

The Chimera Hunter

By Francesca Milani

Once upon a time, far to the north, where the vast kingdom of Lebhaza-Dvorhj stood mighty and intimidating and domineering, there ruled a king and queen who had a young son named Dlenzhius who loved to hunt—and his favorite pastime was shooting his cherished and lovingly cared-for arrows from his treasured, legendary, ivory bow—it had long ago belonged to *the* great bowman King Teirezhius, *his* great-great-great-grandfather.

One day, as the young prince was out wandering and hunting alone on his daily, solitary, ramble in his favorite woods, the peculiar forest of Evozhahtel—consciously, yet very much wishing to forget that he was causing his royal parents much distress at his being alone and hunting in the dangerous, boundless, fantastical forest, full of the wildest, menacing beasts—, he saw a strange creature that appeared as if it was a flying dart piercing the air as it fled through the woods—it was so swift; it looked terrible and unfamiliar and he shuddered as he stared at it—almost unable to peel his eyes from the startling sight. Dlenzhius was not one to be afraid of the creatures of the forest: he was the surest Bowman in all of Lebhaza-Dvorhj and was confident in himself that he could effortlessly protect himself from any aggressor with his strong hand and renowned bow and arrow. But it was almost too late when he realized that the beast was hurling its snarling self—almost angrily—towards him. Instinctively, he knew that if he endeavored to flee from this unhesitant animal, he would be easily caught: he didn't stand a chance if he followed *that* plan. Prince Dlenzhius unconsciously snatched an arrow from his quiver and notched it to his bow. Coolly, he aimed for his oncoming assailant. He shot.

After releasing the arrow, he stepped behind a stout beech tree, still able to see the propelling creature. He watched with stunned astonishment the following scene:

Dlenzhius' carefully guided arrow met the queer beast's great trunk with a soft thud. The magnanimous momentum of the creature kept its body pummeling forward—but not directly in front of it: it moved in circles, crazed in jagged lines. Yet it kept moving onward; it kept plunging towards the prince; it kept moving onward. With a terribly powerful crash, the creature careered right into the huge, old beech tree, shaking the ancient deciduous plant into a deep shudder; Dlenzhius heard the tree creak and groan. He stumbled and fell backwards onto his spine, stunned. The creature collapsed to

the ground with a thump. Then, everything was still—except for the prince who was quaking, if not outwardly, deep within his thumping heart. *What was that?!*

The young prince peered from around the trunk of the tree. An unsettling sight met the prince's eyes: a creature of three different species jumbled together: it was adorned with the deep red orbs of a serpent and the head of an enormous green-poison snake, which smoothly transformed into the golden mane, the flaxen, muscular front limbs, and the torso of a tawny lion; and the end of the creature fluently changed into the hind legs and tail of a scaly, dark blue dragon. The part-snake, part-lion, part-dragon animal was breathing heavily; its forked, blood-red tongue hung out of its mouth full of catlike fangs, gently raising, slipping in and out of it. Dlenzhius' long, sturdy, but elegant, arrow shaft with feathers of silver protruded from the colossal chimera's chest.

The prince of Lebhaza-Dvorhj cringed at the sight; he wrinkled his nose at the unpleasant stench. He didn't know what to do . . . *what was one supposed to do with such a monster?* But the chimera itself settled that question for him: it spoke.

“What isss thiss thorn in me?” it said, almost pitifully, “Why do I, Zmeihissssss, have it? It burnsss! it burnsss! I do not undersstand. No . . .” Its hissing voice trailed off, but it picked up again: “No: I am mad. Becausse of *you*: you have ruined it. Ruined! I am ruined. And you shhhall pay. You shhhall never shhhoot an arrow from a bow again—leassst of all: *those* arrows and *that* bow. Thiss shhhall be unlessssss you take thiss thorn from me. Can you take it from me? Thiss isss your punishhhment for ruining Zmeihissssss.”

The prince could tell that this was no idle threat . . . if it was, what would that matter? But if it wasn't To part with his bow and arrows! This chimera was something mighty in strength: both physically and magically. Weren't all of the fantastical creatures of the Evozhahtel Forest powerful in magic?

Despite Prince Dlenzhius' shock and splitting headache, the prince immediately sprang from his prostrate position and ran back to the palace without once pausing for breath—why would he care for comfort when he might be separated forever from his bow and arrows?—and he gathered together his strongest and most trustworthy men. Hastily, he brought them to the beech tree in the Evozhahtel Forest—but *the chimera was gone!* Instead, a green mist now lay where the chimera had crashed into the tree, and appeared

for all the world like the three-dimensional shape of Zhmeihiss. The prince sat upon a tree stump nearby, and buried his face in his hands. Never again would he draw a bow to launch an arrow. The arrow he had shot for the chimera had been his last

But Prince Dlenzhius would never give up—not his beloved bow and arrow! Many-a-time had they saved his life. He could not give them up, he would not let them slip now—*no!* not now, not *ever*.

He walked back to his father's palace. Zhmeihiss' words mercilessly burned in his head, "You shhhall never shhhoot an arrow from a bow again. You shhhall never shhhoot an arrow from a bow again"

When he arrived, he told no one of the incident, trusting that his men would not either. He slipped away from the kingdom of Lebhaza-Dvorhj, that night, with an incapacitated bow and unusable quiver of arrows, determined to find a means to wriggle his way out of the chimera Zhmeihiss' curse.

By dawn he had left Lebhaza-Dvorhj far behind him. The breeze brushed his face: he was free—except from the chimera's curse

He searched everywhere. He searched for wise men and wise women and wise creatures who could help him out of his plight. No one aided him—no one could. So he decided to go home and never again see another bow or arrow or quiver or glove or tree or forest or animal or target or any creature—"you shhhall never shhhoot an arrow from a bow again"

On his trek back to Lebhaza-Dvorhj, as he stooped to drink from a spring, three elves popped from the water pushing him impudently away.

"Hey! watch yourself! What do you think you're doing here?" asked the first elf.

"Uh, this place happens to belong to *us*, if you don't mind," another elf smirked.

"Rather! If you *do* mind. So, in short, leave?" said the last grinning in Dlenzhius' face. Dlenzhius didn't care to argue. He sat down on a flat stone, sitting there, thinking only of his bow and arrows.

The first elf spoke, "Huh . . . what's eating grandpa? Oh, c'mon, speak up. Don't just sit there and do *nothing*."

Dlenzhius looked up and said hurriedly. "Okay Well, I was cursed by a chimera after I shot my arrow into it so that I can't ever shoot an arrow from my bow again. Whenever I try to, my hands start to feel like rubber and I can't hold it: they just slip out of my hand."

“Huh, big deal,” said the second elf, “You can’t get out of it? Sure you can. You just haven’t tried.”

Dlenzhius fumed at the elf’s words: he hadn’t tried! He had tried his heart out!

“What exactly *did* this chimera say, prince?” the third elf asked.

The words seared his mind. He said dreamily, picking up the snakish accent of Zhmeihiss,

“‘You shhhall never shhhoot an arrow from a bow again.’ That’s what he said.”

The elves laughed. “Any conditions?!” they asked simultaneously.

“Oh,” the prince answered, “if I could take the thorn—*my arrow*—out of him then it wouldn’t matter, but I was too late. He died before I could get it from him.”

“Yeah right, prince,” the second elf said, “that thorn was no arrow: he was talking about some spell that was put on *him*. A riddle, I suppose. Brothers?” Again, they said in sync,

*“A slithering part, a flaxen part, a scaly part;
A flickering ribbon, a coat of gold, scales in want of fire;
If by the princely arrow your tawny coat is kissed,
Before this puzzle is resolved,
You’ll be a mist of verdigris.”*

The first elf explained, “Long ago, a chimera—who was actually Zhmeihiss, if you would like to know—walked up to this very spring and polluted it with its dreadful stench. We were very angry with it, so we put a spell on it: the very riddle we just recited for you.”

The second elf chimed in, “It was horrible! The despicable odor didn’t leave our spring until two hundred years later! I mean, he certainly deserved what he got—”

The second elf forgot what he was saying as the third elf was explaining the spell to the prince. “The answer to the riddle was—you must find that out for yourself; we put it easy on the chimera, thinking it’d get the answer any day. Obviously, we were wrong and he never figured it out. I feel almost sorry for Zhmeihiss.”

Irritably, the second elf reminded his brother, “Uh, excuse you? Sorry for that impolite beast? Don’t you remember what it did to our beautiful—”

Dlenzhius interrupted him, “So how do I find this chimera again?”

“Don’t know,” said the first elf, “You probably just have to go back to wherever the chimera mist was and give him the answer to the riddle.”

“And a piece of my mind!” the prince put in.

The four arrived at Lebhaza-Dvorhj, where the young prince’s return was a joyful one—and also a remonstrating one for him. To the young prince’s dismay, the next day the three elves were gone—they would not be there to accompany him into the woods: he went into the Evozhahtel Forest alone. He was thinking constantly of the answer to the riddle.

As he ventured into the forest, he repeated the puzzle over and over again. What was the answer? Suddenly, as Dlenzhius saw the misty chimera, it dawned on him; the answer was clear as day, the riddle was solved!

The old beech tree was surrounded by a green cloud. The prince stepped forward. “Well, Zhmeihiss, I’ve come to take the thorn from you,” he said.

Zhmeihiss lifted its misty head and stared at the prince unblinking; it nodded.

“It was *you*, Zhmeihiss! *You* were the answer to the thorn riddle all the time!”

The chimera stared; it spoke one word, “Zhmeihiss. The thorn is taken.” Zhmeihiss shimmered and changed from “a mist of verdigris” to an actual being, “a slithering part, a flaxen part, a scaly part; a flickering ribbon, a coat of gold, scales in want of fire.” Zhmeihiss bounded off and plunged deep into the forest, letting loose a hissing cry of triumph.

From his famed bow, and with strong, firm hands, Dlenzhius let loose a hissing arrow of victory!