

“Masks”

I’m not welcome here. Not maliciously so, I don’t get thrown out the front door, but there’s enough stares from the cops saying “you patrol the mall, one step up from crossing guard”, that my steps are always a tad hesitant. But I contend I’m a form of cop, so this bar is a natural watering hole.

I also moonlight as the Crimson Claw, protector and beloved hero of the city. The name sounds a bit violent, I know (the newspaper ran with it, who am I to write them a correction), but it only comes from the red glow my paws emit when levitating objects: anything from crates to cars, tires to trucks. It’s a handy power, telekinesis is. Couple that with ESP, and I have a pretty good window into the mind of any criminal, and the ability to stop them.

It can’t, however, stop the table of detectives from precinct fourteen-foxes, of course-from asking me if I solved the case of the runaway chicken sandwich.

“I did break up a few fights today.” I say while pulling up a stool at the bar.

“Two kids arguing over an iPaw ain’t a fight, Tabitha,” calls out a bulldog from the table next to them. Everyone laughs. That’s my nickname, which has nothing to do with my actual name (it’s Clint), nor anything to do with my job-surprisingly-nope, just because of my orange and white striped fur. Thought those jokes went by the wayside after first grade. I was wrong...or our police force is nothing but kits and cubs, which would explain why the Crimson Claw is so busy.

The comments are routine, and if this place weren’t a great resource for police gossip and leads, I wouldn’t come here. Part of me hoped if I just kept coming in, tolerating their barbs, they’d stop. It hasn’t been the case. I’m still the mall cop trying to hang out with the big kids.

A ram sits down next to me, and there’s a firm but friendly pat on my shoulder.

“Don’t let them get to you. I know there’s a lot of stuff that goes on in those places, my kids make me take ‘em all the time.” He laughs at himself, probably remembering the crowds before the holiday. That weekend was double overtime pay, if only I’d been able to take advantage of it, but there was also a fifteen-foot slug crawling up city hall. Priorities.

The ram wasn’t finished, “In fact, I saw something just a couple days ago you might want to know about,” he leans in so close his curved horns butt me gently, and my suspicions about his role are confirmed by the “SWAT” t-shirt he wears, “those lowlifes at the food court won’t validate my parking, let’s arrest them!” He laughs and turns away, snatching up a large glass and chugging. I signal for another cup of milk.

At least the bartender is nice enough. The coyote slides my cup down the bar and I watch it accurately come to a rest in front of my paws. I nod, taking a sip and enjoying the cool, thick taste on my tongue, washing away the last bits of popcorn I’d been indulging in. That’s enough to persuade me to put an extra five dollars in the tip jar, and he yells “Thanks” while finishing pouring another round for the table of detectives.

And as I’m considering the amount of alcohol that particular group will consume tonight, and how it could affect their job in the morning, the ram quickly displays he’s been had more than his fair share; what was once a pat on the shoulder becomes a slap.

“Then get this buddy, my kid gets in the car and just slams the door right out into the one next to us, scratched it up real good. That’s money I didn’t have, right? Ya know, you’re not so bad,” he laughs and calls for another beer, the bartender happily slides a

bottle down our way, “tell ya what, this one’s on me.”

“I couldn’t, thank you though.” I say, waving a paw before taking another sip of my milk, “I have to work early in the morning.” By that, I mean I’m going out on patrol as soon as my drink is finished, and being even the slightest bit inebriated doesn’t mix with crime fighting.

The ram isn’t having it. He stands up from his stool and looks behind me at what I assume is the table of detectives, “first, he’s not good enough to be a real cop, now he’s too good to drink with us.” The strength with which he puts the bottle down shatters it, which summons the bartender.

“How about you sit down there,” the coyote says. He firmly taps a claw on the bar, but the ram doesn’t take the hint, instead deciding to lightly push on my shoulder.

“Pardon?” I say after a second shove, attempting to keep my composure while my natural good balance keeps me on my stool.

“I’m thinking you should go.” The ram says.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” interjects the coyote, “either you sit down, pay for your drinks, and keep your hands off my customers, or you can call it a night.” He finishes by throwing a rag at the ram’s face. There’s a laugh from the table behind us.

“Look guys, I don’t know who I’d call if a fight breaks out at a cop bar, so how about we just keep to ourselves for a bit.” He finishes, directing his words over my head, and that seems to quiet everyone down.

The ram’s taken the hint and is cleaning up the mess from the bottle as I finish my milk. This isn’t the first time, it won’t be the last, but there’s good information here, it’s important to come. And while I can certainly take care of myself, even without using my powers, it’s nice to at least have a friend in the room. With that in mind, I approach the bartender while I put on my coat and prepare to head out the door.

“Hey, thanks, these guys aren’t bad, I know they have a rough day.” I say, extending a paw.

“Sure, I gotcha, but all my customers deserve respect, that’s all.” He takes my paw and shakes it. Our eyes meet.

I normally don’t, I usually keep my powers in check, but as I look at him, as my fur touches in his, I can’t help it: I see bank robberies, stolen jewels and paintings. Prison escapes and hideouts flash in fast-forward. How long this history goes back, I’m not sure, but it’s as rich as any I’ve seen.

Our paws then separate, and I must have been silent a little too long, as the coyote asks, “Yes? Was there anything else ya needed?”

“No, not at all.” I shake my head and turn towards the door, “have a good night.”

“Will do, have a good one.”

I walk outside, unable to shake what I’ve just seen: who is he, was it his past I just saw, it didn’t all fit. At least now I have something to think about while perching on rooftops. That can get kind of boring. But boring is good, boring means the city is safe.

It’s a cool night and I look back at the bar once more. There isn’t much to the building, and the blue and red neon sign is the only part that stands out.

“Another fun night at ‘Shift’,” I say to myself. Then I get it. I close my eyes, running a paw through the fur on the top of my head as the images instigated by the bartender rush by again. Seeing through his eyes, his memories, the paws...they’re different. Colors, furs, some not even mammal.

“Chameleon.” The last piece comes together, and I realize the coyote behind the bar isn’t a coyote at all. Camden Andri, jewel thief, art thief, dealer of information, secrets, and lies. Oh, and he escaped prison and went into hiding two decades ago. This would be huge, I tell myself while reentering the bar. A few of the foxes look at me, the ram glances, but either Camden’s threat or his drink has subdued him enough.

I can make it quick, few questions should get him to crack, I’m even ready for a scuffle if it comes to that. But from what I’ve read, Camden was never one for combat, which should make it all the easier. And I have a room full of cops.

Who will finally respect me. Not the Crimson Claw, but me, Clint. The mall cop who uncovered the biggest jewel thief of the last half century, who brought him back to justice where he belongs, that will be me, not some mask and cape.

Camden’s back is turned. Reaching over to tap his shoulder, I grip it a little tighter than I meant to, but am glad to be able to reestablish that connect we had minutes ago. Any physical contact will do it. He turns around quickly, but not before I get few more glances into his world. It’s the easiest evidence gathering ever. Those foxes would be so jealous.

But I don’t see heists and hideouts now: I see a home, twenty years of honest work, a family, and children. I see phone calls with accomplices, jobs being turned down, and a coyote form consistently kept. It’s easy to understand, but I almost don’t want to process it: he’s kept clean this entire time.

Camden’s looking at me, and I can only imagine how odd he thinks I am now; or how silly I look to the detectives, or the ram. One arrest by Clint the mall cop could change all that.

Do I really care about it that much?

“Um, just wanted to give you this,” I fumble and hand him another ten, “thanks a lot. Just keep up the good work.

“Yeah, don’t mention it...really, don’t.” He says, and I understand if he’s put off by my staring and completely awkward tipping technique. I’m quickly out the door, for the first time in a while ignoring the comments. There’ll be another time, an actual crime for Clint to stop. Until then I’ll have to settle for the powers, villains, and adventure, and remember they don’t stop when the cape comes off, and that I’m still the same hero, even when I’m not wearing a mask