

THE Wolf Bane



SADHBH FROST

THE WOLF BANE

Societas Aenigmatum

Book 1

SADHBH FROST

Fungous Anthropoid Productions

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*For Wendi,
who supports all of my nonsense*

Prologue: Livinia Monroe

She held aloft the hourglass that she'd filled with her life's blood. The ritual was nearly complete. All that she had to do was smash this on the consecrated altar, and her legacy would be assured. The lives of everyone associated with the Society for Preternatural Investigations, in this branch and all the others, had amounted to nothing. Extra-dimensional incursion continued unchallenged. The beings that hid at the edges of human civilization had not been assimilated into society. All she could hope now was that the knowledge they'd accumulated would be useful to future generations.

She would watch over the books and papers. They would grow under her care, and she'd familiarize herself with their contents. This was the only purpose left to her, and she would sacrifice her life to achieve it. She brought her hand down sharply, smashing the hourglass and spilling her blood on the sigil she'd drawn. The force of the spell tore her body apart, but she felt no pain. Her mind had already been ejected into an empty realm.

Livinia Monroe, the person, was no more. She'd expected to become a spirit inhabiting the library, but what remained of her didn't seem to be anywhere. There wasn't even darkness.

Without a body there could be no senses, not as she understood them, and she saw nothing—felt nothing. She wondered how she would interact with the world.

Then the world returned. All of it, all at once. She was lost in a barrage of shifting experiences, none lingering long enough to identify. Images, feelings, thoughts—all coming too quickly to process as more than a constant assault on her mind. Battered by the stream of moments, she careened through centuries without processing anything.

She was outside of time, and thus it was impossible to know how long she spent in this torrent of experiences. Eventually she held onto a scene for a split second. It was not long enough to catch anything identifiable, but it created a noticeable interruption in the chaos. She tried to recreate that brief reprieve but had no idea how it had happened. It was hard to form thoughts in the midst of everything happening all at once. After focusing her thoughts, she realized that everything was the very problem. Her mind was processing hundreds of thousands of years, all of which had occurred in the instant of her spell's conclusion.

The book that had described the ritual had cautioned that spirits could only experience events through recollections, unable to use their memories to apply knowledge out of linear sequence. This sensory torrent must be her future memories expanding too rapidly for her to filter. She wondered when she'd start remembering what had happened and what she'd done. What she'd learned. Who she'd met.

She could not cry, but she felt sad. She'd chosen to risk this, in part, because all who knew her well were gone. Some still lived, though they'd drifted away after the end of the Society. Only one remained in contact, but she was neither dead nor technically alive. Janice Altura wasn't a close friend, but she understood loneliness and lack of purpose. Livinia thought now that it would be nice to see her again.

For a heartbeat she saw Miss Altura, sitting carelessly on

the loveseat in the mansion's parlor. She—no, *it* now—wore a black dress, trimmed in lace, with black lace-up boots and long black velvet gloves. Its face was covered in white foundation, contrasting starkly against the rich red of its lips and the deep black of its heavy eyeshadow and long hair. Silver jewelry glittered from its pale hands, neck, ears, and waist. As ever, its face revealed no emotion.

"Dead gals are the cat's whiskers now," it said.

The moment was gone. Livinia didn't know when that had happened or what Janice had been talking about, but she felt glad that they had met again at least once. Given the nature of Janice's existence, they could have known each other for centuries.

The chaos of her experiences settled into another memory. She sat in the mansion's attic, crowded with disused furniture and boxes whose contents were long forgotten. There was a small candelabrum on a table next to her, and a book lay open in her hands. She knew it was an adventure story from the Noram Empire, which had collapsed over a thousand years earlier. Though her watching mind had never encountered Norashan, her mind at that time knew it well. She was reading the book aloud to Miss Altura, who lay unmoving on a nearby sofa. Though it appeared to simply be asleep, the Livinia of the experience knew it had been in this state for almost four hundred years. Neither quite alive nor fully dead, Miss Altura had always had periods of deep rest, and they'd increased in frequency and duration until it was uncertain whether it would ever wake up again.

The Livinia that read to her friend knew that she could navigate future memories to see how Miss Altura would fare, but she had long ago abandoned such self-indulgent queries. The futures were many, and finding one risked bringing it to fruition, a risk she had decided to stop taking long ago.

This attitude of her remembered self made her curious. Had something happened because of seeing the future? Had

she been able to communicate what she'd seen out of historical order?

With a little more practice, she felt that she could navigate her memories. Perhaps she had best focus on finding the moment of the spell's casting and progress through time linearly for a while.

Part One

THE PHANTOM WOLF

CHAPTER ONE

The Package

The moving cell was horrible. The noise hurt my ears, and all the bouncing made me feel sick. My old cell had a bed where I could rest and a window to let in light. This was nothing but a dark metal box with no fresh air. When it finally stopped and the rumbling from the front ended, I was tired and sore. The doors opened, and I could see it was daylight. I didn't know what time of day it was, and everything was gray and cold, and I just wanted to crawl into my new cell and eat something.

The guards dragged me out and walked me up the outside of a long building. I went along quietly. They hadn't had to threaten or punish me since I was much smaller. Long before they'd started keeping my head shaved. They trusted me to do that myself now, and it felt natural to me. I couldn't remember why I'd cried when they'd cut off all my hair.

The air was different here. Less cold than at home, but not by a lot. It felt humid, and I thought it might rain tonight. Some guards said they could tell if rain was coming from the clouds, but I had no idea how. For me it was a smell and a feeling in the air. There was a hint of it now, but it wasn't strong enough to know for sure.

Dry orange and yellow papers skidded along the floor

outside, blown by the breeze. The guards had mentioned leaves falling again, and I wondered if that's what these were. I'd never seen one close up, but the colors seemed to match some of the trees I could see. They were really pretty before they fell.

The steps were a problem for me. There weren't any in my cell, and I'd never left it until they brought me to the moving cell. I did my best to keep up with them so they wouldn't get mad, but I had to watch my feet the whole way up. By the time we reached a flat surface again, I was able to put only one foot on a step like they did. I felt proud of learning it so quickly.

We walked past several doors and windows, and I looked at all of them. Everything else was too much. It scared me. There was no ceiling, and the walls were far away from each other. I didn't recognize most of it. I'd seen similar things in my dream wanderings but had avoided them because I'd smelled people. Doors and windows were familiar. It was nice to think there were cells behind each of them. There were so many next to each other that I wondered if this was a prison. Some of the guards watched shows on the screen at their station, and they liked it when people were put in prison cells. No one had ever told me what I'd done to be put in mine. Maybe someone told me when I was too young to remember it.

We met another guard, who stood outside of a cell. She stuck a card into the door and led us through. Back home, a guard would open my cell from the security desk to let the doctor in. I didn't have time to think about that, because this cell was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

It was large. My old one could fit in it twice. And it was filled with things. The floor was completely covered in a rug that felt a lot better than the cold floors I'd just been on. The cot was so large that I guessed there'd be other people in the cell with me. Probably not the guards. They liked to be on the other side of the door from me. There were a few lamps and

small tables, and framed drawings on the wall. A large desk of some kind sat across from the bed. On top of it was a very large screen. I saw a door to another, smaller cell. That was probably for me. The guards would be stationed here.

I went straight to the cell in back as the guards looked over theirs. Mine was dark and small. There wasn't even a window. It had a good toilet and sink, but they took up most of the space. The rest was a strange bed. It looked to me like a large sink, complete with faucet and drain. There was a shower head above it. I didn't like the thought of sleeping there, but at least I could stay clean. There were a lot of towels, too, and I could use them to make it more comfortable.

I heard the guard come in, but I was surprised when a light came on above me. That would help when they shut me in. I turned and watched as he looked over the cell. He took most of the towels, a roll of toilet paper, and a small tool I didn't recognize. I followed to the doorway as he left and saw him go all the way outside. So much for making the bed nicer.

"You good for a while?" he asked the guard outside.

"I'll keep it quiet," she told him.

The other one who brought me in was gone. The one who'd let us in came inside and locked the door behind her. She picked something up from the desk and sat in a chair by the window. After examining the thing, she pointed it at the screen and squeezed it. The screen came on, showing people talking to each other in their own large chairs.

I stared at the screen. I'd heard shows before but never seen one. I couldn't tell where the people were. It seemed like a large empty room at first, but then suddenly the screen was filled with more people than I'd ever seen, sitting so close together that it was hard to make out their chairs. They didn't look as comfortable, but I was standing on a cold hard floor, so I guessed they were okay. Then the screen showed one of the people talking again, but this time all I could see was her head and upper body. What was happening? Guards had

talked about filming, acting, and editing, so I knew this had all happened somewhere else and been put together, but I had no idea what to make of it changing so often.

The image shrank into a corner as the rest of the screen filled with long boxes of text. They'd never taught me how to read, so it was just a lot of white figures on a blue background. One line was bigger than the others, and it started moving down the screen. After it moved a few times I realized that the row had stayed put, but the size difference was moving through them all. I saw the guard squeezing the thing in her hand, so it had to be her doing. While I watched her, the sound from the screen changed, and a familiar voice replaced the others. Lieutenant Buster Grimes of the homicide unit. His image filled the whole screen now as he talked to the medical examiner.

I'd heard *Major Indictments* many times from my cell. It was strange seeing Grimes at last. He was older than I'd thought he sounded. The medical examiner was pretty, but what got my attention was the victim's body. I'd never seen a dead body, but the actor looked truly awful. It was honestly amazing.

"Get the fuck out here and sit on the bed where I can see you," the guard ordered.

I came out and crawled onto the bed. There were four pillows, and all of them were thick. I pushed on one, and my hands sank into it. Poking at the others had the same effect. On impulse, I started slapping them, enjoying the soft noise they made as my hands hit.

"Hey!"

I'd forgotten myself. The guard was angry. She'd granted me the privilege to come into her station, and I'd already screwed up. I stopped what I was doing immediately and made myself small. I squished my mouth and widened my eyes, letting her know I was sorry. Some of them didn't like it when I said I was sorry, but they all liked it when I looked "like a whipped puppy."

I quietly stacked the pillows and rested against them, watching *Major Indictments* with the guard. By the end of the second murder case, I'd learned how to follow the story. The images helped more than I'd expected, especially once I started to recognize the different places the actors moved between. The hardest thing to understand was how free they all were to move around. Some parts happened outside, and there were so many people just walking around. Were there really so few of us not allowed to leave our cells?

Would I be let out from my new cell sometimes? I hoped it would be bigger, like this one, with a screen for shows and a lot of soft pillows. I wouldn't even mind sharing it with a guard. The bed was certainly big enough. I thought about what it would be like to sleep next to this one, but like all the guards she didn't like to be near me. It would be awkward.

I'd gotten used to the sounds coming from outside. Even over the noise of the screen, I could hear a lot of what happened out there. Mostly it was people walking and talking loudly to each other, but every now and then there were rumbles that sounded like the moving cell. Other guards were coming or going.

Then there was something new. A cracking sound, followed by something landing on the floor outside. The guard noticed too, and she quickly crouched down. She looked scared, maybe because her gun seemed to be stuck. The last thing she'd said was for me to get on the bed, but I didn't figure she was going to complain if I hid. I rolled off on the side away from the window and slid quietly to the floor.

The window broke, and I saw the guard move toward the door. Something landed on the rug, and my heart shook at the sound it made. While I was still confused by that, someone came in. Everything was quieter now, but I could still kind of hear things. There were a few more cracks and something else fell. I recognized the sound of the door lock, then the door opening. I didn't think these people were my new guards, and I doubted they would be nice to me. The one who came

in through the door saw me peeking over the bed. He sent the first one out and came closer to me.

He held a gun pointed at me, and all I could do was shake. I hadn't even done anything. I'd been good for years. Was this because the doctor had said I was getting long teeth? He was very worried about my eggs, which he accused me of losing. I didn't know how I was doing that, but I knew that these were important to my keepers. Maybe I'd lost too many.

The man stopped at the end of the bed, not looking at me.

"When I go into the bathroom, run!" he said. "Don't let anyone find you!"

With that, he went into my cell.

He did seem like a guard, so I followed his order. I hurried across the bed and jumped out the window. Living in a cell hadn't let me learn how to do that kind of thing, and I landed badly, but I got up and ran for the stairs. Shouts came from behind me as I hurried down the steps. My only experience with running had been in dreams, and there I had four legs. I made it down to the ground, but I slipped and fell the last few feet. My left foot hurt when I got back up, but I had to keep moving.

Ignoring the pain, I ran in the direction I faced. Cars almost hit me as I sped across streets. Thanks to Detective Grimes I knew what those looked like now. As I kept going, the pain in my ankle became less important. I felt like I could do this for a while longer if I had to, but I wanted to find a place to stop.

Look for a hole. One you can crawl into.

That seemed like a good idea, but I couldn't see anything likely. There had been boxes and barrels in the shows I'd just watched, and they'd been in the narrow spaces between buildings. Alleys, that was it. I ran a few more blocks before I started to see any of those. From there I ran as much as possible through these smaller streets. There wasn't anything large enough to climb into. I'd expected to find people living

in small containers, but they weren't any where I passed through.

At last I saw a large building made of rocks that had large, blocky plants all around it. I thought I might be able to fit in between them, so I ran onto the grass. These boxy plants were very thick, though, and they were very close to each other and to the ground. There wasn't anywhere for me to hide here.

There were square holes next to the building, and there were windows in them. I crept over to take a look. Two of the three had crossed bars over them. One of those and the uncovered one had lights on in the cells behind the windows. I went to the dark window. There were leaves at the bottom of the hole, and it would be deep enough to hide me without my getting stuck down there. If only the bars weren't there.

I reached down to see if I could move them. They were heavy, but I found I could pull them out entirely. I slid them out partway and let myself down. The leaves crunched underneath me, making me afraid of guards hearing. I pulled the bars back in place and buried myself in the leaves. It was damp underneath them, but I was too tired to think much about that. My eyes closed, my breathing slowed, and I fell asleep. In my dreams I explored this new place, favoring my back left leg and searching for a den.

CHAPTER TWO

Elena Arana

Three bodies over two adjoining rooms and the walkway in between. All of them dressed in tactical gear. Not to a military level, she'd seen those guys pass through bases on their way to missions. These were minor contractors. Most of them hadn't even drawn their Glocks. The one who did, the victim in the room with the broken window, hadn't turned off the safety.

Detective Arana didn't like it. She didn't like that they were at the Kersh Inn, she didn't like that they had been amateur soldiers, and she especially didn't like that someone had taken them down so easily. Possibly multiple suspects, better trained and better armed. This one could wreck her close rate. Worse, there was no indication yet whether there was more violence to come.

She looked at the outside victim's identification. Massachusetts. Why the hell were they in Shale, Michigan? Detective Paris called up to her from the parking lot.

"Lena! Found their ride!"

Elena went down the steps, looking for anything that might be useful to the investigation. A few cigarette butts, a shred of paper, and what might be bloodstains. She made a mental note to send their overworked technician to collect

those, then walked out to where Paris stood beside a gray Mercedes SUV with a small trailer hitched to it.

"Massachusetts plates?" she asked.

Paris nodded.

"Don't suppose you brought the keys down?"

Elena shook her head.

"Haven't looked for them yet. There's a lot to document up there."

Paris led the way to the back of the trailer.

"Locked. But check this out."

She knocked on the metal door, and the sound echoed.

"Hear it?"

She rapped on it again, and Elena concentrated on the sound.

"I don't hear anything, Charli."

Paris waggled a finger triumphantly.

"Exactly! You find any luggage up there?"

"A few small bags in one room," Elena told her.

"Uh-huh. Three people, one SUV, a couple handguns, a bag or two. What's the trailer for?"

"It's for—" she started, then she realized what her partner was trying to say. "It's for something that's not in the rooms and probably isn't inside it anymore either."

Paris gave her finger guns and followed with a mic drop.

"Boom. Motive."

Elena frowned. "Or they're on their way to pick something up. Or they already dropped it off."

"Spoilsport."

"There's a reason no one wants to work with you, Charli. Ideas aren't facts."

Paris started walking toward the stairs. "No one besides you, chica!"

"I'm going to break those stupid finger guns," Elena called after her.

Paris was impulsive and often insensitive, but just this once Elena hoped the junior detective was on to something.

At the very least, the trailer could go a long way to explaining what they'd been doing several states away from home. It looked like a rental. She took a photo of the license plate, the stenciled number on the door, and the telephone number. After she forwarded them to her work email, her phone alerted her to an incoming message.

She opened her DMs, and there was a picture of Charli gloating while dangling a keychain by her face. Elena put her phone back in her pocket and hoped this case wouldn't be as bad as she'd first feared.

CHAPTER THREE

Dale Alexander

The pharmacist came back with a bag filled with my estradiol and injection supplies. Between this prescription, the antidepressants, and the amphetamines, we'd seen a lot of each other.

"You want me to ring up the pop too, ma'am?"

I nodded and set the cold bottle of Diet Dr. Pepper on the counter. I'd never stuck with voice training, so I tried not to talk in public. I paid and took the bag. There was a woman behind me, glaring. Did she suspect, or was she just mad about my mask? I left quickly.

The wind had picked up while I'd been inside, and I pulled the drawstrings of my hoodie tight. I'd wanted to crack open the bottle on my walk back to the apartment but decided it was just a little too cold. I probably should've taken a break to pick up the prescriptions earlier in the day, before the sky became uniformly gray.

Dried leaves shushed across the sidewalk, scurrying across my path. If the rain actually fell, they'd stop being fun. Passing a lamp, I saw that several leaves had piled around its base, and I allowed myself a few vigorous stomps. The brittle crunches were satisfying, but I felt myself drawing attention.

A grown woman wasn't supposed to enjoy such things anymore.

I'd reached Remembrance Park when I heard the whimper. It was only about twenty square feet of grass and a few concrete benches surrounded by hedges, but there was a small plaque commemorating two local soldiers who'd died in World War I, so it got to be a park. I thought that a small child might have made the noise, so I peeked inside. Thankfully, no kid in sight, but there was a large dog curled up in a shadowy corner of the hedgerow. It was roughly the size of Thea, my former in-laws' German shepherd. Much shorter ears, though, and fur like a pale yellow lab. I immediately loved it, though it was understandably wary of me. I pulled down my mask to look more comforting.

"Hey, there, pup," I said, calling on my voice training to hit a more reassuring register. "Was that you crying? Are you okay?"

The dog whined and crawled toward me a little, dragging one back foot. It seemed ready to trust anyone who showed it attention. My heart broke, and I kind of understood. I was done with people now, too.

I crouched down, steadying myself with my free hand. "Does your paw hurt? Where's your owner?"

The dog pulled its head back and gave me the side-eye. It didn't have a collar. No owner, or one that didn't care.

"Kicked out, huh? Yeah, me too."

I wasn't sure how to help. I'd heard that wounded animals could lash out unexpectedly, and this dog was too large to take chances with. I could call for help, but would that be best? There were lots of dogs that needed homes. Would they bother healing an injured one or just put it down? I vowed to check online once I got home. Maybe post on the city board.

I set down my bag, pulled my phone out, and took a picture of the poor thing. It blinked irritably at the flash, which I'd forgotten to turn off.

I picked up my bag, stood up, and pulled my mask back in place. "Gotta go, fur friend. I'll let people know you're here."

I tried not to think about the sad light blue eyes that followed me as I walked away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mike Lakeland

He'd called off immediate pursuit of the package, hoping that the extra time would let the young woman escape. There hadn't been a lot of pushback, since they'd had to flee the hotel, swap vehicles, and change clothes before the police could find them. By the time they could safely return to the area, she would have had to be sitting on a bench with a big sign for them to find her.

Mike took a calming breath and called his boss.

"Explain to me about why I heard news reports before I heard from you," she said by way of greeting.

"The package escaped. I wanted to locate it before reporting in."

"And did you? Did you fucking find it?"

He steeled himself.

"Unfortunately, not yet."

"So you fucked up, decided to try to correct it before admitting your failure, couldn't fix it, and finally decided to let me know what was happening. Do I have that right, Lakeland?"

"Ma'am—"

"Find my package. Find it and destroy it. That's the fucking job."

With that, she hung up. Mike rubbed the bridge of his nose. She'd always been testy, but this job had been especially tense from the beginning. Not only did she want them to use deadly force, but she seemed to be much more personally invested. He suspected it had little to do with the business jobs he usually did for her, but he really didn't care. He wasn't going to assassinate a woman who was being ferried like cargo, and he didn't want to know what any of this was about.

He chose a few people to keep searching through the night. They weren't likely to succeed, but it would show they were trying and would run up the expenses. They'd need to mount a more believable search in the morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dale Alexander

My pizza was turning in the microwave. I sat on my secondhand couch guzzling the pop. After a thoroughly glamorous belch, I picked up my laptop and opened the browser. The tab for my professional email account showed notifications, so I opened it and looked through them. More project meetings. I marked them as read without RSVPing.

One was interesting: a pipeline alert. The details indicated that it was an infrastructure issue, not the code. I checked the time, and it was after five o'clock. No chance anyone else was going to look into it. I fired up the VPN for my client's network and started poring over the logs for details of the issue.

When my stomach started growling, I glanced at the time again. Nearly half past seven. I kicked off the pipeline for another check and got up to put the cold pizza on a paper plate. I'd forgotten to put more pop cans in the fridge, so I grabbed one out of the box. I sat back on the couch, folded the pizza in half, and ate it like a cold sandwich while watching the job run. It took twenty minutes, which I should probably address at some point, but it worked.

I logged into my timesheet and added the extra hours for

the day. I would hit the forty hour limit sometime on Thursday, as usual. Mandatory meetings would eat a chunk of that, leaving me very little time to do any work the rest of the week. I hated having nothing to do, but I didn't work for free. A few months back they'd offered me a salaried position, but I knew that without a cap on hours I'd put in around seventy a week. The math just didn't work out. Plus, my therapist kept trying to get me to have a social life. Make friends and do things with them.

I wasn't ready yet. It was hard enough smiling through the small talk before every meeting. Meeting people in person, talking, laughing—that just wasn't me anymore. Not since everyone had sided with Liz. I still sometimes thought they'd been right. I'd certainly made it easy to abandon me. Therapy voice intruded on my thoughts to call bullshit on me. It thought I deserved happiness as much as that stray did.

The wounded dog.

I took a look at the picture I'd taken of it. Everything in the background was crisp from the flash, but the dog looked badly superimposed over the image. It seemed almost transparent, especially where the light was most intense. Weird effect, but I figured there was enough there to enhance. I might need to get creative with the middle though.

It took an hour to alter the photo enough to look reasonable. I used a stamp to fill in the missing parts and did my best to smudge it into looking less like that's what I'd done. It wasn't professional, but it just needed to get the pup recognized. I uploaded it to the Shale message board along with a note about where I found the dog, how scared it was, its injury, and how much I wanted to keep it myself.

I deleted that last part and hit post.

It might rain tonight. I should probably just go check on the dog. Maybe get it something to eat. Give it shelter for the night. Take it to the vet in the morning. Shit. I was already getting attached.

But I should still check.

CHAPTER SIX

Janice Altura

It had been monitoring local sites since the incident at the Kersh Inn, looking for a way to pique Livinia's interest. This was admittedly unlikely, but it had felt the need to try. The attack had certainly been strange enough to raise its own curiosity but lacked that touch of the paranormal that might get through to its host. Rather, the *preternatural*. That had always been her obsession.

There was an intriguing wrinkle to the multiple shootings, but it remained unverified for the moment. Witnesses had reported seeing a bald young woman in a simple gray dress flee the inn at the time of the event. There'd been a few sightings, but no one had found her yet. Nobody else staying there had confessed to knowing who she was. She might have come with the victims, but no one had seen her before the trouble started.

Janice used social media scrapers to sift through local chatter, and while nothing definitive had appeared about the events at the Kersh Inn, there had been a rash of phantom animal sightings. Those happened now and then and usually turned out to be a feral cat or a mangy dog. The reports this time started as a mountain lion and quickly changed to a blonde wolf. It had deemed these sightings irrelevant until

someone posted an appallingly bad photoshop job that tied in to them. Interestingly, the poster didn't actually seem to be aware of the phantom wolf sightings, unless they were being ironic by suggesting the creature was a lost pet.

The picture was of a blonde wolf in front of a hedge. It had clearly been altered, with an exceedingly clumsy bit of work in the center. There was also an appearance of slight transparency at the edges. Janice downloaded it to run through image analysis software. As it suspected, there was a lot of nonsense in the middle, but the rest surprised her. The wolf had been changed to look denser, but the animal itself was part of the original picture. The creature's outline told the story; it blended perfectly with the background. This was real. Someone had managed to photograph an animal that was an actual phantom and tried to make it look solid for some reason.

It sent the results to a tablet and set up a data scrape for the poster, Dale Alexander, before walking down the hall to knock on the library door. This should get its friend's attention. Several rounds of knocking passed before it heard Livinia approaching the door. One of the strictest house rules was that nobody was to open the library door or enter the room without express permission, which in Janice's experience had never once been granted.

The door opened, and Livinia stood expectantly in the entrance. She was rather short, but Janice still had to look around her to get a peek into the library. As ever, the room looked like a rather ordinary, if old-fashioned, home library.

"Miss Altura. You wished to speak?"

"Peep this, boss."

Livinia took the tablet and read the report, frowning.

"This is authentic?"

"Underneath the phony-baloney, sure."

Livinia handed the device back, looking concerned. Janice smelled victory.

"Have there been any other sightings?"

Janice nodded.

"Loads. This is the only picture that's fake though. How bad is it?"

"A phantom animal may be ignored unless sightings persist. It's typically a simple misidentification. A phantasmal animal, on the other hand—that could be quite dangerous indeed."

Janice waited patiently while Livinia thought over the situation.

"I'm going to research this phenomenon. Please watch for any change in the situation, and send the photographer a discreet message."

She dictated her response, thanked Janice for bringing the matter to her attention, and disappeared back into the library. Janice walked back to the computer room and started testing the security of the Shale message board system. There was no reason why it couldn't have fun while following instructions.