

Episode 1.01 Specimen Zero

SFX: [theme plays]

SFX: [mouse clicking]

MARLEY: The Conservatory audio catalog: 45199714. Marley Stone recording from the main office.

SFX: [settling in chair]

MARLEY: No one is here but me. That's fine, I prefer to be alone most of the time. An "independent worker" is what teachers and mentors have called me throughout my entire academic career, so really this shouldn't be any different. And it's not, except for the fact that there aren't any clear rules to follow in the Conservatory.

I don't even know the real name of this place, that's just the easiest descriptor I could think of after scoping it out for a few days. This recording is being saved to the "specimen catalog" file folder, which is the only document folder I can open or even read the name of. I've played around with a few little recordings here and there, and the files seem to name themselves random strings of numbers after saving the first time. As far as I know, unless I re-record over the audio, the numbers don't change so I guess that's the cataloging system I'm supposed to use. I think I'd prefer to learn the Dewey Decimal system all over again.

There's so much to catalog and go through. I don't know if I've even seen half of the stuff exhibited in The Conservatory. Just when I think I might have reached the end of one winding display, it branches off again and leads to somewhere completely new. Things change around here sometimes - more on that later. I wouldn't rule out the possibility that The Conservatory itself is somehow just as alive as the Wonders it holds within. For that reason, I'm treating this facility as a specimen that needs to be cataloged just as much as anything else, if not more.

I've spent much of my time here wandering the corridors of The Conservatory. The campus itself is something more than massive. It seems unending, not in a spiraling, mind melting way, but in the way a university campus feels when a student is new to a school and is just learning all of the different buildings' connections. Except everything is inside - I haven't found any type of exit. Of course there aren't any big red arrows leading me outside in case of emergency. It's not... hostile. I've seen the plans for

hostile architecture: something that screams “get out” and “stay away” like spikes and barbs and signs that say things like “this place is not a place of honor”. This is nothing like that, and the only signs I’ve seen here have been those on exhibit walls, even if I can’t read them.

The walls in The Conservatory are all decorated, whether that be intricate mural paintings of swirling plant life or beautiful artwork displayed in vintage frames. Some are plain looking, but still painted or wallpapered in bright, but soft colors. Whomever designed this place really cared about it. There’s a lot of love, or at least something like it, in these walls. I can’t describe the atmosphere, because it doesn’t fit with anything I’ve ever seen and experienced. I’ve been to plenty of art museums, history museums, natural science exhibitions, zoos, and greenhouses. The architecture and design of The Conservatory feels like a mixture of all of those. I mean, the exhibits are also all of those things blended together. There’s art and plants and animals and I can’t comprehend any of it. Which is why I’m putting this catalog together in the first place. Along with just giving me something to do, documenting all of this helps me organize my thoughts and make sense of everything, because it’s all so new and strange to me. Call me naive but I didn’t know pursuing speculative biology for my senior thesis would lead me here.

Despite all of the unfamiliarity, being stuck in The Conservatory doesn’t feel wrong. I’m aware this could all be a trick of psychology, but I do like it. It doesn’t feel as if I shouldn’t be here. It at least makes up for the days I spend wandering around when I’m not cataloging

At first I tried to map the place out, but I’ve found that to be... challenging. I can recall where the turns are and orient myself from memory, but I can’t seem to be able to draw it physically. The lack of writing materials isn’t actually the problem when you can trace things in dust. It’s the fact that any time I try to physically map out a section of the Conservatory, following it later leads me to a completely different area that I haven’t seen before.

As a test, I took the portable recording equipment with me last night to confirm my theory that this place cannot be mapped. Here’s that audio:

SFX: [tape insert, clicking on]

MARLEY: The Conservatory audio catalog: mapping supplemental.

Marley Stone recording from a hallway in what I assume to be the east wing. I’m heading in the direction I know leads to the courtyard. I’ve gone down this path at least five times in the past 3 days. I tried to add it to my dust map in the office earlier today and I assume following the map rather

than my intuition will not, in fact, lead me to the courtyard with its lazing animals (that all inexplicably have three eyes). You know that feeling you get when you make a wrong turn, or miss your exit on the interstate? I started to feel that tug about 20 steps back. It feels like I should have turned left at that arch to get to the courtyard, but the map I drew says to keep... going... straight - and this is not the courtyard. I'm standing in front of a door, which is strange in and of itself because there aren't many actual doors in The Conservatory, mainly just arches or openings in the walls. But no, this is a real door that... is locked. Great. Well, there's no use in putting this door in my map. I just hope the next time I try to come back here I'll remember the way. In the meantime

I guess I'll keep an eye out for any keys that might fit in this lock. End supplemental.

SFX: [tape stops, ejects]

MARLEY: So for now, I'm giving up on trying to document a map and just... using my memory to navigate. That, and following the sounds that the.. Creatures make.

One constant in this facility is that the office that I record these catalogs in seems to be the central location that everything branches off from. It's quite different from most institutions with a welcome desk and office at the entrance. Nevermind that there doesn't seem to *be* an entrance to The Conservatory; there aren't any guests to welcome in either. As I said before: I'm totally and completely alone here. There are no staff, no curators, and no visitors, and yet everything remains spotless, day after day. The only cleaning to be done is here in this office, and all of that mess is my own. This room is the only room that ever seems to accumulate dust, and I'm trying not to take that personally.

Like all other parts of The Conservatory, someone put a lot of care into designing this office. It's well decorated and teeming with plant life. On the desk, I have this big potted plant with hundreds of tendrils that slowly move to reach out to me when I sit down to work. I've named this one Sarah. The windowless walls are embellished with what looks like a thousand colorful insects. Shockingly, I actually recognize a lot of them. Off the top of my head I can easily identify an *Actias luna* right across from the desk, and a *Popillia japonica* and *Chrysina resplendens* off to my right. There's probably something to be said about the fact that the only familiar things to me are dead, but I won't be the one to say it.

My cot in the corner isn't the most comfortable thing to sleep in, but it's hardly the worst place I've ever spent the night. At the very least, the blankets are warm and soft. Again, I'm left wondering who designed this

place, and who was here before me? I can't be the only person who's ever slept in this room. I can't be the only one that's wandered these halls for days on end, enraptured and terrified and so, so, curious about everything they're seeing. It wouldn't make any sense.

In any case, I still seem to be the only person who's ever tried to document The Conservatory's specimens. I'll actually do that in the next audio log. It just, felt important that I record something about the campus itself. It's just as new and sort of unnerving as everything else that's alive within the boundaries of these walls...

SFX: [chair creaks]

MARLEY: End audio catalog.

SFX: [mouse clicks off, theme plays]

Thank you for listening to the very first Audio Catalog recorded for The Conservatory. This program is written, recorded, performed, and produced by Sidney Jane. You can find out more on our website at [theconservepod dot com](http://theconservepod.com). That's where all of the social media links are. If you'd like to donate to the conservatory and get some behind the scenes goodies as the show is produced you can do so by searching for the conservatory podcast on patreon.

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