the floor. “Wait and see. The door will do the trick”

Rosa took a heavy gulp of rum as an air of melancholy displaced her irritation. “Even if the slogan was fine, we set up the website months ago. There has been no sign of work and we run out of money in two months at best. I really wanted to find something we could do, find some kind of future for us, and instead, I’ve just burned all our money”

Cherry’s eyes widened and she pushed forward “Don’t say that. We just need someone to give us a chance. I know we will be good at this.”

Rosa nodded glumly "I know we can do it, that's not the problem. We just don't have time. It was always going to be difficult until we could get a couple cases under our belts, but it's not going to happen in two months"

Cherry scratched her head, her ears going very still "Well, Uhm. Probably more like one month. The door was kind of expensive"

Rosa gave her a flat look "Great, one month" she leant back and took another drink, staring at the ceiling "I suppose it doesn't really matter"

"Ah don't be like that Rosa. I'm telling you the door's going to turn things around"

Cherry gave her a small frown. She knew Rosa felt responsible for her. She had ever since their mother died but the office was a good idea and Cherry had fully supported it. All she needed to do was give it time.

She looked towards the hall as her sensitive ears picked up the almost imperceptible creaking of the front door. Her eyes widened as a tall, gangly man, barely out of his youth appeared grinning at the office entrance. Golden eyes danced with excitement below a tussled mop of brown hair, which along with teeth too sharp to be human, meant even had Cherry not known him, she would have recognised he was a werewolf. He dropped down into a leather armchair that sat across from the couch, rustling a large, long suffering cheese plant as he sank into the seat. "Well" he said "Aren't you going to say hello?"

Cherry's ears had limited movement but they still pushed tall betraying her own excitement. "Ben!? Is that really you? What are you doing in London?" It was a fair question. Shifters rarely spent time in cities without specific reason and Ben was a long way from Den Sealga. He was a few years younger than Cherry but they had been friends before she left the Den. She thought about when she saw him last. It was during a rare visit back to Den Sealga, maybe five years ago. A trip they had not repeated due to the frigid reception the highland village had afforded them.

"Surprised?" he said with a cheeky smile "There are a bunch of us here with Isaac. The Den's are having another go at rebuilding the Seekers, sending out new apprentices with some of the old timers. Super-secret business, can't talk about it much"

"Isaac?" said Rosa, face scrunched up in thought "Isaac Windtalker?"

Ben nodded "Yeah, that's him. We came down on the train, he was already in London. It was actually kind of scary. I'd never been on a train before and now I've been on three!"

Rosa placed down her glass and smiled "You're training to be a Seeker and are scared of trains?"

"Ah well" he said looking slightly flustered "I mean, I'm not scared now. Keep in mind until last week the biggest place I visited was Ullapool. It felt like every place I visited was larger than the last. Now I've been to Inverness, Glasgow and London! I'm a travelled man now"

Rosa gave a small laugh and lifted her glass taking another drink "That you are Ben." She paused slightly, her expression growing more serious. "They really think they can reform the Seekers?"

Cherry had fond memories of the Seekers and at one point it seemed likely that she and Rosa would both join. When things went bump in the night the Seekers were there to bump it right back. Both her parents had been Seekers and although Rosa had never actually joined, her father had started preparing her for her apprenticeship. Cherry had taken part in some of those lessons too but she had been far too young to do much more than help Rosa practice.

Ben nodded enthusiastically "I think so. It won't be the same as when we were kids but I always wanted to be a Seeker. If you told me this would be happening last year, I wouldn't have believed you"

Rosa gave a small nod "Everyone wanted to be a Seeker. The whole Den revolved around them"

Ben hesitated before nodding "You're not wrong. It's been pretty grim since they collapsed. This isn't the first attempt to get them going again but it's the most serious in a while."

Rosa seemed like she was about to say something but instead took a sip from her glass. The Seekers had been almost entirely wiped out ten years ago while fighting a demonic invasion that had poured through a rift into London. The threat had been of an unprecedented scale and had exposed the supernatural's existence to the world, but it had been recognised that without the sacrifices made, London would have been overrun. As a result, humanity had cautiously welcomed their new neighbours.

"So" began Rosa after a pause, her smile returning as if it had never left "Why London? Not enough monsters in Glasgow or Dundee? There must be something going on, spill the beans"

Ben's grin widened slightly "I can't say too much but we are tagging along with Isaac. A few of the older Seekers have still been active and it was decided that each of them should take on a few apprentices."

"So Isaac's doing something important and you are along for the ride?" asked Cherry "Are you just training with him? Or do you know what he's actually doing?"

"I mean I know" he said "But I can't tell you. I'm not even supposed to be here. Your names are still kind of mud back in the Den" he blinked and raised his hands "Not to me of course"

"We didn't choose to leave" responded Rosa with a note of irritation "We travelled with our father"

"I know" said Ben "I'm sure people will get over it but you must know the Den's change slowly. I think it's because we live so long. There is talk of getting a telephone mast installed and getting the remaining homes connected to the electricity grid." He paused and scratched his head "More people are leaving. I think they are starting to realise they need to change if they want the Den to survive. They're slowly dying Rosa. I understand why some people resent those that leave, even if I don't agree"

"It's going to take a lot more than a telephone mast" said Rosa flatly

“It will” he said quietly “But I think we have something worth protecting. When we were young it didn’t matter that we didn’t have that stuff. Even now, I don’t think it would matter if the Seekers were still around. Some years the victory feasts occurred almost every other week. It was like a nonstop celebration of our triumph over the dark. If I’m honest, I’d give anything to have that back”

Cherry gave a small smile “I can’t say I don’t miss those feasts, but returning to the Den was like stepping back in time. I don’t see why the Seekers can’t exist in a modern world”

Ben nodded “I don’t either, and a lot of the other young apprentices feel the same way. If this all goes well, I am hoping we can all change the Dens for the better”

“I hope so” said Cherry “It’s so rare to see shifters around. It would be nice if we could see others more often”

Ben paused before speaking carefully “It’s complicated. I know that the SPF deal with small incidents and the Sentinels show up when things go really wrong but Isaac says human acceptance of the supernatural has unbalanced things. Creatures that would be forced to skulk in the darkness stand in the open and the police do little more than contain them. In a lot of ways, the supernatural being made public has made things more dangerous. It’s harder to deal with the things that lurk in the shadows when they stand brazenly in the sunlight”

Rosa shrugged “On the other hand, keeping everything secret so people don’t even know the dangers, and don’t know who to go to for help, isn’t good either. No one is considered crazy when they see a ghost or claim they were bitten by a vampire anymore. Seems like it’s better this way”

“Well” said Ben looking thoughtful “I can see your point, but then you would say that. Look at this fancy office! You’ve pretty much embraced this new world”

Rosa rolled her eyes “Should we have not?”

“No” he said smiling “I think it’s really cool and not all that surprising. I mean, supernatural investigators are not so far away from Seekers. Seems like we have chosen similar vocations”

Rosa’s eyes lowered almost imperceptibly “Yeah, I guess that’s true. How long are you around? We should grab a drink or something before you go”

Ben shrugged “I don’t know I’m afraid. I don’t know how long our mission will take but I think it will be a while” he tugged slightly at his coat before standing “Anyway, I’d best be off. As I said, no one knows I’m here”

He walked confidently towards the door and the sisters sprung up to see him out “It was good seeing you” said Cherry giving the wolf a light hug “Where are you staying?”

“I can’t say that either” he said “I’m not supposed to reveal any elements of our mission”

Rosa shook her head slightly “Like telling us what Travelways you’re staying in is an element of your mission”

Ben gave a low chuckle "I know, I know, but Isaac takes this stuff pretty seriously. It's not like you could visit me anyway. I'm pretty sure he would flip if you showed up. I can't promise anything, but I will try and drop in before I leave"

Rosa nodded looking a little troubled "You better. It was good to see you Ben" her brow furrowed slightly "and don't let Isaac make you do anything reckless. Seekers have a tendency to get themselves killed"

Ben opened the door and smiled "Well, It wouldn't be exciting without a little danger" He raised a hand waving farewell and strode out onto the street.

Cherry looked to Rosa as they watched him go "See! I told you the door would get people in"

Rosa gave Cherry a flat look before walking calmly back to her desk and refilling her glass "The door had nothing to do with his visit, not to mention he wasn't a client. We still don't have any work"

Cherry tilted her head slightly "And yet he visited just after it was installed. You have to have faith Rosa"

Rosa's eyes narrowed but before she could reply, the phone rang.

"Hello" said Cherry picking up the handset "This is Hazelwood Investigators. We stick our nose into your business"

"Don't say that on the phone!" hissed Rosa

"Afternoon" came a delicate voice, distorted slightly as if calling from a mobile with poor reception "I understand you are supernatural investigators? Lycanthropes I believe?"

"Ah" Cherry said glancing at Rosa "Not Lycanthropes, Vulpinthropes. That is werefoxes rather than werewolves, but I assure you, we are just as capable"

"I see, sorry" replied the voice with a nervous tone "I don't have much experience with such things."

"Are you okay?" asked Cherry with a hint of concern "Perhaps you should tell me how we can help"

"Yes, perhaps I should. I tried reporting this to the police but they haven't done anything" Cherry could hear her trying to compose herself. She didn't sound scared exactly but there was a clear note of distress. "I tried a few local investigators but none were available for at least a week"

Cherry nodded as Rosa's ears strained, clearly trying to pick up both sides of the conversation "Well, fortunately, we are available immediately! So I am sure we can help"

"Hopefully" replied the voice seeming to calm slightly "My name is Elyse Wood. I own and administer Wood's Sanctuary for Wayward Beasts"

"Uhh...Wayward beasts?" asked Cherry, suddenly wondering if this might be some kind of prank. She had been called a beast more than once by unimaginative hecklers.

“Yes” she said simply “The name has a certain amount of pomp I know, but it was named by my Grandfather. We look after animals, exotic pets mostly that have been abandoned by their owners or rescued by the authorities. We rehabilitate them so they can be rehoused or released”

“Oh” said Cherry, her mouth quirking into a smile “That sounds lovely! I’ve never heard of you, where are you based?”

“Woolwich” she replied “I am not surprised you haven’t heard of us. We are quite small and although we do admit members of the public to raise funds, we do not get as many visitors as we would like”

Cherry hummed and nodded “So how can we help?”

“Ah...well” her voice trembled as if embarrassed “Our residents...Something is wrong. Many are sluggish and tired. I don’t think they have been sleeping well. During the day they won’t come out and greet visitors. It’s gotten so bad, we have had to close the doors to try and let them rest.” she paused and sighed “I am sure this all sounds foolish and not worth your time. I am sorry for bother—”

“What?” said Cherry “You aren’t bothering me! If something is scaring the animals that’s important! They’re in enclosures right? If someone is giving them trouble, they can’t escape”

“I didn’t say they were scared” replied Elyse “Though they certainly seem skittish. We thought it was perhaps an illness but we had a blood test done and it didn’t show any significant problems. You hear so many stories about strange things happening ever since the invasion. I’m not saying it’s something strange like that but...I need help. We can’t keep the Sanctuary going if things stay like this”

“Well we would be happy to come down and take a look for you. When would be suitable for us to visit?”

“Any time really. The Sanctuary is closed for guests right now but if you ring the front door I will let you in”

“Excellent, well then if you just give me—”

“Prices” hissed Rosa

Cherry glanced at Rosa and nodded “Just to check, we charge...” she glanced at Rosa

“Fifty”

“Fifty pounds per hour plus any significant expenses. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine” said Elyse “The address is one hundred and twelve, Songbird Avenue.”

Cherry nodded, squashing the phone between her shoulder and ear as she noted the address down “Excellent! We will be with you as soon as we can”

Cherry replaced the handset and turned to Rosa with a grin “I told you the door would get us a job”

Rosa chose not to respond, instead downing the last of her drink and grabbing her coat “Did she really say the place is called Wood’s Sanctuary for Wayward Beasts?”

Cherry nodded grabbing her own coat and heading for the door “She said her Grandfather named it, I guess it does sort of sound old fashioned”

Rosa considered this for a second before nodding “I guess it does.” She pulled her heavy coat tight “Do you think we should take Serra?”

Serra was Cherry’s cat or Cherry was Serra’s fox. Sometimes it was hard to tell “Maybe” she replied “Let me see what she’s doing”

Cherry and Serra were bonded. The Hazelwood’s had a long standing arrangement with House Swiftstep that should any of their children exhibit the sight they would send someone to act as their teacher in the arts. Cherry had no idea when the arrangement had been made but by the time she was born, it wasn’t taken all that seriously any more. House Swiftstep still sent someone, but it had become more of an excuse to leave the Endless Wilds and Cherry’s cat Serra knew little magic beyond a few small cantrips. Still, the bonding offered certain advantages and with just a little concentration, Cherry could make use of Serra’s senses as if they were her own.

Cherry was about to close her eyes to check Serra’s location when she noticed a series of barely perceptible red swirls outlining a man across the street. He was tall and relatively trim, wearing a long red dress shirt that hung over a pair of dark jeans. He scratched lightly at his bald head as he spoke to a workman standing on a ladder.

“Hey” she said “There is something up with that guy” she tugged at Rosa’s coat while pointing “He has an aura”

“Don’t point” hissed Rosa suddenly serious. She was clearly examining the figure without looking at him directly. Cherry frowned. Her sister always overreacted to stuff like this. Cherry had been born with the sight, an ability that allowed her to see magic and should she ever take the time to learn, manipulate it. An aura surrounding someone could mean several things. It could mean some act of sorcery had been worked upon them. It could mean that they were invoking some kind of spell, though the swirls were rather unstructured so it probably wasn’t that. It could also simply mean that the person’s personal essence was significant enough that it was leaking. The fact that most powerful sorcerers were identifiable by their aura had come in useful several times in the past. Finally, some supernatural beings had an aura simply due to their innate magical nature. This wasn’t true of shifters but it was for fae and a few other things.

“He’s a mage” said Rosa all of a sudden “I can’t believe this. I’m going to give that jerk a piece of my mind”

“Wait, What? How do you know?” asked Cherry, but Rosa had already started stalking across the street. Cherry looked up and noticed the sign that a pair of men on ladders were fitting.

Miles Wright. PhD Sorc.  
Mystical Detective Agency

Cherry sighed and followed, quickly weaving through the traffic that often clogged Highgarden Road “You!” Came Rosa’s irritated voice “Is this you?” she said pointing at the sign “Are you Miles?”

The mage turned with a look of confusion at Rosa’s irritated tone, though, it changed to one of surprise as his eyes fell on her pointed ears “I am indeed. Are you in need of my services?”

“Your Services?” she asked placing her hands on her hips, ears twitching with irritation “No I don’t need your services.” She gestured at his shop “what do you think you’re doing?”

“What am I doing?” he said with confusion “I’m opening a detective agency. What does it look like I am doing?”

“I can see that” she said, her tone tightening “What I want to know is why you’re opening it opposite ours!”

“Yours?” he asked with surprise “What are you talk— oh. Was that door there yesterday?”

Rosa’s hand were clenched but her voice was surprisingly controlled “No” she said “It was not there yesterday”

“I just had it fitted this morning” offered Cherry with a small wave stepping out from behind.

“Well how was I supposed to know?” He asked “I checked in the yellow pages, I didn’t see you there either”

“We only opened a week ago.” She sighed, a hint of defeat entering her voice “We should be in the next one. If we are still here”

“Well I don’t see how this is my problem” he replied “How was I supposed to know you were there, besides, whose ever heard of shifter detectives?” he shook his head with a smile “Maybe you should rebrand as regular investigators. When someone wants the supernatural investigated, they look for a mage”

“Cherry has the sight” blurted Rosa “And who says you need to be a mage. Shifters have all sorts of useful advantages when it comes to investigating”

“She does, does she?” asked Miles glancing over at her with a grin “Well if you’re looking for someone to train her, I am sure we could come to an agreement”

“Are you serious? I’m not done complaining about this, don’t change the subject” growled Rosa

Miles smile was infuriating or at least it was to Rosa. Cherry mostly felt confused and she shifted her weight from foot to foot "Maybe we should go Rosa, we do have a case to investigate"

"There" said Miles "What are you complaining about? You've got a case and everything. I am sure it's very important; a mysterious murder or perhaps a missing dignitary or even a dangerous portal to another world found deep underground"

"Something is upsetting the animals at Wood's Sanctuary for Wayward Beasts" said Cherry simply

Miles grin grew larger "Oh my, that sounds both important and challenging, but I think if you believe in yourselves, I am sure you will be up to the task"

Cherry smiled brightly "Ah, Thank you! I tell Rosa all the time that we just need to believe in ourselves!"

"Cherry" said Rosa in a dangerous voice "Not helping"

"Well, I have an important case as well" said the grinning mage "A theft at the British Museum, though, I admit, it does pale compared to your own important task. Still, I shall endeavour to do my best"

"What?" complained Rosa "You haven't even opened yet. How did you get a case like that already?"

Miles shrugged and seemed to get a little more serious "Most of the directors and curators at the British Museum are mages. When something happens, who do you think they're going to call? I know a couple of the directors and they knew I was opening the office. Even in the supernatural world, it's who you know. Still, don't worry. I am sure you have quite the adventure lined up at the Sanctuary"

Rosa glowered at him and turned to Cherry "Come on. We have an important client to see. Don't underestimate us Mr Wright. Shifters have a long history of dealing with supernatural problems."

"I didn't even know you were there" he said, a hint of frustration working into his cheeky grin

"We have a website!" Rosa said tugging at her jacket sleeve "Ugh. It doesn't matter"

"Who's this guy?" came Serra's voice from the ground

"Oh! There you are" exclaimed Cherry reaching down and lifting the grey tabby to rest in her arms "This is Mr Miles. He's another detective"

"Mr Wright" the mage said, eyes narrowing "Miles is my first name" he paused and his infuriating grin gave way to an expression of curiosity "You're from the Beast Lands right?, I haven't met many of your kind"

Serra gave him the kind of look only a cat could "The Endless Wilds mage. Beast lands is quite offensive, believe me, but given your fashion sense I am sure you are familiar with faux pas" Cherry was gently scratching her head causing her expression to shift as the fox's fingers massaged her

scalp. She glanced up towards her “Can you not when I’m speaking? It’s rather undignified. Scratch my back instead”

Cherry nodded with a smile “Sure”

The mage sighed and folded his arms “So, tell me, is today special? Or can I expect similarly invigorating conversations in future?”

Rosa’s glare faltered a bit and she sighed “No...” she shook her head, though, she was clearly still irritated “Sorry. We just don’t need the competition just now. I guess you didn’t do it on purpose but you still opened an office directly opposite ours. You can’t expect me to be happy?”

The mage rubbed his chin “Well no, I guess not, but I did do a quick check and nothing came up. I’m not moving now, and honestly, doesn’t sound like things are going too well anyway” he shrugged “There is a reason this work is normally done by mages. If she really has the sight get her a master and give it another go in four or five years. I didn’t know shifters could use magic actually, your kind are pretty rare”

Rosa’s mouth tightened slightly “We don’t need magic to do this and shifters aren’t rare as such, they just tend not to live in cities”

Cherry nodded with a smile “We don’t need magic, we have noses”

“Uhhh sure” said Miles “Noses are a unique shifter trait... well, best of luck. I’ll let you get to your beasts while I investigate a murder theft”

“A murder too?” groaned Rosa squeezing her hands into fists “Ah screw it. I am sure we will get plenty of murders in the future, won’t we Cherry?”

“We will?” she replied wide eyed.

“Definitely” She gave Miles a flat look and shook her head “We should get going. Our client is expecting us”

Cherry nodded and gave the mage a small wave before fishing in her pocket for her car keys “Goodbye Mr Miles, see you later”

“It’s not...ugh” he shook his head with a sigh and settled for waving them goodbye.

## Chapter 2

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Rosa looked out the passenger door window, tapping her fingers lightly against the glass. She frowned as they passed a long series of roadworks that were slowing the already glacial London traffic to a frustrating snail's pace. "We should have taken the Underground. I hate London Traffic"

Cherry glanced over from where she was playing with the temperature controls "You know Serra doesn't like it, people just don't look down"

She grumbled in response, glancing at the backseat where Cherry's cat was lying flat pawing at some cheap tablet "I know, I just hate this. Shifters were never meant to move this slow"

Cherry quirked a slight smile "Perhaps not but we are almost past the roadworks. It won't take that much longer, Sat nav says...hmm...twenty minutes"

Rosa drummed her fingers against the window again and watched a woman outside put an umbrella up against the autumn drizzle. If you looked at the surface; at the woman with the umbrella, at the two workmen arguing about one thing or another or at the young mother fussing with her child, it might seem like nothing had changed. It might seem that the world had assimilated knowledge of the supernatural with barely a hesitation but it was a comfortable illusion. If you dipped your hand beneath the surface, separated the oil from the water you would find a churning mess of danger and opportunity. People might act like little had changed but perhaps that was because the closer you got the ground the less impact the supernatural made. Everyday society had never really had much power to choose their fate and as criminals, corporations and governments competed for an entirely new category of talent, that had not really changed.

Rosa scratched her head as Cherry shifted down gear coming into a curve. She felt responsible for her, she had ever since their mother had been lost with the rest of the Seekers. Fate had left them in an awkward place with few of the traditional opportunities made available to either shifters or humans and she had always felt it important to make sure that Cherry ended up being able to support herself.

She considered the sanctuary with a small shake of her head. It was probably some urban wildlife annoying the animals. They would check the perimeter for the scent of a fox, find a damaged section of fence and get paid for half a day. That wasn't going to keep them open and it wasn't going to give them what they needed to guarantee a future.

She gave Cherry a quick sideways glance as she considered once again whether she should try and supplement their incoming with work on the side. Shifters like her could make pretty easy money as bodyguards for unpleasant sorts, though, Cherry was strongly against doing anything like that. Still, if it came to it she didn't need to know. If Rosa had to do something like that to keep the doors open until business picked up so be it. She would just have to make sure her sister didn't find out.

They advanced a few dozen meters before rolling up to a set of traffic lights "We are going to have to be careful" she said "I doubt we will get more than half a day's payment from this. That won't even buy us a week."

Cherry gave her a smile "Every little helps right? It will be fine, don't worry"

Cherry was a few years younger than her at twenty two, though she looked younger still due to the slowed rate of aging enjoyed by shifters. Sometimes, her mindless optimism could be annoying but she was sure her own cynicism was just as bad if not worse. Still, she was right. A small job was still better than no job.

“It does” she agreed “But still, a little care could buy us several more weeks.”

She scratched her head as the lights went green and they started to progress a little further through the traffic. Plinky noises drifted out from the back of the car as Serra used her claw like a stylus to play some terrible freemium game she had been addicted to for at least the last six months. She was about to say something when a familiar tune caused her to scramble for Cherry’s bag, pulling it from the back seat and grabbing the office mobile.

“Rosa Dawnwell, Supernatural Detective. How can I help you?”

“We stick our nose into your business” Cherry said in a low voice causing Rosa to just give her a hard look.

“Uhm...uhm.” Came a nervous male voice with a distinct accent “I think I might have been bitten by a vampire”

Rosa immediately sat forward. Now this was more like it. Of course, right now money was on the front of her mind but that didn’t change the fact she wanted to investigate something more substantial “What happened, tell me everything”

“I, uhh” the line was crackling a bit and Rosa pushed the phone into her ear to try and keep out the noise of the traffic “I was walking home in Regents park. Do you know it?”

“Yes” she said “but not well. That’s the one near the zoo right?”

“That’s right, though, I was walking home on the other side” The line crackled and his voice wavered “I don’t know what happened. I woke up this morning in the woods by the lake. I don’t remember how I got there and I can’t remember walking home”

Rosa frowned slightly “and what makes you think a vampire was involved”

“Well” he said “It’s my neck. I’ve seen enough movies to know what a vampire bite looks like”

Rosa grinned, her face lighting up though her tone was sympathetic “I’m sorry that happened to you. We would of course be happy to investigate and see if we can locate your attacker. Our fee is fifty pounds per hour. We can discuss how much time to allocate up front and if we are drawing close we can discuss necessary extensions at that time”

“Ah” said the voice with a note of disappointment “I’m a student. I can’t really afford that. It’s kind of why I called you. I couldn’t afford any of the investigators I found on the first two pages of Google”

Rosa frowned “If you found us on Google then our prices are on the website”

"I...I know" said the voice quivering "But I thought you might do it for less, like, a lot less. I can only pay maybe a hundred but" Rosa noticed that his breathing had been speeding up ever since they had started discussing cost "I'm scared...The police took a report but because I wasn't that injured they didn't seem to care that much. I couldn't afford any of the mages and so I thought I would try you"

Rosa shook her head slightly and sighed "Why did you think we would do it for less?"

"Because you hate vampire's right? Werewolves and vampires are mortal enemies. There's like a secret war between the forces of darkness and lycanthropes. I thought as werewolves you would want to, you know...stop them"

Rosa frowned slightly looking at Cherry. She wasn't responsible but it felt like the kind of thing she was responsible for. "That's not true kid. There is no secret war, don't know where you heard that. Also, not werewolves"

"Sorry, foxes isn't it?" came the voice in a low tone "So you won't do it? I could maybe find another fifty. It would be hard for a few weeks but...please. No one else wants to help me"

"Two hours" came Rosa's voice "but I won't count the meeting or travel times and I won't charge you expenses. I'll come see you, we'll talk and ill examine the park. If I find something I *may* choose to follow it up. Is that acceptable?"

"A...all right" replied the voice with a gulp "Thankyou"

"What's your name, where are you?"

"Antonio" he replied "Antonio Trujillo but most people call me Ant. I stay at thirty one Grevon Street. Uhm flat two two"

"Right" came Rosa's reply "Stay there and I'll be over in" she paused as she quickly checked the map on her phone "say...an hour"

"Okay. See you then" replied Ant, his mood noticeably improved.

She ended the call and tossed the phone back into Cherry's bag "Well" she said "It seems we have a proper case, though, the client can't really pay. Still, maybe we can use it as a testimonial or something"

"See!" said Cherry with enthusiasm "I told we would start getting business once we had the door"

"That was a phone call! It had nothing to do with the door. He found our website"

Cherry gave her a slight frown "I put in the door this morning and now we have two cases. A proper detective agency has a detective's door. Are you suggesting it's just coincidence?"

"Of course its coincidence!"

Cherry sniffed slightly not sounding convinced "If you say so"

"Ugh, doesn't matter. Just let me out when you can"

Cherry blinked in surprise "Let you out? You aren't coming to the sanctuary?"

Rosa shook her head "You and Serra go. You don't need me. You are perfectly capable of handling this one yourself. I'm going to look into this vampire"

Cherry's surprise soon gave way to a furrowed brow "By yourself? I don't know much about vampires but I am pretty sure they are dangerous"

Rosa shrugged slightly "I can look after myself, besides, if it was that dangerous the police would have dispatched the SPF to deal with it but Antonio said they didn't seem to be interested"

Cherry seemed conflicted but pulled the car into an empty parking bay "Don't take any risks"

Rosa gave a dismissive snort "I can deal with some street level vampire, besides, it's not like it will be active during the day" Mythology informed a lot of what people believed about the supernatural but Rosa was pretty sure they had this particular fact right. She didn't know much about vampires either but she knew that sunlight was harmful to them.

Cherry grumbled slightly, waiting for a rare opening in the heavy stream of traffic to re-join the glacial flow. Rosa allowed herself a small self-indulgent smile. She hated driving in London and for the most part, despite purchasing the car, tried to ensure Cherry did most of it. She would much rather take the underground anyway. She checked her map again and tightened her coat against the autumn drizzle. It wasn't so bad, certainly not enough to deter her from making the twenty minute walk to Greenwich Station.

She walked calmly, checking her phone every now and again to ensure she was heading in the right direction. Two or three years ago she might have suppressed her bestial nature but she rarely bothered anymore. It wasn't that she drew no attention, though her vulpine features were not all that obvious. She still drew the occasional double take but no one took pictures and no one crossed the street to avoid her.

The journey was relatively uneventful, though, the mild interest in her presence continued despite the normally oppressive disinterest typically demonstrated by the metropolitan commuters. Rosa was adept at navigating the underground but today those skills were not required. The route was simple and it was not long until she had arrived first at Marylebone station and then at Grevon Street.

Rosa paused before the door as she took a moment to examine the street. There was no doubt that the buildings here were basic, showing signs of neglect and limited maintenance. Paint was peeling in several places and the small shared gardens outside the flats had seen little attention in months but it lacked the markers of true deprivation. Empty takeaway cartons and occasional empty beer bottles punctuated by the subtle, stale scent of cheap aftershave just cemented that these were likely temporary flats largely rented to students. The landlords cared enough that a basic standard was maintained while their residents saw little reason to care for poorly maintain accommodation

which still pinched their pockets. Even if Antonio had not said so, Rosa would have guessed he was a student as soon as she saw his house.

She reached up to press the bell when she saw a couple through the glass fronted door heading towards her. She gave them a small nod as they passed, catching the door and letting herself in.

The stale scent of deodorant became immediately more potent as soon as she stood within the close. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head slightly. While she was sure most of the residents barely noticed the odour, it made her skin itch unpleasantly. The scent faded slightly as she climbed the stairs to be largely replaced by the scent of cheap fast food. She half-imagined Cherry complaining, insisting that they should be eating better. That being said, she never seemed to have a problem stuffing her face when it was actually in front of her. In fairness, food was a little complicated for shifters. They simply needed more energy than humans, especially if they had been using their shapeshifting abilities. They had actually been temporarily banned from a local buffet restaurant until Cherry had negotiated a shifters specific fee that saw them paying twice the listed price, a price that Rosa still considered a bargain.

Rosa knocked on the door and waited patiently for Antonio to answer. She heard a series of bolts being undone before the door pushed open to reveal a sickly, rail thin boy, though, his Mediterranean heritage prevented him from looking deathly pale. His eyes seem to widen slightly and he glanced into the corridor behind her “H...How did you get in? Sorry. It’s probably a werewolf secret right?”

She frowned at him for a moment and he seemed to shrink away, moving back into the hallway and leaving the door open. She hated being mistaken for a werewolf, so did Cherry. It was unfair in some ways but everyone made the assumption and it had gotten old years ago. “Fox” she said offering no further explanation “You I assume are Antonio?”

The boy nodded and Rosa stepped in closing the door behind her. She followed him into a small, stark living room. To call the flat austere was an understatement. Cheap laminate flooring sat below plain white walls that looked like an underpainting layer more than intentional design. The flat seemed largely bereft of personal touches and other than his subtle scent there was little evidence that this space was lived in.

Antonio sat nervously upon a simple leather couch. Rosa could tell from here it wasn’t real leather both from the sound it made as he slowly fidgeted against it and from the lack of distinctive odour that always accompanied proper leather. She turned her attention from the room to Antonio himself. His hair was short, though uneven, as if he had cut it almost all the way down and had left it to grow in for several weeks. He was clean shaven but a simple study of his face suggested that this was likely done hastily within the last hour, probably after the phone call.

The vampire bite was on full display and pretty much as described. The blood had congealed some time ago and it didn’t look like the wound had been fully cleaned. She suspected that he had lost a significant amount of blood despite his olive coloured skin hiding his clamour. Bags hung under his eyes and there was a slight shake in his movements. Of course, that might just be because he was a student.

“What are you studying” she asked, not really listening to his answer.

“Biochemistry” he said “I’m just in my first year though” Rosa nodded but continued to examine him. She could tell he had received a significant shock and suspected that several pints of blood had been taken. It didn’t seem likely he would suffer any long term effects but he should probably go to the hospital anyway.

She gestured for him to stand and moved to examine him more closely. She pretended to be studying the bite but really she was trying to see if his attacker had left a scent behind. She always tried to do this surreptitiously as people tended to find them using their scent of smell odd. She might not like being mistaken for a werewolf but being treated like a dog was far worse “Has anyone else been bitten?”

Vampires smelled foul, almost like burning plastic. Their scent could linger for quite some time, especially if they were powerful but there was nothing much here at all. That might not mean a whole lot though. “I...don’t know. I heard a few people got attacked in the park. There was an email sent advising us to avoid the park at night”

“But you didn’t”

“N...no” he admitted “but I’ve never had any problems before and its way further to go around”

She shrugged slightly. She wasn’t here to tell him how to live his life. She took a few steps back tapping fingers against her arm “You took a bath this morning, right?”

He nodded slightly “Yeah I did, why?”

“I can’t pick up any of the Vampires trace on you. That’s probably why” she moved over to the window looking out across the street “So at least one other person has been attacked there but we don’t know who or what happened. We could try and ask the University I suppose, which Uni?”

“Regents” he said “It’s not far from here. I don’t study at the campus near the park but I was attending a lecture at the business school on fundraising”

There wasn’t much life outside, the occasional car and a single man walking a dog. She supposed that most students might be at University. She glanced over “You don’t have lectures today?”

He looked down at his feet. His trembles were actually quite bad she realised. Some of his movements she had put down to fidgeting might actually be involuntary “I didn’t want to go” he said quietly “I felt really ill when I woke up this morning”

“All right” she said trying to sound more sympathetic. She felt bad for the kid but there wasn’t much she could do about his condition “Why don’t you tell me what happened”

“Honestly there isn’t that much to tell” he said with a slight frown “The lecture finished a little later than I expected. I grabbed some dinner and walked home” he looked up at Rosa, his eyes darting around as if he was trying to reconstruct it in his head “I remember entering Regent Park but then things get kind of hazy. I woke up in the trees near the toilets. I felt really sick and I didn’t know what had happened. I thought maybe I collapsed, had like a seizure or something. You hear about it

sometimes but I got home and I saw” he gingerly raised a hand to his neck “I...didn’t know what to think. I called the police and they took a report but—”

He sighed slightly “It’s not much is it.”

Rosa didn’t respond immediately. Antonio was clearly suffering and not just from blood loss. She was concerned for his health but she also felt a little excited at the possibility there might be something of substance here. ‘That you won’t get paid for’ came a sardonic voice and she gave an almost imperceptible sigh. It was true, as much as this seemed much more important than Cherry’s little zoo trip, that was the case that actually might pay their bills, for a little while at least.

“You don’t remember being attacked?”

“No” he confirmed looking down “I’m not even really sure when it happened. Everything after entering the park is kind of fuzzy. I’m not even sure where it happened”

Rosa gave a small sigh and nodded “If you can try and remember where you went as much as possible. Perhaps print out a map from the internet and draw on it? ”

He looked sideways seeming even more nervous “I only really have my phone. I don’t have a computer. I’m not sure how I would do that”

Rosa bit her lip slightly and pulled a small tablet from her bag. “All right...just show me, best as you can”

He struggled to provide much but after a few minutes of careful prompting Rosa had a few places to check out.

Rosa tucked her tablet back into her bag, paused and pointed at the front door “Go to the Hospital” she said “I think you may have lost quite a lot of blood”

“I just need to rest” he said quietly “I’ll be okay”

She shook her head frowning at him “You’re not okay. You should go to the hospital”

He paused, seeming conflicted before his eyes widened “T...Two seconds, I almost forgot” he disappeared through a door and came back a minute later with two coin counting bags containing notes “Your fee” he said

Rosa glanced at the money and then at the boys austere surroundings. Damn, she would have given Cherry quite a talking to for what she was about to do “Forget the money, I’m doing this one pro bono, well” she said her brow furrowing “If you go to the hospital”

He glanced at the bags, wiping a thin sheen of sweat from his forehead “A...Are you sure?” he said, a quiver running through his voice “I can pay this at least”

She shook her head “Yeah I’m sure. I’ll look into this and get back to you later. In the meantime *go to the hospital* and if you could contact the Uni and try and find out why they told people to avoid the park that would help”

He nodded vigorously “Of course. Thankyou”

“Don’t mention it kid” she said kicking herself as she said it. It was far too early to be calling anyone kid, well, except perhaps Cherry. *It really annoyed her.*

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Rosa had expected the park to be quiet but people strolled lazily despite the overcast sky. Regent’s Park was large, far larger in fact than she had thought from looking at the satellite view on her laptop. The pond which had seemed fairly small on her computer was in fact a rather significant body of water on which a few brave souls peddled small sky-blue boats aimlessly across its surface.

Much of the lake side was lined with small patches of dense trees through which well-maintained walkways roamed seemingly at random. Rosa frowned slightly as she observed the slowly drifting crowds. Whatever information had caused the University to issue its warning must not be widespread.

She bit her lip, walking quietly along the path as it wound around the lake. She felt like she was drawing a little more attention than usual and a little voice at the back of her head suggested it was due to the proximity of London Zoo. She felt irritated that she let it bother her but she wasn’t going to hide her vulpine features while people were watching. A group of poorly managed children trailing their disinterested parents pointed at her and she quickened her step. Something was wrong. She couldn’t quite place what but something had her hackles up. It was true that she wasn’t exactly what you would call a people person and that crowds like this often made her uncomfortable but there was something else, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

She gave a small nod as she spotted the public bathroom. She had been confident she was on the right path but that just confirmed it. It shouldn’t be much further. She passed the toilet block and took the leftmost pathway. From what Antonio had said he should have woken up somewhere nearby. She scratched her shoulder nervously. This wasn’t like her, what was she missing?

She took a deep breath, waited until the path was relatively quiet and dipped into the woods. She was feeling a little out of her depth. Her only real experience with vampires had been several days spent with her Father tracking one to its lair. He had sent her home while he dealt with it but she remembered that smell, that burning acrid plastic-like scent. If she could pick it up amongst the damp undergrowth it might give her somewhere to start.

She froze for a second ducking behind a tree as she heard a small group move down the path only a few meters from where she was investigating. She knew it was silly but she didn’t want anyone to see her roaming in the forest by herself. People had more than enough stupid beliefs when it came to shifters and she felt absolutely no need to provide them anymore. She let the noise pass and with

the slightest hint of irritation willed her form to change. Her ears shifted, the points withdrawing and smoothing off while the dusting of fur withdrew into her skin. It was a strange sensation, though one Rosa was well used to. Her eyes on the other hand changed without sensation, though, it required a couple of blinks to bring her vision back into focus.

The group passed and she returned to slowly picking through the woods, searching for any evidence of Antonio's presence. She drew air through her nose, looking for evidence of vampiric taint but all she found was the smell of well managed nature, occasionally contrasted by the scent of passing dogs. She found a few footprints that could have certainly belonged to Antonio but then they could have belonged to anyone. The canine presence certainly indicated that he wasn't the only person to make the occasional diversion from the marked paths.

She paused chewing her lip. That uncomfortable sensation was still there, in fact, if anything it had grown stronger. She felt like she was being watched, like every time she turned around someone was staring at her back. She couldn't help but feel annoyed at herself, such flights of fancy were normally Cherry's territory but she couldn't shift that feeling. She really wanted to leave.

On the other hand she also really wanted to find evidence of this vampire. This was the nearest thing to a meaningful case they had received since the office had opened and whether Antonio was paying or not, she really wanted to solve it. If there were vampires involved then maybe they could find a way for someone else to pay. Would the police pay a bounty for such a thing? She would have to check.

She pushed further into the copse. It wasn't hard. This wasn't a real forest, it was a committee recreation of the gentle English countryside surrounded on all sides by urban sprawl, a fact punctuated by the muted sounds of traffic that still managed to infiltrate deep into the park. She paused for a moment and listened. Rosa's hearing was muted slightly while hiding her vulpine features but it was still sharp. She could pick up most of the normal sounds one might expect in the middle of a public park. She could hear people walking, their footsteps echoing slightly off concrete walkways while she could just about make out a few muted thuds which she was pretty sure were people walking on the grass. She could hear dogs barking, car horns beeping and the gentle splash of the paddle boats but despite being in the centre of a large, public park, she could not hear the call of a single bird.

She studied the trees as she continued to move cautiously still taking time to scan the ground for any evidence of Antonio's resting place. Could the birds have been scared off by the crowds? No, London's pigeons were famously aggressive and amongst trees like this she would expect urban wildlife to be taking shelter. Perhaps it was simply coincidence. There had to have been plenty of times during her life there had been no birds tweeting and she had not noticed. She frowned slightly, none of these answers seemed good enough.

She moved past a heavy oak tree, moving carefully across the uneven ground. Her ears were starting to pick out the occasional small trill and warble though it still seemed far too quiet for her liking. She thought she spotted a pair of black beady eyes staring at her from the edge of her vision but when she turned to look it was gone. She kind of wished she had gone to the animal sanctuary now. Cherry was probably petting and tickling a bunch of— she realised she didn't really know what it was a sanctuary for. Still, it didn't change her point, she picked the wrong assignment.

Her eyes widened as she stepped over a tree root and noticed a disturbance in the soil before a narrow ash. She took another last glance across the surrounding tree branches before grabbing her phone and taking several images of the possible crime scene. She knew she should probably get a proper camera for doing this but for the most part her phone was good enough.

The tree bark was damaged in subtle ways that would normally have been easy to blame on the local wildlife but when combined with the disturbed earth looked more like someone had fallen heavily against it. She glanced up one last time and shook her head. Concentrate. Paranoia can come later. For now, she had a job to do. Just knowing Antonio was probably here wasn't enough. What else was here?

She spent a few quiet moments looking over the scene. She quickly identified what seemed to be Antonio's footsteps leaving the woods. Antonio's footsteps entering however, seemed to be missing. Her eyes widened as she examined the crisscrossing sets of footprints that meandered through the uneven woodlands. The loose earth held imprints well in places but much of it was lightly bound by tree roots and small woodland plants. Although she only had a few footprints to work with it seemed fairly obvious to her that someone had dumped Antonio here. She tried to follow the footprints back but it wasn't entirely clear where the heavier footprints had gone, neither was it clear just how much of the print depth could be attributed to its owner carrying another person. If her speculation was correct of course.

Being careful not to disturb the prints she moved up towards the indent to try and pick up any scents. Despite her stronger senses she wasn't a dog and following a trail, especially after this amount of time would normally be impossible for her but if Antonio's assailant had been a vampire, well, that scent would be so strong it might be an option.

She drew air through her nose and sighed. The vampire must have had someone else move the body after feeding elsewhere or perhaps for some reason this one didn't smell so bad. She thought back to some of the things her father had explained during their trek. Vampirism was a curse but it acted almost like a virus. Infecting someone was difficult but once done the curse would mutate. A vampire would always share some traits with their master but there were always changes. She wasn't sure how far that went, whether there were limits to what abilities a vampire might have but the way her father explained it, you had to be prepared for just about anything. That meant she could not read too much into the lack of a scent.

No vampire scent didn't mean no scent however. Making sure she was alone she got down on all fours and pushed her face close to the earth. The heady, peaty smell of the dry soil jumped up first of course but intermingled with that was a faint scent she identified as human. She couldn't say for sure that it had belonged to Antonio but it seemed likely. She drew in air again trying to get a hint of something, anything that might suggest who else had been here. Had it been some human lackey she was unlikely to be able to pick it out from Antonio but most people did nothing to hide their scent, most detectives were not shifters.

Her brows narrowed. There was something there, something sweet? It was faint, barely there even to Rosa's refined senses but it was definitely out of place. There was an acidic hint to it that made it feel out of place, it couldn't be some unknown root or fungal growth lurking just beneath the surface. She strained until her nostrils burned but the smell was fleeting coming and going, barely perceptible even when she could pick it up. Worse, there was something familiar about it, something

that tickled at the back of her brain. She was sure if she could just get a better smell she would know what it was but after a few minutes she gave up, panting slightly from what felt like an absurd effort.

She sat, one leg stretched across the other feeling defeated. She noted a fat crow, sitting, watching her from high in the branches of a thick oak. It felt like it was mocking her, proving her earlier paranoia to be pure fancy. She had found Antonio's resting place and found nothing. The birds couldn't even let her pretend that something weird was going on.

She shook her head with dry mirth and climbed to her feet. She wondered what a mage like Miles would do. Could he cast some spell to peer into the past? Or could he ask the tree what it had saw? She didn't really know much about what magic could and could not do, just that it used essence to power it. She pulled her phone out again and took some close-up pictures of Antonio's dent as well as the various footprints in the area.

She decided it didn't matter what Miles would have done. Her nose hadn't helped today but Human's had been detectives for centuries without any kind of supernatural crutches. She was confident that if they could get a little momentum behind them there was no reason they couldn't be successful too, just, that momentum was proving harder than expected. "And even when you have a case, you're doing it for free" she murmured to herself.

She slid her phone into her pocket and took a step to leave. The Crow was still perched there, watching her from its roost. She frowned slightly. It really did feel like it was watching her. It sat like an obsidian statue, unblinking, staring in her direction.

"All right" she said forcing the nerves from her voice "I don't have any food. Shoo, shoo" she gestured with her hands for it to move.

It didn't react at all. She bit her lip slightly and shook her head with a nervous laugh "Fine, I'll go...I was going anyway" she paused slightly and gave it a grin "Don't tell Cherry I got freaked out by a bird. She would never let me hear the end of it"

She started to walk, her mind drifting to Cherry's cat Serra. The endless wilds contained more than just cats and as far as Rosa knew, contained pretty much everything her world did. Could it be that the crow was from the Wilds? Nah, she really was letting her imagination get the better of her.

She paused after a few steps and glanced up. It had moved, well, its head had in order to follow her movements. "...Freaky" she murmured quietly.

She was about to continue when her breath caught in her throat. There was another one. The crow wasn't alone. There was another high in the branches of different tree watching her silently. She scanned the treeline picking out a third. Three birds like petrified coal staring in her direction. "Time to leave I think"

She pushed through the tiny copse of woodland, picking out at least two more before she reached the path. She got a few odd looks as she emerged onto the concrete path but for the most part did her best to act like nothing had happened. She walked with purpose back towards the gate, continuing to pick out bird after bird sitting silently.

A shiver ran up her neck as she continued. Something was wrong here, that was not normal behaviour. She realised no one else seemed to have noticed the birds behaving oddly and were obliviously going about their business. The birds weren't looking at anyone else either and every crow she could pick out had their eyes focused directly on her. When the first crow took flight to follow she broke into a nervous jog.

The birds followed her all the way to the gate with new observers joining and others occasionally settling on a new perch. She reached the park gate and her jog slowed to a swift walk as she emerged out into the street, glad to be done with that.

She held down a nervous laugh as a huge crow landed atop a street sign just a little ahead. It regarded her with a cold, detached cruelty or at least that's how it felt. She tried to ignore it but after three more steps, completely without warning she bent down, scooped up a stone and launched it hard at her feathered tormentor.

The bird launched into the air just in time. It didn't really take flight, it was more like an extended jump. A single beat of its wings as the stone passed underneath and the crow landed heavily back on the give way sign.

Rosa broke into a run ignoring the confused looks from the busy pedestrians. She didn't care, she just had to go somewhere the birds couldn't. Marylebone station was not far from here and surely they wouldn't follow her into the Underground. She moved as quickly as she could, trying to weave through the human traffic. The station wasn't far, she could deal with feeling silly once she had arrived.

She glanced back a few times trying to pick out signs that the pursuit was continuing. Sure enough here and there she saw a crow land and stare but it wasn't long until she plunged through the pale stone arches of Marylebone Station and joined the escalator queue. She glanced back at the entrance watching the last visible crow disappear from sight as the escalator carried her below.

She sighed and placed a hand against her face. She really didn't want to tell Cherry about this.

### **Chapter 3**

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Cherry frowned as she scanned the road ahead trying to avoid working through an infuriating one way system for the third time. Elyse had warned that Songbird Avenue was pedestrianised but she had neglected to mention just how hard it was to find parking. She tried to ignore the incessant complaints of her sat nav that was blissfully unaware the street was inaccessible and seemed determined she make a U turn.

She gave a small sigh and pulled into a parking bay after contemplating being stopped by the same set of lights for the fourth time. There had been a few spaces here earlier but she had hoped to avoid spending money on a parking meter. She glanced back to Serra who was still poking away at her tablet. "I'll go feed the meter. Back in a minute"

Serra looked up for a moment in what could be construed as a nod before returning to her game. Cherry paused before exiting the car, chewing lightly on her lip. Serra had been rather sceptical about the whole detective thing but she was generally supportive of Cherry, even if that support sometimes felt token. She had been rather addicted to that game Arcane Depths recently. Perhaps she was just too distracted.

She read the parking meter and sighed pressing her debit card against the screen. The money wasted here would have bought multiple chicken wings, a dozen chocolate bars or have contributed towards an exciting radio advert. She hadn't spoken to Rosa about that one yet but she thought it might help with exposure. How much could it cost anyway?

She punched in the old Fiesta's registration and wandered back to knock on the car window "Serra?"

The cat sighed and tapped the screen, the display fading to black shortly after. She pushed to her feet and turned, the door opening before her with only the slightest glow to her eyes. Much like Cherry, Serra had the sight and in fact was the reason they had been soul bound. Serra had arrived in Den Sealga for the bonding ceremony when Cherry was just six years old and they had been close ever since.

Cherry often wondered what the nature of that original agreement had been but she didn't know and neither did Serra. Neither were they really teacher and student as Serra barely knew any magic beyond a simple telekinesis rite that most paragons learned as a priority. She smiled as Serra hopped out the car and the door swung closed behind her. Even if they weren't learning magic like they were supposed to, she was glad to have Serra around. If you didn't count Rosa, Serra was her best friend and together they had been through a lot.

"So" asked Serra "What are you spacing out about?"

Cherry blinked and rubbed her head, pressing the clicker on her keys to lock the car "N...Nothing"

Serra gave her a flat stare for a few moments before giving a small shrug "This sanctuary" she said "What exactly are you planning to do. Seems like she needs a vet more than a detective"

Cherry lightly brushed her fingers through her long hair as she walked. She could see the start of the pedestrianised Songbird Avenue not far ahead "I don't know" she said "I'll work it out when I get there"

"Perhaps you shouldn't have split up, not that Rosa knows what she is doing either"

Cherry gave Serra a little frown "Now don't be techy Serra, everyone has to start somewhere. Rosa thinks we can do it and that's good enough for me."

Serra tilted her head slightly as a few people gave their conversation an odd look. Paragons weren't that common, at least in public. Serra had claimed there were hundreds throughout London but Cherry had not seen much evidence of that. "With my help perhaps"

Cherry smiled "Well you are helping. We got a door. We got a Serra. Everything. Is. Going—" her voice faltered as she was flooded with a sense of unease. She felt like she was standing before a

deep drop starting down at the precipice. The sensation quickly faded but the unease remained and she could feel her hair standing on end in response.

She looked down to Serra and her eyes widened. The sensation had completely vanished. "What on earth" she mouthed quietly before looking back down the street. It was muted but it was there again. Something was making her feel very uneasy when she looked down Songbird Avenue but she couldn't work out why. "Do you feel that?"

"Yeah" replied Serra with a guarded tone "Somethings wrong. Don't know what. Can we deal with this quickly? This place gives me a headache"

Cherry nodded uncomfortably "I don't know what it is either but it does seem to be the street. Maybe it's got something to do with what's happening at the sanctuary. If they are feeling this then it might explain why they seem skittish" She took a moment to look at the handful of pedestrians lazily browsing from shop to shop. "It doesn't look like anyone else is effected"

"No" agreed Serra "Let's find this Sanctuary and then leave"

Songbird Avenue was a strange street. The architecture was mostly Victorian in nature but many of the shop fronts had been renovated to feature something entirely more modern. A mixture of café's, phone stores and small retailers were sprinkled between buildings with grandiose names containing offices for a half dozen businesses. There were enough people walking, talking and eating that Cherry was confident they were not experiencing her symptoms.

Cherry forced herself to continue and Serra followed behind "If It feels like this at the Sanctuary, I'm going home" Said Serra Grumpily "I feel like I've eaten your cooking"

Cherry frowned as she felt her stomach rumble. The sensation did seem to be getting stronger the further down the street they progressed. She tried to focus on Serra as she spoke, that helped a little "How was I supposed to know that you can't use gummy strawberries in a crumble. It was all I had, I thought it would just be sweeter"

"Why would you think that!" complained Serra "I eat most of my food raw and I know that"

Cherry sniffed slightly "There is no point having that argument again. Besides, look. It's just over there"

The sanctuary was a rather impressive building with tall arched windows flanking a heavy, black door. The building was made of red brick while the dull green tiled roof sported an impressive array of decoration along its edges. A golden plaque by the door confirmed this was their destination.

Wood's Sanctuary for wayward beasts.  
Founded 1826 by Sir Henry Wood.

"It's a lovely building" said Cherry "But it's not exactly obvious what it is. That's why it's so important to write it on the door"

"You say that" said Serra "But what actually is it. Is it a Zoo?"

“I think so” Cherry replied as she reached up to bang the Ring-shaped brass knocker. She paused and blinked a few times “Hey I feel better” she turned back to the street and shivered quickly turning to face the door again “What could be causing that...It’s horrible”

Serra shrugged “How am I supposed to know. It’s new to me”

Cherry nodded and lifted the heavy brass ring, knocking it firmly against the door “We can ask Elyse about it. Maybe she might have some ideas”

Cherry’s ears picked up Elyse’s footsteps long before she actually unlocked the door. She heard each bolt being unlocked and the soft crinkle of her smoothing her dress. The woman that answered the door was perhaps in her forty’s, wearing an elegant, if somewhat old fashioned beige-coloured dress. Her dark hair sat in a simple, if well-crafted bun and framed a kindly face, marred by fatigue.

She smiled warmly and opened the door wider gesturing for Cherry to enter. “Thank you for coming so quickly.” She said “I am Elyse, I must admit I did not expect one so young. Can I get you something? Tea? Perhaps you would like a biscuit?”

Cherry’s smile faltered slightly. Shifters aged more slowly than humans and having grown up amongst humanity she had found being treated like a child after turning eighteen deeply irritating. It was worse with other shifters, who tended to consider other shifters children until several years into their twenties. Her irritation quickly faded though. Elyse’s tired smile held no malice and had a note of kindness that was almost soothing. Also, Cherry had a policy of cutting people who offered her biscuits some slack.

“Yes please” she said, returning Elyse’s smile with one of her own “That would be very kind. I’m Cherry, we spoke on the phone” she gestured down to her cat who was sitting on the doorstep by her side “And this is Serra”

Serra shook her head slightly “She never turns down food. Best only put out a couple. If you give her the packet it will be gone in no time”

“Serra!” exclaimed Cherry “Don’t be so rude!”

Elyse gave a small chuckle “My, my. Is this your partner? Aren’t you quite the lovely young lady! I’ve never met a talking animal before”

Serra gave her a flat look “Humans are also talking animals. Serra Swiftstep.”

“Ah” Elyse said, eyes widening slightly “Well of course. I didn’t mean to offend. I suppose there is a more appropriate word but I don’t know it”

Cherry nodded “There are a couple of names but paragon is most common. That being said, ignore her. She is just grumpy because she has no money left to spend on her stupid game”

Serra frowned looking up at the pair “Of course I am grumpy! Free to play! It’s the worst. Do you know I dropped out of the top two hundred this morning? ”

Elyse looked at the pair a little wide eyed but she quickly regained her composure and her smile returned with a hint of amusement "Perhaps you should come in. I feel a bit silly calling someone out over this but I didn't know what else to do"

Cherry looked up from Serra and nodded "Well of course. Please, lead the way"

Elyse moved with surprising grace across the white tiled floor, her footsteps echoing quietly throughout the large lobby. Cherry's ears twitched as she took some time to examine her surroundings. For some reason she had kind of expected the place to look like a house but the entrance hall looked far more like a museum. There wasn't a huge number of physical exhibits but carefully composed displays seemed to detail the origin of many of their guests. Cherry saw a couple of displays talking about dogs and cats rescued but her eyes widened when she saw a display dedicated to Charlie, their leopard "You have a leopard?" she asked in surprise

Elyse nodded as she pushed through a door marked 'Staff only' "We do" she said. You would be surprised what people keep as pets. If we just looked after cat's and dog's we wouldn't be needed. After all, there are many facilities that do just that. People get these animals when there are young and when they grow up, they can't handle them anymore."

"Why not just return them to the wild?" asked Serra as Elyse pulled out a set of keys and unlocked a door that led into a much more homely wood panelled corridor.

"They grew up in captivity" responded Elyse "We try when we can but most can't survive in the wild." She glanced down at Serra as she led them into a busy living room. "We want to do more but trying to train them with the skills they need is something we can less and less afford to do. Housing them at all is something we can less and less afford to do"

Cherry bit her lip slightly as she glanced around the room. It was a strange mixture of furniture, none of which quite matched. Knickknacks and trinkets sat in display cabinets and on small decorative tables with delicate floral porcelains seeming to be the primary focus of the collection. A heavy, if simple chandelier hung from the ceiling casting a rippling pattern of light onto a carpet covered in a dizzying array of colours and patterns. Cherry picked out an easy chair and sat down and looked up with a smile "It's okay, I don't need any biscuits"

Elyse seemed confused for a second before amusement touched her eyes and her lips once again pulled into a smile "Oh. The Sanctuary has operating costs in the seven digits. Believe me, a few biscuits will not cause any further hardship. Please, make yourself comfortable, I will just be a moment"

"Ah...one question before you go" said Cherry as Elyse had turned away "Have you ever noticed anything, uhm, odd about the street outside. Like a strange feeling or sensation?" her voice slowed as she spoke. The question felt foolish despite the fact Serra had felt it too.

Elyse tapped her fingers against her cheek and seemed to be thinking. If she thought the question foolish she showed no sign "I am afraid I do not know what you mean. Did you feel such a thing?"

Cherry shook her head slightly with an uneasy smile "No its fine. Don't worry"

Elyse must have picked up on her unease as her smile brightened, trying to provide reassurance “Well, if you’re feeling a little off, I know little better than hot tea. I won’t be long”

Elyse disappeared out the door and Cherry looked towards Serra, her smile slipping “She didn’t feel it and it was by far the worst just outside. I don’t get it, what is it?”

Serra walked lazily through the room picking out a place to sit before an unlit fireplace “I don’t know” she said “Maybe you could ask that mage?”

Cherry snorted slightly “Rosa would love that, she was pretty livid.” She clicked her tongue slightly “Though, having a mage look at it is a good idea. I suspect that would be quite expensive unfortunately.”

Serra shrugged slightly “Well, whatever it is, most people don’t seem to be noticing it. I’d say it might be linked to our stronger senses but I don’t think so, that doesn’t quite fit. I don’t feel it in here. It will be interesting to see if we feel it in the sanctuary”

Cherry nodded as Elyse reappeared carrying a large silver tray sporting an impressive china teapot, a couple of cups and several saucers. Cherry’s eyes were immediately drawn to a small plate sporting a trio of chocolate pretzels. She wasn’t sure if she had tasted chocolate pretzels before, well, she would correct that oversight shortly.

“I brought you a saucer for your tea” she said holding the door carefully as she manoeuvred into the room “I wasn’t sure if you drank tea but I thought I should prepare just in case”

Cherry smiled, her eyes twinkling “You are too kind, Rosa will be sorry she didn’t come”

“Oh yes” responded Elyse starting to fill several cups with dark liquid “She is your sister right? She couldn’t make it?”

Cherry shook her head “We had another case come in. Rosa is looking into it, something about vampires”

“Oh, how frightful” replied Elyse shivering slightly “Well, I can offer nothing so exciting but...It’s important to me.” She tipped the kettle above a saucer and looked to Serra who simply nodded her head. She poured a little tea on to the plate as Serra pushed up from her haunches and wandered towards the table.

“Thankyou” said Cherry brightly as she stood. She reached down, taking care not to touch the serving plate in case it really was silver and added a little milk from a cute little jug and a quintet of sugar cubes. Serra approached the table and gently hovered one of the cubes onto the plate just before the milk jug vibrated slightly. Serra licked her lips slightly and looked up “If you would add a generous serving of milk, it’s a little too heavy to handle with finesse”

Elyse looked down wide eyed “A...A useful trick” she just stared for a few moments before shaking her head and added a significant splash of milk to the saucer. She watched, seemingly unable to

avert her eyes as the saucer floated slowly from the table to rest in front of her. Serra settled down and watched the sugar cube melting into the surface.

“A lot of paragons know a little magic.” Offered Cherry “It makes their life much easier”

Elyse nodded, wiping her forehead with a handkerchief and picking up her own cup of tea “You hear about such things but seeing it is quite different.” she looked over with a smile and took her seat “But times change and we must change with them.” she took a small sip of her tea and placed it on a saucer to her side “My great, great, great grandfather founded this place. Back then it was just a few cages in his garden. He was a veterinary officer in the army during the Burmese war and when he came home he started a practice within this house. I wonder sometimes what he would think if he could see it now.”

She took another sip of her tea as Cherry’s eyes darted from her to the biscuits “It started small but a few chance encounters left him in charge of a young lion and several chimpanzees. Eventually, he started charging people five shillings to see the Lion to help pay for things and soon the sanctuary was born”

She gave a small sigh and placed her cup down as Cherry ‘subtly’ added a pretzel to her plate drawing a small smile from Elyse “We didn’t have the museum then and never more than a handful of residents but people came. By horse, London Zoo was quite a journey and it would be at least a decade before the underground was built. Now? Well, it’s a lot more difficult and our costs have spiralled. No one tried to rehabilitate the animals back then or ensure that their feed was well balanced. I fear if things continue as they are, we will close the doors early next year”

Cherry listened carefully despite the draw of the pretzels. That didn’t stop her biting into one as she listened though. Her attention wavered slightly as it broke in her mouth, the salt contrasting with the sweet chocolate in a rather unexpected way. She paused before taking another bite. Who knew salt and chocolate would work?

“I’m sure it won’t come to that” said Cherry with a soft smile. It was clear Elyse really cared about this place and Cherry certainly didn’t want to see the animals lose their homes “Can you tell me as much as you can about what has been happening. After that, I’d like to see the enclosures”

Elyse nodded reaching over to take a pretzel herself “It started a few days ago. Our cleaner is on holiday just now so I’ve been trying to mop the museum at night. I was cleaning up and I heard the animals getting upset, I went out quickly of course. Sometimes foxes get into the garden and scare our smaller residents.” She paused slightly and her eyes widened “Oh, I am sorry. We never hurt them of course, only chase them away...”

Cherry shook her head with a small smile “I am not a fox but I am still glad you don’t hurt them”

Elyse nodded, her expression still suggesting she felt she had made a major faux pas “Ah, well, when I went out, there was nothing there but an hour or so later the same thing happened. Again, I went out and couldn’t see anything but it was clear the animals were agitated. I put on some of the security lights. I don’t like doing that as it can affect their sleep but I wasn’t sure what else I could do”

Cherry finished her pretzel and took a deep drink of her tea, enjoying the slightly bitter scent as much as the flavour. She wondered briefly what Rosa was up to but forced herself to focus as Elyse paused “And this repeated in future nights?”

“Not exactly” replied Elyse “The next day many of them didn’t seem themselves, they seemed tired and sluggish but we put it down to a bad night’s sleep. We heard some grumbles from the guests but most people are used to visiting zoos and sometimes seeing an empty enclosure”

Cherry nodded.

“Next night it happened again, well sort of. They didn’t seem to get as agitated but they definitely seemed disturbed. I thought I heard some weird screeching noises but every time I went to investigate there was nothing there. After that, I didn’t hear any more noises but our poor animals didn’t recover.” She bit her lip slightly, obviously distressed “Some of our residents have held up better than others but they are all still sluggish and unresponsive. Many won’t budge from their dens at all anymore. Our resident vet performed several blood samples but apart from a few showing signs of anaemia, he didn’t find anything wrong. We have out them on Iron supplements but so far it hasn’t helped”

“Do you know if anyone else in the area has had problems? Is this the first time you have had issues like this?”

“No, though our neighbours aren’t really in during the evenings. There is an office block to our left but it’s rarely open past dinner and I think the house to our right is part of someone’s investment portfolio. It’s rarely visited”

Cherry placed her empty cup down and drummed her fingers against her shoulder “All right. Well, unless there is anything you would like to add, I think it’s probably time to take a look at the sanctuary”

At first glance you could be forgiven for mistaking the sanctuary for a country garden. Little copses of small trees and well-tended flowerbeds flanked little bridges and pathways that delved deeper into the surprisingly large space. Miniature buildings and mesh fences stuck their heads above the sculpted fauna and the sounds of insects and occasional flash of a butterfly showed that the gardens drew a significant amount of nature beyond its rescued residents.

Cherry spent a few moments taking in the space as Elyse closed the museum door behind her. The sanctuary while still small, was far larger than she had expected. It looked like at some point they must have purchased the gardens of several adjacent properties and merged them into a single plot. She supposed that the buildings turned offices would not have much use for them and the sanctuary could make better use of the space. They were also not alone it seemed and she could pick out at least two gardeners in blue overalls, removing branches with a set of shears from one of the small patches of trees.

“Normally” Elyse said “The sanctuary would be a lot noisier than this but many of our residents will be sleeping. Even those that are awake are much quieter than normal. The silence might seem peaceful but to me, it’s almost frightening”

Cherry's ears twitched. Elyse was right. Even to her enhanced ears there was remarkably little sound apart from the assorted buzzing of insect life and the quiet, focused work of the gardeners. She could pick out a slight rustling from the nearest enclosure, a tall, glass fronted structure filled with long ropes, branches and wooden platforms. Elyse must have noticed her looking because she spoke up.

"That's our chipmunk enclosure, though, we have kept other animals there in the past. We are currently looking after three, Ollie, Chestnut and Cinnamon but they barely leave their nest. Normally they would be running, climbing and playing at the moment but we have hardly seen them since this whole thing started. They were always popular with visiting children and now there is nothing to see. The same story is repeated across the Sanctuary"

Cherry frowned slightly "That does seem strange" she moved up to take a closer look at the cage, Serra trailing behind. She spent a few minutes in quiet examination as Elyse waited, hands clasped in polite silence. The cage was large and rather well appointed. It was clear that the Sanctuary took the health of their animals seriously. A large food bowl sat filled with seeds and nuts in one corner next to a tiny artificial pond, fed from a small plastic tube hidden amongst a series of delicately placed stones. She could hear the animals moving, hear them draw and release breath but it was slow, or at least it seemed so to her. Had that been the only sign of problems, she would have suspected in her inexperienced opinion, that the animals were ill or perhaps just unhappy but there was something else, something that Elyse was unlikely to have noticed.

The glass cage did surprisingly little to block scents and she could pick up the earthy mulch of the chipmunks bedding, the mild, musky odour of the animals themselves and a faint, stale scent from a small cache of nuts hidden somewhere, left to dry. Underneath all this however, barely noticeable even to her senses, was an unpleasant, chemical odour that she did not recognise. It was clearly out of place and she might have suspected that it was a remnant of some aggressive industrial bleach had the scent been more ubiquitous.

"Can you show me the rest of the Sanctuary" she asked "Do you have any idea where the sounds you heard were coming from?"

"I always got the impression it was towards the back but let me show you around. I am afraid not many of our residents are likely to greet you but perhaps you might wish to return once this sorry affair has been resolved"

Cherry gave her a warm smile "Well of course I would like to. Hopefully we can work out what has been going on and get everyone smiling again"

Elyse returned her smile though it seemed to struggle to touch her eyes. She just looked exhausted and there was an element of defeat there too. Cherry glanced back to the cage. What was that smell? Perhaps it wasn't significant, maybe she was picking up the residue of something used to clean the paving stones or some unpleasant medicine used by the resident vet to try and coax them back into life but it felt significant. Elyse walked past her, moving with that same grace despite her obvious fatigue. Cherry hoped she could help. Elyse seemed kind and neither she nor the resident animals deserved whatever was happening here.

Serra's voice drifted up from below "Go with Elyse. I am going to have my own look around"

“Uhm, all right” said Cherry, bending to scratch lightly at her neck. “We can meet back at the museum door” her voice dropped low “Did you smell that?”

Serra nodded “Yeah. Do you know what it is?”

Cherry shook her head “No...I thought it might be bleach but, I’m not really sure”

“That wasn’t bleach. I have my suspicions but I need to investigate for a bit. Go with Elyse, we can share notes later”

Cherry straightened and looked up. Elyse had stopped a little ahead and was waiting patiently, obviously standing just far enough ahead to give the pair privacy. Cherry moved forward a few steps and gave her a smile “Okay, let’s go”

Elyse nodded and started up again “Serra is going to look around on her own? I suppose she naturally will have a unique perspective”

“Serra likes to be pretty independent, when it suits her anyway. She might be a paragon but she is still a cat”

Elyse’s lips twitched slightly “I don’t know much about Paragons but it is fascinating to meet one. I’ve wondered sometimes if they could help us here. Could they have unique insights into the problems we have? Could a Paragon talk to our animals and tell us how they’re feeling? Help us understand their needs?”

“Ah” said Cherry “Well they can’t actually talk to animals or at least none of the ones I have met could. They probably do have a better idea what they want but they couldn’t act as a translator”

“Oh” she said with obvious disappointment “That’s a shame. I’ve always thought life would be so much easier if we could just talk to them. Anyway, we have reached our next stop. A lot of these enclosures are general purpose and just now we have a small family of Racoons living in this one. It’s a bit small for them to be honest but we got them tagged and we let them out while the Park is open. They like to dig so we have to keep an eye on them but it’s the best we can do without a bigger enclosure. The last few days though, if we open the doors they don’t leave. They haven’t in some time”

Cherry crouched down, looking through the chicken wire that criss-crossed between the wooden fence posts. Elyse had called the enclosure small but it seemed pretty big to Cherry, still, she supposed that some animals needed a lot of space and others weren’t suitable to be caged at all.

“Racoons aren’t native to the UK” explained Elyse “These little guys were imported illegally and they can’t be released into the wild. We are looking at exporting them back overseas once they have been rehabilitated but unfortunately, the only enclosure we have large enough for them is being used by Charlie”

Cherry didn’t think she had seen a raccoon before and unfortunately it didn’t look like that was going to change today. A small wooden hut sat somewhere towards the back of the enclosure and

from the soft, subtle sounds she was picking up, she suspected they were awake and moving. She spent a moment examining the cage before drawing air through her nose. The racoon scent was almost immediately identifiable despite not having encountered them before. It was pungent and musky. Not particularly unpleasant but that chemical smell was there too and maybe even a little stronger.

Cherry stood back and Elyse seemed to sense that she was finished. She brushed down her dress to clear some arboreal flotsam that the autumn winds had gifted her. "It's a real shame" she said "I feel bad for our raccoons even when they seemed happy. A lot of our residents shouldn't be here and we actively try and find them better homes in Zoo's or through relocation projects but without us, a lot would be put down. People are really irresponsible when importing pets"

Cherry hadn't really thought about that before. The nearest thing she had ever had to a pet was Serra and neither of them thought of their relationship in those terms. She had always liked animals and had been aware that people kept pets beyond cats and dogs but had not considered the consequences "Does this always happen? When people have unusual pets do they always end up somewhere like this?"

"No" Elyse said as they walked "I don't think a lot of these animals should ever be kept as pets but some owners do look after them. It depends somewhat on the animal, our chipmunks for example will probably be adopted eventually and can make good pets but our racoons never will be. They will need to either go to a larger sanctuary or go back home"

The pattern repeated as they moved through the gardens. Each enclosure was well build with its contents obviously chosen and maintained with care, yet rarely were their residents to be seen. In many cases, Cherry's enhanced senses would confirm that they were awake and moving inside their dens but with the exception of a pair of fruit bats sleeping upside down from a heavy tree branch, she didn't actually see any. That chemical scent followed her too, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker but it was present at almost every cage. She still wasn't sure what it meant but Serra seemed to have some idea and the cat probably had the more sensitive nose.

Eventually they reached Charlie's cage, an unroofed perimeter fence that could be walked around and viewed from any angle. It was large and yet compared to big-cat installations she had seen elsewhere, it didn't seem enough. The enclosure was densely appointed however and contained a variety of plants and trees. A little hut like structure had been formed from a series of 'fallen' logs while a small climbing frame of posts and ropes sat at one side. Unlike many of the other animals, Charlie was visible but he was slumbering, eyes half closed at the entrance to the wooden den.

"It's too small" said Elyse "But it's five times larger than the cage we rescued him from. We are in talks with Longleat about moving him to their safari park but we are worried at how he will integrate with the animals there. We were training him but he hasn't been responding very well. You could probably walk in there and be perfectly safe. He probably wouldn't do more than look at you." She paused and glanced at Cherry "Not that you should."

Cherry hummed slightly. The leopard had seemed to turn to look at them and shifted slightly to rest his head on an impressive paw. It did seem lazy, though perhaps tired was a better word or maybe satiated. Cherry did consider going to examine him for a moment. What Elyse had not taken into account was that shifters were stronger and faster than humans. She had never 'fought' a leopard

before and for a moment, the absurdity of the image caused her lips quirk but she had no doubt she could handle it if she had to. She didn't want to cause him any unnecessary distress though. Whatever had happened here was not normal and the animals did not need to be disturbed further.

She scented the air and frowned. The chemical smell was stronger here than at any other cage. She walked slowly around the enclosure, focusing on the scents and sounds that surrounded her as Elyse waited patiently. Interestingly, the scent was not everywhere and instead she picked it up in drips and drabs as she moved. Sometimes, she would catch the scent on the wind, drifting from within the enclosure itself but in other places, it seemed to stain the paving stones beneath her. It wasn't exactly a trail and it didn't seem like the kind of scent caused by something caustic moving through the park. It was too broken up, too patchy to be some shadowed creature dashing through the sanctuary at night.

Cherry spent several moments thinking silently after her circuit had brought her back to Elyse. "The Buildings" she said eventually "What's in them"

"Reptiles mostly" she replied "We have a small insect house but we are planning to repurpose it soon. There isn't much demand to rescue insects anymore and it's mostly empty"

"Have they been affected?"

Elyse frowned slightly "No. I should have mentioned that earlier. Those are usually locked at night, so I always assumed whatever it was couldn't or didn't try to get in"

Cherry nodded "All right, well, I think I will need to meet with Serra and Rosa to discuss our next steps. Before I go, I will need to discuss how much time you want us to allocate but we can do that when we are back inside. Usually Rosa does that stuff but she would be annoyed with me if I didn't."

"I understand. Thank you for your help" she said with a soft smile "Even if you don't work out what's going on, just knowing someone is looking into things makes me feel better. As you can imagine, the police were not very interested in some tired animals"

"I guess I can understand." Cherry said "Unless it was the SPF and they believed there was a supernatural element, they probably wouldn't show much interest."

Elyse looked back to Charlie's enclosure and paused. She seemed to be weighing up whether to speak, as if afraid of the answer "Did, did you notice anything?"

Cherry paused herself, unsure whether she should reveal her findings. "A scent" she said eventually "I don't know for sure it's important but it's present at almost all the cages. Serra has been looking for it too. We will probably come back with Rosa at some point to investigate further"

Elyse nodded uncertainly, as if not quite sure how to take that information "You will be welcome anytime of course and hopefully you will visit us in better times."

Cherry gave her a warm smile "Not hopefully, certainly!"