Detective beagle

I smoked my pipe, expecting to inhale the same amount of smoke I used to, but the size of my lungs deceived me once again. I turned toward the window behind my desk.

My reflection startled me.

It was no different from the face I had seen that morning while brushing my teeth, yet the passing hours had done remarkably little to soften the surprise.

My usual features had disappeared.In their place was the face of a dog.A beagle, to be exact.

And from that morning onward, I was left with one question:

Why?

Why had people turned into animals?

On my walk to the office, I passed sheep and goats walking upright, dressed in gowns, coats and polished boots as though nothing whatsoever had changed.

My favourites were those in a hurry.

They would rush along the pavement, briefcases swinging at their sides, until some accidental reflection in a shop window caught their eye.

They would stop.

Walk backwards.

Look again.

And then their faces would collapse into horror.

My own reaction had been no different.But I grew accustomed to the situation remarkably quickly.

Being a dog has its advantages, I must admit.In only seven hours at the office, I solved twenty cases that had previously left me completely defeated.It is astonishing how many clues hide inside a scent.How many secrets surround us simply because our senses are too weak to notice them.A husband who claimed never to have entered a certain hotel room.A thief who insisted he had never touched the missing necklace.A woman who swore she had not seen her sister in weeks.

Before that morning, they had been mysteries.

By lunchtime, they were paperwork.

And yet, when evening came and the final client had left my office, the greatest mystery of them all remained untouched.

Why had this happened?

How had this happened?

And, perhaps more importantly—

why was I a beagle?

Most of my nights used to be spent at the Black Noir, a small local bar hidden away in one of the city's numerous narrow alleys.

Despite being a loyal customer for years, I had recently discovered that I had apparently been pronouncing its name wrong the entire time.

“It’s Black Niar,” the thin waiter meowed.

Or at least, I think that’s what he said.

Then again, I could never be entirely sure.

I never really trusted cats.

You know how they remain quiet until it is too late. How they lie to deceive, how they leave you hanging. You lean in for a hug or a harmless pet, and somehow walk away scratched, offended, and missing a finger.

Cats, I believe, are among the greatest deceivers there are.

Strangely enough, none of my cases had ever revolved around one. Then again, perhaps that only proved my point.

They knew how to hide their tracks.

Even from a tracker like me.

The first night after the whole situation had unfolded, the bar was packed.

Never in my life had I seen so many different animals squeezed together, shoulder to shoulder, all begging for the comfort of a drink.

I took my usual place at one of the sofa tables, pulled out my notes, and waited for my order to arrive.

Then I began to observe.

You see, when a case is open, working hours become rather meaningless. Clues can appear anywhere.

Even in one of the least remarkable bars in the city.

The Black Niar.

After weeks of observation, my notebook was filled with arrows and circles connecting names, addresses and identities—with absolutely no luck whatsoever.

The Black Niar remained my usual spot, though the first heavy wave of customers had begun to fade. Soon enough, the same loyal regulars I had known before all this happened started standing out again.

At the tables closest to the windows always sat a beautiful ginger fox.

She ordered something different every night, claiming each new drink to be her favourite. She paid little attention to anyone around her. Her eyes remained fixed on the window, staring somewhere far, far beyond it.

On the opposite side of the room, beneath the brightest lamps, sat a moth and a roach.

They appeared completely obsessed with the glowing screen of an open laptop.

They whispered to one another in words I could rarely make out. On the screen were graphs. Pie charts. Pictures of products.

And numbers.

So many numbers.

Lastly, at the bar, there was always a wolf.

A lone wolf, as I liked to call him.

He drank alone.

Stood alone.

Spoke to no one and looked at no one.

He remained there until his fourth drink was finished, and then, without saying goodbye to anyone, he quietly slipped out of the bar.

All of this led me to one observation.Unfortunately, that observation only created another question without answering any of the ones that came before it.

Had people become the animals that represented who they truly were?

Or had they simply begun behaving like them because their animal instincts were slowly overpowering whatever remained of their human nature?

I had spent many nights turning that question over in my head.

On one of them, I sat at my usual table, licking the salted rim of my margarita glass, when a blood-curdling scream tore me from my thoughts.

The door burst open.

A dove stumbled into the bar.

Her entire body shook. Her arms waved frantically through the air, and the dress hanging from her thin frame was dusty, wrinkled and badly torn at the hem.

“Please! Help me! For the love of God, somebody please help me!”

I looked around.

Nobody moved.

The fox pulled her eyes away from the window for barely a second.

The moth and the roach glanced up from their laptop.

Then, almost as quickly as they had noticed her, everyone returned to whatever had occupied them moments before.

By then, it was late.

The bar stools were empty.

I got to my feet immediately and tipped my hat toward the trembling woman.

Dog or not, I had never forgotten my human manners.

“Good evening, madam. Allow me to introduce myself. Detective Beagle. At your service.”

Her enormous eyes widened.

“Oh, thank God. You’re exactly who I need, Detective.”

She rushed toward me.

“Quickly! You have to come with me.”

I reached for my notebook.

“What happened?”

Her voice broke.

“Those wolves.”

She blinked for a long moment,seemingly trying to hold back her tears

“Those bloody wolves killed my husband.”

I arranged my face into what I considered my most serious detective expression: eyebrows drawn together, chin slightly raised, lips pressed into a faint frown.

“Lead the way, madam.”

I followed her toward the door.

As I stopped beside the coat rack to retrieve my coat, the slim cat appeared from behind the bar, still polishing a glass.

“Be careful, Detective,” she whispered.

“Of the wolves?” I chuckled, slipping one arm into my coat and then the other.

She said nothing.

For a moment, she simply stared at me.

Then her whiskers twitched.

“No.”

Driving had never been my profession, even in human form.With paws, it had become considerably more difficult.Lately, the streets had been filled with terrible drivers. Or perhaps incapable ones would be more accurate.If paws were difficult, I could only imagine hooves.

The lady beside me kept her eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead. Every so often, she lifted one feathered hand to point toward a turn I was supposed to take, but otherwise she remained completely silent.

Eventually, she pointed ahead.

“We’re here.”

The moment I stepped out of the car, one scent overpowered everything else on the street—old and new alike.

Blood.

The dove hurried ahead of me while I followed, studying the neighbourhood as I went.

Three nearly identical houses stood side by side, separated only by narrow fences, small yards and wooden porches.

Across the road stood a yellow post office and, beside it, an old diner with faded lettering above the entrance:

THE FLY’S MILK

Thick greenery stretched along both ends of the street.

It took me only a moment to realise that we were standing in one of the last neighbourhoods within the city limits. Even so, the tall and narrow buildings of the centre were still visible in short distance.

The dove reached her front door and stopped.

She opened it, but immediately stepped aside.

“My, oh my. I don’t know if I can look upon such a gruesome scene with the same bare eyes twice!”

With that, she collapsed dramatically into my arms.

“Do not worry, madam. I shall take care of everything, as a true detective is supposed to.”

I carefully placed her back onto her feet and tipped my hat.

“Alone.”

I stepped inside.

The first thing I noticed was the door.

It creaked.

Loudly.

Not a polite little squeak, either. The hinges groaned as though announcing my arrival to the entire house.

I opened it again.

The same sound.

Closed it.

Again.

Interesting.

Whoever had entered this house without wanting to be heard would have had a difficult time using the front door.

My bare paws sank into the furry carpet of the hallway.

Only, in one particular spot leading toward the living room, the carpet felt considerably furrier than before.

I stopped.

Looking down, I found a thick strand of grey fur lying between my paws.

I leaned closer.

The scent accompanying it was exactly what I had expected.

Wolf.

Mr Dove lay in the middle of the living room, his feathers bent beneath him at unnatural angles, his face buried in the carpet.

The scene was considerably less violent than I had imagined.

After examining the body, I found only one visible injury: two deep puncture wounds at the base of his neck.

Like a vampire's kiss, I thought.

I stood and surveyed the room.

Everything else appeared untouched.

No overturned furniture. No broken belongings. No footprints.

Not even the lingering scent of unfamiliar feet.

Just an extraordinarily tidy living room that seemed almost as surprised by the murder as the victim himself.

Then I noticed the window.

It faced the front garden, and beside its handle the glass was covered in a collection of small scratches.

Someone had tried to force it open.

Or, at the very least, wanted it to look as though they had.

Outside, the woman who had brought me here stood beside a muddy patch of earth, watering a bed of flowers with the garden hose.

Tools were scattered across the grass around her, as though the garden itself had sneezed and thrown them everywhere.

She glanced toward the window and gave me a weak little wave.

That was when my nose caught something.

Wolf.

Again.

I turned slowly, following the scent until it brought me directly back to the window.

Wedged into the narrow gap between the frame and the glass was another tiny piece of grey fur.

I frowned.

Then leaned closer.

One sniff.

Another.

Something was wrong.

Not necessarily with the fur itself.

With where it was.

The first piece in the hallway.

The second beside the window.

Both exactly where one would expect evidence to be found.

Almost too exactly.

I took another breath through my nose.

Beneath the heavy wolf scent was something else.

Fainter.

Softer.

Familiar, somehow.

I could not place it.

Not yet.

So I folded the scent carefully into the back of my mind and left it there for later.

When I looked outside again, Mrs Dove was already watching me.

For the briefest moment, neither of us moved.

Then she smiled weakly.

And returned her attention to the flowers.

Days passed.

I was nearly driven to insanity waiting for the laboratory results to either confirm or destroy Mrs Dove's suspicions.

Every night, I returned to the same old bar.

And every night, the wolf sat across the room from me.

Alone.

Quiet.

Drinking as though there were no dead dove, no grey fur, no scratches on a window, and certainly no detective watching his every move.

I wanted to speak to him.

More than once, I nearly did.

But whatever remained of my professional discipline stopped me each time.

A detective should follow evidence, not curiosity.

Unfortunately, curiosity had never been particularly interested in professional discipline.

And with every passing night, it ate at me a little more.

I thought to myself it will only be one question, one drink, not to mention the case at all. Just a simple questions and simple answers.

But if I wanted answers, I needed to make myself less suspicious.

This couldn't feel like an interrogation.

It had to feel friendly.

And since the suspect came to the bar every single night, i knew just the way.

The fox acknowledged me by lifting the tip of her nose ever so slightly. Then, without another word, she returned her attention to the window.

“Mind if I buy you a drink?” I asked.

I waited.

Silence answered instead.

I swallowed and bit the inside of my cheek.

“I've seen you here quite a few times. Thought I might finally introduce myself.”

“What are you after, Detective?”

Her voice was low and steady. Her eyes remained fixed on whatever existed beyond the glass.

I let out a long sigh and ran my tongue across my teeth.

With one paw, I waved toward the thin cat behind the bar—a gesture that had been considerably easier when I still possessed fingers.

Two of my usuals.

“I hope you like margaritas,” I said, dropping back against the sofa.

“I'm more of a wine person.”

She finally turned slightly toward me, bringing one paw close to her face while keeping her posture perfectly still.

“Well, you're about to taste the best margarita in town.”

When the cat approached with a tray carrying two narrow glasses, I thanked her as soon as they touched the table.

She disappeared again almost as quietly as she had arrived.

“You know,” I began, running my tongue along the salted rim of my glass, “I've watched you stare out of that window for weeks now. What could possibly be so interesting that it deserves all of your attention?”

The fox remained silent.

After a while, she placed one finger against the rim of her margarita and slowly traced a circle around the glass.

“At first, I was looking at myself.”

I said nothing.

“The face looking back at me was so unfamiliar. It felt like staring at a relative I hadn't seen since childhood.”

Her finger continued around the rim.

“Now I look past it.”

She nodded toward the window.

“The whole city is visible from up here. Strange, isn't it? For such a hidden little bar, the view is remarkably good.”

For the first time, her eyes seemed to brighten.

“I see the church. Every afternoon, those fluffy chickens walk past it. I see the bank—the pigs and sheep rushing in and out just before closing. I see the clubs in the centre filling with flies and crickets and hippos and goats.”

She paused.

“Hell, from here I can even see the post office.”

My tongue stopped against the salt.

“And that dreadful diner beside it. My father used to own the place.”

She took her first sip of the margarita and grimaced.

“You know it?”

I stared at her.

“The Fly's Milk?”

Her eyes flicked toward me.

“That's the one.”

My grip tightened around the glass.

The yellow post office.

The faded diner.

The three houses across the street.

I had been there.

My eyes widened.

Suddenly, the fox wasn't simply staring out of a window.

She had been staring directly at my crime scene.

Do you perhaps know her?" I asked, placing a black-and-white photograph of Mrs Dove on the table, careful to keep most of it covered from any wandering eyes.

The falcon glanced down at it. "I don't think so..." she replied before taking another sip of her drink. "Wine is better, you know." One feather lifted into the air, signalling for another order.

"If your father owned that diner, and you were in and out of the place as often as you say, you must know the neighbourhood rather well."

She remained silent, her eyes once again fixed on the road beyond the window. After a moment, she spoke. "You know, before my hands became feathers, I used to be an artist. I left town when I was seventeen. Thought I was going to make something of myself." She gave a quiet, bitter laugh. "I came back empty-handed. Bruised by all that fame I was apparently never going to have. Years have passed, but I still like to think of myself as a free spirit."

The cat arrived carrying another narrow glass on a black tray and placed it carefully in front of the grey falcon. She offered her a forced smile before drinking half of it in one swallow.

"And free spirits absolutely hate cops," she continued, slamming the glass back onto the table. "Cops, detectives, anyone with a badge, a title, or the unfortunate belief that authority makes them important. You come here asking questions as if you know me. As if you care what I'm going to say. As if my answers matter to you for any reason other than the fact that you might gain something from them."

Her feathers curled around the glass again, much more gently this time. "Remember this, Detective. Keep it somewhere safe in that little notebook of yours. The world has not gone mad."

I said nothing.

"Everything is exactly the same. The only difference is that now none of us can hide the animal inside."

Something in the way she said it made my ears twitch.

Then she added, almost carelessly, "And whatever happened between Mr and Mrs Dove, I'm simply relieved one scam won't live to see another day."

I stared at her. "What do you mean by—"

She turned her head away sharply, although not quite angrily. There was something wounded in the movement, something strangely young, as though for a moment she had become seventeen again, storming out of a house after an argument she had spent years pretending not to remember.

I tried to speak again, to ask what exactly she meant, but my presence had clearly become unwelcome.

And I had always known when to leave a place where I was no longer wanted.

On the other side of the bar, far enough from the main scene I had been trying to appear part of, the two colleagues whispered to one another. They pointed at the glowing screen, pressed buttons, and scribbled notes as though whatever they were working on required their full attention.

I approached them slowly, hoping not to startle them, momentarily forgetting that both of them could probably sense the vibrations of my footsteps long before I reached the table. They glanced at me for barely a second before turning their attention back to the screen.

“Hello, fellas. You know, I’ve seen you staring at that damn thing for so many nights now. Preparing some sort of project?” I asked, forcing my voice slightly lower in an unsuccessful attempt to sound more masculine.

The two looked at each other. The moth pulled the laptop closer and began typing something while the roach turned toward me.

“I’ll tell you all about it if you convince the cat to turn the lights down a little,” he said. “With lighting this bright, my friend can barely focus.”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

The roach stared at me for a moment, his antennae trembling over one another.

“Dude. You see me?”

He stretched out all of his arms and legs, presenting his dark brown body as though it answered the question for him.

“That cat barely wants to look at me, let alone talk to me.”

He laughed, though the laugh quickly dissolved into a rough, dry cough.

“Please.”

I turned on my heel and made my way back toward the bar.

The wolf stood alone only a few metres away.

Until then, I had imagined that if I ever found myself standing this close to him, I would be met by a creature soaked in anger. I expected claws wrapped tightly around a glass as though it might shatter at any moment, teeth hanging beneath curled lips, eyes narrowed into threatening slits, fur wild and uneven.

Instead, I found something entirely different.

“Can I help you?”

The cat suddenly appeared in front of me, forcing herself directly into my line of sight.

“Yes. Yes, um—”

I startled slightly and leaned back.

“Those two over there.” I pointed toward the table in the far corner of the bar. “They asked if you could dim the lights a little. Apparently they can’t focus.”

“Maybe they should stay home if they want to focus.”

“Hm?”

“I said if the lighting bothers them so much, they can go home and do whatever it is they’re doing there.”

She continued wiping the counter as though the matter had already been settled.

“Oh, come on. Just turn it down a little. It seems rather important.”

“No.”

She hissed the word before turning back toward the collection of bottles behind her.

“Oh, come on, Marti. Don’t be so harsh on them. It’s hardly their fault they turned into insects.”

The low voice beside me made my ears twitch.

The wolf.

His voice was deep and steady, but there was nothing frightening about it. No threat. No hidden anger. If anything, he sounded calm.

He allowed a faint smile to escape his lips and gave me a small nod of acknowledgement.

“No, of course it isn’t,” Marti replied, placing a shot glass in front of him. “But it is their fault for behaving like insects. Who knows what they’re planning over there? I heard them talking about economic corruption once. I’m not getting involved in that.”

“Just for tonight,” I said.

I glanced toward the wolf and then back at Marti, trying to make the request appear far more important than it really was.

She sighed heavily, rolled her eyes, and reached for the light switch with one claw.

“Just for tonight.”

I attempted something resembling a thumbs-up with my paw before walking backwards toward the table.

A sudden burst of applause came from behind me.

I turned.

The moth and the roach were both staring directly at me, clapping and cheering as though I had just returned victorious from war.

I was unable to look at my watch, so I had no idea how long I had been sitting there listening to them explain their plan.

At some point, their words stopped forming complete sentences in my head. I drifted in and out of the conversation, returning only whenever I caught fragments such as *corporate*, *stocks*, *chicken coops* and *great success*.

I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about, but they seemed as fascinated by it as I found it useless.

Several times I glanced over my shoulder toward the bar. On the last of those occasions, I saw the wolf leave a tip for Marti, finish his drink and disappear into the night.

My plan had failed.

I had learned nothing from him, gained almost nothing from anyone else, and had very little idea of what I was supposed to do next.

I slapped both paws onto the table.

“Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure. Truly. But I really must be going.”

My eyes remained fixed on the door the loneliest customer in the bar had just walked through.

“Are you sure?” the roach asked. “We could actually get rich if this shit keeps happening.”

“Language,” the moth muttered.

“Sorry, dude. I’m just excited. It’s not often we get the chance to bring in a third person, you know? Especially after what happened to that poor bird.”

I stopped.

“What did you say?”

The roach blinked at me.

“That bird. Mr Dove, or whatever his name was.”

I slowly turned back toward the table.

“What about him?”

“Oh, he was really into chicken-coop stocks.”

The moth looked at him.

The roach shrugged.

“What? He was.”

He turned back toward me.

“Before he died, he pulled everything out, though. All of it. Moved the money straight into his own account.”

My ears lifted.

“His own account?”

“Yeah. Strange move. Bold, too. He always seemed like a careful guy. Well… bird.”

The roach scratched the side of his head with one of his hands.

“Anyway, he left the group right before chicken-coop stocks went through the roof. Still made good money, obviously, but he seemed like the sort of guy who would’ve known to stay in.”

He paused.

“A week later, he’s dead.”

The moth lowered his head.

“May he rest in peace.”

I said nothing.

The thoughts inside my head had begun tangling themselves together faster than I could separate them.

Mr Dove had withdrawn his money.

Transferred it into an account of his own.

And then died.

For the first time since entering the bar that night, I was no longer thinking about the wolf.

I rushed toward the door when Marti’s voice stopped me.

“Whoa, whoa, Mr Detective. Why the rush?”

She giggled softly while pouring a long glass of wine, presumably for the falcon still sitting by the window.

“I have to go, Marti. I think I finally put the pieces of the puzzle together.”

My excitement must have been obvious. My tail certainly wasn’t helping.

“To the Dove residence, I suppose?” she said, her eyes fixed on the wine as it filled the glass.

I stopped.

“Yeah…”

For a moment, I simply stared at her.

“How did you know?”

Marti finally looked up.

“Don’t let me become an obstacle, Detective. Go ahead.”

She pushed the bottle back onto the shelf and smiled.

“Whatever you’re looking for is right there.”

Before I could ask what she meant, she disappeared behind the counter.