

"Faces"

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Contrary to popular belief, creatures of a more supernatural persuasion do -in fact- exist. And they have -in fact- existed through the extent of recorded history and beyond. Casey was one such creature, though you wouldn't have known as much from a cursory glance, nor a prolonged staring contest. Casey was a shapeshifter who wanted to just live a normal, mundane life, and for the past seven years he had been able to do so.

Until today.

Today was the day that his past was going to come back to bite him in the rear. Again.

You see, Casey hadn't always been Casey, which came with the territory of being a shifter. Eventually you would have to assume a new identity, move on to another town, find a new face, a new name, start all over again. Most shifters lived nomadic lives as a result and could conjure up new faces on the fly. Casey was not most shifters. Casey didn't want to drift around, and unfortunately, Casey was the only shifter he had ever heard of that didn't have the inherent ability to make up a new face.

He had to steal people's faces, so to speak. Not that he literally took their face away from them, just that he kind of assumed it. Then he would go a few towns or states away, somewhere that face could be untethered, where he could cook himself up some new, normal, mundane life.

Even though it sounded easy on paper, it never really was easy in practice. Casey hated leaving behind families, friends, jobs. Hell, he even hated having to give up a particularly stunning view. However, they weren't all winners. His last life, for example, was something he was all too eager to escape from.

Though he was convinced he had jumped enough towns away to not be recognised, he ran into a few old acquaintances of the man whose face he had stolen. Turns out he had accidentally slipped into the life of a cattle rustler. Apparently, a notorious one. Notorious enough to have a bounty on his head, a bounty that people very much wanted to hunt. One such bounty hunter had found him, and after narrowly escaping with his life, the only face Casey could conjure was the last face he had seen, the bounty hunter's own. *That* was the moment that Casey began to exist, this time multiple states over.

It had been seven years since then, and his past hadn't caught up to him in that time. Truth be told, this lifetime as Casey had become one of the rare lifetimes where he started to forget that it wasn't his face, that this wasn't truly his life. He'd found his way into running the general store in the town where he had landed, he had found a nice girl to settle down with, he was happy. He *was* Casey.

When he headed for the post office, leaving the general store in the care of a young lad who often helped stock the shelves, he wasn't expecting to have the foundations of his very identity shaken. But those foundations *were* shaken, his head was sent into a tailspin when he saw the bounty hunter, the same man he had stolen this face from, walk into town.

In a small stroke of luck, he had seen the bounty hunter, but the bounty hunter hadn't seen him. Casey's first instinct was that of self-preservation. AKA; abandoning this, his umpteenth life. Both cowardice, and an attachment to this life he had carved out for himself, stayed his hand. For now. So, he pushed that urge to run away to the side and thought about his next best plan. He returned to his store, thanked the young lad who had watched the place and sent him on his way with a few dollars in hand.

It was some time in the afternoon, business was far from dying down for the day, but Casey had no intention of leaving the store open any longer. These four walls were going to be his refuge from his past. There were two customers left in the store, both of which were shepherded out of the building with promises of a discount if they came back tomorrow. Right as he was about to close the door, already reaching for his keys to lock the place up, another would be customer came along. Aside from the initial annoyance about the store being closed for business, he seemed to have something else on their mind entirely.

"Now Casey, help me understand what in the world is going on." The customer's brow furrowed as he spoke, a look of pure and utter mystery.

"I beg your pardon?" Casey responded.

"You were just over at the sheriffs, and you were kind of rude to me!"

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're—" Casey was cut off midway through.

"And you weren't wearing that! Did ya change? What's going on? Hey, do you have the *thing*—" The customer was cut off now too, as Casey slammed the door shut and locked it in a hurry. He went about the store flipping over the "Open" signs that hung on just about every window to their "Closed" counterparts. The shapeshifter was left with nothing but the inventory of his shop to listen, as he sank down behind the counter and rambled to himself.

From the moment the bounty hunter had set foot in town, he started getting these funny looks. The looks continued, as he unloaded the bound man from the back of his horse and strongarmed him into the sheriff's office. One of the deputies saw to the process of locking the man up in a cell, while the sheriff himself pulled his attention from the book he had previously been engrossed in. He had been sort-of-kind-of present in the preceding moments and was soon able to gather that it was time for him to render payment.

Of course, he sought to first set eyes on whoever had delivered the state's latest charge into his care. Expecting to see some stranger, an out of townner just here to earn some coin. Bounty hunters didn't tend to always be local, so, imagine the sheriff's surprise when the man who was standing before him looked just like the man who sold him all his groceries.

"Casey? That you?" Bewilderment had already set itself upon the sheriff.

"Casey who?" The hunter asked for clarification.

"Casey you, my man! You're the guy who runs the general store right? Why are you turning' in bounties suddenly?"

"Sheriff, I promise you I have no idea who or what you are talking about. My name is Rhys, ain't nobody calling me Casey." This time he offered clarification, rather than asking for it.

"Is that damn right...?" The sheriff trailed off, an incredulous look on his face as he kept eye contact with not-Casey. He didn't even need to look as he counted out the allotted bounty due to the supposed Rhys. It was a decent little pile of money when it was eventually nudged across the desk. "Crazy world we live in, you look just like the feller. To a tee." He shook his head, both amused and still half disbelieving.

"Yep, I'm sure it's a mystery." Dry and unamused, Rhys gathered the money and thumbed through it to verify he had been paid in full. There was a slight pause before he secreted the money away into his jacket, but it wasn't due to the money being wrong. It was mainly the fact that he couldn't stop pondering the sincerity and conviction with which the sheriff had mistaken his identity.

The thought wasn't deep enough to have taken him under, though. After that momentary pause, business went about as usual. Which is to say, the bounty hunter exited the station with a complete lack of a cordial farewell. He was here for money, not niceties. It was quite unfortunate that a stranger beckoned to him the moment he set foot onto the street outside, set upon those unwanted niceties.

"Well, hey there Casey! You know, I was just about to come over to your shop to pick up the thing... You know, the *thing*...?" The stranger leaned in close to emphasise, as his voice dropped to a low and conspiratorial whisper.

"I promise you I have no idea who or what you are talking about." For some reason, Rhys parroted that quiet and clandestine tone. He then straightened up and making it very clear he didn't want to engage with the man any longer by beginning to turn away.

"Naw come on now, I know your face—" The stranger was cut off with a speed and ferocity he was entirely unprepared for.

"I am not Casey! Now leave me alone, for goodness' sake." With that, he stormed off, hoping that would be the last he would hear of it. Of course, it wasn't. Far from it. Every single person he interacted with, from the barkeeper and every patron at the saloon, to the hotel clerk, even the town drunk. All of them kept greeting

him with familiarity, and a name that had previously been alien to him but was now utterly infuriating.

He had tried to go about his business as he was wont to do, but with every turn he was being confronted with this continued case of mistaken identity. It was gnawing away at the inside of his skull, and frustration is what led him to seek out this Casey. The general store was easy enough to find, since it bore that same name that was driving him crazy. The store looked very closed, both metaphorically and literally, thanks to the signs hung about the place. He tried the front door, but it was locked. He tried to peer through the windows but couldn't make out more than shadows.

He rounded the outside of the building and intended to try the back door, but he didn't get the chance to try. Because the back door was already opening, with a man slinking his way out of the building. It was dark back there, the sun was hanging in the sky in front of the building, casting a large oppressive shadow behind the place. Even still, he could see the silhouette of the man emerge from the store, and the itch in his skull refused to let him just walk away.

"Now hold up there, partner!" He called out and the figure was obviously startled. For a few steps, silence filled the air between them, before the figure called back to him.

"I've got places to be!" Casey began to move away from the approaching Rhys, leaving the door wide open behind him, his fingertips turning white with how desperately he was gripping his keyring.

"Aww, come on now, Casey!" Rhys threw the name out there, and the way that the escaping figure paused mid-step upon hearing it confirmed exactly who he was. Rhys sped up, and his quick approach made Casey attempt to leave once more. The shifter tried to break out into a sprint, but the pause had been just long enough for Rhys to catch up before he could get too far.

After a few frantic steps, Casey was about to round the corner, but instead found his momentum being turned about forcibly. Rhys yanked Casey until he was facing him, both stood at the very corner of the building. The shadow which they had both previously been enshrouded in, now only fell upon Rhys. Casey was bathed in the light that slipped between the general store and the building next to it.

There weren't any words that could do justice to the shock Rhys felt. All he'd been expecting was someone who could maybe be mistaken for him from the right angle on the right day. What he hadn't been expecting was the face that stared back at him being so identical to his own that he may as well have been looking in a mirror. Even the birthmark that sat underneath Rhys' left eye, was sat right there beneath Casey's own left eye.

The bounty hunter opened his mouth, but no words came out. Partly because he couldn't squeeze them past the strangling lump that sat in his throat, and partly because of the sucker punch that connected with his jaw. Casey had slipped the keyring around his hand, with all manner of keys jutting out to-and-fro like a

makeshift claw. Every piece of metal that contacted Rhys' jaw was sharp and unrelenting.

The blow was enough to send Rhys stumbling back, his footing failing as he fell down his rear. Casey took his chance and successfully disappeared around the corner this time. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds before Rhys was able to drag himself back to his feet and around the corner in pursuit, jaw still thrumming with pain. Blood had already begun to ooze from the wounds on his face, staining his clothes as it trickled down.

The bounty hunter was left standing there, bleeding, his mind almost feeling like it was trying to twist into itself. The only thing he could see was a discarded apron which bore the same signage as the front of the store. He pushed on to exit the alley between the two buildings, and no matter how many times his head swivelled from left to right once out on the street, there was no sign of his identical assailant.

From that day forward, Rhys would become fixated on the man who wore his face, at least for a while. Months would turn into years, and eventually he would begin to doubt even his own recollection of events. Every person who heard his story would doubt him at every turn, and that wore the hunter down. Maybe he *was* just crazy. Even so, his jaw would continue to ache whenever he beheld himself in a mirror.

Casey, meanwhile, was no more. The shapeshifter had managed to escape by the skin of his teeth yet again, and he was forced to kiss goodbye to that normal, mundane life. He left town, abandoned everything from his land to his love. At some point he would return to that same town, a few lifetimes later, when Casey was but a single piece in the puzzle that was his unnaturally long lives. That time around, the town wouldn't capture him quite the same. He didn't find that same happiness, just an ache in his heart, and reminders of what could have been.