

## Furry Felonies

by **Atticus Benight**

During my first year in AA baseball, the team's marketing director, Rob, beckoned me into his office just after the start of a game. His shelves were lined with limited edition memorabilia—bobble heads, signed balls, and souvenir bats—all products of his tenure with the organization. On the opposite wall, life-sized posters hung depicting some of the team's most promising prospects from the past several years—Kenny Baugh and Max St. Pierre.

I occupied a corner stool, the only seat capable of accommodating my tail. As he closed the door, he lowered himself into the vinyl office chair across his desk. He scooted close to the desk and leaned in. As he did so, I noticed an odd resemblance to a young Mickey Rooney—round face topped with red hair, and a lip full of tobacco.

"I need a straight answer," he began with a minty tone of mock sinistry. "What are you willing to do for this club? Any limitations, tell me know."

"Depends on what you had in mind," I answered with a hint of hesitation.

"Well," Rob continued. "Would you be willing to 'apprehend' a few of our competitors—put them out of commission ahead of this next road trip? You know—get the bad juju going for their team?"

"You're suggesting?"

"Kidnapping," Rob said. "More precisely—kidnapping Steamer and Diesel Dawg."

Comprehension dawning at last, I nodded. After considerable thought, I did what any self-respecting employee might do when their boss asked them to commit a felony—I asked for an advance.

"I'll need rope, perhaps some duct tape, a couple of burlap bags—I mean, you gotta have head bags," I said ticking off my grocery list of abduction supplies, as if I had done this before. "Oh, and gas. I'll need gas."

"Gas?" Rob raised an eyebrow.

“For the drive,” I said, “and maybe fire. Mostly for the drive though.”

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A few days later, I found myself outside of the Blair County Ballpark in Altoona, PA, lugging an oversized blue and purple bag through the crowd gathering at the front gates and into the stadium. Along the way, plastered all over the ticket windows, front gates, and support columns were wanted posters from the Altoona Police Department. According to the brief narrative, a six-foot tall wolf had accosted two of the most “beloved” mascots in minor league baseball over the prior weekend, and that Steamer and Diesel Dawg had not been seen around the ballpark since. One local television studio claimed to have the “treacherous crime” on video, and a few television screens near the concessions were looping the grainy footage of two over-sized, awkward—perhaps drunken—Muppet-like creatures, bumbling around the empty parking lot. Then, from out of nowhere, a white van screams into view and a fuzzy, gray, four-fingered paw hoists them inside and speeds away. The prime suspect of it all—the diabolical, sinister, no-good mascot— C. Wolf.

Little did I know that at a news conference earlier that day a young boy named Conner was recruited to get to the bottom of this “crime.” He was declared a special deputy of the Altoona Police Department and presented his badge, but the Chief of Police was at a loss. No resources that they possessed would be a match for an anthropomorphic six-foot-tall, baseball-playing wolf. But then, as though called into action by hopeless circumstance, the blue and yellow Power Rangers arrived to provide backup. Conner donned the red ranger’s jumpsuit and mask, and was charged by the Chief of Police to lead a special investigation to pursue and capture the diabolical fugitive known only as C. Wolf.

I was later briefed on these facts by a mole that we had positioned within the front office of the Altoona Curve—named Zee. She was a slender, sexy woman, with long twisted blonde hair and smelled perpetually of peppermint—the top mint aroma in my opinion.

“In something like this,” Zee began with a Cheshire grin that exposed every one of her white teeth, “there are no rules. Your goal is to evade—until the 7<sup>th</sup> inning. Then, you’re needed here.”

She opened a map and indicated a small area behind the outfield wall.

“That’s where we’ll stash Steamer and Diesel Dawg. There’s a trap door there that you can come through—we usually send a dancer out onto the field when there’s a homerun. Anyway, you’ll go through there, and the Power Rangers will be on your heels.”

I accepted my instructions and thanked Zee. In return, she pulled me in tight for what I found to be an invigorating embrace.

“You’re really great for doing this,” Zee said.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” I told her.

“No, no,” Zee insisted, unwilling to relinquish her hug—not that I was complaining. “You’re a real hero.”

“Well, thanks,” I answered as she released her grip on me.

I gathered my gear and breezed past her, through a sea of cubicles, and into a meeting room where I slipped more easily into character. When I emerged from the room, Zee brushed up against me and offered two half pats, half gropes on either side of my tail, punctuated by a subtle squeeze.

“You know,” Zee said, “I don’t often get the chance to meet another wolf.”

“Another?”

“Oh,” she said. “I thought Rob told you. I’m a wolf too—deep—deep down.”

After several moments, Zee revealed that she was a furry. She was self-described wolf and considered that her primary criteria for selecting a potential mate. If you were not a wolf, she would not be interested. Half curious, half frightened, I stepped from the office, slid on the giant wolf head, and readied myself for what I imagined would be the most hostile crowd I would ever face.

When I first emerged onto the concourse, the jeers that I had expected did not materialize. In fact, children were lining up waiting their turn for a high five or a hug. One little girl, three-years old with blonde curls and wearing a t-shirt with Steamer on it, even beckoned me to bend down, and she kissed the eye patch over C. Wolf’s left eye—the one that legend says was knocked out by a rogue foul ball hit by Jose Guillen back in 1995—before the decision was made to install a higher and wider net as a backstop behind home plate.

“Boo boo all better?” she asked in a voice that could melt any heart. I nodded.

Before the game, I ran about the stadium—occupying random seats, offering a handspring or two in the infield, and harassing anyone who crossed my path in an Altoona Curve baseball cap or jersey. After all, with Steamer and Diesel Dawg incapacitated, this was my house, regardless of what any of the wanted posters might imply. Even my team was wearing their home whites, while the Curve sported dingy gray uniforms. Oddly enough, the sentiment that this was my house seemed to be echoed by the fans themselves. The more I taunted, jeered, and harassed them, the more they cheered.

Finally, when the game was about to begin, I sought refuge in the bouncy houses along the first base line as Conner and the two Mighty Morphin Power Rangers took to the third base dugout. As someone who grew up with the first generation Power Rangers, something immediately seemed off. There was a long ponytail flowing from beneath the blue ranger’s helmet, and the spandex costume was stretched to the max, barely accommodating the form of what was clearly a rather hippy, full-breasted, plus-sized woman. The uniform of the yellow ranger was similarly taxed to its limits, but with a very different, husky beer-bellied form. The stitches, straps, and buttons of bib-overalls were clearly visible through the thin yellow fabric—even at this distance. Perhaps Billy and Trini (the original blue and yellow rangers) had each undergone hormone therapy, or maybe they had mixed up their power coins before teleporting to the Blair County Ballpark. In either case, I could not help but think that post Power Ranger fame must have been really unkind.

After the crowd was informed of the kidnapping of Steamer and Diesel Dawg, Conner and the other rangers began their pursuit. I remembered Zee’s instructions—to evade until the 7<sup>th</sup> inning, so I did just that. I bounced with a few kids in the bouncy house with a giant likeness of Steamer on top of it. That is until I saw the blue and yellow rangers enter the kid zone. Immediately I hopped out, waggled my fingers at the tip of my long, wolfy snout, and sprinted toward the fence just as a final out was made and the outfielders began trotting into their dugout. I leapt the fence, and ran to my team’s dugout where the “power punks” could not follow. It was as if I was Goldar, and

the dugout was Rita Repulsa's moon base. Once there, the rangers would not—or perhaps could not—pursue.

I hunkered down there for a bit, until I noticed one of the players exit the stadium through a door in the dugout. At Jerry Uht Park, my home stadium, there were no doors. The clubhouse was located in the Erie Civic Center, and getting there involved a long walk across the outfield. But here, a door in the back of the dugout led to a network of concrete hallways. It was getting hot, and I needed a break, so I followed this player through the door, removed my head, and ambled through the underbelly of the stadium.

Eventually I stumbled upon the laundry and sat in there for a few moments chatting up one of the grounds crew while guzzling a Gatorade. Just then, a yellow body flashed in front of an open door and I saw my nemesis sneaking down the hallway, glancing side-to-side. Luckily, he hadn't looked up and didn't see me, headless, straight ahead. I tossed the giant head back onto my shoulders and ran in toward the open door and slipped behind it, pinning myself in the corner against the wall.

Conner entered the laundry, two drenched, foul-smelling power rangers slinking along behind him. The member of grounds crew that I had been speaking with started to grin. Just as they cleared the doorway, I slipped out and backed into the hallway. I made an exaggerated tiptoeing motion, as if I were a cartoon rabbit evading the hunter by walking in his own footprints. At that point, the grounds crewman lost all composure and I rounded the corner to a booming laugh.

The ballgame progressed quickly and before I knew it, I was called behind the outfield wall. By the time I arrived, members of the front office staff were already wrapping clothesline around Steamer and Diesel Dawg and positioning them next to a large box that contained the transformer that powered the score board. With a boost from Zee, I scurried up on top and struck a menacing pose.

When Conner came into view, he made a bee line straight for my prisoners and began unwrapping the rope from around their chests. Just then the other Rangers noticed me.

“Look out,” one of them shouted

Conner assumed a karate-like pose just as cheers erupted inside the stadium from the final out. I looked down at Zee, who was poised at a small hatch in the outfield

wall. That was my cue to take the battle onto the field so that the fans could witness the conclusion. I jumped down on the far side of the transformer and waited for Conner to catch up to me. He grabbed me by the arm and flung me through the hatch and I tumbled onto the outfield just as a convoy of police cars roared onto the warning track through a gate in right field—lights flashing, sirens wailing.

From out of nowhere, Conner emerged with a giant dog catcher's net and he flung it over my head, knocking me to the ground. As I fell, I felt my foot connect with something and when I looked down, to my horror, it was Conner. I had just kicked the Make-A-Wish kid. For a long moment my heart plummeted and I wondered if we had taken this thing too far, but when he finally rolled back to his feet, he struck another pose for the audience, two police officers lifted me up and tossed me into the back of an SUV. The door slammed behind me.

I removed my head and stared out of the tinted glass as this convoy began moving once more. Conner was in one of the patrol units, waving at the crowd, and Steamer and Diesel Dawg bobbed on the back of a golf cart, finally free after a weekend of "torment." The convoy rolled out of the stadium and onto a narrow service road that connected with the parking lot. One of the police officers opened the rear hatch and I replaced my head for the last time that day.

When I rolled out, Conner was waiting and I knelt beside him. He stared at me with serious look on his face.

"I love you C. Wolf," he said. "But you're a bad doggy."

The police officer grabbed one of my arms and locked a pair of handcuffs around my wrist. With my free arm, I covered C. Wolf's eye and covered in the most pitiful position I could. Conner motioned toward Steamer and Diesel Dawg, still poised, smiling unblinkingly on their golf cart.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said with a pirate-like growl.

Conner looked up at the policeman and said "It's ok, he's sorry. You can let him go."

"Are you sure," the officer said. "We can run him downtown."

"No, he learned his lesson."

And with that, the police officer removed my cuff and I knelt down to offer Conner a long hug of appreciation.

This was Conner's wish. He suffered from a seizure disorder—though I can't recall specifically what it was—and the Make-A-Wish Foundation offered him the chance to live out his dream of fighting crime with the Power Rangers. As I left the ballpark that day, Conner, Steamer, Diesel Dawg, and a few of the police officers were riding up the white hill of the wooden roller coaster that over looked Blair County Ballpark. I watched them teeter over the crest and rattle their way along the rickety track. And that was the last I ever saw of him. Though I think of him often, I never learned what happened to him. I'd like to picture him as a teenager now, sitting atop the Appalachian foothills in central Pennsylvania, wondering occasionally who I was—the man who played a wolf one afternoon so he could have a childhood dream come true. Perhaps he'll read this account of that day and think to himself—"Hey, I think that's me," and maybe, just maybe, he'll kick his five-year old self for wasting his wish on me.



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