

Snowfall

[Cold Open]

ORSEN: [via voicemail, pleasant despite the subject matter] Hello Shelly, it's Orsen. I wanted to check in with you and see how you're feeling. I received your earlier voicemail and I'm sorry about what happened to the Mara case—I'm sure it's tough to hear someone's... *life resolve negatively* on a phone call. I'm confident, however, that you did your best, and that for the next call, things will be a bit calmer.

I also wanted to follow up about an e-mail attachment I'm sending to you—a fascinating piece of training audio. Rich managed to find it on a recently discontinued server among various other recordings of calls, and he assures me they're unclassified according to some fascinating loopholes, so you can share this with your audience guilt-free. Additionally, I think it paints at least *one* of our former customers in a positive light.

Hope all is well. Call me if you need anything.

SHELLY: Sure, whatever. Here you go, listener. I'm going to go lay down. For like. An imaginary month.

[The intro music is different—it's upbeat and almost fun, but forcefully so.]

CAROL: [A new voice. CAROL is not quite cheerful, but she's certainly forcing the sentiment.] Welcome, new community members, to the Office of Paranatural Services! If you're listening to this recording, congratulations on your successful application for our Support Service Team. My name is Carol, and I'll be your onboarding specialist. As you may or may not know, our Paranatural Support Service Team—often called the PSST for short—remotely provides solutions for a wide range of magical, technological, and supernatural issues from across the entire globe from our headquarters here in sunny [BLEEEEEEP]. As a service agent, you'll be assigned to callers and users who speak your languages from your time period.

Customers who call or write in to our service team will require basic to advanced support to make their lives easier when dealing with forces beyond their comprehension. Service agents provide Level One support for our organization, meaning gathering information, dispensing advice, guiding directly, forwarding calls, and escalating to our Intervention Squad or technical teams as needed. As an agent, your wits and critical thinking will help our customers thrive in the face of real danger.

But agent, you won't be alone! We've assigned you a useful information-gathering device called a "Script". This script will guide you through unfamiliar lore, complex solutions, and even provide you with false identities for each call to help keep your work anonymous. This will assist you in keeping your non-disclosure agreement, as well as protect you and your loved ones from being targeted by harassment, curses, and extraterrestrials.

You'll also have the mentorship and guidance of a seasoned manager by your side. Your manager is a former agent who has duly proved themselves "in the trenches", and likely has some useful advice to share! They'll work one-on-one with you to help you do your best in your time here. Say, why don't we meet a seasoned manager right now? Raun, why don't you say hello?

RAUN: [breathes heavily, but less threateningly]

CAROL: Um, Raun? It's time to—

RAUN: [totally normally, this is human raun. They're cheerful and nice omg!] Oh! Um, sorry! I got a little distracted.

CAROL: No problem at all. Raun, would you mind introducing yourself?

RAUN: Thanks Carol, that's a great idea. I'm Raun Hoskins, that's spelled R-A-U-N, and my pronouns are they/them. I am the, um, manager and coordinator for Service Team 9, so, heh, if you're listening to this, you might end up on my subgroup. I'd be happy to have you!

CAROL: That's great, Raun! We're happy to have *you*. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about your team?

RAUN: Happily.

CAROL: What's it like working on your team?

RAUN: Well, Service Team 9 abides by all OPS standards in our team organization—that is, individual workstations with one-on-one interactions with the, uh, well, me as the manager. We're proud to have comfortable working spaces, and team members are allowed a personal item at their desks, and there's plenty of snacks and drinks in the break room as well.

CAROL: Sounds great, Raun!

RAUN: Sure is. I try to incorporate my employees' suggestions into the workplace environment, too—for example, we recently incorporated a policy to streamline and quickly approve technical requests, should an agent need some new technology to assist them. Our ham sandwiches now come with packets of mayonnaise and slices of cheese, as well—that was requested pretty frequently.

CAROL: Yum! Sounds like your team is well taken care of.

RAUN: Thanks, Carol! You know, though, it might be better if they could see each other. I've got a lot of complaints—

CAROL: [interrupting] We'll see what we can do! So, Raun, would you feel up for taking a service call, so we can give your future team members an example of a support call from a real master?

RAUN: Oh, I didn't think—

CAROL: Phone's ringing, Raun! Looks like we've got a live one!

RAUN: Uhh, right!

[RAUN picks up. Guess who it is on the line.]

Thank you for calling the Paranatural Support Service Team hotline! This is... Skip speaking, and I'll be your agent today. Your call may be tracked and recorded for quality and training purposes. Who may I ask is calling today?

SHELLY: Uh, hi Skip. My name's Shelly. Short for Michelle. I saw online you help with supernatural shit?

RAUN: I think we can help with that. What seems to be the problem?

SHELLY: Well, it's like this. It's snowing pretty heavily here, right?

RAUN: I'm actually not in your area. Could you describe the snow?

SHELLY: Oh, sure. I'm in Portland, Maine, okay? So when it gets cold, it gets COLD. Cold-cold. And the snow feels like, well, snow. It's cold, and this morning, it was packable, and it's kind of gotten a little chillier since then. But I don't think the snow itself is the problem?

RAUN: So, Shelly, what's got you worried?

SHELLY: It's... it's what's in the snow. I think. Like, in the falling snow. There's a lot on the ground already. I've been walking downtown tonight, okay? And I was with some friends from out of town showing them the lighthouses and junk, but then I look away, and they were gone.

RAUN: You're all alone?

SHELLY: Yes? No? I don't see my friends any more. It was like, they suddenly weren't there any more.

RAUN: Well, that doesn't sound very good. So you're worried about your friends disappearing?

SHELLY: Somewhat. I just... actually, I'm worried about everyone disappearing.

RAUN: So, everyone disappeared.

SHELLY: Right. Because, uh. Now that I'm looking around... there's no traffic. Nothing. No people. Only parked cars. It's so quiet... Skip, do you think... do you think this is real?

RAUN: It's real, Shelly, and I'll be able to help you out of this. You're dealing with something abnormal, so it might be scary.

SHELLY: O-okay, like, ghosts and stuff?

RAUN: Could be. We need to gather more information first, though.

SHELLY: Sounds good. I'm going to try texting my roommate real quick, is that okay?

RAUN: Sure, take your time.

CAROL: Did you see how Raun—I mean, Skip, handled this situation? After gathering some basic information and judging immediate danger, they comforted the caller emotionally to get them into a calmer mood, and prepared them for possibly making a hard decision or completing a difficult task. Most of our customers are forced to fight for their lives—even if they don't know it yet. How do we know they're going to be in danger? Well, through use of our revolutionary [BLEEEEEEP], the PSST's contact information is only available when a customer is in danger from something that we cover! This feature is rather expensive for us—thankfully, it's more than funded by selling the user data that we automatically gather from each user!

Now, I'm betting that "Skip" is going to work with this customer to figure out the situation at hand. Knowing what's actually behind an issue before providing any sort of guidance helps you prevent costly mistakes. Their lives are often in your hands—you wouldn't want someone to die on the phone, *would you?*

SHELLY: I'm back. Sorry about that, Skip. The text didn't go through.

RAUN: No problem, Shelly. Okay, first thought—we need to retrace your steps. You were looking at lighthouses, and then... everyone went missing. There have been no signs of life?

SHELLY: I see... I see stores with their lights on. Street lights are working. But... there's no one here. There's no signs of anyone.

RAUN: Can you go into a shop?

SHELLY: Sure, let's see... [the ring of a bell, and a door opening.] The lights are on. Hello? Hello?

RAUN: Do you hear anything?

SHELLY: No, everything is just... weirdly quiet. Like, uh, I thought I'd hear a heater running, but it's just all muffled, as if the snow fell in here too.

RAUN: So no matter where you go—

SHELLY: Yeah, no sound. Creepy, huh?

RAUN: Definitely creepy. I'm going to look up these details and see if I can get you any useful information. In the meantime, I'd suggest you stay put, and try to stay warm.

SHELLY: Yeah, okay, it's a bit warmer indoors. [pause] Any guess as to what this is? It's definitely supernatural, right?

RAUN: Oh, for sure. I'm finding things on... [Script ding] oh gosh.

SHELLY: Shit, is it bad?

RAUN: Shelly, it's a snow spirit. It's similar to a demon or ghost. It's waiting to ambush you somewhere in the snow. [Script ding] And it's hostile towards you.

SHELLY: Wait, what? Are you serious?

RAUN: Did you do anything to upset... anything dealing with winter?

SHELLY: I shoveled out my walk. Does that count?

RAUN: Probably not.

SHELLY: I told my roommate that "jack frost pissed on the sidewalk real good" this morning. How about that?

RAUN: That's... more likely, but probably not it.

SHELLY: Okay. Then... Oh! I made a snowman this morning with my friends. Some of them have never seen snow, so we thought it'd be fun.

RAUN: I mean, probably not, but I can check—oh. Yeah, I guess it is. You made an effigy. Maybe you didn't get the spirit angry, but you did summon it.

SHELLY: I gave it an old bra as a hat and named it Ligma.

RAUN: Okay, you definitely made it angry.

SHELLY: Aren't you going to ask—

RAUN: [Ignoring her entirely] In any case, you're dealing with a conjured elemental of snow and ice. Now, the good news here is that it's an elemental, so—

SHELLY: It must be straining to be free from its confined physical form?

RAUN: Yes, exactly. Wait, have you encountered them before?

SHELLY: Oh, yeah, of course. [mumbles something]

RAUN: What was that?

SHELLY: In video games.

RAUN: [chuckles]

SHELLY: [upset] Come on! I think it counts for something! It's not my fault my shitty snowman made a monster!

RAUN: I'm sorry, we just hear that a lot. But you're right, it does count for something. Are you comfortable with—

SHELLY: Way ahead of you.

RAUN: You didn't let me finish.

SHELLY: And I know what you're going to say—yes, I'm going to smash it with the first heavy object I can find. [sounds of rummaging]

RAUN: We might be able to dispel the binding magic keeping it in this world and bound to you!

SHELLY: Okay, but that sounds really complicated, and I don't know how fast it's gonna come at me. So if I have to wait on it, I want something hard.

RAUN: Okay, but that may only buy you—

SHELLY: YES OKAY THIS IS JUST FOR MY OWN SAFETY OKAY THIS WILL MAKE ME FEEL BETTER LET ME HAVE THIS SKIP

RAUN: Jeez, okay, okay.

CAROL: Seems like your customer is a real live wire, Raun!

RAUN: She really is! She's maybe a bit too gung-ho.

SHELLY: [Over the phone] I can hear you both! Am I on speaker?

RAUN: Sorry Shelly, we're recording a training right now.

SHELLY: Oh fuck yeah! All your new employees are gonna hear me beat up a snow ghost!

RAUN: [laughs uncomfortably]

CAROL: While the customer prepares for her untimely and messy demise, it's worthwhile for us to point out details of Raun's Script—their magical research device. Each agent receives one of their own in a style of their choice—some people choose books, binders, or scrolls; others prefer tablets, small computers, or other technologies.

No matter the form, each Script gives its agent an invaluable tool for dealing with the supernatural—knowledge. By connecting with our Paranatural Internal Toolset, a script can easily display difficult-to-find and often forbidden knowledge in a format that won't fracture an employee's mind. It also gives each Agent a new pseudonym to use in every single call, to help protect them from time bleed.

RAUN: Time what?

CAROL: [said quickly, as if all this jargon makes sense] Time bleed is a complex and dangerous phenomenon that occurs when an agent acts upon contradicting information they haven't yet experienced themselves under non-linear circumstances, creating an open loop that can cause heavy contradiction-distortion fields to fluctuate, leading to great harm and/or death.

RAUN: Great harm? DEATH? What—

CAROL: Changing pseudonyms protects agents' identities from hostile customers!

RAUN: But, wait, I don't understand—

SHELLY: Ha ha, YES! This is *perfect*!

RAUN: [as if talking to a dog or a child that has absolutely gotten in trouble] Shelly... what did you find?

SHELLY: A big-ass ceramic lighthouse. Gonna slam this motherfucker on a snow ghost head!

RAUN: Are you sure you can just take that—

SHELLY: Gonna take one of these snow globes too. Could be nice to throw. Oooh, that's a lot of glitter.

RAUN: I'm glad you're so chipper about this, but you do know that your life is likely in danger, right?

SHELLY: I mean, yeah, obviously. But I'm all adrenaline right now and I need to keep myself thinking on topic. Speaking of which, I get that this is some kind of winter spirit but, like, why did I get separated? What's with all the silence?

RAUN: Let me see if I can find anything...

SHELLY: Honestly I get the whole effigy thing. This part I don't get. It sounds like I've been cursed. Maybe it took some time to set in.

RAUN: Aha! Shelly, you've been cur—wait, yeah, you're right.

SHELLY: Well hot damn!

RAUN: It says here to break the curse, you'll need to... well, destroy the effigy. Simple enough. It's ice, so hot water can help with that, as will anything that heats it up. But yes, the curse basically sent you into a spirit world where it can hunt you easier.

SHELLY: Woah. I'm astral projecting.

RAUN: Yeah—no, wait, no, you're not astral projecting. But, you're stuck there until this is solved. Think you can take out this monster with a... ceramic lighthouse?

SHELLY: Don't really think I have another option. Thanks, Skip.

RAUN: Good luck, Shelly.

[SHELLY takes a deep breath and heads outside. She takes a few steps.]

SHELLY: Skip, I see footprints. Big ones. Weird ones.

RAUN: It must be looking for you. Tread carefully.

SHELLY: Sure thing. [More steps.] It's here.

RAUN: You can see it?

SHELLY: Yeah, sort of. I think it's hiding in the snow. Blending in like it's got camouflage. I can see movement nearby! The snow is, like, shifting and shuffling towards me, fast. [SHELLY starts running.]

RAUN: Where are you going? What's happening?

SHELLY: It's picking up speed super fast. Shit. Wait, Skip, I'm trying to melt this thing, right?

RAUN: Yeah, it should—

SHELLY: Well, I'm in Maine, right? So here's the curious thing about this place... our roads are awful. And we get a lot of cold weather. Snow and ice. So we're used to it.

RAUN: Okay....

SHELLY: [the sound of scraping ceramic against the ground] And you know what really sucks? Driving in this bad weather. So we do some not-environmentally great stuff to make sure we can still get from one place to another, even if it reduces the lifespan of our vehicles.

RAUN: Shelly, are you using...

SHELLY: I'm gettin' road salt all over me and the lighthouse. [footsteps become more solid] iCome on, snow fucker! Come and get me!

CAROL: Raun, what's happening? This was supposed to be a routine call.

RAUN: I don't know! This is fully out of my control.

CAROL: Well, new agent, I'm going to let you know this right now—this is NOT a typical call. But it's a good example of—

[There is a shout from SHELLY and a roar of a creature, a slam and a ceramic thing shattering. Otherworldly shrieking and hissing from the salt.]

SHELLY: FUCK YOU FROSTY EAT ROAD SALT UGLY MOTHERFUCKER

RAUN: Shelly, are you—

SHELLY: AAHHH, the upper half is still moving! [more slamming, heavy agent breathing.] Okay, it's done. I got a scratch, but that's it. It's still writhing, but it's melting. And I think the snow is stopping. Thanks, Skip! Oh hey, woah, people are back! I'm going to text my friends again.

RAUN: [to CAROL] You know, I think she'd make a—

CAROL: You don't need to say it—I was thinking the same.

ORSEN: [from far away, slightly panicked] Raun? Could I borrow you for a second?

RAUN: Sure. Carol, could you talk to Shelly for me?

CAROL: Happy to.

ORSEN: Now, Raun. This is a very urgent problem.

RAUN: One second, Orsen, I just need to—

ORSEN: A. *Very*. Urgent. Problem.

RAUN: Oh, OH! [panicking] Thanks, Carol.

SHELLY: Something going on there? My friends told me they're like a ten minute walk away, so I gotta get moving.

CAROL: Miss Shelly Gardner? Age 29, United States citizen. Are you currently employed?

SHELLY: Yeah sure, I mean, in retail.

CAROL: Ah, I see, it says here you're a clerk at a record store.

SHELLY: Yep. Why? Is this a survey?

CAROL: More like a job offer, Shelly. How does being a paranatural support agent sound to you?

SHELLY: Damn—I mean, wow, maybe? Does it pay well? Probably better than what I get.

CAROL: We can negotiate compensation at your interview, but we do offer health insurance.

SHELLY: Huh, guess it couldn't hurt to interview. Sure. Cool. Thanks? Can I keep the snowglobe?

CAROL: We'll send you a date and time, as well as an address for one of our satellite offices. Hopefully, we'll meet again for orientation!

SHELLY: Wait, seriously, should I return this—

[CAROL hangs up.]

CAROL: [drops the formal voice] Looks like we'll have to record another training. Oh well. At least we snagged another agent for the Service Team. We've been losing way too many of them lately. [sigh] [mockingly:] Hey new agent! Bet you didn't know that our customers don't typically solve their own issues! Ugh. End of recording.

[The file ends.]