**Chapter 1: Dropping Into Trouble**

Grio and Syd’s morning began in the way they’d come to expect at R.I.F.T.—with an unexpected call at the crack of dawn. They barely had time to throw on clothes and down some coffee before they were rushing to the scene of a strange incident that, on the surface, sounded like little more than a nuisance.

As Grio pulled the car up to the small park just off 4th Street, Syd gave him a sideways look, stifling a yawn. “So, let me get this straight—we were yanked out of bed to investigate werewolf droppings?”

"If only cleaning up after teenage were-eagles was this simple," Grio mused silently, thinking of Aidan's latest mishap with sparking talons. The kid meant well, but he was a walking storm in training. At least Cillian hadn't set anything on fire—yet. *And then there was Caoimhe. The girl had inherited every ounce of her aunt’s crocodilian grit, which, paired with her competitive streak, made her a terror in sparring sessions. Last week, she’d flattened the punching dummy—and nearly a chunk of the wall behind it.*

Grio shrugged, parking the truck. “Apparently, it’s more than that. HQ says this is some sort of territorial message. They’re concerned it’s part of a larger turf issue.” He cracked a grin. “And hey, it’s got to beat dealing with vampires first thing in the morning.”

Syd snorted, unbuckling his seatbelt. “Barely. Nothing like starting the day with an inspection of supernatural scat.”

They stepped out of the truck, greeted by a very nervous park groundskeeper who was keeping his distance from a cordoned-off area under a small grove of trees.

The man approached them cautiously, wringing his hands. “Are you the, uh… animal control?”

Grio flashed his R.I.F.T. badge. “Something like that. Can you show us where the… incident occurred?”

The groundskeeper nodded quickly, leading them to a dense cluster of bushes surrounded by bright yellow tape. “I’ve seen dog droppings before,” he muttered, glancing at them nervously, “but this… this is on a whole other level.”

Grio and Syd peered at the scene. In the bushes was a dark, steaming pile of droppings, scattered in such a way that it looked oddly deliberate, almost like some twisted form of graffiti. The markings spread out in a wide radius, each one more strategically placed than the last.

Syd took a step back, waving a hand in front of his nose. “Oh, fantastic. And here I thought vampires were the worst thing I’d smell before breakfast.”

Grio chuckled, shaking his head. “Welcome to the glamorous life of supernatural regulation.” He glanced at the groundskeeper. “Thanks. We’ll handle it from here.”

As the groundskeeper left them, Grio pulled on a pair of gloves and grabbed a biohazard bag from his pack, barely containing his smirk as he handed it to Syd.

“Oh no,” Syd said, taking a step back. “I am not touching that.”

Grio shrugged, the smirk still on his face. “Suit yourself. I’ll just let HQ know that you’re not up to handling the ‘territorial analysis.’”

Syd rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath as he reluctantly snapped on the gloves and crouched down by the markings. “This better get me a pay raise.”

Grio chuckled, glancing at Syd as he leaned against the truck. “Think of it this way—at least you’re not home refereeing Aidan and Caoimhe. They’ve turned sparring into a contact sport... for the house. Last week, they cracked the living room wall.”

**At R.I.F.T. HQ: The Morning Debrief**

Back at headquarters, Grio and Syd sat in the break room, debriefing over coffee as they waited for the lab team to analyze the sample. The room buzzed with the usual early-morning energy, agents milling around, discussing cases, and catching up on intel. Screens lining the walls displayed news feeds and local reports, including one mentioning a recent uptick in missing children cases.

Grio took a sip of his coffee, glancing at one of the screens. A newscaster was covering a story about a local family who’d reported their son “wasn’t the same” after a camping trip near fae territory. The report made Grio think of his own family. Aidan was still struggling to control his storms, and Caoimhe’s shifting had made sparring sessions at home... eventful. Even Cillian was beginning to show signs of his mixed heritage. The thought of anyone taking advantage of kids like his made his blood boil.

Syd followed Grio’s gaze. “Third report this week about kids acting strange after going near fae sites.” He frowned. “You think there’s something to it?”

Grio shrugged, setting down his mug. “Could be nothing. Or it could be something we need to look into. Missing kids and odd behavior aren’t exactly new to us, but we can’t ignore it if there’s a pattern.”

Before they could discuss it further, their comm devices buzzed. A message flashed on the screen: **“Agents Ó Mórdha and Scarbrosi, report to Director Hawkins’ office.”**

Syd drained the last of his coffee, giving Grio a grimace. “Here we go. You think it’s more werewolf droppings, or are we moving up the supernatural food chain?”

Grio chuckled, grabbing his gear. “Knowing our luck, it’s both.”

**Director Hawkins’ Office: A New Mission**

They reached Director Hawkins’ office, finding her already seated with a stack of files in front of her. Her expression was serious as she gestured for them to take a seat.

“Morning, Agents,” she greeted them, her tone crisp as usual. “I assume the werewolf marking investigation went well?”

Syd sighed, slouching back in his chair. “If you consider handling werewolf droppings before dawn a success, then yes.”

Hawkins allowed herself a small smile before her expression turned grave. “Good. Because we have a more pressing issue. We’re seeing increased rogue fae sightings, reports of children acting strangely, and now werewolf gang conflicts breaking out over territory disputes.” She handed them a file. “This morning, a shifter bar downtown was trashed, and the gang responsible left an… unusual calling card.”

Grio opened the file, revealing a photo of a wall covered in symbols. Alongside typical shifter tags, there was something else—a faint but distinct fae symbol intertwined with the others.

“Fae magic?” Grio muttered, frowning.

Hawkins nodded. “That’s right. And the rumors coming out of the shifter community suggest some of them may be forming alliances with rogue fae. If that’s true, this goes beyond a turf dispute. We’re looking at a possible coalition forming under the radar.”

Syd looked skeptical. “So the fae are cozying up to shifters now? What’s in it for them?”

“Protection, influence, possibly something more. Fae are known for being cunning, and if they’re making deals with shifters, it’s likely to secure their hold over both worlds. We need you two to investigate—discreetly.”

Grio nodded, flipping through the file. “Understood. Any leads?”

Hawkins handed them a list of addresses. “These are known shifter hotspots where we’ve seen fae markings. Start there, and be careful. If the coalition is real, they won’t hesitate to protect their new allies.”

**Into the Shifter Underworld: Fang & Talon**

Their first stop was Fang & Talon, a dimly lit dive bar notorious for its shifter clientele. The bar was packed, the air heavy with the scent of smoke, sweat, and adrenaline. As Grio and Syd stepped inside, heads turned, eyes narrowing at the sight of their badges.

“Friendly crowd,” Syd muttered, glancing around. “Think they’ll talk?”

Grio smirked. “Not voluntarily. Let’s start with the bartender.”

Syd chuckled. “At least you’ve got built-in sparring partners at home. Amara’s all about college applications these days. No wrestling matches for me.”

Grio grinned. “You can have Aidan for a week if you want. Kid’s got enough electricity to power a generator. And if that doesn’t scare you off, Caoimhe’s been testing her strength on anything that doesn’t move fast enough.”

They approached the bar, where a stocky were-bear wiped down the counter, eyeing them warily.

Grio leaned forward, flashing his badge. “Evening. We’re looking for information about recent… alliances forming in the community. Specifically between shifters and fae.”

The were-bear grunted, barely sparing them a glance. “Not my business who people associate with.”

Syd leaned in, crossing his arms. “It is if it’s stirring up turf wars and disrupting the peace. Or would you prefer we start asking your patrons directly?”

The were-bear glared at them for a moment before muttering, “Fine. There’s been talk of fae types making promises—protection, power, whatever you can imagine. Some of the younger guys are curious, but the rest of us… we’re not so sure.”

“Not so sure, huh?” Grio raised an eyebrow. “Any idea who’s buying in?”

The bartender shrugged. “Don’t know specifics, but I’ve heard they’re offering ‘protection packages’ for anyone willing to side with them. They’ve even given out… gifts.”

Syd’s expression darkened. “Gifts? Like what?”

The bartender’s gaze turned cautious. “I don’t know. They don’t tell me much. But I heard something about ‘children.’ That the fae are… ‘giving’ them as a gesture of goodwill.”

Grio and Syd exchanged a look, tension tightening between them. If the fae were indeed “giving” children to shifters, it would confirm their suspicions about the missing kids and changeling replacements.

“Thanks for the tip,” Grio said, sliding a few bills across the bar. “If you hear anything else, you know where to find us.”

As they turned to leave, the bartender muttered, “Good luck. You’re gonna need it.”

**Wrapping Up the Night**

The information from the bartender left them both unsettled. As they drove back to HQ, Syd broke the silence. “So the fae are trading human children like bargaining chips. How much darker does this coalition get?”

Grio’s jaw tightened, his eyes fixed on the road. “Dark enough to turn allies against each other and manipulate entire communities. And if we don’t get ahead of it, they’ll have the whole supernatural world in their pocket.”

They knew they were facing a growing threat, one that went beyond rogue fae or territorial disputes. The coalition’s influence was spreading, and the missing children were just the beginning.

But for Grio and Syd, failure wasn’t an option. They were R.I.F.T.’s best, and they’d take down anyone standing in the way of peace—even if it meant facing the fae’s darkest forces.

Grio and Syd pulled up to R.I.F.T. HQ after their stop at Fang & Talon, the grim weight of their findings lingering between them. The quiet ride back had given them time to absorb what they’d learned, but the idea of the fae trading children as “gifts” left an unsettling tension in the air.

As they walked through HQ’s bustling main hall, they spotted their colleague, Agent Lucy Tran, who was carrying an armful of papers and balancing a coffee cup in one hand. She barely looked up as they approached, mumbling a quick, “Oh, hey, guys.”

“Hey, Lucy,” Syd said, flashing her a tired grin. “Any good news for us? I could use a little pick-me-up after the night we’ve had.”

She stopped, glancing at them over the top of her glasses. “Good news? Well, the printer jammed again, the vending machine’s out of chips, and someone left a mysterious, unclaimed sandwich in the fridge that may or may not be alive.”

Grio snorted, patting Syd on the shoulder. “See? We’re not the only ones dealing with supernatural horror.”

Lucy rolled her eyes, pushing her glasses up. “Seriously though, Hawkins is looking for you. Said something about a new development in the missing kids cases. Sounded urgent.”

“Of course it did,” Syd muttered, running a hand through his hair. “Nothing says ‘Tuesday at R.I.F.T.’ like new horrors before dawn.”

Grio raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Come on, Syd. If we’re lucky, maybe it’s just a ghoul infestation or a vampire rave in a library.”

“Somehow, I doubt we’re that lucky,” Syd replied, rolling his eyes. “Let’s go see what fresh nightmare she’s got for us.”

**Director Hawkins’ Office: Dark Revelations**

They arrived at Hawkins’ office to find her pacing, files spread out across her desk. She looked up as they entered, her expression a mix of concern and barely restrained irritation.

“Agents,” she began, gesturing for them to sit. “Glad you’re here. I just received intel that takes our concerns about the fae coalition to a whole new level.”

Grio and Syd exchanged a glance before taking their seats. Hawkins handed them a file, her expression hardening. “This came from a surveillance team we’ve had stationed near a fae contact point. They’ve observed a steady stream of shifters coming in and out, but it’s what they overheard that’s troubling.”

Grio opened the file, scanning the transcript of the surveillance team’s report. The notes mentioned shifters being approached with offers of protection and “fae-infused enhancements.” But the last few lines of the report caught his attention:

**“… observed a shifter leaving the meeting carrying what appeared to be a child. Speculation: changeling replacement confirmed…”**

Syd whistled, his eyebrows rising. “So they’re actually handing out kids as part of their recruitment package? What’s next, a loyalty program with free fae power-ups?”

Hawkins gave him a wry smile, though her eyes were deadly serious. “I’d laugh if it weren’t so disturbing. This is confirmation that they’re actively recruiting shifters by giving them human children to… raise. Changelings embedded in human families, positioned as future assets or sleeper agents.”

Grio shook his head, disgusted. “So we’re dealing with an entire generation of potential fae loyalists growing up in human homes, right under everyone’s noses. And when they’re ready…”

“They’re an army,” Hawkins finished, nodding. “An army that looks human but answers only to the fae.”

Syd leaned back, folding his arms. “It’s like some twisted daycare program from hell. ‘Enroll now and get your very own sleeper agent, free of charge.’”

Grio sighed, setting the file back on her desk. “So what’s the plan? We can’t exactly walk into fae territory and demand they hand over all their changelings.”

Hawkins’s gaze sharpened. “Not yet, anyway. For now, I want you two to track down any additional shifter leads. If we can disrupt their alliance with the fae, we might stand a chance at cutting off the coalition’s influence before it spreads further.”

**The Next Stop: Shifter Compound Recon**

Armed with new intel, Grio and Syd headed out to one of the identified shifter compounds—an old, rundown industrial complex on the outskirts of town. As they pulled up, the faint sounds of heavy machinery and snarling could be heard from within the fenced-off lot. A group of young shifters stood outside, eyeing them suspiciously as they parked.

“Friendly place,” Syd muttered, glancing around. “Looks like they really rolled out the welcome mat for us.”

Grio smirked. “I’m sure they’ll warm up once they see our charm and dazzling personalities.”

They approached the entrance, where a burly shifter with a nose ring and tattooed arms stood, blocking their path. “This is private property,” he grunted, crossing his arms. “What do you want?”

Grio flashed his R.I.F.T. badge, his tone polite but firm. “Just here to ask a few questions. We’ve heard some of your folks have been meeting with fae representatives recently. Figured you’d want to tell us about it before we start digging ourselves.”

The shifter narrowed his eyes, glancing from the badge to Syd, who gave him a lazy smile and a little wave.

“Look,” Syd said, dropping his hand. “We’re not here to cause trouble. Just need to know if anyone’s been offering your group some… unconventional perks lately.”

The shifter’s expression didn’t soften, but he jerked his head toward the main building. “Go in. But don’t expect anyone to roll out the red carpet.”

As they stepped inside, the smell hit them first—a pungent blend of sweat, musk, and something sharper, like iron. The main hall was crowded with shifters of all ages, some huddled in small groups, others watching Grio and Syd with undisguised curiosity.

“Looks like they’re throwing a ‘get out of here, R.I.F.T.’ party,” Syd muttered under his breath.

Grio chuckled, nudging him. “Just stay friendly. These guys might be our only lead.”

They approached a table near the back, where a young shifter with a shaved head and a scar across his cheek was leaning back, sipping a beer. He looked up as they approached, a slight sneer curling his lips.

“You two lost?” he asked, his tone mocking. “Or did R.I.F.T. send you down here to spy on us?”

Grio leaned against the table, unbothered by the hostile reception. “Not spying. Just curious about any new… connections you might have made recently. Specifically with fae.”

The shifter’s sneer deepened. “And what if we did? Not like R.I.F.T. has been doing us any favors. Fae are offering something better—something real.”

Syd raised an eyebrow. “Something real, huh? Like changelings? Or maybe some fae-enhanced abilities?”

The shifter’s eyes flickered, betraying a hint of surprise. “What’s it to you?”

Grio straightened, his gaze hard. “It’s our job to make sure the supernatural world doesn’t go rogue. So if you’re working with the fae coalition, we have a problem. The kind of problem that ends badly.”

The shifter laughed, a cold, humorless sound. “You think you scare us? The fae have promised us real protection. And they don’t just come around to lecture us when something goes wrong—they actually deliver.”

“Deliver what, exactly?” Grio pressed.

The shifter’s gaze turned smug. “Power. Territory. And kids—children they say are special. Ones who can… help us take back what’s ours.”

Grio and Syd exchanged a look, their suspicions confirmed. The fae were dangling human children in front of the shifters, using them as leverage to gain their loyalty.

“Right,” Syd said, his tone dark. “Because nothing says loyalty like trafficking children.”

The shifter shrugged, unbothered. “Kids are expendable. And besides, these are fae kids. They’re not… real.”

Grio’s expression hardened, his jaw clenched. “They’re real enough for their families. And if you think selling out to the fae will end well for you, you’re more naive than I thought.”

The shifter sneered. “You don’t get it, do you? The fae aren’t just offering power—they’re offering a way out. A way for us to stop living in the shadows.”

Before Grio could respond, the shifter’s attention shifted to something behind them. They turned to see a figure emerging from the shadows—a tall, imposing man with piercing yellow eyes, marking him as an alpha. He took one look at them, a slow, predatory smile spreading across his face.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves some R.I.F.T. visitors,” the alpha said, his voice low and dangerous. “I’d offer you a drink, but I doubt you’re here for a social call.”

Grio met his gaze, unfazed. “Just here for answers. And maybe a little warning: alliances with the fae don’t end well. Trust me.”

The alpha chuckled, his gaze cold. “We’re beyond warnings, Agent. And the fae? They’ve given us something R.I.F.T. never could—respect.”

Syd stepped forward, his voice calm but with an edge. “Respect won’t mean much when you’re cleaning up the mess they’ll leave behind. The fae don’t play fair, and they don’t stick around when things get rough.”

The alpha’s smile faded, his eyes narrowing. “You think you’re the only ones who know how to protect the world? Maybe it’s time you realized R.I.F.T. isn’t the only game in town.”

Grio’s expression was unreadable as he held the alpha’s gaze. “If you want to fight for the fae, then go ahead. But don’t expect us to clean up your mess.”

With that, he and Syd turned, leaving the compound with more questions than answers. As they walked back to the car, Grio’s mind churned with the implications of what they’d learned. The fae coalition wasn’t just recruiting—it was arming its allies, preparing them for a conflict that would shake the supernatural world to its core.

And as they drove back to HQ, Grio knew one thing for sure: their work was just beginning.