

An Assignment in Overcoming the Terrifyingly Familiar

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A mid-size rental van cuts through the busy as usual streets on this muggy summer day in Seattle. It bears the strange logo of a tuxedoed ghost holding a rose with its' ghostly tail and a spooky expression, the UMBRA logo and inside this van are a driver and an agent who is sweating and itching in anxiousness at the assignment he'll soon be reaching the location for. This agent is a Hawaiian Monk Seal named Howell. He's got skin that is a sky blue color with a greyish underbelly though right now it's being covered by his Umbra uniform, his left flipper is gone and replaced by hard light that's right now a concerned bright orange color, he's 22 and a somewhat recent UMBRA Academy graduate turned agent that you could mistake as older than he actually is. His chauffeur meanwhile is a fluffy grey furred Harper seal that's older at 26 but can be mistaken as younger than that and is the one leisurely darting through these Seattle streets and mini hills, his name is...

"Hey Rico. Can you please slow down at these mini street hills? I think I'm gonna be sick at the rate you're going down them."

"Huh? Am I actually driving too fast for you, Howell? That's a surprising thing to hear from such a grizzled ghost hunter like you." The harper seal says cheekily.

"Listen, just because I do something dangerous for a living does not mean you get to endanger my life *nggh*... or my lunch! Stop driving so carelessly on these hilled streets!" Howell says exasperated while gripping the seat with his arm flippers.

"Ughh, fine. We're practically at the assignment location anyway." Rico says this as he slows down a little and a few minutes later after arriving on a flatter street their destination is reached and Howell eases himself off the seat, still slightly sweaty and panting,

"Oh thank goodness! We made it, well most of me made it anyway. I think your driving left my stomach back at a stoplight somewhere along these freaking hilly roads." The monk seal says with annoyance though also half jokingly.

"I didn't drive that bad, jeez. Anyway we're here let's just get started on what we need to do"

They exit the UMBRA sanctioned van and grab all the also sanctioned gear on hand that they think they'll need stored into convenient packs both of them have as well as locking the van

doors before the seal duo walk on their flippers toward the Seattle sea market and the docks that are leading them further to their assignment. The two of them walk through the sea market, Howell moving at a somewhat fast but steady pace through everything only stopping once to grab a snack while Rico stops to try the samples of jam and such and soak in his surroundings like the sight of fresh fish being chopped all while still keeping almost at pace with Howell surprisingly. Howell notices the Harper seal with at least two bags worth of food and souvenirs and is annoyed but can't complain thanks to Rico keeping up with him as well as he has so far so instead he merely grumbles to himself as his hard light left flipper changes from it's neutral light blue to a bright yellow of annoyance. Both seals keep walking through the sea market regardless of all distractions and distracted feelings while munching on their respective snacks till they reach the end of the sea market and get to what seems to be a wooden dock surrounded by water and boats as well as a waiting figure.

The waiting figure turns out to be a large Osprey. One with bright red feathers on it's back and head, maroon ones in their m shaped wings as well as ones that are more dirty white in color covering the bird's stomach area though only a few of those are visible thanks to the Ospreys green shirt covering most of them. On top of that green shirt the Osprey is also wearing a blue sports watch draped over it's right wing, a white cap on its head, green bands near its shoeless taloned feet (on top of the shape and hooked talons of bird feet making fitting shoes near impossible plus you don't exactly need shoes when you can just fly) and then there's the loose fitting dark blue shorts that are just kind of circled around the Ospreys spindly bird legs all giving it a unique, kind of sporty look. The anticipating Osprey soon sees the seal duo with their UMBRA uniforms of all black suits from the blazers to the loafers with the exception of visible white undershirts and a red rose pattern right next on the sleeves of the blazers. The bird waves to them and both agents have a moment of confusion before realizing he must be the one who essentially called them here for this assignment in the first place and so they walk to him so they can all talk and figure out the situation here, Rico starts talking first.

"Hello. You must be the one who called us about a ghost problem Mister ummm Montana, right?"

"That'd be me. I'd prefer if you call me Eddie though, that's my first name. You're both from UMBRA?"

"We sure are. So ... Eddie, what can you tell me and my partner here about this ghost and what problems it's been causing you?" Eddie Montana, the osprey gives a slight chuckle at this question before answering as he starts rubbing the broad tip of a wing over his other wing making Howell notice something but for now he stays silent.

“Oh. About that, this isn’t so much a problem for me as much as it is for some of my fish friends underwater. Some kind of sea serpent or dragon has made a home out of one of the underwater castles here off the docks. You know the kind that fish use as basically city parks on top of their own homes away from home. So yeah this ghost dragon or whatever is basically scaring them and preventing the water castle from being used like usual. Some of the local fish, including a personal friend of mine, wanted me to tell somebody about it and get some help. You can help us right?” Eddie looks at both Howell and Rico with his head tilted and his eyes questioning.

“Well I-I... we should...” Howell stammers, unable to finish a sentence as that left flipper of his now a mixture of two colors, a deep orange and a very icy bluish white. Rico quickly speaks up to try to save his UMBRA partner from further embarrassment.

“What my associate here is trying to say is of course we should be more than able to help with that fierce ghost. That sea dragon is no match for the UMBRA duo of Ho-ow” Howell gives Rico a light smack across his fluffy neck as he overcomes his strange all encompassing worry to whisper out a reminder to the harp seal who looks at him a little shocked by the sudden slap.

“You dolt, remember **codenames**. We’re not supposed to use our real names out in the field”

“Right, Right, gotcha. I’m surprised you remembered proper protocol for a change.” Rico whispers back as Howell huffs out a “whatever” and they both go back to talking normally to the bright feathered Osprey looking at them, head still tilted though now more in confusion than questioningly.

“As I was saying, we...UMBRA agents, Solar Striker and *sigh* Swift Aqueous, we’ll take care of that ghost serpent no problema. The sea castle is right here off this dock right?”

“Yep. I can show you where. I’ve seen it since I like to dive around here, it’s what we Ospreys do after all. Follow meee!” Eddie says eagerly while gesturing to follow him by waving a wing forward. Rico shrugs and follows while Howell snaps back from his mind being elsewhere and his hazel pupil’s undilating as he rushes to catch up without a word said but some sweat starting to form on his skin. He catches up in less than a minute and asks a question when he does as the three walk together now.

“Hey Eddie. Mind if I ask you something real fast?”

“Of course not. Shoot buddy.”

“I noticed the watch you’re wearing. Is that a crow on it?”

“Sure is” the Osprey gleefully says while looking at and positioning his maroon colored wings to show it off. “Cloudbreacher Caw, snazziest and most functional Avian sport watches on the

market. This one was kind of expensive at a little over 200 but worth it all things considered. It's got a small barometer built in to tell pressure and altitude in exact numbers too if you change modes, it gives the date as well as the time, it's got a compass mode and then there's that classic logo. Oh and it's got a rechargeable battery too that's only slightly different from those usual watch batteries and it's also waterproof which is a huge thing for someone who does a lot of water div- gosh am I rambling? Sorry I just can't help it, this watch is just too perfect and it can take just about anything. Just look at it!" the osprey says with the enthusiasm of a kid trying to impress his friends with a cool new toy as he angles it in the right way to show off the watch's face.

Rico does for all of three seconds and that's enough for him but Howell is entranced by it or more specifically by the logo. Nestled in the screen between the digital time readout and the small old school barometer there is the logo in the dark blue and bordering on black purple buttoned watch. It is a raven cawing triumphantly with one top wing disappearing into a cloud while the other lower wing is in the space between a very small C.C. that's black against the blue interior of the watch screen. It's beak and face are about to fade into another cloud but obviously won't since the icon is immobile. Such detail put into this small icon that few would really care about beyond it being a brand signifier. Howell though, he cares only because he considers it an omen that he hopes he's wrong about. He gulps nervously before realizing that his fellow agent and the bird giving them directions are starting to leave him behind and he rushes to catch up to them both.

They both look at him coming up behind them and decide it better to just continue to their goal point in silence rather than say anything. Mere moments later Eddie stops and examines where they are before nodding to himself. "Sweet, this is where we need to be or should I say where you need to be. Since I'm not some ghost catcher or agent or whatever I'm gonna go kick back at the sea market. Good luck you two, try not to die to that serpent, cause that would be a serious bummer" the Osprey says while beginning to flap its maroon wings to fly off. Before he can fully leave though Rico shouts up at him which makes the bird pause "hey wait! So this is the place? To reach that ghost serpent all we've got to do is dive down from that part of the dock here?"

"Yup. It's right here, just a straight swim down from the edge of this dock" Eddie points to his left to the dock right across from them and while it's hard to see the undersea castle from here there is a big chunk taken out of the dock from what looks like a huge bite given the marks. "So are there any landmarks we should look out for to know when we're close?" Howell asks while the Osprey is still there.

"Yeah. You'll see a rotting sign with a lobster holding a sponge and a towel on it that says Cray's Spa Service about halfway there and then a massive rock with some algae and a big swordfish

carved when you're really close. If you see a kelp bed with a lot of otters eating there you've gone too far." The two seals from UMBRA both nod at each other, deciding together that they know all they need and say "Thanks Eddie" together.

"No problem guys. Be safe on the hunt and you look after the little guy, alright?" The Osprey says and asks, pointing at the monk seal who simply nods his whiskered head as Eddie Montana flies away vanishing into the clouds.

"Little guy?! I'm older than- aw forget it." Rico says in annoyance that turns into defeated indifference. The two seals are alone now and that means they can truly start their mission of spectral pursuit and hunting.

"Alright let's double check that we have all our gear before we take our dive." Howell says before starting to rummage through his bag and double check his suit "let's see: tri-vision tracking goggles which I probably won't need, emergency air supply canisters and mask, ghost trapper jar for if capture is possible, and finally spectral shock darts for if our powers fail or aren't enough or something. Bags good though given what we're going up against might need a backup ghost trapper jar and some more shock darts. Could you go get those for me Rico?"

"Me? Why me?!"

"Because you have super speed and I don't. Plus that'll give me time to double check my suit while you do that and then we can go. Alright?"

"Fineee. I'll go. I'm sure I'll be back before you're done anyway." Rico huffs before zipping off leaving Howell to stand there before he starts moving too. The fluffy gray seal arrives at the sanctioned van and grumbles about how his speed shouldn't be used to fetch other people's things like this. He pulls out a car key from a pocket on his suit and presses a button on it unlocking the van doors with a near silent click. Rico goes to the compartment under the front seat where they keep the ghost trapper jars only to see that the emergency extra one is already gone. He looks around the compartment for it and checks the rest of the van too in case it was misplaced but fails to find the trap jar he was requested to bring to his fellow agent. He decides to check for the shock darts next only to see that surprisingly most of them are still there, despite the monk seal saying he took some only the ones that Rico has on him are gone from the spot in the trunk where they're kept.

Rico is baffled, wondering how Howell could have just forgotten that he took all the emergency supplies he needed already. Disappointed at his wasted time the harp seal heads back to the docks and makes it back in no time at all to the spot he was at before only to see Howell not there. He looks around for a minute to see if he can spot the other seal with his hard light

flipper but sees nothing until he looks at that end of the dock with the bite in it and notices fresh water on it. It takes him no time at all after that to piece together what Howell just did and now all he can think is how he's going to give that short-furred bastard a piece of his mind as he bolts into the water after him wasting no time. It takes Rico all of 3 seconds to catch up to Howell which catches the monk seal completely off guard and makes him spin underwater for a moment before regaining his bearings and turning to now face his angry fellow seal right in the blackness of his sclera and the grey iris of his eyes with his own shocked black sclera and brown iris of his own eyes.

“WHAT THE HELL BRO?! Why'd you send me on a false errand like that so you could leave me behind!? I thought we were doing this together? You know, how we're **supposed** to!!” There's scathing anger in every question, rhetorical or not and Howell isn't sure how to respond at first.

“I...” there's a pause in Howell's words, a nervous one but then he starts talking more clinically and with less emotion. “I sent you on that ‘errand’ in the hopes it'd keep you busy and distracted long enough for me to reach the undersea castle, fight the...ghost while you waited above in the car and we'd be done sooner. I work better alone and you're a liability given how little you've actually fought ghosts in the field. You shouldn't have followed me to fight an S grade threat like this.”

“**EXCUSE ME!?** Are you trying to imply that you're a **higher class of hero** than me? Because I would like to remind you that not only did we graduate from the same academy with close enough grades to be stuck together apparently but I've been at this longer even if I'm not one to always be in the middle of the action and hunting down specters like killer possessed teddy bears and whatever else. I'm on the same level as you, comprene? Besides, it's against UMBRA Academy rules to do missions alone like you just tried to. They're supposed to be done in squads and for a grade S ghost like this should be ideally done with a squad of four.” That paraphrased reciting of the rules calmed Rico down a little but Howell is still swimming along seemingly detached from it all just trying to reach his objective but then he responds to Rico.

“...I have a special arrangement with the academy that allows me to go on missions alone and without my students I'll have you know. Also I didn't want to say it before because it might offend you but with your powers and lack of field experience using them outside of the typical years of academy training you're a B maybe A grade ghost hunter at best. I was just trying to protect you before.” The monk seal says all of this hesitant at first but then more matter of factly.

“Are you seriously bringing up grades now?! I'm not some scrub, I know how to protect myself **AND** use my powers. Besides, your powers made you considered a B grade agent too before your weird power boost less than a year and a half ago.” At the mention of his powers and that

day almost a year and a half ago Howell's eyes widened this time and his mind drifted back to memories of then while Rico continued to talk. "Honestly I can't believe that just because of that boost, whatever caused it and you getting into UMBRA as a second year you apparently think you're better and more capable than me. After all I may be a chauffeur but I'm also a mentor too and... are you even listening? Howell... are you okay? Howelllll"

17 Months Ago

OH MY GOODNESS! I can't believe I made it to shore in one piece. I can hear myself panting from swimming as far and as fast as I did, under the circumstances I did. I look down at where my left flipper used to be now only a cauterized stump and then I look down at the only other survivor of that ghost serpent's surprise attack that I'm dragging along with my good flipper as I wash onto shore on my underbelly utterly drained from everything.

"Can you believe it Albright? We made it!! ...Albright? Come on, why... why aren't you answering me?" I look at him and his fluffy sea otter body again to see why he's so unresponsive and that's when I notice something poking under his UMBRA jumpsuit, holes I didn't notice before probably thanks to the rush and shock of trying to get away. It looks like transparent marshmallow leaking out of his jumpsuit, I go to shake him to see if that'll get a response and this makes the jumpsuit lift to reveal the last thing I'd want to see, a massive bite mark in his toned side that seemingly went through his clothes but punctured the skin though weirdly there is no blood from the wound only these globs of this translucent marshmallow looking substance.

I go to touch it but my flipper simply goes right through the stuff and into the open air and it feels like nothing is there even though my eyes see this translucent fluff jutting out of the bite wound and Albright's beige fur. Then again I'm also seeing a couple of spots in my vision, maybe I took even more damage from that attack then I thought? Then I look into Albright's seafoam green eyes and see that they look absolutely dead, still and lifeless, something I didn't notice when I was rushing to escape with both our lives and reach land again. I use my good flipper to generate a bit of white light to shine into his eyes and sure enough no response, no dilation. **DAMMIT!** He must have died from these injuries on the way here and I didn't even notice and then a realization dawns as I'm on my knees. I remember my UMBRA academy lessons on the soul and how some ghosts are capable of actually directly harming it and it all clicks and I proceed to make a fist before I slam my remaining flipper into the sand falling over from the effort and offput of balance by doing that while one armed.

Here I lay pathetic and exhausted on my back now, the last of my UMBRA class. We'd all recently graduated but it's hard for classes and even teacher-led ghost hunts to prepare you for a proper out in the field chase and fight especially against something stronger than you expected. Albright, Crystal, Gallos, Ursa, and Aaron, they're all gone, they all risked their lives and

allowed me to escape though not unscathed. Not even close, this was supposed to be a more routine mission, it was supposed to be...

“It was supposed to be crows dammit, It Was Supposed To Be Crows, IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE CROWS. **IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE... AHHHHH!**” I say then scream this while feeling the air heat up around me due to anger. I slam my flipper again on the ground some of the sand from the collision barely missing my eyes though not missing my nose and whiskers and I sneeze as the heat continues to irradiate around me but I don’t really feel in the mood to put my powers back into check not that I can generate that much heat to begin with really. I repeat “it was supposed to be crow” a few more times since a ghostly murder of crows was what we were actually supposed to be fighting, only a B Class threat and not an S Class one like the ghost serpent which ambushed us. I feel like I’m going to collapse but then I notice a robed figure approaching out of what almost looks to be a portal, one of black and dark blue swirls and this figure, I realize it’s approaching me fast.

“Ahh someone who could use my brand of assistance.”

It says with the voice of someone ancient, mysterious and pretty self assured all at once.

“What? Who are you...uuuu?”

“Answers will come in due time, young seal. In the meantime rest for you will need it and have more than earned it.” This figure has more uncertainty and what almost sounds like a sort of apprehensive pity in it’s voice now and now I have a ton of questions. I don’t want to pass out with it just hanging around but I’m fading in and out of consciousness but before I do I notice a clawed, sort of bony hand. It’s got a claw to it’s chin in thought and my last thought is how I hope that’s not a bad sign though given what led me to this beach it feels like an ill omen.

I eventually come to again after what feels like two days later but I look up at the sky and see the sun is setting so it can’t have been more than a couple of hours later. I look down and I notice a bowl of what looks to be fairly creamy potato soup next to me with a blank index card next to it. I pick up the index card and suddenly words actually start appearing on it through some kind of blue flame scrawling across it and I almost drop it, the flame written words say “eat the soup for it will restore you.” I’m wondering if I’m dreaming or possibly even hallucinating right now and reach into a tightly sealed waterproof pocket of my UMBRA uniform to pull out the UMBRA protocol guidebook and turn to a page I haven’t fully read yet and the words are clear and readable so I can’t be dreaming. I’m not sure how to tell for sure if I’m hallucinating or not so I decide to sniff the soup and also look around to see if that’ll help.

I bring my muzzle close to the bowl and take a deep whiff and it smells just like potato soup though there’s also the smell of some kind of grass or root that I can’t recognize but it doesn’t

smell dangerous. I take a quick look around at my surroundings and notice that I'm next to a tree now as opposed to a few feet from the water as I was before then I also notice that I can't see Albright's body, he's probably still back near the water but it's weird I moved and he didn't. I don't see that robed figure around anywhere either which makes me slightly worried but then my stomach growls and I realize I'm starving. I'm still somewhat hesitant to eat this soup with mysterious origins but it's the only thing available right now and there's no real sign of danger to suggest I shouldn't aside from maybe that fiery note and that this could have been laid out but whoever that was in the robe.

I don't have a spoon or anything to make a makeshift one but when I feel the soup and it doesn't feel too hot so I lift it up and just slurp it all down getting almost every savory, perfect temperature drop of it. Then I begin to feel something strange that makes me question that decision, the stinging sensation of hydrogen peroxide but around my entire body and especially my insides like my throat and stomach like I drank it. It's not too painful but it's concerning and incredibly unpleasant. This feeling lasts for a solid minute and while I feel it I do notice that some of the cuts and bruises I got in my earlier escape are starting to heal as well as just my body as a whole. When the strange all over stinging sensation faded I felt healed and refreshed, able to stand up again on my own two legs and flippers. I look down at myself again and see I somehow(probably thanks to confusion and pain) missed that I'm in completely different clothes now, instead of my UMBRA stuff I'm now in dark blue and palm tree patterned Hawaiian shirt and surprisingly form fitting black shorts that even have a perfectly sized tail hole. This tells me that whoever is doing all this has a sense of humor I guess given the choice of shirt and also raises more questions one of which I'm not sure I want the answer.

"Oh **marvelous** you've awoken. Feeling revitalized...I take it? How was the soup? I see you consumed all of it."

"YAAHH!" I shriek, startled by hearing the sudden voice behind me making me turn around to see the robed figure from earlier only now their sleeves are rolled up a little and their hood is off allowing me to see their face clearly. It was a sort of patchwork with it's goat eyes and muzzle, it had big canine teeth jutting out though suggesting some feline in there too, while most of its face is covered in a weird mix of brown, white and black fur it's forehead and the top of its head are covered in scales meaning it lacks fur on top of it's head as well as lacks ears, weird to have that trait in common with whatever this...person is. It's been staring at me with a completely blank expression for a little while now though following my eye movements so I think they or he....maybe knows that I'm examining it, I need to say something.

"Yahh! Sorry for yelling but you startled me. Where did you come from? Also who and if you don't mind saying, what are you?"

“I didn’t necessarily mean to sneak up on you but where I come from matters not all you need to know is that it’s far from here but also I was wandering around about when you washed up. As for who and what I am, I am many things but primarily a creature of trade. I have many names but you may call me the Planes Seller of Dreams or C. Chimera if you’d prefer.” He answered several of my questions in a roundabout way but then raised several more. I’m still trying to figure out what this stranger’s deal is and if I shouldn’t just try to blind him with my light and go. He starts to speak again while I contemplate some more on this situation.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I left the soup that restored you to better health and why I am here now. I’m here to offer you a deal if you’re interested, one that’ll make you stronger. Strong enough to never be in the kind of condition like when you washed up to the shore here again, interested”

“F-First off how will that be done, more soup? Secondly, what's the catch? And thirdly what did you do to my UMBRA outfit?! **Where** did you get these clothes and how did you get them on me?!” I tap my foot flippers on the sand and glare at this stranger intent on getting more answers and figuring out exactly what this deal is he’s offering me and if I should actually trust this chimera to make me stronger.

“More soup? Oh no no no, I have let’s say a more special concoction for that. Trust me I sell efficient solutions and there is no cost other than what you are already paying. As for the matter of your previous clothes they were worn, tattered and blood stained so I transmogrified them into something less damaged and cleaner to save the time of crafting whole new ones which would have taken slightly longer in spite of the ease that using magic for that would allow. Also since I know you were thinking it, I can assure you I merely altered your clothes on your form and threw in a little extra material for repairs, I did not need to remove them from you at any time.” The planes seller smiles at me in a way that screams mischief was done and I decide that I’m finally done listening to it.

I’m ready to go on the attack and show this stranger why messing with an UMBRA agent is a bad idea. I start to generate heat and light mixing them together into a self made laser to fire at this guy. Suddenly I notice his eyes change to be more feline and one starts glowing a bright gold as well as his formerly bony hands becoming hooves. What is this guy? It doesn’t matter, I fire a hot orange laser bolt at him but then I see that he had already moved out of the way of my attack. I fire another bolt of hot light and he dodges that too, with ease no less.

“How...h-how are you dodging me like this?!”

“Ahaha! You remind me of this man I know in New York, full of questions and willing to fight for the answers” he says as I ball my right flipper and go to strike him only for him to teleport

behind me and then I feel shock go through my shoulder and I start to feel numb. It continues to talk as I back up and prepare another move, I can't lose now after all that's been done to keep me alive.

"Of course he's a polar bear now, a pretty powerful one too and I could assist you with what I have to offer as I assisted him." I ignore it's offer and try one last time to get it. I finish internally generating the light needed and then I unleash it in one big bubble of heat and radiance hoping to blind and possibly burn this Chimera so I can get away from it. However he seems to have predicted my move again and when the light fades he's in his own black protective bubble and I've only waddled a few steps. He pops the bubble by pushing out his hands and before I can blink twice in his direction he kicks me in the side with enough force to send me flying which given his formerly bony hands and hunched over frame I would have previously thought impossible but this chimera effortlessly countering my attacks proves that it's incredibly strong and I have no true idea of its capabilities.

The numbness makes it hard to move and that last blow was almost crippling. Before I can fully stand I feel a really long and thick appendage wrap around my weakening form, around my arm, shoulder and legs and I know now that it's over. This appendage coils a little more almost up to my face and I realize it's a tail, a snake-like one covered in black scales. The creature it's attached to comes closer and the grip loosens a little. It's eyes are intense black diamonds suspended in orange when it starts approaching but then they soften slightly and dilate slightly and it's tail loosens a little around me.

"Such a shame that violence was chosen before I even had a true chance to show you what I was offering but I expected no less. Hopefully now you've seen the extent of the power I possess and how I have the ability to back up what I offer. Are you willing to see it now or do you have more questions?"

"Of course I have more questions! Like where's the body of the sea otter that washed up with me? Did you do something to it? Why are you so eager to help me and offer this... power concoction you said you had? Also what the hell is a man?" I take a deep breath just wanting to get that all out there and I think the Chimera knows it. I continue to talk.

"But I suppose all those questions don't really matter do they? You've got me at your mercy and have proven you're not just talk. I'd be a fool not to take you up on your offer."

"Of course your questions matter, one of the answers to them will reappear soon enough and you've confirmed a suspicion I had about this world with another one. As for the ones involving the whys and hows of me doing this, those are things you need not concern yourself with. Now about my deal, I want this to be a choice still so here... is what I offer..." the planes seller moves

his hands into one of the pockets of his robe, makes a circular motion with it and then there's a blue glow as a clear bottle full of light grey bubbling liquid is pulled out. He puts it right in front of my face and raises an eyebrow.

"So that's what'll make me stronger huh? Strong enough to never be in this kind of state again?" I think it over for barely two seconds before I decide to take his offer. After all, what choices do I really have here?

"Okay I'll take your deal, how much is the bottle?"

"Oh I assure you as I stated priorly, all costs will already be...paid. All I need to do is check one minuscule thing and the deal is done and the new strength will be yours." As he finishes saying this his eyes go back to glowing again only this time they're this blackish purple color and he starts looking me over with clear intent.

"Ah perfect, I don't have to worry about you having it. As I suspected, this little concoction will heal that broken rib. My check is done, you may take the potion from my hand now and complete this deal." His cheery words and that ability to just see through me I think give me pause but I cautiously do as he says and take the potion of grey bubbling whatever this truly is and he gestures with what looks like a lion's paw now to drink. I take a sip and taste nothing, it's like somehow even more flavorless seltzer which I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. I drink more since I can't imagine him giving me this potion to drink just one sip or he would have said something right?

Anyway I drink more and he starts smiling, I notice that he's got goat horns now where the scales used to be. I finish the grey bubbling brew with trepidation and the Chimera only continues to smile with a grin that leaves me worried and questioning all of this. I feel nothing at first but then I notice that a light is starting to envelop me slowly starting at my bottom flippers and working it's way up my legs. It's followed by a strange burning sensation in my belly like when you drink hot tea too fast and it's also spreading. I turn to the planes seller but it's summoning another black and blue portal like before and it begins to walk towards it but not before looking back at me as I'm consumed by whatever trickery it just pulled.

"Please, what is this? What did I do to deserve this? Help me, help me please. I don't want this." The light has finished enveloping my lower half and that burning sensation is intensified and is now also heat starting to consume the area around me.

"This is exactly what you want even if you don't realize it just yet. By the time the potion's work is done you'll be stronger and when I think you're ready we will meet again Howell. I foresee and await our next encounter but until then sayonara." With that the Chimera takes his leave with

me wondering how he knows my name among other things but knowing that I'll never get a solid answer as I continue to be consumed by light and heat.

The heat builds even more and has reached a point where one of the palm trees nearby spontaneously combusts. I've never radiated heat like this before. I want to scream and at first I can't but then as sand begins to turn to glass I find my voice again as the light is all over me now and finally covers the last of my head. The heat has risen to a level I never would have been capable of making and yet despite the painful burning sensation I just feel like I'll be fine still I can't help but scream out.

“RRAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

When I'm done screaming I fall down exhausted and just barely able to move as the light fades as does the extreme heat which drastically dwindles down leaving me...altered I guess in a small crater of glass. The first thing I notice is naturally my vision which has shifted to a bizarre black and white. I look down and am horrified to see bones where my flipper used to be. I go down to touch the bone, shivering slightly in fear at what might be happening only to be shocked when I don't reach the bone but feel flesh, my own flesh still there but I don't actually see it. I look down a bit more at myself and realize I can see the bones in my tail and also see slightly through the sand, this must be some kind of X-ray vision.

I blink in surprise and when I open my eyes my vision has actually changed again into varying shades of red and some blues or blacks that must be infrared. I blink one more time and my vision turns violet, ultraviolet. I must be able to see with the whole electromagnetic spectrum now, amazing. I blink some more and get my eyes back to their regular state of vision and then I look down again but this time at the cauterized stump that used to be my left arm flipper till that ghost sunk its fangs into it and there I notice something shocking. There's light in the shape of a flipper where the flesh used to be, it's transparent but the same sky blue color.

I go to touch it and to my disbelief it's actually solid, almost as solid as the original flipper and as I touch it in surprise it actually changes color to a bright yellow. What is this? What on earth was in that concoction that Chimera gave me? Whatever it was it worked miracles; confusing, astonishing and semi painful miracles. The feeling has returned to my body and legs again so it's best to get moving and fully figure and sort things out later. I stand up and after a bit of wobbling steady myself and start moving again. I'm not really sure where to actually go at first, walking aimlessly till I catch some blue smoke in my peripheral vision and see two things I was starting to worry I lost forever.

Next to a charred palm tree are both my UMBRA bag and Albright's lifeless cadaver both leaning on the tree. I rush over and rummage through the bag and find exactly what I was

looking for, pretty much intact, a cell phone to call UMBRA Academy and get some help. Everything looks okay all things considered even the body of Albright looks relatively unharmed even if I know that isn't the case, man this is going to be a hard story to sell when I do get back to the Academy. I'm just glad I have a way to get help at least and not be stuck here. Maybe that Chimera is a decent guy of his word after all. Just as I think that while I double check that all my stuff is in this bag I check the wallet. Forty dollars is missing.... damn that lying bastard.

Ughhh I could go for a drink. As I think that I see my light flipper suddenly begin to change... into what looks like a glass now, made of hard light. Definitely going to have to try to figure this new flipper out when I get back and also everything else that happened here. I've just got to make a call for help and....

Hmmmm



Howell is brought back to the now by a hmm noise and then is internally startled by the sight of Rico's face right in front of his own analyzing it intensely like he's looking for an answer. The two seals are incredibly close to each other, close enough that they are merely an inch or three from bopping their noses against each other. Normally Howell would mind but given the flashback he just finished having he's a little out of it. Rico is close enough that Howell can feel the harp seals breath on his face and smell the calamari and pretzel sticks on it. He's tempted to kiss his underwater companion just to see if this is all real and moves an inch closer with Rico's eyes still locked on his and now Howell's looking at him intensely too. Howell is about to go for the kiss but before he removes the very little distance between them Rico finally seems to find what he was looking for and talks after moving back a few inches himself.

“Oh! Would you look at that, you've finally returned back to earth! So what awfulness were you flashing back to?”

“Huh? What? Where are we right now?” Howell tries to assess his surroundings and figure out just how much he missed

“We're practically at the castle right now. We passed the swordfish sign about five minutes ago. Seems you were just swimming on autopilot this whole time. Want to talk about why?”

“What?! We're here already? Also how do you know that I was swimming just automatically and that there's some awful reason for that?”

“Well for starters because I was trying to reach you for half an hour or so but also because I **studied** psychology at UMBRA. The multiple instances of disassociation, your reactions at the

mention of the ghost, the stuttering and pauses and then you just seemingly being somewhere else mentally while I tried to talk to you and reach you for a good while. I can tell you're troubled by something about this mission and likely from past trauma. I have little doubt you think I didn't notice but I was actually starting to seriously worry, I was five seconds away from calling the headmaster for some help." Howell sighs and looks Rico in the eyes.

"Look, I'm fine. I-I just got a little lost in thought but I'm here now and we're at the castle so let's just go and d-d...do what we came here to do. Okay?"

"Are you sure you can actually handle this? This ghost is an S Grade one and I've got to be sure you're doing okay enough to deal with that kind of threat. There's no shame in admitting that you're not at 100 percent right now, friend." Rico says with genuine concern while Howell shivers slightly before answering back.

"I'm fine... I'll be fine."

"Besides I should be worried about you not the other way around, *hrrmpff*" Howell grumbles under his breath

"What was that? You say something?" Rico looks to Howell but Howell looks ahead towards the castle in front of them

"N-Not at all. L-l..let's go in."

"Alright then. If you're absolutely sure you're okay, let's go in."

Howell faces towards the castle now as does Rico who turned to face it fully. It's gigantic and imposing on the outside and on the inside it's full of narrow, closely confined hallways that are almost a maze, large almost vacant rooms and a terrifyingly powerful ghost that can strike from anywhere. Howell gulps in anticipative dread at the familiar enemy he knows he'll have to confront and prays he can truly defeat with his previously unhad new range of powers. The two ghost hunters are now in front of the colossal metal door separating them from the inside of the castle but before they go in Howell hesitates before saying one last thing.

"Age before beauty, heh heh" Howell laughs nervously. Rico wants to counter Howell's cheeky albeit apprehensively said remarks and opens his mouth to start speaking but then notices the tense terror in his fellow seals shifting eyes so he doesn't instead replying with a biting "I'll pretend I didn't hear you say that."

Howell and Rico finally go into the castle side by side. They both notice that all the lightbulbs in the castle are completely shattered with broken glass almost everywhere on the

floor, a definite sign of ghost activity here. Howell blinks three times to be able to see infrared and Rico puts on his tri-vision tracking goggles to see it as well. At this most of the area becomes dark with a few spots and a trail of blue as well as a very sparse few spots of orange. There's very little heat, partially because of the ghost they're trying to find and partially because of the place they're in. Usually there'd be more heated areas for those that preferred slightly warm climates but neither seal minds.

The search for the ghost serpent goes on for fifteen minutes without a single visible trace. Howell and Rico searched vigilantly together watching each others backs as they went through rooms decorated with things like potted plants of kelp, bits of coral, waterproofed paintings and pictures, scattered weights or a pull up bar on a door now and then, as well as various racks or containers for storing things though those appear to have been emptied. Eventually it's Howell that first notices the elusive ghost serpent spotting a bunch of levitating stones loosely connected by what looked like the dark blue shape of a tail the ghost would have going down a hallway as he and Rico swim through an adjacent large room. The monk seal anxiously closes and rubs his eyes to make sure he's actually seeing what he thinks he just saw but it's already gone by the time he looks again. Rattled by the potential sight Howell does his best to try to rationalize what he just saw as his mind possibly playing tricks on him or anything other than what he doesn't want to believe just passed him by.

Just as he breathes a sigh of relief after a few minutes of no further disturbances and convincing himself that that wasn't a real ghost sighting there's suddenly a loud clang and the shaking of the walls of the hallway they're now in. Suddenly there's a cold current that cuts through them both and then Rico points to the wall stupefied.

"L-L-Look! Over there!" Howell looks and sees an aspect of the horrifying reality that he didn't want to before. The face of the ghost serpent burned into the wall, fanged, terrifying and grinning maliciously. It's only an imprint though one that it clearly left intentionally since it can easily phase through walls without leaving a trace. Suddenly there is a loud, satisfied "*ahhh*" coming from all around the two and then before them it appears making both cry out in shock with a bubbling "*gahh*".

"Ahhhh... feeble hunter. We meet again."

"What? No...no,no,no! This isn't happening right now." Howell says in fearful denial as his heart races and his mouth starts to go dry. His solid flipper starts to shake slightly which his flipper of light becomes several different colors moving around like the goo of a lava lamp; a mixture of white, orange, black and a dark blue.

“H-Holy shit, the ghost is all around us! Wait... why did it just say feeble hunter? Does it know you or something?” Rico says while looking right at Howell and taking off his goggles. The massive ghost has yet to truly appear or strike but they know it surrounds them and could make a move at any time.

“I see, you’ve never told him about our previous... I would say battle but it was more a massacre than a fight. Did you expect to never see me again? To not have to tell the tale of when you encountered me back in waters elsewhere and what happened then? You should have known when you fail to drive away or capture a ghost that we tend to haunt around.”

The ghost finally decides to stop toying with the two ghost hunters and appear outright phasing through the walls to show its head and tail, body remaining lodged in the walls. “Gyahh!” the monk and harper seal shriek in unison as the spectral leviathan’s head and tail appear before them. The ghost serpent’s tail and head are almost exactly what you’d expect, the tail is a coiling mass of translucent but also red and dark blue colored scales. It’s head is flat and very snake like with the same red and dark blue translucent scales, it’s got full top and bottom rows of fangs but the scariest thing about it are it’s very large, completely white, dead eyes that without any sort of pupil or lens are almost completely devoid of expression or at least any expression we’re capable of comprehending.

“T-T-To answer your q-question Rico yes I know him but that’s a long story. For now we need to...**Run!!**”

“G-Got it!” Rico says and the pair bolts down a hall, turning corners to try to escape the serpentine threat. It’s ultimately pointless though with the abilities it has as it levitates some pots as well as pictures off the wall and launches it at both of them hitting Howell in the leg and Rico in the back. Both seals go down onto the floor and before either can pick themselves back up the ghost serpent strikes again and uses its massive tail to pin them both to the floor.

“Did you really think running away would be that easy?”

“M...maybe” Rico responds, Howell says nothing instead trying to struggle his way out of the serpent’s grasp but it’s a futile attempt.

“Well you thought wrong. You’re no longer in the safe world of the mundane. You’re in my world now and I intend to crush both of you. Any final words?”

“M-Missile”

“Missile? Interesting choice of- gahhh” The ghost serpent doesn’t get to finish it’s sentence instead having a hard light missile launched right into its face courtesy of Howell who’s left flipper is currently resembling a retro, arcade looking spaceship. He launches another light missile and the ghost serpent hisses, it’s grip loosening enough for the ghost hunters to break out of it. Both now stand trying to look less scared and more ready for a fight, it’s sure to be a rough one.

End of Part 1