

“If nothing ever changed, there’d be no butterflies.”

It was the sort of weather they make paintings of. Not the happy bright paintings with a meadow or a sunset, but the kind of paintings that use up a whole tube of dark blue and makes critics accuse the artist of secretly hating his mother, as art critics are wont to do. Reclining in my cabin, I watch the rain patter against the window and listen to it rattle the door.

No real reason to sit in my little shop today. Shouldn’t be any customers, and to be honest I can make a ton of money without it anyway. The trick to wealth is that you don’t really need a lot of money. If that were it then most people who win the lottery wouldn’t wind up poorer than before they bought the ticket. The trick is to have an income large enough that you need to worry about any spending. Money and savings just drain, while income is like a pond on a river and can potentially refill any loss. And considering how many different things I can grow myself that are worth about their weight in gold, I’m pretty much set for life.

A pound of white truffles or saffron can get me a couple thousand dollars. Same with a pound of whale vomit, or “ambergris”. Caviar, being fish eggs, can net me about that much per ounce. And then there’s Rhino Horn, which is worth several times its weight in gold, but I don’t really feel like helping that particular market along so I don’t mess with it. I could probably be a millionaire if I felt like it.

The water drizzles down the glass as the trees bend in the background from the roaring wind. The ceiling would be leaking if I hadn’t taken care of any leaks years ago.

I like my cabin. It’s large enough for me, and I’ve always been one of those people who will use something until it falls apart instead of getting something new. Though, I must confess to getting some nice bookshelves for all those biology books I got, and another for all the random tabletop rpgs. And a good recliner. And a decent pistol. That thing shoots like a dream.

Okay, okay, I like Alderdale and am too lazy to move when I have my privacy out near the woods. I’d worry about some murderer or predator or something, but to be honest I’m the scariest thing in this city.

Literally. They just posted a poll online about scary capes, and I made the list.

The internet’s been busy the past couple weeks.

I think I’ve become something of a pseudo-celebrity. Sort of a cross between villain and hero, or like a Jack-The-Ripper in that my targets are either those who “go looking for me”, i.e. times that I faked, or actual pedophile rapists, human traffickers, or contract killers.

Most people think I’m killing those people I go after. Which is good, that’s the image I was trying to cultivate, at least within those criminal circles. It’s not really true, but it’s still a very useful

rumor when you're trying to scare those types of people away from your community, as opposed to simply being a spandex-cop.

Not that the police don't do good things, of course. But I am, after all, a vigilante. Someone who operates outside the law. Well. Outside the normal person law. There's been talks about special "hero laws", though they rarely get too far, and the laws for citizen's arrest have been beefed up as a result. Still, breaking and entering. Assault. Kidnapping. Invasion of Privacy.

What's weird is that I still respect the law despite breaking it constantly, I suppose. I guess one of the reasons I can keep that particular Cognitive Dissonance going is that I always do everything in my power to leave them for the police, where they can find the proper evidence and prosecute them in a court of law. I just act as the force of nature that lets them investigate, and which the criminals are more than happy to hide in a jail cell from.

Cape legal philosophy is weird.

I pull the lever on my recliner, and lay back, listening to the wind and the waves of rain. My arms are as thick as a Tiger's, covered in striped soft fur modeled in shape and design after the same, with the large fingers of the paws made dexterous and nimble enough for typing and holding things. The muscles are still as condensed as I normally keep them, though as species go human muscle is one of the denser kinds around, ounce for ounce, so with all the extra muscle fibers I'm honestly not sure of how strong I am.

I went to the local butcher and bought him out of a pig or two. My jaws are strong enough to crack bone, which made eating easier, though I still prefer good food and roasted them slowly following a local recipe. There is NO beating traditional North Carolina barbecue. Cooking makes food easier to digest, anyway. It's one of the reasons humans could afford the energy sinks that are our brains. The parts I couldn't really bring myself to eat, I surrounded with a sack of flesh and dissolved slowly with acid over a day or two, borrowing the idea from pitcher plants.

Funnily enough, when it comes to actually tasting my food, I'm a picky eater. I can make a mean barbecue, though.

My golden red hair forms an almost literal mane as it sweeps back from my head and face, in a style similar to a Japanese Kabuki actor. My prehensile tail holds my mug of steaming hot chocolate, my thick hands folded in front of me resting on the column of muscle and fur that is my humanlike torso.

I just feel like being fluffy today. It's like being my own blanket.

Leaning up to take a sip of hot chocolate, I glance up to the vial that started it all, now empty on a stand in one of my bookshelves. Some more heroes might come after me. I might not be able to keep up the vow of silence bit while in cape form. Which is a shame, since I think it

really added to the whole “creepy” factor, especially with the facelessness. Kinda gave an otherworldly horror. Or at least that’s what I was gunning for. Maybe I can make up for it with a crazy enough voice. Like, several voices at once, or something raspy, or deep, or all three. I’ve had trouble keeping up the voicelessness as it is, anyway.

Come to think of it, if I seem like a big enough threat, they might start sending some of the REALLY big names after me. Like the rest of Wyrms, or maybe Stumble. Maybe a cape bounty hunter or something big that I don’t know about.

I suppose it’s best to lay low for a little while. For both this reason and the obvious one, I am thankful that the types of people I go after aren’t very common, and that my work tends to be much slower than the normal superhero. Most druggies and other such crimes I tend to just give anonymous tips to the police and let them handle it, while sometimes secretly giving them an edge by stealing bullets or closing off escape routes. They’re so much easier to terrify, the thought of cops can already make some of them jump at small noises.

Besides, if I have to worry about a reputation, which honestly is tiring, frustrating, and annoying most of the time, then it may as well be one that focuses on the worst of the worst. Make my targets pretty clear, so I’m more prevalent in the minds of those types of people since they know I’m singling them out.

I sigh, take another drink of hot chocolate, and enjoy the tasty tiny marshmallows while basking in my warm fuzziness as I lean back. The roar of the storm batters against the house, the trees nearby creaking under the strain.

The power goes out. I just sit back, adjust my eyes, let my mind wander, and enjoy the storm. It’s relaxing.

Water washing through the branches, wind rushing through the sky... The landscape is getting a good cleansing.

I suppose the big capes issue might not be as bad since I’m a shapeshifter. But Wyrms managed to find me just fine. I glance over to the trunk at the end of my bed, filled with assorted clothes of various kinds. Small casual wear, lanky hoodies and jeans, a tuxedo, a little black dress, basic sets of underwear, skirts, suits, and more of all kinds of class, size, and gender.

Man, between that and the poster of myself I had made to keep from forgetting what I looked like, most people would probably label me a sexual deviant or something. Nevermind that it’s just kinda weird pretending to be a different person. Demon monster or animal, sure, but another person and it’s just a little bit weird.

Especially the underwear part. Makes me uncomfortable, but I'll take a little weirdness if it could mean possibly saving someone's life.

I wonder if all capes would look crazy if you went through their things, or just all the shapeshifters. We could form a club, but we're a pretty hard group to find.

Even shapeshifting, though, there are capes who can sniff that sort of thing out. Probably not as many in my case, but still. Of course to get people THAT specialized coming after me with enough heat to take me out, I'd probably have to truly terrify people, seeing as it would mean they'd be ignoring the unspoken rule to never go after a cape while they're under their civilian identity.

Or I'd just be unlucky. Wouldn't be the first time. Though thankfully I've had to tangle with incredibly few capes in my time. Most people with superpowers tend to be big and flashy in both powers and presentation. Probably yet another reason for the brightly colored spandex.

I take another swig of hot chocolate. Can't really say that I'm not flashy myself, either. Just a different sort of flashy, what with blood everywhere and claw marks and webbing or wood. I should really work on finding ways to do my thing that require using up less of my body. I can only eat so much before a fight, and the longer it goes on the more my resources are depleted. Maybe if I started using web that was wound into rope.

Huh, come to think of it, one of the reasons that whale vomit sells so well with perfume companies is because they use it as a bonding agent so the scents will stay on whoever applies it longer. I could probably do something with that myself. Glue people's arms to their bodies and stuff, rather than tie them.

Worth a shot. Might even be creepier. It's kinda hard to judge horror and creepiness when you're the one doing it. All you can really do is see how people react and try to guess what factors contributed to that.

It's sorta funny, considering that I hate the horror genre myself. Never really understood the people who play a game or watch a movie to enjoy being terrified. A good sense of dread, maybe, but almost nobody does that anymore. It's all gore porn and jumpscars.

...which, come to think of it, is pretty much exactly what I do. Huh. I should work on that. More being unseen, more creepiness, rather than just straight-up gore. Would probably save me a lot of biomass, too.

Whelp, I know how I'm freaking out my next targets.

Finishing off the hot chocolate, I set it aside and grow my furry arm out to grab a book from the shelf on the far wall, bring it back and crack it open. One of the perks of being a shapeshifter,

things aren't really as often beyond my reach anymore. Maybe they'll have the power back on when I finish reading. Always takes a bit longer for those not in the middle of the city. Pulling a lighter, carefully due to my fur, I move a candle nearby and light it. It's not much, but it greatly helps my ability to see.

Figure it's time to read up on one of the classics: Frankenstein.

After all, what better environment in which to read it?

Okay, an abandoned hospital might be one. But still. My point remains.

The next morning, wake up and finish the book. Never really expected it to have so many stories within stories.

Getting up, I fix myself a small glass of sweet tea, and wonder when they'll get the power back on. The storm has now abated. There must be more damage than I thought. Who knows, maybe I could lend a hand. I pull out the poster, and carefully craft my face and body again.

Hmm. A bit more mass left over this time. I use it as muscle, and pull on a large coat to hide my arms and torso. Lacing up my shoes, I open the door, walk out into the fresh smell of petrichor, and lock my door behind me before taking a stroll into town, stepping over a few fallen trees.

I start to help out various groups of people clear the streets and clean up the tree branches scattered here and there. It's quite a sight. People from all over town helping or walking around in a daze, worker crews everywhere, power company trucks going to and fro, catkins EVERYWHERE, and quite a few windows broken and junk scattered. I make my way through town, taking orders on what's the biggest problem, and which group needs the most manpower.

There thankfully wasn't a major landslide or anything. I'd have gotten a notification on my phone if there was.

Looking at all the people helping, even those who aren't getting paid and whose store or house isn't the thing they're helping to fix, it reminds me of why I still have faith in humanity. There will always be far more humans who care about each other and are willing to put aside differences in times of crisis to do good, than there will be those who take advantage of their fellow man. To quote a good author, "This is so fundamentally human that it's found in every culture without exception. Yes, there are assholes who just don't care, but they're massively outnumbered by the people who do."

As I walk through the streets, I notice a crowd gathering around a shop and head towards it to help when a police officer tells everyone to please leave. That's a little odd. When they start to clear a bit, I see lots of "Police Line" tape, more so here than anywhere else. Wandering my way towards one of the people leaving, I ask what the damage was over there. Was there something going on?

"Yeah. They found a dead body."

"What?!" Granted, sometimes in storms like these people did lose their lives due to accident or happenstance or deciding to tapdance on the roof while wearing copper armor while shouting that 'All gods are morons', but it's still a tragedy. "Man. I knew the storm was bad, but it's still always a shock to hear-

"It wasn't the storm. I heard the police say something about homicide."