



## **DANGER ZONE ONE**

### **— WEREWOLF ZONE — PART I**

**M**adison held up her wrist, checking the holographic map that projected from her I.DAC bracelet. She glanced away, looking at the deserted industrial sector. A vast majority of the area was still under construction, which explained the clutter of large machinery, equipment, and supplies. Portable light towers were spread around the site, providing a decent amount of illumination, despite no workers occupying the location. Beyond the lights, the darkness of night surrounded the area. The nearby forest could barely be seen from Madison's current position.

Reena shivered in the cold night air. “It's been so hot lately, this sudden change in temperature's chilling me to the bone!”

“Then walk *faster*,” Madison replied, “you'll get warmer.”

“Heh,” Reena chuckled, pointing down to her police uniform, “a skirt sure doesn't help with the cold, either.”

Madison shook her head. “There's no sign of anyone here. I don't even see tracks.”

“I'm confused,” Reena said, “isn't this a job for animal control? Weren't all those people attacked by a dog?”

“No,” Madison countered, “there were *three* reports of large dog attacks. There were also *four* reports of attacks by a man who *looked* like a dog.”

“The two people who were killed out here,” Reena began, “couldn't anyone at the department tell who—or what—was responsible?”

“Forensic reports were inconclusive,” Madison explained. “The hair samples they found at the scene possessed both canine and human DNA. Likewise, the surrounding tracks resembled a large dog, but had characteristics of a human foot.”

Reena shivered again, but this time it wasn't from the cold.

“We're getting nowhere looking around here.” Madison pointed to the outlying forest. “Let's go

deeper.”

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“Aah!” Reena tripped over an exposed tree root. She stumbled forward a few feet before catching her balance.

Madison turned, shining her flashlight on the Rookie. “Watch where you're going!”

Reena's grip tightened on her own flashlight, face red with embarrassment. “S-sorry—I'll be more careful!”

The sound of distant voices caught Madison's attention. She spun towards the source. An orange glow could vaguely be seen, originating deeper into the woods.

“What do you think's going on there?” Reena asked.

“That's what we're going to find out,” Madison responded, already walking off. “Let's move—and try not to trip on anything *else*, will you?”

Reena laughed nervously. “S-sure.”

“Looks like some kind of camp,” Madison muttered to her partner as they entered a small clearing in the woods.

Before them rested a large horse-drawn caravan with writing painted onto its ornate wooden exterior: *Valhdemar's Mysteries and Wonders*. Several men and women, all dressed in strange handmade attire that looked like it belonged in a bygone century, danced around a roaring campfire. Two horses stood near the front of the caravan.

“An old horse-drawn wagon?” Reena gasped. “I've never seen one before—at least, not in person!”

“Never imagined something like this in Pallad City,” Madison said, looking over the wagon.

“This is our first time here,” a raspy voice cut in.

Madison and Reena turned, coming face-to-face with a wrinkled, elderly woman. Easily in her mid eighties, she approached them, cane in hand.

“Who are you?” Madison asked. “What's this all about?”

“My name is Mavena,” the woman answered. “Mavena Valhdemar. We're a performance troupe from Visaria.”

“Visaria?!” Reena repeated, dumbfounded. “The country?”

“You're a long way from home,” Madison added.

“We travel the world,” Mavena said. “We have been to countless countries to perform. Distance is of no concern to us.”

Madison cocked her head to the side. “And what do you perform?”

“The forgotten wonders of Visaria,” Mavena explained. “We have dance and feats never before seen. There is magic, enchantment, the tellings of fortunes—”

“All right,” Madison said, holding a hand up for the woman to stop. “You have a permit to be here?”

“We have no permit,” Mavena replied, shaking her head. “I did not know we needed such a thing.”

Madison gestured to the caravan. “You use any animals in your performances? Specifically, any dogs or—”

“No dogs,” Mavena quickly responded, cutting the officer short. She pointed her cane towards the two horses nearby. “Those are the *only* animals we have.”

“Is there a problem, grandmother?” A handsome young man in his early twenties walked towards the caravan. He had long black hair, blue eyes, and a firm, muscular build.

“No, Barsali,” Mavena said, “everything is fine.”

Barsali's attention shifted to Reena. He offered the girl a friendly smile. “My apologies, we are only a humble group of performers, we mean no trouble.”

“Hi, uh, m-my name's Reena,” the officer said, blushing. “We're with the Pallad City police department.”

Barsali smiled. “Ah, I wish we had such beautiful police in Visaria!”

Reena chuckled, her face flushing a deep crimson.

Madison rolled her eyes. “Look, it's late, you can stay in this area tonight—but tomorrow you either need to get a permit or move along.”

“Thank you,” Mavena replied, “the Valhdemar's are in your debt. We will obtain this permit you speak of.”

“Yeah, well you might want to relocate anyway,” warned Madison. “There's been some attacks in this area and—”

“Attacks?” Barsali asked. “By who?”

“Who—or *what*—we're not sure,” Madison explained. “That's why we're out here investigating. A few people have been attacked, two are dead.”

“We will heed your warning,” Mavena said, her tone grim.

Reena's attention was locked on Barsali. “Yeah, you guys really shouldn't wander around the woods or leave your wagon, it's unsafe!”

“I appreciate your concern for our people,” Barsali replied. “We will abide by your wishes.”

Madison turned. “All right, let's get going, Rookie—we still have a lot of ground to cover.”

“Bye, and stay safe!” Reena said, before following after her partner. Once they were out of earshot, Reena leaned in towards Madison with obvious excitement. “They seem like *really* nice people. And that Barsali—”

“Yeah, I saw you giving him the eye,” Madison groaned. “We're not out here for date night, you know!”

Reena gasped. “Aw, no way, it wasn't anything like that—*honest!*”

“Whatever,” the white-haired officer sighed. “Things will go much faster if we split up. You take the north sector, I'll go east. If you spot anything—and I mean *anything*—immediately contact me via your I.DAC, got it?”

“You bet,” Reena said, cautiously gazing into the dark woods ahead. “B-but are you sure splitting up's a good idea?”

“Don't tell me you're afraid of the dark?” Madison rolled her eyes. “What would Barsali think?”

“I'm n-not afraid!” Reena frantically shook her head. “W-who said I was afraid?”

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Madison had navigated through the shadowy woodland for almost twenty minutes before coming to a stop. The rustling of leaves and crunching of nearby twigs had set her on edge. She aimed her flashlight in the vicinity of the noise, but the meager illumination was little help. The moon overhead, nearly full, had cast a soft glow over the woods, but not enough to provide clear line of sight into the blackened woodland abyss.

Another sound, this time closer, prompted Madison to reach for her Halvok-99. She removed the firearm from its holster.

*Krak. Krak.*

More snapping twigs was all Madison needed to hear. She held her weapon outward. “Come on out, this is the PCPD!”

*Krak. Krak.*

“I’m not going to repeat myself—come out, slowly!” Madison ordered, her icy tone making it clear she wouldn’t think twice about firing. For a moment, she wondered if she was even speaking to a human. The reports had been vague and inconsistent—there was a chance that they weren’t hunting a person, but an animal. Regardless, Madison’s finger inched closer to the trigger. “Last chance or—”

A section of leaves parted and a darkened mass of fur and fury thrust itself forward. The moon’s soft radiance flickered off a set of white jagged fangs, while two fiery eyes—red and inhuman—flared in the foreboding twilight.

Madison gasped and backed up, firing off a round. Then another. She wasn’t sure her bullets had struck their mark. The *thing* in the dark was fast, despite its hulking size. The officer watched as the hairy blur leapt down to all fours, but quickly sprang back up, rising to a full bipedal stance. She could barely make out any of its features in the darkened woods, but could clearly see its large teeth bearing down on her. Instinctively, she threw her left hand upwards, flashlight tight in her grip. The creature’s massive jaw came down on her and sank its fangs into her forearm. The flashlight flew out of her hand, spiraling to the dirt.

“Shit!” Madison cursed, swinging her right hand around—firmly clenching the Halvok. She fired repeatedly, causing the beast to reel back and withdraw. The officer dropped to one knee, wincing from the searing pain in her wrist. She fired at the insidious creature as it retreated into the shadows. Before realizing it, she had discharged her last bullet. The gun was empty, smoke still rising from the barrel. An inhuman series of howls echoed throughout the forest, each one further away than the last.

*What the hell was that thing?!* Madison thought to herself, cradling her wounded forearm. Large teeth marks were embedded in her flesh, allowing a steady stream of blood to flow down her hand and drip onto the grass below. She tried to get to her feet, but her body felt increasingly heavy. Madison’s vision blurred and, an instant later, her head hit the ground. The already dark woods grew darker, until nothing remained but complete and utter blackness.

“Madison! Madison! Wake up!”

Madison stirred on the grass, the Rookie’s voice exploding in her ear. Just the act of opening her eyes felt like a herculean task, but she managed to raise her eyelids. The Rookie crouched over her, fear and panic evident on the girl’s young face.

“Madison!” Reena repeated. “Are you okay? What happened? You’re bleeding!”

Climbing to her knees, Madison looked to her left forearm. It was covered in blood. “S-something came out of the woods. Bit me.”

“So, it *was* an animal?!”

“D-don’t know,” Madison stammered. “Couldn’t see it clearly. B-but it couldn’t be human.”

“First thing’s first—we need to get you to a hospital!” Reena cried, trying to help her partner up.

Madison pulled away. “I’m fine—this is nothing.”

“But what if whatever bit you had rabies?!” Reena shouted. “Plus it looks like you lost a lot of blood!”

Struggling to her feet, Madison bit her lip, face contorting from the pain. She hated to admit it, but the Rookie was right. “Fine. Let’s go to the hospital...”

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Madison tossed and turned in her sleep, fingers clawing at the sheets with such ferocity that she tore the fabric. Her eyes burst open and she sat up, drenched in sweat. For a moment she wondered if it

had all been a dream, but a glance to her bandaged left forearm was all the confirmation she needed. Her memories were hazy, but she recalled going to the hospital and getting the bite looked at. Fortunately, a blood scan revealed that she hadn't contracted rabies. After cleaning the wound with disinfectant, the doctor had wrapped her forearm in gauze wrap.

“Damn,” Madison muttered while stepping out of bed, dressed in white panties and a black tank top. “How long did I sleep for?” She glanced around her bedroom, sunlight beaming in through the window. Snatching up her NetPhone from the nearby nightstand, her eyes widened at the sight of the device's digital clock. It was already noon.

Madison jerked her head sideways, the shrill chirping of birds taking her by surprise. At first it almost sounded like one had managed to get inside the apartment. She walked over to the window, cupping her ears. It had become obvious that the noise was originating from outside—*but why was it so loud?* She looked to see if any birds were near the windowsill, but none were in sight. The nearest bird she could locate was across the street, perched in a tree.

A strange scent worked its way up Madison's nostrils, nearly causing her to gag. *What's that nasty stench?* She followed the noxious odor, exiting the bedroom and walking into the kitchen. The smell intensified to the point of being unbearable by the time she arrived at the trash can. *If it's gotten this bad, I really need to take out the garbage,* she thought to herself, removing the lid. To her amazement, there was barely anything in the trash, aside from a few scraps of food and a barely eaten cheeseburger. *Really, that's all? What's making it reek so much? Or is my sense of smell better than I thought?*

Taking a step back, Madison found herself salivating at the thought of food. She turned, opened the refrigerator and set her sights on a piece of raw steak. She pulled the meat out but, instead of searching for a pot to cook it in, took a bite right out of the rare beef. Blood ran down her chin as she continued devouring the meat in a frenzied rush. Her sudden, irrational hunger had come as a surprise, but she didn't consider it for long—the overwhelming desire to feed had completely taken hold.

Madison stood in front of the bathroom sink, unwrapping the gauze around her left forearm. She staggered back at the sight of her wound, or—more accurately—*lack of one!* The teeth marks that had punctured her flesh the night before were nowhere to be seen. She held her arm up, closely examining herself. It had entirely healed, leaving behind no sign of the injury whatsoever.

“Impossible,” Madison whispered under her breath. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror, noticing more definition and muscle tone along her arms, legs, and abs. “What the hell's going on...?”

*\_to be continued*