

Synchronizing With The Changes of a Lifetime

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A man walks through the woods on a cool spring night, a place called Shadow Magic's Grove though he doesn't know it by that name. All he knows is that he's walking through it as he has done before on multiple occasions just wanting to spend a bit of time away from the city nearby that he calls home. In another world he and a stranger turned friend met out here and that friend was able to walk with him and direct him back to the train station home and they warmly parted ways after getting to know each other. However in this world the man is lost and alone but there is no friendly bear in these woods that he'll see. It's late at night and he's supposed to work tomorrow but instead he's out past 10 and he's pretty sure he's lost because there's no pathway or recognizable landmarks, just trees and nature all around him. In anger he feints a punch against a tree before leaning against it and tries to hold himself together.

His bosses have already warned him about his latenesses and if he's late again he could very well be fired. He's only 24 and holding down a steady job shouldn't be this difficult but all 4 of the jobs he's had he's never made it past the 3 month probationary period. He was hoping this time could be different, he thinks as he pulls at his wavy black hair in frustration. Being a paid intern working in a mailroom was not his ideal job but it's been providing paychecks and was better than the job before that when he was a telephone interviewer. Until he quit that job by walking out but they were already shutting that place down and you basically made your own hours there so it worked out smoothly, more smoothly than he'd have wanted. All the frustrated man wants is some stability in his life instead of feeling like nothing works out for him and he's constantly struggling to adjust to the changes life keeps throwing his way.

Unfortunately for him life has another change in store this very night or perhaps it'd be more accurate to say a series of them in store. The man starts walking again and tries to get the slightly cracked screen of his smartphone to work well enough to give him directions so he can find some kind of way home. He's too distracted by this to hear a nearby dead tree branch break under the weight of a powerful feline paw. Those same paws wade silently along grass still growing back from a rough winter's long faded frost until they break another branch and this time it does get the man's attention. He looks up from his phone to look around, understandably not trusting the woods at night.

When he sees nothing but the typical sights of nature he shrugs and keeps moving towards what his phone tells him is the nearby train station he can take to get home. He doesn't take more than a couple of steps before he hears a low growl from very close behind him. From out of the darkness of night a ferocious feline figure pounces. It is big, slender, powerful and pins the man, scared and confused to the grassy ground before he can properly react.

“Aaahh-Mmmftpmmm” The start of a scream is muffled by the soft brown pawpads of an otherwise light gray furred paw that knows exactly what it’s doing.

The man is flipped over by one paw after having been brought down from behind as the other paw still covers his mouth until it lets go. He’s now able to look up to see who or(perhaps what is better in this case) attacked and pinned him down out of nowhere. What he sees right above him fills him with a primal terror and floods his mind with an overwhelming amount of questions. It’s an exceptionally big big cat which the man first assumes to be a cougar given its frame and its size as well as the darkness of the night making it hard to see. Theorizing that he’s already good as dead anyway the man struggles to move his hand and then fumbles in his pocket for his phone as the cat’s grip tightens and its claws pop out.

As its claws start to breach the skin of his shoulders the man finds his phone though with his arms pinned by powerful paws he’s forced to squirm it towards him. He wonders why the cat hasn’t attempted to truly harm him yet instead settling so far for minor scratches on his shoulders that while they hurt and are bleeding at a slow pace are barely a fraction of what this creature could do to him. After half blindly messing with his phone screen for what likes a small eternity but has actually been less than a minute he’s able to shed some light on what he thought was a mountain lion. In actuality though he now sees that it’s an utter beast of a lioness, though with slightly off proportions like in its legs, arms and head which all seem longer and bigger than they should be as does its whole body. Still the man doesn’t have to be a zoologist to recognize that distinct shape of the head and distinct tail, recognizable even if puffed up and stretched out in ways that don’t seem right. There might not be a mane but there is a small amount of brown hair on her head suggesting some humanity to this lioness creature.

“Hissss The lightttt.” The lioness hisses at the sudden emergence of light as she talks and lets go of the man she was pinning down. Allowing an even better look at her and her smoky gray fur as he slowly creates some distance between him and the lioness.

“Hole-y shit!”

The man is now able to stand and assess himself for any serious injuries. He finds nothing serious along his frontside aside from a few scratches along his jeans and a few more that are a little more than skin deep in his shoulders but they’re manageable. He wonders what kind of diseases that a lion could carry, if there are any that would affect humans. He thinks and doesn’t run because he knows that would only provoke the lioness to attack him as he escapes. Or would it? It spoke to him, it’s gotta be some kind of hybrid or beastman or something, something intelligent enough to speak and therefore be bargained with is the man’s train of thought.

“Wh-Why are you doing this? What do you wa-want from me?”

“Meattt... and moneeeey.” That’s what he was afraid of, more so that first answer than the second one.

“What are you?”

“Isn’t it obvioussss?” No, not really or rather not fully thinks the man.

“Only so much... li-listen! I can give you what I have now and get you some more money and some meat that’s tasty... ta-tastier than me.”

“Why sssshould I believe you?” The lioness blinks as its eyes adjust to the change of light and she now shifts her weight back to her hindlegs, ready to pounce once more.

A sigh escapes the doomed man’s lips as he knows whatever he says next probably wouldn’t make any difference and he mutters out “because I’m a man of my word wouldn’t be enough would it? You’ve already made up your mind haven’t you?” The lioness or rather werelion as the man is about to discover nods her head to leave no room for doubt and gets right behind the man before he can take another step to try and get away. He manages to turn his head and body just half as he feels a tongue with the texture of moist sandpaper lick his cheek. This is followed up by a set of fangs digging into his arm and him getting pushed back to the cool ground.

“**AAAAHHHHHHH! Aaa- I knew i-AAAAHHHH-it!**” The man says this between screams as the lionesses fangs pierce further through skin, muscle and meet each other leaving a rather serious wound.

The man expected her to have ripped that flesh from his bones but instead the lioness decides to take her pound of flesh from the man’s left leg. He screams with an even stronger sense of pain as fangs once again puncture skin as well as the stitched denim on top, the sinewy muscle and this time the crunching of bone is also added. The hungry, sadistic feline takes a sense of pride in her slow dismantling of her prey as she tears the man’s flesh from his bone and chomps it to bits before swallowing. She’s about to go for more, from his already scratched up shoulder this time but before that can happen giving the man another life draining wound there is some kind of strange blue glow from behind a tree. The lioness and man dismiss it at first until the sound of someone muttering interrupts the mutilation occurring. That wouldn’t be enough on its own to stop the lioness but then a dark blue ball of fire appears before both her and her victim.

“What is this?! Magic??” The lioness asks. The hiss now gone from her confused voice.

“It is indeed magic. A magic that shouldn’t have been needed and may still not be needed depending on your next decision. There was supposed to have been a purchaser of my wares here, to fend off creatures of the night.” A visored, not exactly human looking figure steps away from the tree that hid its emergence as it speaks with a voice that sounds absolutely ancient.

“Does-does that mean you’re here to help me. **Groooooan**” The man asks as he groans in pain from the multiple bleeding wounds and the lioness who is pinning him still with one paw on one of his scratched up shoulders.

“Nnnnot if he knows what’s good for him. Mmmmaybe I’ll let that gussied up threat go if you leave now... **OLD** man!” The hiss returns to the lionesses voice as her confusion is replaced by frustration at the prospect of another person wandering through territory that belongs to her.

“Intriguing. Being asked to leave when I shouldn’t even be here. Being asked for aid when that should be asked of another.” The strange figure puts a currently clawed finger to his chin. “This world isn’t exactly right. There’s something angry in this place.”

“Yeah, MEEEE! You weird old...what are youuuu?”

“Hmmm. Ahh, if you ask for an introduction does that mean you intend to cease the attacks?”

“Not a chance. I just want to know what I’m aboutttt to insult and then killlll.” The lioness rakes her claws along the ground.

“What a pity that’s your decision. While you can, remember the Cunning Chimera. For that is the only one of my many names you’ll get to know.” At this the lioness lifts her paw off her prey and then fully focuses on glaring at the strange figure that interrupted her hunt with an intensity that could boil an ocean.

“Why you arrogant-**Hrrnn-Rrowwwlll!**”

The lioness is interrupted mid pounce by the dark blue flame entering her head through her right ear. Seemingly at the whim of the Chimera she was about to maul with a stoked fury until that flame moved when his bony old paw did. Although now that paw is looking a bit more scaly instead of covered in what looked like tiger fur before. The flame is gone now, wedged between the ears of the werelion and her caterwauling is interrupted as the light behind her green eyes starts to grow dimmer and she stands upright to put her paws to the side of her head. The dimming affects even the yellow sclera surrounding those green eyes which become a slightly lighter shade of yellow along with her now less bright green eyes. There is no sound from her other than the faint sound of her moving her arms and legs back and forth like she’s trying to

shake something out of her. After a minute or so of ineffective flailing on two legs the lioness is back to 4 legs with eyes that still have some light in them but it's dimmer now, there's something vacant in what were once very angry eyes.

"She stopped looking so angry. In fact she looks practically incapable of showing any emotion. What'd you do to her?" The man asks as the lioness proceeds to stand on all fours next to the man and the chimera looking lost.

"Something that shouldn't have needed to be done and yet not much difference is made. Shouldn't have come here." The chimera says as they shoo the lioness away with a gesture of their now thick nailed paw and the lioness leaves with any sort of resistance or fuss strangely absent from her.

"Well I'm glad you came here from wherever you're from. Now if you could please call an ambulance cause I happen to be y'know dying here!?" There's a bit of anger in the man's voice as he shouts for further help from this visored stranger who is looking around everywhere but at him till the shout draws his attention.

"You! Such a fascinating microcosm of it all. A persistence and tenacity that defies all that's wrong here. An imbalance of price that's leading to renewal and I'm the one left wondering if maybe there is a reason to be here." The Chimera babbles in a way that makes the man feel like he's simultaneously being perceived and yet looked past at the same time and that annoys him.

"What does all that even mean? Are you going to help me or not!?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure, I've already helped you with the potion once and he paid on that world. Assisting you with that lurking lioness without any kind of deal or further payment is a decision I'm already not too confident will lead to good outcomes. Done because you've paid prior." There's a strange glimmer behind the Chimera's visor as he talks and ponders plenty of things.

"Please! I have money, if this is about payment, just help me!" The man reaches out his hand to the Chimera who surprises by crouching down to look closer at it.

"Money worked originally but very rarely do I trade as simply as that. Though you continue to be extraordinary in more worlds than one. Slow to start but scabbing over very quickly."

"What?... That's...that's not possible. How?!" The man is puzzled as he looks at his leg to see that there's skin and bone again where mere minutes ago there were only bite marks and a chunk of him missing.

It's bleeding, still broken skin when he first looks down but it scabs over and heals before his very eyes till it looks more like a housecat scratched him a day or so ago rather than the reality of a big werelion taking out a piece of him with only her jaws. He checks his shoulder next by feeling along where scratches once were and finds smooth, healed skin instead. He sighs in relief at first and then winces in discomfort as he begins to feel a tugging sensation along only his arms and the backs of his hands at first. It spreads and multiplies like rain cascading down as a storm starts but feels more like tweezers tugging at every inch of him. Dark gray fur starts sprouting along the back of the man's hands and then like that feeling of discomfort it spreads to his arms and in no time the fur proceeds to grow all over him in patchy areas that become connected by continuous fur growth.

As the man turning werelion's fur grows into a proper lion's pelt the rest of him also starts to morph and change. His hands contort and stretch to become strong, powerful paws with his palms bulging outward and color shifting to take on a new form as pawpads for those growing paws. His hair starts growing and spiking outward as it grows and grays to become a light gray mane of hair. The lower half of his face elongates as teeth begin sharpening to fangs in his mouth which is transforming into a squarish muzzle. All the while the Chimera looks at the transforming human with a mix of disgust and concern as he takes off his visor to reveal a pair of currently cat's eyes. jaguar specifically. Not that the man can tell that as he's overwhelmed by the changes his body is going through, struggling to stay on even his knees let alone the feet bursting through his shoes as they become less human and more leonine by the passing seconds.

The man's feet quickly catch up to the transformation of his hands and become his second set of powerful paws. The spread of fur reaches his chest and slightly sagging stomach making the coverage of him in fur almost complete. Before it can finish though there's a painful tingling feeling flaring up along the man's entire spine. The back of his pants develop a small, growing bulge trying to make itself known as what will be a long, slender tail but for now is a fuzzy gray nub trying to break free. At the breaking free of his growing tail and continued growth/transformation of the rest of him the Chimera decides to speak and react directly to the change underfoot.

"Incongruous! I can't stand by as this change continues to be so incongruous and offensively wrong. He would have taken my paws for assisting for free much less at a cost to myself but I decide my deals now. Hold still my glorious anomaly."

It takes the former man(now almost completely overtaken by the features of the lion) a second to realize the Chimera was addressing him with that last sentence. He wants to run away but no longer knows or trusts his radically changing body enough to outpace the enigmatic being far older than he'll ever know. So instead he decides to give a warning, refusing to let the pain and uncertainties force him to do nothing.

“GRRRRRRRRRaooo” The transforming werelion gives a long, deep growl that changes a bit at the end but maintains the message.

“*Ohoho!* I can understand the concern but I have no intention of hurting you. My desire is towards providing a gift overdue and nothing more.” The Cunning Chimera can’t help but laugh with what’s become a sheep’s muzzle as it inches towards the concerned transforming werelion.

The Chimera raises their hand and starts muttering an incantation in a language too ancient to be recognizable by many including the former man he’s offering his particular brand of assistance. As he recites this incantation his hand starts to glow with a magical aura of dark blue and he places it on the changing werelion’s face whose tail finally breaks free and extends outward to develop an off white colored puff at the end. Along with that his eyes start to change color with first his pupils changing to a light green and then a dark yellow starts to bleed into his sclera that become less white as time goes on. Before the yellow completely overtakes his once human eyes the Chimera finishes his incantation and spell with a quick swipe over the werelion’s growing back which has burst through most of his shirt, now too tattered to be considered anything more than a loosely held chain of rags. The Chimera smiles again with the mouth of a green iguana this time as he waits to see the spell take effect.

It does so practically instantaneously with first a wave of energy starting from the werelion’s back and then going down to what used to be hands and feet but are now paws. This wave brings with it a numbing of pain and any discomfort from his first transformation. Then comes a second transformation with the same speed of the first. It starts seamlessly, painlessly from the middle of his back working its way from there to his face and fingertips and then back down to his toes. With that the first thing to change is his fur color going from shades of gray to one singular shade of bright white. Then along the werelion’s new coat of white fur emerges some big blue spots, like light blue polka dots popping up almost at random.

The tip of his tail poofs out and takes on the same light blue as those spots, looking more like a sky blue puffball on the end of that slender, snowy lion’s tail. At his other end the werelion’s mane bleaches at the tips to develop spikes of milky white around its edges. The transformed man’s eyes change once more but this time to completion as the yellow that had overtaken most of his eyes previously is replaced by a dark blue and the light green darkens to more of a jade color. For a split second there is a flash of blue flames in the pupil’s of the newly changed werelion as if a spark of potential has just been ignited. The Conniving Chimera never stops watching, although the eyes with which he watches change from a feline diamond shape to a horizontal goat shape.

Normally he'd use potions or some sort of magic consumable like soup or something, work out some sort of cost, whatever that might be. A price usually paid by the time of his arrival or through the act of accepting its' deal. Today however they used only an incantation and their hands to even out the price asked by a world with a different, harsher edge and a bit more eager to take whatever it can. There is a glee in the Chimera's expression as his old methods seem to work flawlessly, methods that he's become more used to using for self defense against those who are confused and made skeptical by his offers and explanations. He wants to be sure however.

"Ahh, a better synchronicity has been achieved! My alterations to your new form have made you more capable and with you losing considerably less than you would have without my assistance. Aren't you fortunate?" The Chimera asks that question with a bit of smug sarcasm contrasting with the genuine elation at the results of his own handiwork. The former man turned werelion stares at the cunning creature who "gifted" him with his new form as he starts to become accustomed to standing with it.

"Rrrrr... I... I still drron't-don't understand what you're talking about. What have I sy...synchronized with? What do you need me to be capable of? Do I... *Nyah...* owe you some kind of favor?" The werelion asks questions which test the jaw he'll need to become used to speaking with as he also stretches his limbs and awaits answers from this currently tiger eyed figure he doubts will actually tell him what he wants to know or even properly address any of what he just asked.

"Very inquisitive despite what you're still adjusting to, marvelous. And this all puts you in some ways further along than he was at this time, things move even more differently around here than initially expected." The werelion scowls at the chimera once more observing him rather than answering him but then the chimera speaks again.

"Well you seem to have synchronized with an impatience for answers *ehehe*." The chimera chuckles briefly before continuing. "You have better synchronized with the ideal way this was all supposed to play out, with the gifts that should have shielded you. As for debts, you owe me nothing. I prefer not to thrust great expectations on those I provide my methods of aid, you living your life and adjusting to the changes is enough, you don't have to worry about your place in my plans. That said my admirable werelion one thing you can do is tell me your name. Do you remember it?"

"My...name? Uhhh my name is...*ngghh*... hang on...*ughh*." The werelion squeezes his temples with a paw trying harder than he thinks should be necessary to remember something as basic as his name. Going through his memories being like walking through fog to a destination someone else told you about with some parts of the fog being thicker than others till some kind of inner voice whispers an answer for him. "Theo! My name...is...Theo!"

“Extraordinary. You are proving quite extraordinary.”

“...Thank...you?”

“You can thank me next time we meet, assuming you get a chance to, given what’s in store. Ah yes, we might meet again more than once and you might see him too, the contrast in your lives.” The Cunning Chimera speculates as his eyes become enveloped in a dark blue glow, already plotting the future ahead.

“For now though my business here concludes. I trust I’m leaving this place in better hands than I did before. Be well and happy hunting.”

“Huh? Happy hunting?? Wait, where are you going?! Don’t leave me by myself out here!” The newly realized Theo questions and cries out as the Chimera taps into the air and with an extending of reptilian fingers makes a dark blue portal appear.

“I couldn’t stay even if I wished to. Being here has extracted a price from me and I can’t risk an uneven balance by staying. Besides, I can’t stay a planes-seller by sticking to one plane of existence.” With one hooved foot through the portal to who knows where and one hooved foot still in this new Theo’s world the Chimera says one last thing. “You’re less alone than you think you are.” And with those final words the Chimera leaves and Theo is on his own again in the grove.

The grove that in another universe changed the life of an ursine counterpart a year later and in different ways than it did here but differences even larger ones should come to be expected between universes. And in this universe Theo is still lost and left with a head full of questions, some answers and memories of a human life that feel like they’re fading in and out as they try to adjust themselves to a whole new being. Everything fades and takes a back seat however to an overwhelming feeling of hunger suddenly emanating from the lion’s stomach. Despite what the Chimera said there was a cost to all their changes, all that transforming after all. Theo puts a paw to his growling white and blue furred belly and with a light blue glow his hunger lessens but doesn’t completely fade.

The werelion just used a new ability that he both didn’t know he had and certainly doesn’t know how to consciously use just yet. Over the coming weeks and months he’ll start to adapt to his new body, his new magics and the changes it’ll all bring to his life. Soon enough he’ll be able to make himself a proper sandwich to sate his hunger only to get surprised by the sight of a more chill, ursine version of himself. Of course that’s a little while in the future, right now Theo’s hunger is still there and about to make a roaring comeback. So he thinks about the Chimera’s

words and decides to let the hunt begin. He sniffs the air and picks up a scent, deciding to let his human mind take a backseat to the lion's instincts in the search for food. Leaving his human life behind to embrace his new one as a magically altered werelion and deadly hunter who will go on to find a home in all of New York's forests, parks and any other place creatures can freely stalk the night.