

# **Meeting in that Tavern for the Second Encounter**

**By: A.X. Bueno**

“So you’re finally going to tell me the story about your second meeting with that tricky chimera, huh cub?”

“Finally tell you? It’s only been like a few months. I’d have assumed someone who’s a hundred and fifteen years old would know what patience is.” I say before chuckling

“Are you really sassing me cub after all the effort I’ve put into training you after these past few months? Psssh, where’s the gratitude nowadays?” my... magic mentor I suppose is the right title to give him asks me in a jovial and half joking manner.

“First off it’s only been a couple of months, and secondly stop calling me cub and I’ll start the story, after all you know my name.” I say trying to be serious but can’t help but smirk in response.

“Fine, *Theooo*. So tell me the story, I’m dying to hear it after all this time.” Marsh says overdramatically with a smile that tells me he’s only teasing me.

“Alright Marrssssh. I’ll tell you it since you want to know so bad. The only question is where to really start it, oh got it!” I say back feeling my own face smiling back at him.

“I sure hope you’re startin’ at the beginning. You know, like a story should.” I merely glower now at Marsh in what I hope is a way that shows I’m not gonna dignify that response with one of my own and merely start the story

“... Anyway I’m gonna start the story now. It happened last year about two months after I transformed into the bear I am now. Back when I still had a lot to learn.”

I was on the hunt for that Conniving Chimera aided by a letter he sent. It allowed me to track him by scent to a tavern over in North Jersey. I think it was somewhere in Jersey City around Grove Street. I’m not fully sure because I was mostly just following my nose to where that Chimera was, it was the only clue I had to his location and it was a cryptic enough clue at that but I’ll get to what it said in a sec. So I walk up to this bar that looks like it got permanently stuck in the late 1800’s, it had really old fashioned brick work, an old oak door with a somewhat rusty knocker that I’m pretty sure was just decorative and resembled a dog’s face in the middle of said door, old stained glass windows that had black window panes and the name of the bar in the middle and these bronze colored door handles. There was moss and a few cracks scattered

across the bricks and the place's name which was The Crafty Malamute, even had parts of a glass letter missing, it was the c.

So I go to the door and sniff the air to make sure it's scent was still there inside and it definitely was so I knock on the door. The door actually opens on its own while glowing and there I see and smell the figure of the chimera wrapped in the same concealing robe he was in when I first encountered him. The place is mostly empty save for the bartender, a waitress and three patrons, surprisingly only one person there wasn't a beastman but anyway he looks right at me before I can even take three steps in the place with these glowing yellow goat eyes previously concealed by a visor but weren't anymore and gestures for me to come over with a clawed finger. I walk over and he smiles and starts talking before I can.

"Ah, I am glad you have arrived here my admirable werebear. I see my letter was all that was needed after all...excellent! Now shall we converse? Because I sense you have questions."

"I have many questions starting with why you wanted me here and why didn't you give clear instructions?! Do you know how far I had to walk and even swim to get here? Why'd you have to be so vague and give me all of *two* clues to go off of?!" I was angry with him and while I had other questions I wanted to ask about me, him and what he wanted by doing what he did to me I asked those first. In spite of my anger he seemed entirely unperturbed by me and what I asked simply continuing to sit while looking at me with an annoying amused smile before he proceeded to respond.

"There's no need to be so hostile. I will-"

"Wait, wait hold on" Marsh cut me off, bringing me back to now.

"What is it? I was starting to get into the meat of my story."

"So you said you walked and swam to New Jersey in tracking them but you live in New York. Wouldn't you be taking some kind of transportation there like a train or a teleportation gate? How far did you go on foot?"

"I did take a teleport gate but I took it only to Newark, I went on foot the rest of the way." I see Marsh dash to type something up on his phone.

"That's like a two and a half hour walk and crossing one if not two rivers! YOU WALKED THAT AND SWAM AT LEAST ONE RIVER?!"

"Yep. I couldn't afford to risk taking public transport too far and rolling past the scent."

“How LONG did it take you to reach the chimera that way?! Did you really swim through a river to get to him?”

“It took about 50 minutes and to answer your question, sort of. I had a teleportation charm that I managed to buy at the time that allowed me to teleport most of the way across those waters but yeah I still swam a bit on the way.”

“That’s insane. How do you manage that?!”

“I was determined plus I’ve got the body of a polar bear. Makes it a lot easier. Anyway…” It takes me a second to remember what comes next in my story and then I continue.

“There’s no need to be hostile, I will give answers to your questions though whether they are the answers you truly want will remain to be seen. Our modest convening here was and is the first of several tests and you certainly surpassed expectations. Know that while not every step you took to get here was of absolute necessity they were all telling, to answer your other questions. Care to have a seat now? I have a bit more to tell you and you’ve walked and traveled far.” I noticed a glint in his goat eyes and then watched as the pupils shifted in the moment to become a vertical slit like a snake’s.

“Oh my…! The books were right, you really are a shapeshifter.”

“Why so surprised? I know you’ve been studying me, now are you going to have a seat and perhaps a drink so we can speak in comfort? I’d recommend it, all things considered, after all you have much ahead of you.” He gestures to the chair again with his hand and I angrily huff and almost raise a paw to slap it away but stop myself.

“No I’m not going to sit down, I want MORE answers!”

“Suit yourself though I’d suggest you stop clutching the table like that given you’re not really controlling your strength right now.”

He was right, I was still learning how to adjust to my recent shift in body and strength. I looked down to see that I was actually starting to crack the wood of the table which got me concerned looks from the grey haired and grizzled human bartender with his glass eye along with a waitress who was a cow beastman, who had bulk to her and was brown furred with a few big white almost cream spots and a thin scar under her left eyebrow. With both of them staring at me I decided to let go of the table and try to keep my anger focused on who was in front of me.

“I’m not quite sure how you know I’ve been studying you but yeah I have been and I have to say for someone who’s apparently been around as long and in as many places as you it’s amazing how little concrete information there actually is on you. I looked through at least a few dozen books and couldn’t even find an actual name for you. Most just gave vague descriptions and called you a Chimera and contested how real you were and where you first appeared. Most of the official sources agreed at least that you were known for having powerful magics, selling potions, appearing mysteriously and also selling aid for reasons unknown to all but you. There’s records of you dating back several thousands years in almost forgotten ancient texts with rumors that you’re even older than that with roots that run deep but any definite origins being untraceable. Some sources say you were there for things like the beginning of the Assyrian Empire and others claiming you were in Ancient Greece or that you were around and a well known presence during the renaissance in Italy.”

I take a breath after all that talking and before I get to the next set of questions I am going to ask I decide to wave down the waitress and order a blackberry margarita, waiting for it to come before proceeding again. I sit down and take a few sips of that before continuing to talk, the Chimera merely smirking probably in smugness at the time for me sitting down and drinking something like he wanted.

“Yep, it has a tendency to do that and some way or another of practically always getting what he wants, at least that’s what I’ve always heard ‘bout that one.” Marsh chimes in to say and I just say “good to know now” before continuing.

“Now that we’ve got all that out of the way I’ve got some more questions. Who and what are you my really? Why were some parts of my transformation delayed like my hair? And most importantly what are you trying to get from me?! What’s your endgame? That secret price you’re trying to get from me?” I huff angrily and wait for answers.

“Ah, those are questions not too easily answered but I will try to do so as best as I feel suited for this moment. To start with I go by many names and who I am other is irrelevant than I am a Chimera as you already know and someone who assists others for a price. A price you may or may not be on your way to paying. Why your transformation had some parts of it seemingly delayed is something I have several ideas about but really can’t know for sure like you would. I did give you the serum that changed you but I only saw options for your transformation, the eventuality of it was thanks to your own making, well in a way. As for my endgame, I’m still trying to determine if you’re ready for that.” He puts a hoof to his then striped chin to rub it in frustrating contemplation.

“ARE YOU SERIOUS!? Stop being so cryptic and give me some real answers for GOODNESS SAKE!!” I give a decent roar at those last words giving me some aimed stares but the Chimera doesn’t even seem at all phased.

“Posturing will get you nowhere A-” I stare at Marsh and realize I’ve never told him my original name before and decide to try to skip over it. “Posturing will get you nowhere A-(I fake static noises to cover up skipping my birth name). I told you the answers wouldn’t be easy ones or ones you truly desired. If you want better answers prove yourself to be worthy of them to me, oh ornery werebear.”

“First off, don't use that name for me since I plan to have it changed. You can call me Theo, that's the name I'm going to use to go with my new body and you better use it instead of... that other one or werebear. Secondly I'd be happy to prove myself if you're not going to stop being an annoyingly cryptic weirdo!”

I take some more sips of my almost finished drink before standing up and walking the few feet to the Chimera preparing to deliver a knockout punch right to his smug, ever changing face. Before I take my shot his left eye develops a dark blue aura around it and he effortlessly dodges my punch and then grabs my arm, holding and examining it.

“Such speed, such power and such fascinating blue spots. My serum truly did make you an admirable creature, an amazing creation.”

He releases me, with an amused grin and I merely snarl in frustration before going in for another punch only switching up my hand and adjusting my moves to try and be less predictable. He dodges it and two more punches with his eye still having that glowing aura around before I decide to go for a kick instead but he dodges it too with a grace and and delivers his first counter attack after I miss my own, a punch surrounded by the same aura as his eye. I barely had time to react, it hit with such incredible speed and strength that it actually sent me almost flying back to land on my furry behind a good distance across the tavern.

“How are you doing that? How do you have that kind of speed and strength? You're supposed to be some ancient deal maker and potions seller and yet you're so far ahead of all of my moves. Seriously, what are you?!”

“From the sounds of it I'd say he was truly ahead of what you were doing. I've heard before that Chimera had precognitive abilities, that his left eye can see a few seconds into the future in a fight and even more when he wants to in other scenarios. Can't believe you actually saw it first hand-”

“Come on, man seriously?! I’m in the middle of describing the action here... but thanks for the explanation I suppose.” I say a bit annoyed to be dragged out of my story telling like that but at least Marsh gave me a new detail again.

“Sorry. Please continue, I’ll try not to interrupt anymore since it’s getting pretty interesting now.” With Marsh’s apology I get back into it.

“A-heh-hem **I am** plenty more than what I appear to be and what those old books and rumors will tell you. Also while not all your moves are easily predicted I happen to be an exceptionally good reader of men, beast or not. Now, shall we continue?”

“If we continue, will you at least give me a name to call you besides just Chimera?”

“I suppose I can but the issue there is I am a creature of many names; The Merchant of Many Planes, El Chivo con Garras, Realms-Shifter, The Sly Dreams Seller, The Everchanging Dealer and there’s a couple more besides that but I’m sure get the point since you are intelligent, after all.” I’m not sure if that bit about intelligence was meant to be sarcastic or serious but it makes me grind my teeth all the same.

“Don’t mock me! Those are all titles at best, what is your actual name?!” I say as I go for an uppercut hoping he was distracted enough to not avoid my punch as I zoom in. He was as prepared as ever though but instead of blocking this time he uses an extra bit of magic by spreading his hands and then crushing them back together as they glow that dark blue to create some kind of very small explosion that would have caught and probably singed my arm if I wasn’t prepared for that myself.

“Oh ho! I see you’re using some kind of charm of protection, I’m not sure where you have it on you but that’s some decent work. Doesn’t seem to protect against physical hits but still adequate against general magic though I suspect not fully self made.” He was actually praising my amateur charm crafting. After I found the way to make it in a book of magic I bought the ingredients from various shops and molded and put it together myself adding the mix of some of those ingredients to a carefully selected stone. I needed someone to enchant it though and add a bit of magic to a few ingredients. It was a pain to find someone for that but yeah most of the work was done by me.

“I sure am! That’s not the only trick I have up my sleeve either” I say, confident in the little bit of research I did into magic and charm making and a few other subjects like the Chimera’s history while pulling up a small smooth purple orb that was in my pant’s pocket. I throw it right at it and hit their left hoof. The orb breaks against the hoof and the purple smoke begins spilling out. As it does the hooves change into a jaguar’s footpaws.

“Wow! A smoke bomb meant to weaken and dispel magic...that’s an impressive thing not many could pull off, especially not a beginner to all this. On someone less experienced with magic that might have been successful.” The Chimera sniffs the air with a composite nose and then he puts on a confident smirk. “Though I can tell you put too much lavender and iron shavings and not enough redwood shavings. That creates a weakness to be exploited allowing me to do...**this!**”

He then moved his bony handpaws so they could join before proceeding to clasp them together just to split them apart again in a dramatic swiping motion. This made the smoke turn the same dark blue it’s hands did earlier as it’s magic made it become this whole bunch of floating vines which they then used to attack and try to incapacitate me. The vines were annoying and him hitting me with them hurt a lot but I was able to tear them apart eventually with my claws. While I’m distracted with those though, the Chimera takes the time to sneak up behind me and spook me, barely allowing me to get out a “YAHHH!” before talking.

“You know Theo, in regards to your earlier point, what is a name but a title that you are handed as your first and primary identifier. Have several more of my titles; The Cunning Chimera, Old TigerEyes, the Fighter for Fortunes and the Beastman of Mystery. Also have a reminder that your enchanting skills still need more work, continue to study hard young bear.” He says as he puts a clawed hand right on the middle of my back and then mutters something that I couldn’t hear.

What he said must have been a spell because I feel myself not only get knocked back by some energy flowing around me and especially the charm of protection I had hidden in one of my pants pockets as I hear a **crunch** and feel it now broken into shards. I hit the floor with a **thud** and do my best to scramble back onto my feet again as it, with what was probably magic enhanced speed is already right on me again waiting for me to get back up. I then get a hard flick in the nose by a black cat claw, a mere second before being flung back by an intense, scorching blast of concentrated air. Which is then further followed up by an actual fireball that I just barely manage to dodge but I do end up getting hit regardless by the ball of lightning that came immediately after. The shock is intense. I feel it course through my body and fry bits of my white fur but I’m resilient and manage to stay standing, barely.

“A-are you t-t-trying to KILL me? What’d I do to deserve all this, this sudden slew of attacks” Almost every word is difficult to get out. At this point most people that were in the tavern have cleared out after seeing the Chimera’s brutal attacks leaving only me, it, and the bartender who’s crouched in the corner of where the drinks were with only a broken bottle clutched like a knife. That said both me and it are pretty close to the exit door and he looks ready to push me through at any second.

“Kill you? Never. That would be foolhardy given that I gave you what made you this way for a reason. I wanted to show a sampling of how much more you still have to learn, if you do choose to improve your innate skills and not let your potential be squandered by inaction. Of course I choose to be but a guiding hand to what your path will be, which is something that you ultimately decide either aligning with or defying my intentions even if you aren’t aware of what those are.”

He takes a breath before continuing and then looks straight ahead like he’s seeing something that I can’t. He then starts to stab at the air with glowing dark blue hands which makes glowing... I guess small dots is the best description which leads to him making a small circle around each and then those small circles and dots explosively merge together into moving images or what I thought were moving images. My mind needed a minute or two to understand what they really were and the Chimera goes on to try to fill the gap in my understanding.

“For you see, beginner in this mystic world... Theo, I could have chosen from a whole multiverse of options and yes before you ask that is indeed what those **portals** are. In fact I have before, to provide other boons and helpful magics of mine for varying prices. Instead for a pretty special potion and offer I chose you and for good reason even if as I’ve said plenty of times already you still have much to learn and practice both to hopefully fulfill and know the reason.

“Portals to a multiverse? What? Why are you showing me all this now? How I can prepare for something you refuse to give a full or even clear explanation on? T-This all makes no sense!” By then I was tired, bruised and fed up with parts of my fur blackened from everything it threw at me, not really seeking answers to these questions or a response instead I’m gazing at those portal trying to figure out their significance. The Chimera’s eyes glow and then he says pretty much exactly what’s on my mind.

“I know I’ve put you quickly through so very much with my testing and that it doesn’t feel like it meshes with all I’ve said so far but I assure you that my lessons here will be invaluable to you in times that are coming soon enough. Take a minute or two to catch your breath and truly grasp what I’m showing you here, including the portals. I still have time and so do you.”

Most of my mind wanted to reject what he just said and continue my attack in the slim hope I’d finally catch him off guard but another smarter part of my mind as well as my battered body decided to take that minute to really soak it all in. I look at the portals and notice it’s actually one big portal behind him just split into five separate pieces by thick, jagged dark blue lines of magic, similar to the one that makes the border between the portal and this reality though that border is a little more solid and darker in color. Anyway, within those five linked portals each show a different vision of reality, a different universe I guess. In one of them there’s what looks like a human mage with a cloak and everything laying in a rather ornate bed and making

mini ice flurries with his hands. There's another that has an ordinary looking rhino sitting on a chair in a grass hut and drinking from a cup of water while a female tiger sits on a chair opposite him.

I see yet another where a human in a very dark blue business suit is dropping off a medium sized box on what looks like a high up floor of a city building. Then there's one with a big grizzly bear napping peacefully on a chair in what appears to be a library with a lot of humans in it who merely pass him by. In the fifth and I suppose last one there I see a large white lion with the same type of bright blue spots as me along with a scruffy mane of black hair. He seems to be preparing some lunch in a kitchen at what almost looks like my house but with things not quite in the right place or a different color than I have them. He's preparing a pretty simple looking turkey and cheese sandwich along with some barbecue chips, he takes the bread from the toaster and is about to put some mustard on it when he appears to notice me. I was initially just observing the portals but when the lion... version of myself I guess noticed me I decided to take a step closer. The Chimera surprisingly just lets me with no words or blows exchanged, even stepping out of the way as I slowly as well as with some difficulty walk to the portal with the white and blue lion feeling mesmerized by it and him as he seems to be doing the same and soon enough I'm standing close enough to touch the portal.

"Woah!!" I exclaim as the spotted lion's right paw actually starts causing the portal to ripple with its contact. I raise my hand to it as it begins to come through and just a fraction of an inch before our paws met and the lion's breached through there was a spark that made us both recoil.

At that the Chimera started visibly snickering as I got taken aback by that spark. That spurs me to try and do one more desperate action to overtake this Chimera, whoever he really is. While he's still snickering to himself I arch back, bare my fangs and then I lunge right at him hoping that my teeth actually get to sink into him and that he'd survive if they did. My fangs did make contact... with one of its horns which surprises both me and it until that Planes Seller of Dreams then develops a face of disappointment as it's horns blaze with that dark blue fire and it starts to "tsk, tsk" at me as I start to feel a slight burning sensation along with feeling myself also become unable to move.

"I will admit that you caught me unaware with this more primal way of attack. However you just made a very novice, **unwise** move with it. I would hope for a little less savagery and a little more finesse and reliance on skill rather than brute force going forward." As he says this I try as I still can to wiggle myself free from his horn to no avail as it felt like I was magnetized to it by the jaw as it continued to burn and then I felt something horrible almost beyond proper words, my wonderful fangs, my teeth in general straight up melting.

“Your teeth... melting?” Marsh asks me in the now though I don’t mind it this time given what I just said. He’s also trying to look into my muzzle at my fangs in visible confusion but I intend to continue my story regardless of that.

“Melting, yep. Right out of my mouth, don’t worry I’ll explain it cause I know it’s hard to believe but let me tell you it happened and was horrible in ways that have stuck with me.”

Back to the past and the story, I saw it and then realized I felt it when I saw drops of a color between white and beige begin to drip down onto that old wooden floor. At first I thought it was my fur liquifying for some reason (I guess what it actually was, was simply too terrible to believe at first) so I checked the fur around my head and muzzle which stings a little but it all feels fine. Then I feel a chill go up my spine as I stick my finger in my muzzle still feeling like it’s burning up my mouth and feel shocked and horrified to feel diminishing lumps where my large fangs and teeth were. I pull my finger out and some of that melted enamel... I guess comes out along with some red spots which could only be blood which all falls to the floor. I scream a toothless scream at this which I only imagine must have reverberated through the Chimera’s constantly shifting skull.

**“MMMMMMHHHH! UMMMMNNNN!”**

“*Sigh* I did warn you but I understand that may not have been enough. I apologize for these actions however I believe this to be necessary. I suppose I should conclude our encounter here regardless, I have other places I must also be off to.”

At that the Cunning Chimera made a sweeping motion with his hands which dispelled the fire around his horns and also allowed me to be unstuck from them. After I became free of them I decided to just kneel down, grazing my hand over the small white, beige and red puddles that used to be my teeth in a state of shock and defeat. That’s when the Chimera sighs and at that I manage to lift my head up and go back to trying to stand, able to though my left leg limps slightly which changes the Chimera’s expression to a happy bordering on smug grin. I don’t get to stand or rather limp for long before he approaches me, picks me up with dark blue glowing scaled hands and then punches me with the strength of a damn train. At this point even the bartender has fled the tavern and we are both close to its exit and at that super strength punch I do too as my very wrecked body breaks through the wall into the warm spring air outside.

At this point my legs have given up when I try to stand and all I could do is lay there feeling completely broken, consciousness starting to fade. The Chimera comes out of the hole he made by punching me, proceeding to make a house shape with his hands and then a pushing motion after and with that the brickwork of the wall and maybe even the inside the place(it was hard to tell with me losing consciousness and the moving bricks and stuff blocking the inside

view) started magically repairing itself. Then the Chimera walks over to me casually with a very neutral expression and moves me to face them with a goat's hoof.

"I take my leave now but we will meet again soon enough, my remarkable werebear. I now know that you will be extraordinary, I can be certain of that."

That's the last thing he said to me before I felt some kind of magical energy building up in my chest and my whole body started glowing a mix of different shades of blue. I struggle to lift a slightly charred paw, to do what I can't remember now, maybe clean up my bloody nose and muzzle. Doesn't matter though as the Chimera simply puts his bony again hand over my own and gently lowers it down again as the energy kept building. This makes me panic with my eyes probably shifting about and me sweating about to start screaming for help with whatever strength I have left.

"AA-"

"Shhhhh. Shhh. Don't panic, just rest." The Conniving Chimera says to me like a parent trying to lull a child and before I can even say "what?" I feel that built up energy start to explode inside of me.

I don't get a chance to really grasp what he did in the moment because that explosion of energy inside of me soon spreads outward and that sends me flying several feet. The last sight I see is the final damaged brick of The Crafty Malamute, the tavern, repair itself and then fly back into its spot on the now completely fixed wall now looking even better than when I first arrived here. The Chimera was already three quarters of the way through stepping through one of his portals by the time I tried to look for him in those few brief instances before I plopped back onto the ground. Almost immediately after hitting the ground I finally faded into unconsciousness. I woke up to find all my injuries miraculously or I suppose I should say magically, healed and that it also seemed to be several hours or so later since it was nighttime by then.

"As for the rest of my story, I mean you know most of it by now. That experience with the Chimera, well he was right. I still had a lot to learn. So I began studying alchemy, making potions, refreshing my knowledge on how to cook. I changed my career, officially changed my name, bought new furniture and a new home for myself. Just started improving my life and eventually I met you and you were able to teach me so much that I might not have learned on my own. I owe a lot to you, like my ability to use magic and lessons about the world we're in. That leads us back into the now I guess."

“.....” In the now Marsh is surprisingly silent, black paw to his chin that has a speck of dirt on it. I wait for him to say something but for a good three minutes at least he doesn’t and we sit in bizarre silence till I finally say something.

“Ummm Marsh, are you okay? ... I finished telling the story, you...you can say something now. Please?” I start to worry

“Huh, wassat? Sorry I was just really lost in thought. That was quite a story you just told, gave me a lot to think about. That’s all.” Marsh says, taking his paw away from his face and looking at me which relieves my worrying. He continues on after taking a sip from one of the water bottles I got for us in between telling the story.

“I can see why you never told me it before. That whole battle with the Chimera, it sounds like quite a traumatic and confusing ordeal and those make for difficult stories to tell. Still I’m glad you trust me enough now to tell me. You’re lucky though, both that that Conniving Chimera showed you mercy and that you didn’t have the Hexagonal Order intervening though considering...shoot! I may ‘ave said too much.” Marsh covers his mouth with his paws but I’m not going to let him say that without explanation.

“No, no I think you could stand to go on. Who are the Hexagonal Order and how come I’ve never heard of them before?”

“Are you sure you want to know, cub? Trust me when I say you don’t know about them for darn good reasons. They only show themselves when serious trouble’s brewing and magic is involved. The fact you’ve never heard of them is a **good** thing.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time being in the dark about what happens in the world, this world. Tell me who they are, please? I accept whatever consequences come with knowing.” Marsh sighs at my insistence and for a second I’m worried there’ll be more unnerving silence.

“Well I suppose I should start with their official name instead of what I just called them, officially they’re called the Order of the Observational Orange Hexagon. That name is a bit misleading and sometimes I feel like just for alliteration since while they do observe the magical goings on in the world there’s more to them than just that.

“Okay, you’ve told me their proper name. So what do they do? Who are they?”

“Getting to that right now, don’chu worry. You know how the Chimera is extremely old and was around during and at the start of several ancient civilizations?”

“Yeah. I just told you I learned about all that.”

“I know. Consider that the Hexagonal Order while we can’t be sure if it’s older as a whole since that Everchanging Dealer most likely started it’s existence in some other realm and comes and goes from this one is probably older than the existence of that Chimera and they’ve been here much more consistently. Their *modus operandi* for at least a few millennia has been to keep a watchful eye on the magic users of the world and to put them down if they become serious threats to life as we know it. They prefer to work in the shadows though they are known about by practically every major government who let them do as they feel necessary since the order is older than basically all of them and it is very effective at what it does.”

“Wow! So how do you know so much about them then?”

“My own mentor, the dragonfly beastman I’ve told you about before, for a time he was a key part of the order. He used to tell me vague stories about them and what they did, the threats they stopped and some of the methods they used. I didn’t believe him at first but then well... I had my whole experiment with Necromancy and they intervened, they found out through one of their hidden eye spells and I definitely believed after I had an encounter with them over that.”

“You had an encounter with them?! What’d they do? Are they powerful?” I say while digging into a brown bag popcorn that finished being made while Marsh has been getting through his own story, it’s been hard to just stay still and talk or listen to all this serious life stuff we’ve both been sharing, I needed something to do in the meantime besides play with my thumbs or pace around.

“Mmhmm, I sure did have an encounter with them. They have a special spell, the hidden eye spell that allows them to have many eyes almost everywhere that alert them when dangerous and/or forbidden magicks are being used. Along with that they also have agents to keep tabs on places or people they deem potential threats. I got caught by one of their hidden eyes trying to resurrect... well you know who and that part of the story, so they threatened to stop me in the middle of my attempted resurrection. At the time I was in the height of grief and in a lot of pain from so much going on back then so I tried to take them all on, they sent a good chunk of their numbers then, about 20 of them.” Black, bear paws dig into his own bag of popcorn, he gulps that and some water down then continues.

“In regards to your question about their strength let me just say individually most of them are seriously weak, haha. When it comes to sheer power I’d say I’m able to best all but like five of them without breaking a sweat and you’re probably evenly matched with almost half of them. Together though... together they’re practically unstoppable to all but the absolute best and very well experienced magic users of which there are very, very few. So yeah I tried to fight them but

they overpowered me and put me on trial, I pleaded my case and thanks in large part to my grief, the circumstances and the fact that I was only trying to bring back one person meant that I got off with a serious warning and a six month ban on my magic carried out through spell. Luckily that was a good number of years ago and my magic has been back and only getting better for some time...unlike some other things or people.” He says a little somberly but then goes back to being nostalgic and happy, showing off by making some green fire with his paw that he lets dance around it before splitting and transmogrifying it into two cans of Sprite and passing me one.

“Impressive. You’ve convinced me that they’re not to be messed with all that history. You think they know I exist though? They mainly deal with magical goings on and threats, right?”

“Oh they definitely know you exist, Cub. You’ve had dealings with and even freakin’ fought **THE** Conniving Chimera, the Merchant of Many Planes. They are someone that the Hexagonal Order actually gives free rein to because they don’t want to incur the wrath of something so ancient, powerful and otherworldly. That said they still watch very closely it and any activity it has with people, magic using or otherwise. You don’t know how lucky you are or how fortunate that they not only didn’t do worse but healed all your injuries to insure no serious damage to you.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah! That Chimera has melted minds, broken souls or sometimes twisted people into looking unrecognizable for less than trying to pick a fight with it. You're extremely lucky it apparently really values you and showed mercy. That said while it’s done those kinds of horrible things to people it’s never killed anyone at least not that anyone knows of, it’s a truly mysterious being. Still you fought well enough against it that it took notice of your skill and you lived to tell someone like me the whole story, I’d say you’re a potential threat. Especially with my training on top of what you already taught yourself.” Training... that reminds me, I had something more to tell Marsh, I almost forgot.

“Ohh! That reminds me, the story of my second Chimera encounter isn’t the only thing I wanted to tell you about. There’s something else that I wanted to tell you, face to face and now I remember what it is.”

“Wh-What is it?” Marsh asks with a bit of nervousness in his voice as he sips from his can of soda.

“Well...it’s hard to know how to say it but I think with the possibility of the Chimera coming back that I need new, different training. And while your training has helped me

immensely...I..." I pause and struggle for the right words to say next and Marsh takes that opportunity to talk and makes this just a little harder.

"You need me to switch it up, right? Get more experimental with your training? Help you get an edge against that Chimera? Is that what you're trying to tell me, that you're in need of new and improved training? I guess I could take a crack at it and maybe help you learn."

"Let me finish please, I was trying to say that while I appreciate all your training I do need new training, HOWEVER I already found someone who can help me with that. Someone... well new who's willing to help and teach me and I said okay to that. I'll probably be gone, training with them for the next few months. I just wanted to let you know before I left so we could say goodbye for now and to let you know you probably won't see me for a little while."

"So what you're saying is you've got a new mentor to train you?"

"More or less. I just need a new approach and he can provide that, and maybe money too."

"Can he? Is he a magic user too? Is he better than me, then? Stronger?" Marsh huffs out some air at the end of his line of questions.

"What? No, he's... well he's a superhero and while I don't think it necessarily matters, yeah he's pretty strong. He's supposed to be the 'Number One Hero' according to what he told me and also a couple of newspapers and articles I could find on him and what he does."

"Ohh I see. So he's going to teach you the ropes, deputize you and before I know I'm almost never seeing you again, that about sum it up? I know a thing or two about superheroes, I'll have you know."

"Really? I had no idea. How's that possible and why are you suddenly acting so-?" I get cut off.

"Pfft! That's one of the things about being a showman, you learn about other showmen and superheroes, the ones you hear about. They can definitely be showmen. How do you know this "hero" anyway and what's his name?" Marsh huffs again and raises a glaring eye right at me.

"Good to know but why are you acting this way? You're getting all huffy, want to know all these details and interrupted me just now for no reason. What's up with that?"

“Don’t worry about it. I just want to know more about this guy you think can offer you... **BETTER**, fresher training than me before you leave me in the dust. Anyway, you gonna answer my questions?”

“I will but to set things straight I never said his training will be better or that I’m just leaving you for him to not come back. I’m going because he offered me the possibility and I said yes, besides this won’t be forever. I’ll come back to you especially since he’s just teaching me different things, like superhero fighting moves or using my powers more actively to do things like help people. Considering his powers are earth based and not magic I could still come to you for more lessons in that or you know visit as a **friend**!”

“Hmpph, you say that now but I don’t even know where you’re going or how soon. Thanks for answering my other questions... I guess.”

“I’m going to Grove City, that’s where this guy is located... and his hero name is Bonebreaker. I’m leaving to meet him and start my training in a week, this could even turn into an actual hero job.” I say trying to ignore Marsh’s bizarre pettiness this time.

“Is that right? Sounds like you’d be leaving your old job behind then. When did you even meet this Bonebreaker anyway? Do you even know his civilian name?”

“Ok, enough! Are you jealous or something? Is that why you’re asking me all these questions?! Why are you so worried about me going off to train with this hero?”

“W-well I just worry about your...safety, want to make sure this guy is on the level. That he’s going to train you right, that you’ll come bac-I mean that he won’t hurt your back during a routine exercise. Yeah.” Marsh is stuttering with folded back ears and a slight redness to his face, I’ve never seen him act like this before. I think...

“I was right... **wasn’t** I?! You are jealous that someone else might be teaching me new tricks or maybe you’re more scared that I won’t come back. You don’t have to be you know.”

“What!? No, I’m Not Jealous!” I just stare at Marsh. “Seriously...I’m... okay, fine I might be. Can you blame me though, you’re one of the only friends I got and you’re gonna be I don’t even fully know where-”

“Grove City”

“Never heard of it. Don’t even know what state it’s in. Tell me you do.”

“Well not exactly but Bonebreaker told me he’ll take care of how I get there.” I have to admit he’s got me there as I rub my paw sheepishly over my black head fur.

“Wow! Also you basically **admit** you don’t know his civilian name or you would have used it there! Why are you so trusting of someone you apparently **barely** know?!”

“Because he’s a hero and both can and has helped me. I looked into him, I’ve got a good feeling I could trust him. Besides I barely knew you when we first met and trusting you has only improved my life, it feels like though not right now with you doubting me like an overprotective dad!” That finally gets through to Marsh and his entire body and expression softens and he looks a little sad now as he sucks in a breath.

“*Sigh* I’m sorry, really sorry. I didn’t mean to come off that way. I’m just worried about you, cu-Theo. Being a hero can be pretty dangerous and while I know you didn’t necessarily have to tell me ahead of time, this is all kind of a shock. I-I expected you to stick around a little longer...before something like this happened. You’ll be careful right?”

“Of course I’ll be careful. Come on, he’s a superhero and you’re making it sound like he’s going to try and kill me as soon as we’re in a room together. I won’t even be alone there, he said that he recruited other people for this potential hero gig. I’ll be fine, probably.” Marsh breathes in and then exhales a heavy sigh, I think he’s finally given up trying to argue and try to be overprotective with me.

“Alright. As long as you’re sure you’ll be safe.”

“Yeah, I’m feeling pretty confident. Plus he already has a good idea of what I’m capable of considering how we met up. About two weeks ago we both happened to be visiting an art museum at the same time in the same part of Manhattan, he says he was there doing hero work while his civilian job had him visiting the city as some kind of necessary trip. I was there just to appreciate the art but regardless we were both there when the museum was getting robbed. I decided to step in and try to do something since I was there and naturally he did too, being a hero. These were some pretty powerful robbers, pretty strong beastmen and some had more superpowers than just a bit of beyond human strength. Still some punches, some potions and some super precisely thrown rocks and ice later we brought them down and Bonebreaker was impressed enough that he gave me his hero association’s number and offered me the opportunity on the phone the next day.” I take a sip of soda before continuing.

“So yeah that’s how I met the guy, we stopped an art museum robbery together and he saw my abilities in action. He then offered me the chance to become a superhero after we spoke on the phone two weeks ago and of course I told him yes. In another week I’ll be headed out to his

home city to start training to become a superhero. Hopefully things will start off easy and I won't die on my first training mission or something, ehehehehe" I giggle at the thought but Marsh doesn't instead looking really pensive about all this, chin in paw.

"I'd certainly hope not. Have you picked out a codename yet? Have you started packing yet? What's going to happen to your current job?" A lot of the jealousy and worry has now left from his voice but some of the worry along with curiosity now remains.

"Not yet but I'm considering Growing Glacier, might shorten it to just Glacier, haven't fully decided on that for sure. Not yet but I think I'm going to start tonight. As for my current job I explained the situation as vaguely as I could while getting the idea across and they told me I could resign for now and when the months are over I could get the job back or sooner if things somehow don't work out. From there I'd figure out a way to make things work out. Does that answer all your questions?" I say and ask earnestly.

"I suppose though I do have one more. This is kind of embarrassing... I know you've been promising you'll see me again and that we'll remain friends and you might still come to me for magic training or just to hang out but still. Could I...have a... oh man" Marsh pauses and takes a deep breath. "Can I have a reassurance hug...phew, got that out."

"Of course you can, Marsh. You don't even need to really ask, you're my friend. Come over." I extend out my arms for a warm, fuzzy and maybe a little dirt speckled embrace.

At this Marsh takes a second then bolts into my open arms and we squeeze each other tight as bears do. He struggles to reach up and ruffle my hair and I merely shake my head at the sensation. We stay locked in the embrace of each other for a solid five minutes at least before I eventually try to take a step back but Marsh doesn't seem to want to let go. I try a little harder to push away and at that the older moon bear gets the message and moves back and for another minute we're just looking at each other with confusion on what to do next till I break the silence.

"I hope that hug gave you the reassurance you were needing. Sorry I had to break the hug but I need to get up and use the bathroom, we've been sitting here for a while now."

"It did help a lot, thank you. I'll just be here till you get back."

"Okay! You could pick a show or movie to watch in the meantime, it's still early in the day and I want to watch something fun."

"Sure amigo. I'll find something while you're in the bathroom."

I use the bathroom and come back to see March has found a good action/drama series and it's not too long at about ten, hour long episodes. It's about a plague of zombie beastmen and a college campus of a school of both beastmen and animals that's the last bastion of safety. We watch a couple of episodes of that, talking and taking snack as well as bathroom breaks in between before it gets late and the sun has been down for an hour or more. At that point Marsh leaves but not before one last goodbye hug. After that all that is left is me and my suitcase as I start to pack for what will surely be an interesting and exciting several months ahead.