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THE CLEAR CUT

By Mottsnave



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The Clear Cut * By Mottsnave

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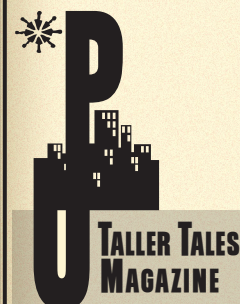
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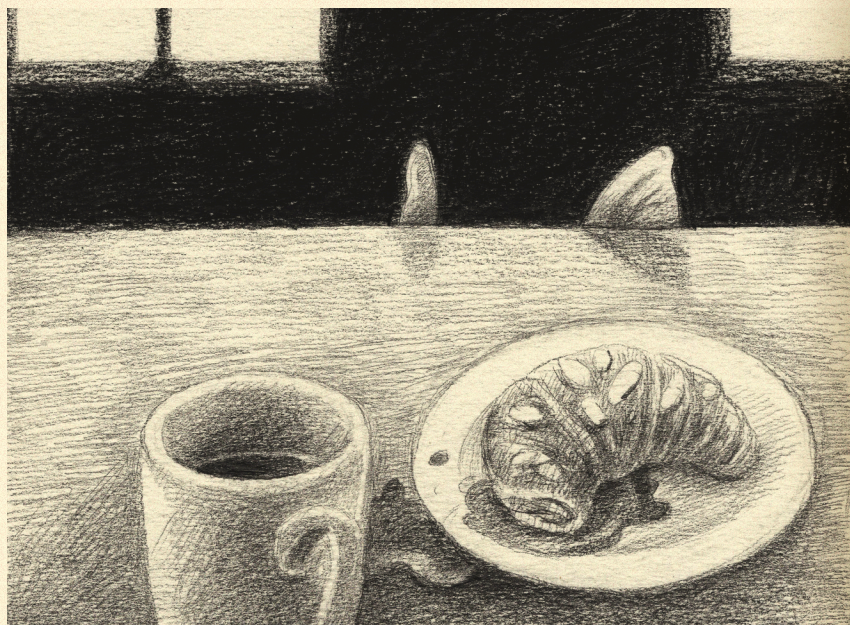
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THE CLEAR CUT

by Mottsnave

THE ASSIGNMENT

It was a devious beast of a problem.

My brewing had ground to a halt the previous afternoon after three days of dead ends, inert masses and over-reactions. In this case, theory and practice were not only not speaking to each other, they refused to even glance in each others direction. So, abandoning practice completely for the moment, I

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by Mottsnave

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THE CLEAR CUT

decided to try to bend theory to my will. The result was that, some twenty hours later, I was wading through discarded reactivity charts, ingredient substitutions and alchemical process diagrams. I was also getting nowhere. I rubbed my forehead and wished for a cup of coffee and one of those almond croissants from the bakery on the other side of the island. If there was any single key, it was eluding me. It was more likely anyway to be a number of unrelated factors... I relented and let my hand fall to the hot mug of coffee at my side and raised it for a sip. The second I tasted it I spit it out, shoving myself back violently from the table, my chair tottering to the floor behind me. Where the hell had that come from?

I had my wand out and my back against the wall. Some of the coffee had sloshed out and onto a small plate holding a pristine almond croissant. I cast protego in front of me. There was something on the other side of the table, not moving: two grayish tips directly across from me. "Step back to the door," I snarled, "now!"

The gray tips bobbed as their owner moved back with little bowing steps, gradually revealing a bald dome and enormous eyes. A bloody house elf! I dropped the protego – it wouldn't do me any good. When I could see down to its knobby knees beneath the hem of the souvenir MEMORIES OF IRELAND tea towel it was wearing, I said "that's far enough." I was trying to keep my breath even. "What's in that coffee? Who sent you after me?"

"Milk, Master Headmaster, no sugar." I always hated their creaky hinge voices; this one was just as grating as the rest of them. It was also evading my questions.

"What ELSE is in it? Tell me everything that was put into that cup, by you or anyone else!" I knew house elves well enough, since I had been forced to work with them for over a year. They enjoyed playing dumb and squeaking by under the letter of the law, but they had a great deal of trouble with an outright lie. If one could phrase a question just right...

"Coffee, sir, and water and milk. I brew it properly, and no one else!" it declaimed with some tiny pride. I guessed it was male by the sound. I glanced at the pastry. I didn't really want an ingredi-

THE CLEAR CUT

ent list, but I also didn't want its presence nagging at me. "Is there anything remotely harmful in that croissant?"

"Too much sugar is being bad for you sir, but sweet almonds do not contain enough hydrogen cyanide to be harmful. Master Headmaster, only bitter almonds contain amygdalin which will produce hydrogen cyanide in dangerous quantities."

I narrowed my eyes.

"I don't need a herbology lesson from you," I said. "Tell me who sent you here and if anyone is with you."

"I come alone, sir. I was not sent, we all agree that Master Headmaster will help. He owes us and he know –"

"Owe you? Owe who? I owe no one! I'm *done!*"

"We all agree – you owe us."

"You've all agreed have you? Than no doubt you are all perfectly correct. May I ask who and what I could possibly owe?" The creature had a disturbingly confident air about him.

"All us elves of Hog –"

"That's enough! I owe no one from that place. Not another word – *get out.*"

"You owe us."

"Get –" I began, but the thing *interrupted* – "we do you *services!*" with smug finality.

I stared at it for a moment. "You are bound to serve the headmaster and the school. There is no obligation between us for any service performed while I..." I trailed off. The little cloud of smugness hadn't dissipated a whit. I propped my chair back up and regained my seat. I gave the offending coffee mug a small shove away before I looked at the elf again. "What service, exactly, have you or any of your... colleagues performed that could possibly create an obligation on my part?"

It gave a bow, bits of the Giant's Causeway brushing the floor, before it began again. "You is no longer Headmaster, but we have done you services. We is not telling anyone that you is living, or your name, or where you are. That is services."

"No, that is blackmail."

"And the one you trusted with your life says you will know what

to do, you will help us, because you owe us, and you can find out things." It all came out in a rush.

The one I trusted... I didn't particularly want to hear his name. I sighed. "And what exactly do I know how to find out?" Perhaps they had lost their precious treacle tart recipe. I felt a creeping resignation in the face of his stubborn squeaking. Perhaps he sensed it, for he came around the side of the table and spoke conspiratorially: "There is elves missing, sir. They is family to us."

"From... the school?"

"No sir, they is family to some at the school, but they was here, in Newworld. But we always know where they are, until now we don't know. No one knows." He drooped a bit.

"Undoubtedly someone does. You do realize that it is different here? House-elves are free to change their employment at will. They could easily have found some place which –" He was shaking his bulbous head mournfully.

"They is family – when they flit, they tells us. We always know. Now it's nothing! For three months the longest."

"What are they called, and where were they last?" I asked, flipping over one of the less crumpled charts.

"The longest gone, he is Wilia, who was in a kitchen called Starkeys in the town of Peoria in the country of Illinois –" There wasn't any point correcting him on the terminology, "for only two weeks gone the other, she is called Mayni, from Under City Importers, in Seattle City."

"Isn't that convenient?" I glanced down at my paper. The logical starting place was clear enough. "Well, why would they go?"

"Why would they go where, sir?"

"Anywhere, why would they go anywhere? Were they looking for some other place, did they want to move? Was there any falling out with their employers?"

He drew himself up in indignation. "They is proper, our family! We do not flit just for wants –" He was winding himself up so I cut him off.

"Proper or not, things are different here." He clearly hadn't grasped it the first time I said it. "I don't see how it serves you not to answer me. Did they express any discontent to you or anyone

else at the school, did they have any plans?"

He shook his head with a sniff. "And I don't suppose you have anything else useful to tell me?" I didn't get a sniff that time. "All right, sod off then, I have work to do." I could already feel my resignation brewing into irritation, as it usually did. I didn't bother looking up as he bobbed backwards.

"You do the finding out, and then you tells us. Kob comes back in five days." He wasn't there when I looked up again, so he must have gone then. I surveyed the room around me; the wreckage of four wasted days plus one cold cup of coffee plus one soggy almond croissant.

POR NADA

I tried a Point Me first. It wasn't likely to work as it is a simple spell to block, but I held some hope that I could find the two quickly and return to my work. Of course my wand spun aimlessly each time. Pointless. I couldn't be sure if the failure of the spell

meant anything in itself, it could have been blocked by any number of things: distance, a warded location, or even that house elves don't use true names. I sighed, I would have to put in some legwork after all.

Despite its name, UNDER CITY IMPORTERS was not part of the main underground wizarding quarter in Seattle. It took advantage of the cheap rents in the industrial district just off Harbor Island where it was located in a huge warehouse. It was well known for having the cheapest prices for the overstocked miscellany of the wizarding world. I had even been there once myself chasing down cheap vials. It of course turned out too good to be true – the vials were terrible Latvian knockoffs and I cracked the neck of the first one I tried to pry the stopper out of. I had never seen fit to return to the store until now.

The apparition point was near a loading dock across from the main

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entrance. I watched for a moment the shoppers entering in small groups, parents and students mostly, by the looks of them. I tried to convince myself that it would not feel crowded inside, even if it seemed a bit busy out front, as the cavernous space would quickly swallow them up. It would be nothing so bad as the markets in Manaus.

I passed through a couple of wards on the way in; just the basic anti-apparition and an alarm against removing objects whose alerting charms hadn't been deactivated. The lines were labeled in green lettering on the threshold.

The impersonal methods were undoubtedly effective for the big box stores favored by the Americans, but it made it almost impossible to find a clerk when you wanted one. I searched through a maze of aisles. I saw several clerks, but as they were all struggling to hold a Wingardium Leviosa on an enormous cage as they maneuvered it onto an upper shelf, I thought it safer not to disturb them. At length I spotted one of the store's bright purple vests at the end of an aisle. The young woman in it was shoving jars of bulk scrying solution onto a shelf.

"Excuse me," I ventured.

"Yeah?" She didn't pause or look up.

"I need to speak to a manager."

"If you've got a product complaint or return you take it to the Returns desk, behind aisle 57." She finally straightened so she could point the way around the end of the aisle. She was quite young and had the off-center ragged haircut favored by the student customers of the shop.

"It's not a return or a complaint. I need to speak to a manager."

"What about? Look, the managers aren't always here so," she said impatiently. Why couldn't Americans finish their sentences? It seemed like their brains shut down halfway through their thought.

"I need to speak to one of the elves who work here."

She snorted. "Ok, definitely not management. They don't give a crap about the little guys. You want to talk to Angie, she hangs out with them. Angie?" She shouted the name and started around the end of the aisle, still talking. "Couldn't tell you why, I mean, can't *stand* those voices, like frickin' nails on a blackboard..." She drew up next to a small brass horn bolted to the end of a shelf.

"Kelsey 348" she said into it. There was a buzzing hiss as a sonorous charm activated. "Angie, customer, aisle 23, Angie, aisle 23," she boomed across the store. "There, she'll be by, just hang out here." She swept away without looking back.

I spent some interminable minutes looking at the shelves, which were crowded with rows and rows of stuffed fantods under glass. Who the hell could possibly want them?

Another purple vest finally appeared around the far end of the aisle. It was a slightly older woman than the first, perhaps in her late 20s, with dyed-black hair pulled back except for a fringe. Her clothes under the horrid vest actually showed some of her figure. She wasn't making an effort for this place, surely? There must be something afterward.

"Angie, I presume?" Her eyes had a little intelligent spark to them.

"Ha, yeah. How can I help you?" Her voice was sliding into her trained customer-service formality. That wasn't what I needed.

"Kelsey said that perhaps you could. I'm trying to get in touch with one of the elves who works here: Mayni."

"Oh, she's gone, she left a couple of weeks ago, I think."

"Oh, no." I tried to show surprised disappointment. "Is there any way to contact her? A position she was looking for just opened up with her family. She was very insistent that we contact her if that happened."

"Well, we can ask the others. The store doesn't keep records on the elves. It doesn't have to since they're... *officially* 'independent magical creatures,' and the management doesn't want to deal with any paperwork they don't have to." She started to walk down the aisle. I followed.

"Are you in charge of the elves?"

"Oh no, I just like talking to them, so I know them pretty well, that's why Kelsey paged me. Once you get past all the formal crap with them they're great to talk to, you know?" She threw a glance back at me, but I must have looked blank because she chuckled. "*Really*, they get all straightforward and they have this perverse sense of humor..."

I couldn't honestly think of any elf who had ever been straightforward with me. She was tapping a steel door labeled "EMPLOYEES ONLY" with her wand. "Come on," she said, ushering me into the massive stockroom of the warehouse. I followed her past boxes and

crates until she found a group of elves trying to herd a tangle of animated Fusebox Dwarves back into their crate with whisk brooms.

"Hey, Nimmo!" Angie called above the "Dreeb, dreeb" of the dwarves, "Nimmo, just for a second, ok?"

One of the elves broke away from the fray and came over to us. "Nimmo, have you heard anything from Mayni?"

He gave a short shake of his head and gave me a look before turning back to Angie. "Mr. - " she began.

"I'm Mr. Ramson. Her family is looking for her. Do you know where she went?" He studied me with some care for a moment. If he were looking for truth on my face, well, my statement was true enough, as far as it went. "Or perhaps you could pass a message on to her?"

"No, she doesn't tell us where she goes, but she wanted a position with a house and a family, and she says she gets it."

"Did she say what family?"

"No, just a new family, a couple with child."

"And where?"

"Nothing, she just has to leave quick as they are moving up north."

I felt that I couldn't push any further without them becoming suspicious. "Look, perhaps I could leave my number somewhere, in case she does contact anyone here. Would that be alright?" Angie took my scrawled number on the back of a shipping label and pinned it to a dusty corkboard on the wall. Nimmo gave me a glance, but picked up his whisk broom without another word and went back to the clattering dwarves.

"Well, thank you," I told Angie resignedly as she shoved open the steel door.

"Hey, *por nada*," she called as it swung between us. I was afraid she was right.

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STARKEY'S

It would be a real chore to apparate all the way to Peoria. I would probably be sick for a week. Instead, I made my way to the main portkey office behind Volunteer Park. Being early evening on a weekday, there was customer just finishing with the only clerk when I arrived.

"One, with a return, to Peoria, Illinois."

"Return? Oh, round-trip. We don't have direct to Peoria in stock, we can do Union Station Chicago. Then you get a local key at the office there." The woman behind the counter ran her finger down a chart while she continued. "Current rate is \$0.1386 per mile, 1,735 miles each way, and with the round-trip discount that comes to \$360.71"

Bloody hell, the little shit would pay for this. I was glaring. "Well, sir, can I help you?" There was an irritated edge to her voice now.

"Yes, fine, I'll take it," I said grudgingly. She relaxed as a sale was forthcoming. I signed the draft with a sigh as she summoned the key encased in a blue plastic easter-egg.

"It's touch-activated so we advise that you do not break the seal until..."

"Yes, *enough*, I understand the principle." For \$360 I wasn't going to sit through her inane safety drivel.

"Alright, sir, have a very *pleasant* trip," she said frostily through a frosty little smile.

A few minutes later, when I staggered into place suddenly at Union Station, I tipped the portkey (a very small rubber duck that had horns on its head, for some reason) back into its plastic case and tucked it away. The man at the portkey counter gave me a much cheaper, thank god, local to Peoria together with a map that he helpfully duplicated and marked with the portkey site and the restaurant I was looking for.

Chapter 3 of **THE CLEAR CUT**

BY MOTTSHAVE

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I arrived in a narrow side street and made my way down to the nearest intersection to get my bearings. It was the first time I had set foot outside since Seattle and I was glad I was wearing my heavy navy coat. The season was much earlier here than on the west coast and the hour was later. The bare trees shuddered in a chill breeze and the buildings' peeling paint looked scraped by the weather.

According to directory that the portkey clerk in Chicago had used, STARKEY'S was set a bit north of the town on the edge of Forest Park. I could see the wooded bluffs sloping up from the river beyond the town. I fixed the nearest bluff in my mind and apparated.

The light was beginning to fail as I picked my way down off the hill. I could just see the pale flowers of early bloodwort and trout lilies sprinkling the hillside. A flock of crows were making a riot somewhere as they settled for the night.

STARKEY'S was a dark wood-sided building brightened by a large pink neon sign proclaiming its name. The neon was clearly a concession to a muggle clientele. Most wizarding establishments in smaller towns here had to do business in both the wizard and muggle worlds if they were to survive.

It was only about 5 pm and the place was mostly empty. There was a PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED sign, but no greeter, so I took a seat for myself at the bar. It was definitely a mixed establishment with a muted TV playing over the end of the bar and electric beer signs on the wall. They probably kept all their magic in the back. The only patrons were a family sharing a very early dinner and some teenagers in a booth flicking the ice cubes from their drinks at each other.

With a sudden clanking, the bartender shoved his way backwards through the kitchen's swinging door, a large bus tray filled with fresh glasses in his arms. The shaved-down stubble on his head and his horseshoe mustache had gone gray; he looked to be in his 60s, but he was still built like a weightlifter. Or a drunk-lifter, perhaps.

"What can I get you?" he asked as he started unloaded the glasses. I ordered a beer. As he set it down, I let him see the handle of my wand in my cuff. His light-blue eyes behind his rectangular glasses looked at me sharply.

"You want the back?" He jerked his chin towards a dark doorway next to the kitchen doors.

"No, but maybe you can help me." He waited for me to continue without taking his eyes off me. "I'm looking for a house elf named Wilia. He works for you?"

He gave a disgusted snort and went back to stacking glasses. "Hell no, he doesn't and good riddance. He hasn't been around for months. What do you want his sorry ass for?"

I trotted out my story again: "His family is looking for him."

"They can have him, they want to track him down. Look, I hired him on 'cause I heard his kind are good with food and prep and you don't get any union hassles." He grimaced as he finished with the glasses and turned his gaze back on me. "Then what does he pull? He quits on me right before shift on a Friday! He's got some story that he's got to go right away 'cause he's got a new family up north and they're moving. He won't get any reference from me!" He stabbed his finger into the bar in front of me. It seemed to relieve his feelings

"You want to find him?" he asked more calmly.

"Yes, did he say anything else about where he was going?"

"Just that it was some couple about to start a family and he had to go with them right away because they were moving. I didn't ask about the details, I was too damn pissed about him leaving us in the weeds on a Friday night." He chuckled. "Good luck if you find him, he's no prize."

I mulled it over as I finished my beer. I left money on the bar and stepped out into the sharp March air. The sky still held onto a blue glow, but the woods behind the bar were dark now. I picked my way back up the hillside. At the top, I leaned against a tree and watched the headlights below trace the course of the highway along the river to Peoria. I was beginning to get a bad feeling about this. Two new families, both moving right away, and two elves that hadn't been heard from since... it was too much to swallow. I pulled out the portkey and let it yank me away.

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SEARCH TERMS

Two points might make a line, but where this line was pointing, I couldn't venture to guess.

I also couldn't necessarily assume a pattern from just two points, but it was certainly suggestive of one. And if it were a

pattern, then there would be more than two cases, unless this was some sort of attack directed specifically at the relatives of Hogwarts' elves. I couldn't quite accept that idea. If someone was trying to pressure the Hogwarts' elves in some way, why hadn't any demand been made? Besides, how would any outsider even know which elves were related to which? I had never met anyone who had the first foothold into elf genealogy. I wanted to see if I could find any other cases to fit into a pattern.

It was about six in the evening when I reached Seattle, but the library should still be open. Usually, the wizarding library was in a concealed wing of the central muggle library, but the building was currently under construction. I had seen the plans for the new structure; it was to be a modern monstrosity. Thankfully a temporary branch had been set up in the undercity.

Most of the scrying bowls in the periodicals section were free. I scribbled by search terms on the small scraps of paper laid by the bowl: *house elf*, *missing*, *family*, *moving*, and after a moment of thought, *north*. I dropped the words one by one into the bowl where they were taken by the shifting mists.

Shortly a list of references swam up to the surface in mirror image. I laid a sheet of parchment flat over the surface then peeled it back, revealing my leads. I began my hunt through the stacks. The stories weren't very promising. A house elf was questioned by police about the location of the diary of a missing teen... an opinion

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by Mottsnave

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LITHA 2007

piece about children in families with a missing parent being raised mostly by house elves...US census data missing data on house elf numbers and locations... The only conclusion I was beginning to draw was that the Americans' classification of house elves as Independent Magical Creatures meant that no one kept track of their movement or location.

The most pertinent article was, surprisingly, a column in the *MAGICAL ECONOMIST*. It discussed house elf travel across the US/Canada border and the commercial loophole it presented. Protected by their classification in the United States, house elves are allowed unregulated travel across the border into Canada. However the Canadian Ministry of Magic, as a member of the Commonwealth under the British Ministry of Magic, regulates house elves as property and levies taxes on owners, especially inheritance taxes. In short, there was a loophole of untaxed and undocumented house elves traveling to Canada. The author concluded that the scope of the problem was unknown as the US does not keep accurate records of house elf movement.

I sat for a while, curling and uncurling the edges of the magazine. I still didn't have a clear pattern, but assuming that someone wasn't targeting the relatives of Hogwarts' elves, what would be the motive for quickly spiriting them away? It seemed like both had gone willingly enough. Of course it would be hard to make an elf go anywhere against its will, unless it were bound into service, and that wasn't done in the US. Of course they could have been bound into service quite willingly in Canada. If the *ECONOMIST* article were correct, there would be no official record of such a transaction. The worrying thing was that they hadn't been heard from since. Elves must normally have ways to communicate when they changed employment, otherwise why would Kob and his family be concerned with their silence?

I decided to approach the problem from another angle. Back to the reference section; a Canadian tax manual gave me the annual property tax ranges for house elf ownership, but the fees were minimal, roughly \$50 per year, depending on age. As a capital gain the

tax was more substantial, roughly \$700, but I still couldn't see the taxes as steep enough to create a smuggling problem. Buying and selling elves was illegal in Canada, as it was in the UK. Of course there were ways around that. In the UK I knew that that the most common method was providing "references." A potential buyer would post a notice stating that he was willing to pay a certain amount for a reference for a good house elf. At a pre-arranged time, the seller would dismiss a house-elf from their house by presenting them with clothes, while the buyer would wait immediately outside and offer a new position to the elf as they exited.

I had no personal knowledge of Canadian practices. I had long since decided never to set foot in Canada. There are close ties between their Ministry and Britain's, particularly in the judicial branch; Canada's highest magical court was still the Wizengamot, and I wanted nothing to do with that. I would have to rely on more research.

Back into the stacks; I picked up a week's worth of issues of the *VANCOUVER SCRIVER*. I spent the better part of an hour crawling through the classified ads. Out of a week, there were two ads offering to pay for references, one for \$12,000, the other for \$10,000. Well, there was a profit motive there, but the demand didn't seem to be very high, and I could still see no reason for the elves not to give word to their families.

As I returned the papers to the stacks, I turned the problem over in my mind. There had to be profit and demand for there to be a reason for the elves to be moved quickly without suspicions from their current employment. Moved quickly to where they could be voluntarily bound into service, perhaps...and then not heard from again.

I realized that I could think of a reason for all that. A very good, very profitable reason. I felt cold and tired. I wanted to be home. I left the library and apparated below the house, just beyond the greenhouse. The long hanging clouds had settled into a chilly drizzle. I spat on the ground and passed through the wards into the yard. Trudging through the dark wet grass, I ducked dripping tree branches until I reached my back door.

I heated some soup and made a pot of tea while I considered

what I knew. I didn't have any actual lead or trail to speak of, just a possibility that could fit the circumstances. I would have to find an approach, some way to test it.

I knew I should call Dick. With his connections and specialized knowledge, he could probably give me some angle of approach, but I was just turning my spoon against the edge of my empty bowl fighting my reluctance.

I had to admit to myself that I didn't want to raise the question with him. His imagined voice hung at the back of my mind, sharp and disappointed with my depravity. I had to argue with myself; he had never spoken to me like that before, and he already knew the worst of me. Surely he wouldn't cut me off now? And if he did, why would it matter? I didn't need to work for him anymore. Somehow I couldn't quite convince myself that it didn't matter.

I shoved myself away from the table before my reluctance got the better of me and stepped across the salt ward to my office. When I had come to the US, I found that the whole wizarding population here had long since gone over to using telephones in preference to the floo network. In fact, there were only a few working floo networks left, scattered among the cities of the east coast, and used almost exclusively for transportation, rather than communication. The wizards here found the speed, the convenience, and not least the lack of mess, an irresistible attraction of the phone.

If I wanted to run a business here, even an entirely wizarding one, I had to have a phone along with a few other pieces of technology. When I got the house, I had converted the old pantry to a tiny office. A thick salt ward ensured that the phone and computer would work most of the time, unless the weather was exceptionally damp.

I pushed aside my pile of half-packaged orders and shipping labels to uncover the phone and called the lab. It was late, but I knew they were running variant trials this week and the lab would probably be staffed all night.

The phone buzzed and crackled in protest to the magic in the next room, but the connection seemed strong enough as the receptionist's voice came through. It took a moment for her rapid Por-

tuguese to fall into place in my mind. My Portuguese was getting worse every day and it hadn't been any too good to start with. *All dialogue between brackets { } should be understood to be spoken in the Portuguese language.

“Stolz Research Labs, how may I direct your call?”*

“Is Doutor Stolz available?” I was satisfied that I got the Portuguese out, if haltingly.

“Yes he is... oh, Doutor Ramson?” She switched over to English. “Yes, they are running the tests very late tonight, and Dick is waiting. How are you Doutor Ramson? You missed carnival, when will you come back to Manaus?”

She got it all out in a rush. Valeria always wanted to practice her English on me, to the detriment of my Portuguese.

“Not at present. May I speak to Dr. Stolz?”

“Oh, yes, I am connecting you!” I held for a long moment, listening to the crackling line. At last a click, and Dick's loud bluff voice boomed out.

“Cyril, how are you? Valeria says you are coming back to visit?”

I sighed. “Valeria has an active imagination. I'm in the middle of something just now.”

“How's the research coming; anything for us to work on yet?” I had nothing for that but a groan. He gave a bark of laughter.

“Like that, eh? Well, if you ever think that running some variant trials would inspire you...”

“Oh, god no, let the lab rats slave over them!”

“They're slaving away as we speak – at least I assume they're working and not getting high off fumes without you keeping an eye on them. Now if I could ever mention to them that you might be dropping in I believe I could squeeze a little more productivity out of them,” he mused.

“Mention whatever you like, Dick, they don't have to know my plans.”

“Ah, but if I keep bluffing them they'll catch on eventually. I can't have my best threats lose their power or I won't get any work out of them at all! Well, I see that you're going to be stubborn with me, as usual. So, how can I help you?” he asked, adopting a mock-formal

tone that irritated me.

"If I'm keeping you from your work..." I began.

"Oh, stop that, now spit it out!"

"I just need some information. It has to do with your connections."

"Do you need to put your hands on something quickly? I might have it in stock and I could send it to you under a research permit."

"No, it's nothing I need, or want even, but I need information on how you would go about getting a type of ingredient."

"Well, that's certainly obscure, even for you. I could probably be a bit more help if I knew what kind of ingredient we're talking about."

"*Penates domestica*"* I said reluctantly.

There was a pause. I noticed I was scraping the paint off the pencil in my hand with my thumbnail. Dick's voice came back on, but it wasn't sharp, just wary

"I don't really have any business with that type of material, but I know that you don't either, or I would be a bit disturbed. Should I be worried about you?"

"I don't use it and I don't want to. I need to... look into a matter for someone I know. For that I need to know how someone would go about getting it."

"And this person you know – "

"Wants no part of it either," I said firmly.

"Well, I don't know very much about it myself. They're not native down here, and I haven't heard about much of that trade going on locally. I don't think that the dealers that I do business with handle it at all. They're a bit too small-time. But I have heard about the trade existing in Europe and North America. There can't be more than a few dealers in it since they really started enforcing the ban, after they found all those elves cut up in that hotel at the world's fair.

"Now if you need to know how someone would get their hands on them as ingredients... I don't think he deals himself, understand, but do you still have that name I gave you, the man with the pale face?"

**Penates Domestica* derives from the Roman household gods particularly associated with the larder. They were given small food offerings, which recalls the British folk tradition of leaving a little food out for the Hob.

"Ah, yes," I said.

"I imagine that if anyone would know someone, he would. For a request like that, you would need a calling card, a very good one."

"I probably have something I could use."

"Well, of course. Now, I feel like I have to remind you of our bargain. If you give me any cause to worry about you, I really will start to pester you with calls and letters and albatrosses and all sorts of annoyances. So don't make me worry about these questions you're asking."

"You have my assurance that there's no cause to worry."

"I'll gladly take your assurance, but I will also take your call next week, Cyril, or there will be albatrosses."

"Enough, enough," I protested.

"Very well," he said with a laugh, "now I'll say good night, but Valeria wants to speak to you again." There was a click and a crackle and Valeria's voice came back over the line. "Dr. Ramson?"

"Yes," I said wearily.

Suddenly a chorus of voices blared out, vaguely in unison "*We don't need a fucking calming draught!*" and dissolved into laughter. *Damn*, they were never going to let me live that down. It sounded like the entire staff of research assistants was there. Well, I would give them what they were asking for.

"Get back to work, you lazy morons! Do you think the variants are going to brew themselves while you clown around? When you imbeciles blow yourselves to smithereens, it will give the greatest pleasure to ship your remains home in a matchbox!"

A smattering of applause joined the laughter. One voice broke out above the rest: "Thank you sir, may I have another?"

"Shut it and piss off, Grossman, you're the worst of the lot!"

The laughter and whistles receded suddenly as Valeria took me off the speaker. "I say *boa noite* now, Dr. Ramson, we must help Grossman, he is crying."

"Yes, I'm sure he is. *Boa noite*, Valeria, *boa sorte*." I hung up.

I felt strangely elated as I prepared for bed. I had some difficult brewing ahead of me tomorrow, but I felt that I could see my way forward. Also, Dick hadn't cut me off; he hadn't even threatened it.

I lay down and closed my eyes. As I relaxed I could see for a minute the rows of brewing tables in the lab, research assistants going over variant charts into the night... I let the image float away again.

Very distinct and cold, above me somewhere near the foot of the bed, a high voice travelling swiftly towards me said, "Severus, stand before me."

My body clenched violently and I froze, curled on my side. My chest was shuddering and my legs and arms cramped. A thin stream of air pushed its way out through my throat in a dreadful whine. I willed one of my hands to unclench and laid it on my wet face. *Auditory hallucination, it's common, it's nothing, it's always nothing, every time*, I repeated in my head.

I staggered on my cramping legs as I got out of the room and slammed the door jerkily behind me. Leaning heavily on the rail down the stairs, I made my way into the bathroom. I cast the charms badly, with a shaking wand, but finally I had the shower on as hot as I could stand it.

Leaning my head against the tiles, I drenched myself in the spray until my muscles finally relaxed and the pounding water drove all other sounds from my head.

I dried off and shuffled across to my little office in my bathrobe. I closed and locked the door to the kitchen, then turned on the desk lamp and radio. The public radio station out of Seattle always picked up the BBC news service late at night. They were talking about culling livestock due to some disease outbreak. Perfect and boring. I curled up on the sagging sofa under the quilt I kept there, finally drifting off to sleep listening to the rain and the droning voices.



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CALLING CARD

When I woke the next morning the radio was still chattering. *Insufferably cheerful*, I thought, but I didn't muster the energy to get up and turn it off. Instead, I stretched out as much as possible, throwing my legs over the arm of the couch and thought about what I could brew as my 'calling card.'

Dick was correct that it would have to be a good one. If I was right in my guess and someone was taking elves to sell as ingredients, they were dealing in something rare, completely banned and very lucrative. Several kinds of banned potions could be made with elf parts, and they could also be put into service of placing extremely powerful protections on a residence. There is more than one kind of blood ward.

Students at Hogwarts were taught that food cannot be created through magic; not quite true, of course, like much of what was taught there. In more barbaric times inventors used elf parts to imbue objects such as tables, tablecloths, stewpots, horns-of-plenty and grinders with the power to bring food out of nothing. If one could get the parts to manufacture such an object now, well, it could be sold for an astronomical sum on the Dark Market. If one managed to provide real or forged documents proving the object to be of pre-ban manufacture, it could be sold openly for even greater sums on the Light Market. Elf parts dealers could expect a very good exchange rate. I would have to present them with something similarly rare and lucrative if I wanted them to let me in.

I considered Felix, but quickly rejected it. I would never want to hand that to a potential adversary. Then I thought of my Lamaria Unguenta. The age-old problem with flying ointments, from Hartlieb* on, has been their instability. To suddenly lose the power of flight is a rather permanent dis-

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by Mottsnave

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*Hartlieb, here, is Johannes Hartlieb who described the use of flying ointment in the 15th century.

appointment. All the standard formulas are much more reliable at getting one high than getting one's feet off the ground.

In my more experimental years I had managed to create a stable version of the formula by inserting a timed release that allowed the effect to taper off gradually after a predictable length of time rather than the dangerous sputtering out of the previous versions. For a short period of time it proved very lucrative for me. However, the popularity of my version led to cheap knockoffs that really were quite dangerous. Since I reasonably refused to publish my formula, the Ministry of Morons finally banned any flying ointments altogether.

I had kept working on it in private, over the years, removing the intoxicating properties, as I felt it preferable to keep my wits about me if I was not on the ground. It had come in very handy on a couple of occasions.

However, I would need to adjust the formula. I couldn't let it be recognizably *mine*, for one thing, and the intoxicants definitely had to go back in. I tried to make some of the changes in my head as I dressed and made tea and toast. I left the dishes where they were and picked my way through the back yard's long, sodden grass to the greenhouse. Before I went back up to the house with my ingredients, I leaned back to watch the sky. It wasn't raining, but layers of clouds were scudding by, one obscuring the other. It would be the last I saw of the sky for quite a while; I knew it would take me all day at least to brew the supply of ointment that I wanted.

Everything took much longer than expected, of course. I was short on animal fat, and had to clarify the leftover bacon grease I kept in a can by the stove. It wasn't exactly usual, but it would have to do as I hadn't any unbaptized babies lying about. I had the bulk of the work done at last by one in the morning, and dragged myself upstairs to the kitchen feeling ravenous.

I had time to eat, and even sleep for a while since everything had to infuse for hours before the final steps. By eight I was bottling my batches. I had decided to make two variants, a 'light' batch that contained few intoxicants but plenty of flying power, and a 'heavy' version full of the intoxicants and little else. It would be very effec-

tive at producing the *sensation* of flight, however.

It still had to be tested, though. I took half a fingernail's worth of the light batch and dragged it across the inside of my wrist. It took a little under a minute; I knew it was taking effect as the cellar brightened perceptibly. I bounced a few times on my toes then I left the ground easily, so easily that I had to put my hands up to stop myself from hitting the ceiling beams. I brought myself back down to the floor. It was an underdose, and the effect would wear off soon, but I still felt the elation and easy confidence of the intoxicants and my own success.

I pocketed one of the small sample vials and left the rest of the jars on the bench; they would keep better in the dark of the cellar. When I emerged up the cellar stairs into the kitchen, the light stung my eyes, even though the sky was still overcast. My mood seemed to match the brightness of the morning. I felt like celebrating, even though I had to remind myself that the ointment wasn't at all guaranteed to lead me to anything.

I still had a couple of sausages left, so I fried them with some eggs and made a pot of tea. After breakfast, I was at loose ends. I finally had something to move forward with, but there was nothing I could do with it for the moment. It was far too early in the day to track down the Dark Market, and I had little chance of finding my contact before then. I tried working in the greenhouse for a few minutes, but quickly threw down my trowel in frustration. I couldn't focus; I needed to do something, anything, to move forward.

I was struck by a sudden impulse to speak to the elves at the importers' again. Now that I knew that two were missing under identical circumstances, well I was willing to bet that there would be more. I didn't bother going back up to the house to get my coat, as the day seemed quite warm. When I left the greenhouse I went down to the edge of the yard, stepped across my wards and apparated.

When I arrived at the loading dock the daylight was bright and grainy; everything looked washed out. I was relieved to step into the dim indirect lights of the store. As I started to walk towards the back, I realized I hadn't the slightest plan of how I would get to speak to Nimmo again. I didn't want to try to explain myself to

Angie; I just wanted to question the elf.

The thought of Angie inspired me to grab a towel off a shelf of dry goods. Perhaps I could use the impersonality of the warehouse to my advantage. There was no one in sight so I quickly transfigured the towel into a bright purple vest. I couldn't quite believe I was doing this, it was a bloody stupid plan, but I couldn't seem to gather my faculties to come up with a better one. With a plan this stupid, I might as well have a stupid name to go along with it. I transfigured the price tag into a name tag reading "Bob."

I shrugged into the awful thing and continued towards the back of the store. I had just turned in to cut through a row of shelves when a customer rounded the other end. *Shit*. I turned and ducked into the next row, but it was too late, she had already spotted me. I could hear her "excuse me's" getting louder behind me. It was useless.

"What?" I turned and barked at her.

She was holding up a jar of something blue labeled GEORGE'S MARVELOUS MEDICINE.

"I bought this just two –"

I cut her off, "product complaints and returns go to the Returns desk, behind aisle 57."

"Oh," she said and turned away. Not even a word of thanks, sodding customers.

As I continued back to the stock room, I tried to dredge up my memory of the pattern of taps that Angie had used to open the door. I thought I had it, but when I got to the door and tried it, all I got was a dull clank and the door, still locked.

"You new?" said a voice behind me. A young lanky black man was standing there, also in a purple vest. "They probably didn't key in your wand right, let me get it." He stepped around me and performed the tapping pattern. He pushed the door open for me.

"There you go, uh, Bob. Take your wand in to Mike on your break, he'll get you fixed up –" I let the door close behind me on his last words. I hoped my rudeness would keep him away from me. It seemed to do the trick; the door didn't open again behind me.

The stockroom seemed deserted at first. I had to walk through a ver-

itable maze of crates and boxes before I heard the telltale squeak of elf voices. I stopped and stepped back. There was a narrow alley between two rows of crates that I had missed. It looked like a tight squeeze, but that's where the voices were coming from. I worked my way through by shuffling sideways and came out into a small cleared space around a shin-high table set with a yellow cloth and topped with a tea.

There were eight house-elves around the table and all of them were staring up at me. Thankfully, Nimmo was one of them.

"Nimmo, I want to speak with you." He continued to stare at me accusingly.

"This is not your name." I didn't know if he meant my name tag or the name I had given the last time I was here. It didn't matter, they were equally false.

"It doesn't matter; I need to speak to you about Mayni." I noticed a couple of the elves at the table look at each other.

"I already tell you, I hear nothing."

"And her family has heard nothing as well. There is another, in Illinois, who went to join a new family who was about to move north. He has been gone for three months and nothing has been heard from him either." The elves' ears were down now and there were glances around the table.

"To my mind, where there are two, there are more. Has anyone else heard of others like this?"

There was silence. Nimmo looked back at the table. Two of them had dropped their eyes. A young-looking female shook her head slowly.

"Very well," I said shortly, "if you decide you can help, you know where my number is." I turned to go and started to wedge myself back through the gap in the crates. Nimmo's voice came unexpectedly.

"There is a back door, Mr. Ramson. Two left then right." I nodded at him and went. I dumped the purple vest on top of a box near the door and let it revert to its towel form. I left and apparated home.

I wasn't sure if the elves knew any more or not. Some of the looks they had given each other... but it would have been useless to press them. I had no leverage with them, they had no reason to trust me, and Legilimency doesn't work on non-humans.

Well, whether they decided to give me any information or not, it didn't change my course of action for the rest of the day. The afternoon seemed dim and chilly now. I went back up to the house and began to change myself into Mark.

I had made the most significant changes to my appearance a little over two years ago; keeping my hair cut short and dyed brown. I hadn't updated the corrective spell on my eyes, so Cyril now wore glasses. I had stayed with only non-magical alterations, as wizards seldom notice those.

There were only superficial differences between Mark and Cyril, but as they moved in quite different circles I felt they were sufficient. I put away my glasses and put in my contacts, then went upstairs to change into Mark's clothes: trainers, jeans and a hooded sweatshirt proclaiming his support of the Boston Red Sox. As I transferred over the contents of my pockets and the sample vial, I called my conversation with Dick back into my mind. The sounds of his heavy Boston accent filled my head until Mark's voice slipped into place. I took a breath. Now I was going to have to really play.

CONTACT

Thanks to Dick, Mark already had a few contacts in the Dark Market. I could get most restricted ingredients that I needed with Cyril's research permit, but when I had looked into the forms I would have to fill out, the waiting periods and the paper trail it would leave I decided to let Mark take care of most of my acquisitions. Cyril had a professional reputation and a spotless record. I preferred to keep it so.

Mark had another reputation altogether. He was from Watertown, Massachusetts, and a gifted amateur at potions, which he made

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mostly for his own recreation. He had occasional need for restricted ingredients, for maximum recreation, and no moral qualms about obtaining them on the Dark Market. Also, he always paid cash up front and didn't talk to anyone. He was very useful to have around; I didn't want to have to burn his identity, but I needed his contacts now.

Seattle's Dark Market was always on the move. Unlike Knockturn Alley or the Maxwell Street Dark Market in Chicago, there simply is not enough of a wizarding population locally to support the graft needed to keep the market in one place. If you wanted something on the market here, first you had to find it. Luckily it wasn't too difficult if you were known.

I began my search in the underground. Most of the wizarding quarter in Seattle is located below the skyscrapers of downtown in miles of passages under the city streets. The quarter had almost been exposed by above-ground neglect of the Pioneer Square area in the 1950s, but discovery had been headed off by some ingenious misdirection. The Seattle City Council had opened a few of the areas in worst repair to muggle tours as mere historical buildings, simultaneously sealing off the passages to the bulk of the quarter.

In its best sections the underground's cobbled streets were flanked by graceful fin de siècle columns, polished wood pediments, and shining shop windows below glass-brick skylights casting cool green or lavender light over the scene. Of course, this was no good for anyone looking for the market. I took a winding passage that sloped down towards the waterfront until I reached the flat brick facades and massive stone arches of the lights district. The skylights here had long ago been bricked over so the strip clubs and bars could exercise the best in bad taste with riots of magic lanterns in all colors.

It was still a bit early in the day, so I had to hit three bars before I saw a familiar face from the market. I sidled up to his stool.

"Hey, you seen Skeeze today?"

He looked around absently. His eyes looked a little glazed already.

"Sure, Mark, sure. I think he was setting up at Gasworks." It figured. Dark wizards always love the proper atmosphere. I knew the park well as the market had been set there before. I apparated to a secluded area

near the entrance then began to wander through the looming abandoned industrial equipment. I found the market behind one of the high fences peppered with toxic waste warning signs, screened from the public by concealment charms. The lookout at the edge of the fence recognized me and nodded me across the anti-apparition wards.

The market wasn't exactly bustling at this time of day. A small dark man was eagerly setting out an assortment of dodgy magic coins, amulets and a very disgruntled-looking turtle. A blond woman that everyone knew as Jansson was selling unregistered wands out of her coat pockets. Mr. Weary, a bushy-bearded regular who always wore a long fur coat no matter what the weather was quietly hawking a featureless, armless black doll. A few washed out juice whores, the cartilage of their features beginning to blur, moved from one seller to the next trying to get the best deal on the potion that kept them in business. If I ever had a need for quick cash, all I would have to do would be to bring a batch of poly to the market.

Skeez was leaning against a bit of pipeline watching the passing buyers. It could be *Skiis*, I supposed, I had never seen it written. It didn't matter much; no one used their real name on the market. His eyes fixed on me as I approached. He was a wiry figure with a long rectangular head. All the color from his hair and face was leached down to a uniform dull dish-water. I suspected his color had been worn away from one too many fade potions. All his life was in his flinty eyes, always alert.

"You don't have an order with me currently, Mark," he said in his usual precise way, "would you like to place an order?"

"Yeah," I hesitated, "but Skeez, I don't know if you can get this thing." Irritation played across his face. Skeez had his professional pride.

"If you think I can get it, you come to me. If you don't think I can get it, you can go to hell."

"Come on, Skeez, you know I always come to you, cash on the front end, and no problems."

"Very well, you say there are no problems, so what I don't *understand* is, why you talk like there are problems." He still looked huffy.

"Not problems Skeez, I just never heard of anyone having this stuff, but if anyone has it, you've got it." He finally looked a bit

appeased. "I need parts for something I'm working on; it's got to be fresh hob parts, eyes." I said leaning in close to him. He sighed and looked out across the water of the bay.

"Why am I speaking to you, Mark? I am speaking to you because you come to me recommended and with cash in hand, like you say a good customer with no problems. I do not want to turn a good customer into a problem. What you are asking is the thing which puts a small time cooker – now you admit you have no organization behind you – it puts a small-time cooker in over his head."

"You know me Skeez, you got my name from Nemo, you know I don't spread talk."

"Did I say you talk? I have never known you to talk. I believe you don't have the resources to support that order."

While I might have the resources, Mark certainly didn't. I dropped my head for a moment.

"Uh listen... I've got something. I can't move it; like you say, I don't have any organization – that's how I like it," he couldn't know how true that was, "but you could, and I know nobody else's got it." He waited.

"It's Green Ointment." I let him see the vial in my palm. His face didn't move but his eyes fixed on it. He blew a little air out his nose.

"Stable."

"Stable," I agreed. "Three fingers, three hours."

Our hands met fleetingly. He stood motionless for a moment while he worked the stopper loose inside his cupped palm. His hand passed before his nose briefly, then the vial was tucked quickly away.

"Bacon?" He lifted his eyebrows at me.

"It works," I said aggrievedly.

"We'll see. You'll meet me tomorrow night at nine, I'll tell you where," he said, dismissing me. He shoved off from his pipe and moved away. I walked to the other end of the Dark Market and back out into the park before I folded the hair I had plucked from his cuff into a paper envelope.

I apparated home. I had work to do.

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Art by Mottsnave

PRINCIPLES

I sat at my desk staring at the colorless, almost transparent hair in front of me. I hadn't expected this, hadn't planned for it or counted on it. I was going to simply wait for the dealers to make contact, but this was an opportunity. I could never leave an opportunity on the table.

I felt a flash of irritation at Skeeze. How could he be so careless? Didn't everyone take care of loose hairs, especially if they were going to be visiting the Dark Market? *Reckless fool!* Perhaps he thought his hair was useless because of the fade damage. It would certainly be useless for polyjuice, but I had something else in mind.

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Practitioners like to call dark magic the 'useful and dangerous art' referring to Frazier's three principles. The first is the useful one; the part may affect the whole, and the whole the part. The second and third principles are the dangerous ones; all energy must have a source, and finally the caster may affect the spell, as well as the spell the caster.

I had my part of Skeeze to affect the whole, but as he wasn't available at the moment, I would have to stand in as the source for now. I slid the hair carefully onto a piece of paper, anchored it in place with a few drops of milk and my own blood, then wrapped it in a scrap of wool I had reluctantly cut from the hem of one of my jumpers.

I rummaged in my desk for a magic marker. There it was – *KWIK KASTER – long lasting, writes on any surface, reliable*, it asserted. I drew the circle around the bloody, soggy mess and cast the words. It seemed to take well enough, despite the fade damage to the hair. At least the liquids were quickly absorbed. Now it was just the unpleasant matter of incubation. I picked up the little grey cocoon-like 'spindle' and bandaged it to the inside of my right wrist.

And now, nothing... It took a moment to sink in that there was nothing further I could do until the next evening when Skeeze would presumably contact me. I wound up spending the evening buried in the mindless work of getting caught up on my shipping orders.

The tedium of the job served me well and I was able to drop easily off to sleep. Sometime early in the morning I woke sweating and flushed. I had been dreaming that my mother was serving food around a long table but blankly refused to give me any, serving the strangers but not her own son. I was yelling in fury at her for food when I woke. I couldn't tell if it was the heat of the piled covers that woke me or the itching burn of the 'spindle' that was squirming and feeding on my wrist.*

I threw off some of the blankets and rolled over onto my right arm so I couldn't feel the movement of the wretched thing. I would be glad to be rid of it, but I knew that the longer I kept it, the stronger it would be. At length I was able to fall back to sleep

*The 'spindle' is an adaptation from Icelandic folklore. Traditionally, it was believed to be made out of a bone and wool, suckled on a witch's breast or inner thigh, and sent out to suck the milk from cows, which it then brought back to its mistress.

A TECHNICAL DISCUSSION OF MAGICAL ALIGNMENT FOLLOWS:

Dark Magic is not a subjective value judgment. Dark Magic is a technical designation for any magic spell or process that meets two or more of Frazier's three principles. The first: the part may affect the whole, and the whole the part. (With the corollary: a symbol may stand for an object, and an object for a symbol.) The second principle: all energy must have a source, and finally the third principle: the caster may affect the spell, as well as the spell the caster.

All potions abide by the second principle, since the material ingredients and heat applied to the potion are the source of energy. Some potions, such as Polyjuice, which abide by the first principle as well (the hair is the part which stands for the whole) are classified as Dark.

Spells which require a certain intent, mood, or determination on the part of the caster (such as the three Unforgivables) abide by the third principle. The Unforgivables also abide by the second principle, in that their energy comes from the body of their target, so they are also Dark spells.

This is all in contrast to the many light spells, such as Lumos, which seemingly could be cast in your sleep as long as you got the words and wand movement right.

(continued next page)

despite my tingling arm.

I spent most of the next day at loose ends; finishing and packing more of my potions orders; tinkering and getting nowhere with my research; weeding in the garden in the rain, but mostly trying not to rub at my wrist.

After it began to dim outside, I ate and started to get ready. I put my 'light' batch of the ointment into a bag of holding and tucked it into my sweatshirt pocket. Following that was money, a few emergency potions, a marker, my broom, shrunk. I didn't know how far I might go tonight.

Finally, I pulled up my right sleeve and carefully unwrapped the bandage. My 'spindle' was certainly transformed; the grey wool wrapping had been completely absorbed revealing a five-centimeter long smooth worm, about the width of a pine needle, firmly anchored into the veins of my wrist. It was almost transparent, except at the end where it joined me and adopted the color of my flesh. The other end squirmed and quested upwards on exposure to the air. I pulled my sleeve back down to cover it.

I apparated to the undercity. I had no idea yet where I was to meet Skeez. He held all the cards at the moment, he would choose our meeting-place and he would choose to be there first. I cut through the winding corridors to the lights district. Even this early the Friday night bar crowds were beginning to con-

gregate. I chose a bar that I knew Skeez occasionally visited and took a seat at the end of the bar where I could watch the door. I didn't recognize anyone from the market that he might send to me as a messenger, but I had time. I ordered a coffee and nursed it, confident that he would get word to me when he wanted me.

Another coffee and an hour and a half later, word came in the form of a pale shape fluttering over the dregs of my coffee. It looked at first like a ragged moth, but when I knocked it down with my spoon it unfolded itself on the counter as a scrap of paper with the words SCHMITZ PARK.

It was full dark in the heavily wooded park when I arrived. Unfortunately I didn't know the place well, only well enough to know that it was quite large and had several entrances. I chose the one I knew best and headed out on the winding paths. I couldn't do much more than let Skeez find me; he had clearly set up our meeting so that he would see me first. I held a low lumos so he wouldn't miss me in the gloom.

My light gleamed off the wet patches on the trail and the pale irregular blotches of fallen lettuce-leaf lichen. Just when I beginning to be disoriented on the twisting paths, another pale blotch disengaged itself from the darkness and drifted towards me: Skeez's pale face. The rest of him faded into view as he approached.

"Let's walk," he said as he came up and fell into step beside me.

"Well?"

"They think your ointment might be passable on the market and would like a trial batch in exchange for the parts you mentioned."

Might be passable. I knew he was just positioning himself for the haggling to follow, but it still rankled.

"I know the quality of my ointment, Skeez. I already prepped the batch; a dozen hundred-gram jars. The sample I gave you was of the same brewing. They have no reason not to be satisfied with it!"

"I just told you they are willing to make an exchange," he retorted.

Light spells don't take any special intent or use up energy. No one seems to get tired from casting light spells.

On the other hand, Dark spells are much harder to block or counteract, since they have their own energy and intent behind them. A simple Finite won't cut it. They are also more flexible, since the mood or intent of the caster can change the outcome of the spell.

"And – their offer?"

"A pair."

"One pair? Shit, you're kidding!"

"I'm not –"

"Do you know what my layout was on this batch? There's over a grand in raw ingredients in there!" Or there would be if I didn't grow most of it myself.

"That's a lot of bacon, Mark. Did you kill the pig yourself?"

"I'm talking about *six* pairs, Skeeze, one eye, one jar, yeah?"

"This is what I was afraid of," he sighed. "You're in over your head. You just don't know the market. I like you, Mark, you're a good customer, but if I go back to them with that kind of offer, they'll know you're inexperienced and they'll just try to take advantage of you. Let me help you out here, Mark. It's got to be a reasonable offer."

"One pair is not reasonable, not with my layout. I just can't afford a trade like that; I would be out of the brewing business, this would be the last batch I ever made."

"I've worked trades on the market for more than ten years. I know the rates. I might be able to work them up to two pairs."

"Tell me something, Skeeze. You've been on the market ten years? How many working, stable Green Ointments have you seen? I'm not going under five pairs."

"I know you're new on the market here, that's why I'm willing to help you, that's why I'm not taking offense," he assumed a patient air.

"The fact that there *aren't* any good Green Ointments out there *is* the problem, Mark. Everyone's been burned by the crap that's out there, no one's buying it anymore. These people you're trading with, *they're* going to have to do the marketing for you, *they're* going to have to convince people to buy, *they're* putting themselves out there for you. If they go over three pairs they'll be taking a loss on this, and that is not going to happen."

"Three pairs –" I repeated.

"Done," he said, extremely quickly. He put out his right hand. As I took it, I could feel the spindle at my wrist squirm eagerly and start to work its way up from my cuff. "Twelve jars, one-hundred grams each,

of Green Ointment, of the same batch and of the same quality of the sample provided, to be delivered – now?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. I nodded. "To be delivered now," he continued, "in exchange for three pairs of fresh hob eyes, intact and in good condition to be delivered –"

"Tonight," I interrupted.

"I need a little time – by dawn tomorrow," he countered. I sighed and nodded. As long as he went to meet with them directly, it would suffice for my purposes.

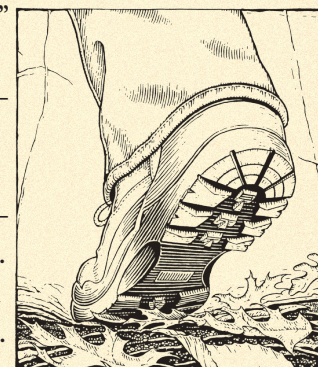
"To be delivered by dawn tomorrow, March 17th, 2001, at a location I will send to you by note, speaking to none but the supplier regarding the objects of our trade through the completion of our business." He paused, but I didn't have anything to add. It was a standard wording and acceptable. "In Good Faith," he finished. "In Good Faith," I agreed and we shook to seal the bond before breaking the hold. It wasn't an Unbreakable Vow, no one on the Dark Market would ever consent to that, but it was quite good enough for a short-term contract.

I brought out my bag of jars and passed it to him. He tucked it away quickly without bothering to open the bag. The "Good Faith" took care of that.

"Later, Mark," he said and moved away into the dark trees. I could feel the invisible thread of the spindle stretch between us as he walked away. It had imbedded in him, but I was going to have to be fast if I wanted it to hold. I ducked behind a tree and cast a *Silencio* and a disillusionment on myself, then turned and quickly followed the tugging at my wrist.

I caught sight of him through the trees as he began to turn in place. *Shit!* I held fast to our tenuous physical connection in my mind and apparated, turning it into a side-along. I could only hope he wouldn't notice.

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CROSSING

I landed in snow. I was in a dark forest, somewhere up in the mountains, I guessed. It didn't feel like we had apparated more than 300 km, but now it was snowing with tiny stinging wet flakes. I wasn't dressed for this and I

could already feel the cold cutting through my trainers, but I didn't want to risk his attention with a spell; no disillusionment is perfect.

I could just see him dimly through the trees ahead of me, silhouetted against his lumos, and the spindle tugged at me again. I took a couple of steps forward and stopped short. *Shit, snow!* I would be leaving tracks and I couldn't chance him seeing them. I was going to have to use his tracks and I was going to have to hurry. He was pulling ahead.

I scrambled forward until I could see the apparition spot where his tracks began. Luckily he hadn't landed clean and his tracks began with a bit of a scuffle. I added to it by leaping onto the spot from behind the nearest tree. It was a stretch and I didn't land too well myself. I had to wipe out my hand-and-knee-prints with freezing fingers.

I couldn't let him get too far ahead. I ran as well as I could while landing in his tracks. Hopefully I wasn't making too much of a mess of it. I could only barely see the shadowy impressions in the snow and I was afraid it wasn't a very neat job. I was counting on the still-falling snow to cover up my misses.

A steep hillside loomed in front of us. He changed his course and came up to the slope at the base of an enormous red cedar. I was almost caught up to Skeez now, he was just eight or ten meters away, but I couldn't see him properly from my angle, he was too close to the tree. Tracks be damned, I *had* to see what he was doing.

Panting silently, I ran out of his set of tracks on a tangent until I could see him again. The snow around him glowed in the light of

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BY MOTTSSNAVE

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his spell. He had already cast something else as well; I assumed it was just a Revelio, as there was now a heavy wooden door set into the hillside in front of him.

He began to cast something, presumably to open it. I recognized the first part of the movement; it was a few steps above a simple Alohamora. I crept a few steps closer; I had to see the key at the end. There it was! He circled his wand three times to the right and stopped at 1:00, back to the left one and a half to 7:00, then just a few steps to the right to 11:00, and the door clicked open. I had it. He slipped through, the door closing behind him and immediately fading into the snow.

Finally, I could cast without the risk of him seeing. I warmed and dried myself a cast a quick Impervio. I should have done that at the start. I couldn't let him get too far ahead of me, but at the same time I wanted him to be far enough ahead to not notice the door opening. I cast an obliteration charm behind me to wipe out my tracks; then I went to work on the door. I put a Silencio on it before I cast the key, so there wasn't a click as I eased it open a few centimeters. I listened at the crack carefully. There was darkness beyond and distant footsteps. I slipped through quickly.

It was a dark low tunnel sloping slightly upward. I could see the glow of Skeez's Lumos some thirty meters ahead. My spindle was still tugging at me. I hurried to close the distance. As I approached the light of his spell, I could see that the tunnel looked a bit like a mine shaft with thick wooden supports at regular intervals. At a level part of the tunnel there was a gash in the floor bordered by a thick salt ward on either side. The gash was dark; I could smell what was there before I could see it: running water.

I wanted to examine it, but the Lumos ahead of me was receding rapidly and I had to go on. I jumped over the wards and hurried up the tunnel. I was just three meters behind him when he reached the end. I was relieved to see that he didn't cast anything on the door to exit, just stepped through. I slid out behind him just as the door clicked shut. He was already turning again. Damn, the spindle wouldn't take much more of this. I apparated with him and hoped our connection would hold.

It was light and flat where we landed. I dropped to the ground and flattened myself. No disillusionment is perfect, and here there was absolutely no cover and several tall sodium lights casting a sickly orange glow over everything. Skeeze was moving towards a low sprawling blue and white building under the lights. There was something off to the side, playground equipment. Was it a school?

The spindle was jerking and gulping at my wrist. It wasn't going to stretch much further, and I couldn't have it in its desperation give Skeeze any sign of its existence. I would have to finish it off now.

I yanked it forcefully out of my flesh. It started to writhe but I cut it off by crushing its head between my nails. The wretched thing expired with a wheeze and devolved into a sodden mass of milky, bloody wool. Good, I had had enough of it.

Skeeze reached the pavement that circled the building when another figure stepped around from the playground side. They were only about thirty meters away from where I was lying still on the grass, and I could see him pretty clearly when he tilted his head up to look at Skeeze. I was surprised that it was a young man; he only looked about 21 or so. He was a slightly stooped figure in a dark blue jacket and a baseball cap, a drawn thin face with a short beard. I couldn't see much more about his features from where I was lying. I wasn't going to be able hear much of what they were saying either, I realized, if they kept their voices down. It didn't matter to me so much, they would probably just haggle.

I was much more concerned with finding a way to follow him. I had cut my connection to Skeeze, but I knew roughly where he was going anyway. I needed to know about the other one now, and I wouldn't have much time. I needed something of his so I could track him.

Thankfully an idea came to me. I gnawed off a sliver of a fingernail and spit it into my palm. Last year on Dick's little expedition with the research assistants up the river we were annoyed every afternoon by the bloodsucking motuca flies. In some ways they were better than the mosquitoes, since they weren't disease vectors and were relatively slow and easy to kill, but in one way they were worse, their bites were deep enough to draw running blood. I cursed

them along with the rest until I heard some of the Indian stories about the mother of the sun and the moon turning a fingernail into a motuca fly and sending against someone. I had always wanted to know how to make a fly sending and eventually bargained with one of our hosts to show me. Now I could finally put it to use.

I had to risk a spell, but the two were involved with watching each other very carefully. I breathed over my bit of fingernail and directed it at the younger one, hoping the cold wouldn't slow it. I blew on it hard and the little white chip flew off my palm, turning into a brownish fly looping drunkenly towards its target.

Skeeze and the kid were still talking, bargaining, I suspected. Skeeze always had to try to get a better deal. Coming to some kind of agreement, they put out their hands to seal it. A second after they shook I saw the kid jerk back sharply and slap his wrist, swearing loudly. Motuca flies always go for the wrists and ankles.

He and Skeeze looked over at the pavement and the remains of my fly, I supposed. I didn't seem to raise their suspicions. I watched, relieved, as Skeeze pulled out my bag and handed it to the boy, who passed him back a brown-paper parcel. I tensed, they must be almost done and then I would have to move quickly. The packages disappeared into charmed pockets. The kid passed something smaller to Skeeze, money perhaps, then Skeeze turned without another word and disappeared. The kid was already walking around the corner of the building. I waited for a moment, but he didn't come back into view until I saw a dark shape rising into the air beyond the building's roof. *Broom*. I ran stooping to the pavement fumbling for my wand.

I wasn't confident that I could follow him by broom without help. I was not a fast flier and the visibility would be terrible. I would lose him at the first low cloud.

I had to scan around with a *Lumos* before I spotted my smashed fly in a crack in the pavement. I picked it up gingerly by a wing. Had it found its mark? I set it on a clear bit of pavement and crushed it open, revealing a thin smear of blood. Excellent, I still had a chance. Wincing, I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood, then spat it out on the ground.

Despite its claim to write on any surface, my marker had difficulty with the wet rough pavement. My circle and symbols were terrible. I scowled at it, but I couldn't do it over, this had to work. I connected my bloody saliva to the remains of my fly and finished the spell with a muttered *Venio*. The line I had drawn between my blood and the fly darkened and shot off, skimming like a shadow over the ground. I quickly unshrunk my broom and followed.

For the most part I could see very little of where we were going except for the black shadow of the *Venio* ahead of me. At first we had flown above dark fields and some isolated farms, but soon we reached a river, swung hard to the left and rose into the low-hanging clouds. I had to focus, flying hard into the featureless gray. I stared fixedly at the black line ahead, hardly daring to blink. Without it in front of me I would be completely disoriented. At length I couldn't even tell which way was up.

I flew for what seemed like hours, eyes streaming from the cold air and stinging drops of the clouds, when suddenly a vista of scattered lights opened up below me. I jerked on the broom and almost veered off course, my first confused thought at the sight was that I had somehow turned over and was seeing stars upside down. In another moment it fell into place; I was above a town.

The shadow ahead dipped towards the lights and swung again off to my right. We had left the river and an industrial district and were now heading across a residential area. I could see the bulk of the city, whichever it was, off to my left where a pocket of skyscrapers glowed against the clouds and dark water beyond. Below me, however, the city was not at its best, the low apartment buildings and few detached homes had a hard-worn look that I knew well.

The shadow dipped very low and then suddenly landed next to the street under the cover of two close-planted pines. I landed as well and followed as it turned the corner at a walking pace and entered an alley halfway down the block.

Three houses in it turned through a chain-link fence gate next to a white wooden garage and started through a dim back garden. I stopped at the gate, but quickly drew my hand back. I felt a cold pressure against

my fingers that told me it was heavily warded. I could see the shadow bobbing up the back stairs of a boxy white wood-sided house.

Finite. I quickly broke the *Venio*; it wouldn't do to have the shadow actually reach its target.

Careful not to touch the wards, I craned to look as closely as I could at the house and yard. One lit back window on the first floor cast enough light to see that the yard was nothing but untidy grass with a cement flag path up to the back steps. The garage stood on its own, a few feet from the neighbors' identical garage. It had a small window on each side; the wards covered it as well.

The house was bordered on its other side by a three-story brick apartment building. On the near side was another small wood house, gray, with a low yew hedge running between the yards. I touched the neighbor's wood fence. Unwarded.

I scrambled over the fence and shoved my way through the prickling yew branches into the neighbor's yard and edged along the hedge between the two houses. My trespass didn't give me much information except that the ward extended the length of the yard out to the front. There was only one lit room in the house and I couldn't see in.

The front yard, when I emerged on the street side, was much of a piece; a ragged lawn, chain-link fence, a cement walk up to the front porch. Metal numbers on the gate read 13156. The front gate was unwarded, but it didn't surprise me since I could see a mailbox mounted on the front porch. If he wanted any mail or visitors, he would at least have to leave a path up to the box. I suspected he had arranged his wards similarly to mine, with only the front walk free, but closed across the threshold.

There wasn't anything else to do here tonight. I was sure that Skeeze would want to get rid of the banned goods he was carrying as quickly as possible, just as I had counted on him to do with my ointment. I couldn't keep him waiting, but at least I wanted an idea of where I was. I headed quickly up the street. The nearest corner told me I was on the corner of Estes and Van Allsburg. Half a block away a manhole cover labeled VANCOUVER PUBLIC WORKS told me I was in Canada.

I apparated to the school yard, where I vanished my scrawled circle

and the remains of my fly and spindle, then back to the mouth of the tunnel. I couldn't apparate back to Seattle without setting off all kinds of border alarms, and I had plenty of reasons not to want Immigration after me. The running water and the wards in the tunnel must have been designed to allow one to cross the border without detection. I would have liked to examine the spells, but I didn't have the time.

I went through the tunnel as quickly as I could, ducking the heavy beams supporting the ceiling. When the door shut behind me at the other end and faded back into the snow, I could see Skeeze's tracks leading away into the woods, already blurred by the falling snow. Why didn't he simply apparate from the door? There might be some sort of alarms to prevent ambush at the door, so I decided to follow his example.

A few meters into the woods a wet fluttering brushed against my cheek. I swatted at it sharply before I realized that it was a note. The damp paper flapped into palm and unfolded limply. I wondered how long it had been looking for me. The blurred letters read "JACK BLOCK PARK." I knew the place; the Dark Market had been set up near there a few times. I hurried on to the apparition point and left.

I hated being late. It is unprofessional at the least, and when trading restricted ingredients it is dangerous and simply not done. Dark wizard standard time is a half-hour early for any meeting. The one time I had been seriously late, though it was years ago now, what had been done... I would never forget it, as much as I wished I could.

I was worried about my reception now. I apparated just inside the park where a road crossed railroad tracks between two tall chain-link fences. I could finally drop the disillusionment and Silencio I'd been carrying. I sighed with relief as the chill of the disillusionment left me. I cast a Tergeo on myself to make sure there were no traces of snow as I hurried into the park. I was shaky and feeling a bit ill from all the apparitions in quick succession.

Past a small parking lot a path left the road and skirted the waters of the sound. I could smell the salt water and seaweed on the rocks below the guardrail, but I saw no sign of Skeeze. I followed the path along the water as it rounded a point and the view opened.

Huge loading dock cranes, like silent long-necked beasts glowing from the orange sodium lights, towered overhead. The lights of the skyscrapers across the water were blurred by the steady drizzle.

"Thought you'd take your time and enjoy the view?" Skeeze's voice was low and sharp with anger. He was coming out of a fade as he stepped across the path to meet me.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been waiting over an hour!" Well, it wasn't my record, but it wasn't good.

"Shit, Skeeze, I came as soon as I got your note!" I wasn't lying, hopefully he could tell. I scrambled in my head to put together an explanation for myself.

"What! Where the hell were you?" he repeated.

"I was in Kosti's..." I said, naming one of the undercity strip clubs.

"You *know* they don't let notes in there. You fucking idiot, why the hell would you go there if you're waiting on a note?" He hardly ever swore; he was truly angry. I tried to turn it back at him.

"Damn it, Skeeze, you told me dawn. Why wouldn't I think I've got a couple of hours at least?"

"I told you *by* dawn – if you're waiting on a delivery from me, you don't go out whoring, you better be waiting ready to pick up, do you understand me?" he said vehemently. I didn't care how angry he was as long as he didn't think I was crossing him.

"Sure Skeeze," I answered, dropping my gaze.

"*Do* you?" He took hold of my sleeve near my shoulder. I had to struggle not to jerk back or draw on him. I looked back up at him.

"Yeah, alright, yeah Skeeze, I understand." I didn't try to hide my annoyance. He dropped his grip. "Have I *ever* been late for a pickup?"

"*Now* you have." I could tell he wasn't going to forget this. I could probably expect to pay through the nose for anything I got from him for a year at least. Well, it couldn't be helped; I had had to try to track the kid.

"If I didn't have Good Faith with you..." he muttered as he pulled out the parcel. I felt my anger beginning to rise. I may have been in the wrong for being late, but this was *Good Faith* and I hadn't broken it. That was going too far.

"Don't talk about breaking faith with me!" I snarled.

"I would never suggest it," he said with a warning note. He pushed the parcel towards me ungraciously. I took it and tucked it away. He was waiting with his hand out impatiently. I shook it. "In Good Faith," he said shortly. I repeated it, ending our bargain. Without another word he apparated away.

ANGLE OF APPROACH

I didn't particularly want to apparate home, but the idea of a cold broom ride over open water with rain driving in my face appealed still less, so I apparated anyway.

I staggered and almost retched when I landed. I had reached my

limit for one night. I spat and crossed my wards and then leaned for a moment against the greenhouse door waiting for my stomach to settle. Out here on the island the drizzle was a gentle rain that ran down my face and dripped off the end of my nose. I would have something hot to eat, I decided. The nausea had passed and I was feeling ravenous.

I put the parcel on the kitchen table while I got dinner together, but I didn't leave it there for long. I felt irrationally like it was watching me through its plain brown wrapper. I took it downstairs to my basement workroom before I ate, telling myself it would be safer out of the way there.

I was done eating and clearing up at 2:20 am. I knew I was delaying unwrapping the parcel and I knew I was an idiot for that. There was no mystery as to what it contained; I had it on Good Faith, after all. I trudged downstairs. The sooner done, the sooner I could be in bed.

The brown paper was held in place by a few pieces of spello tape. It had been charmed to repel the elements and to avoid detection spells. I peeled up the tape and pulled away the paper revealing a large

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mason jar filled with clear liquid and three pairs of house elf eyes.

A vision rose up, unbidden. I could see a wretched thing crouched, scrabbling on the floor. An eye rolled towards me. Tony took a few steps over to the figure and leaned over it... I shoved the image back down angrily. *Over and done with*, why couldn't I remember that?

I focused on the real eyes in front of me. They were all paired. Two pairs were the usual green, in slightly different shades, the third pair somewhat smaller than the others and a sort of hazel color. As promised they appeared fresh, very fresh. They were not scratched or bruised and the pupils were unclouded. The sclera was in perfect condition.

There was about a centimeter of optic nerve attached to the back of each, cut cleanly. Very cleanly, so clean I could see the artery and vein, the individual nerve fibers. There wasn't even any discharge from the nerve or veins into the solution. I had pickled enough newt eyes to wonder at the neatness of the work.

That was that. Whether or not that made an end of my job, it was certainly the end of the job for the night. I went up to bed.

Later, much later, I walked up to the door. The long tall door, the paint blistering and falling off of it in chips. I was trying to walk up to the door, to get close enough. Those three boys were in there. I could hear them inside, I had to get them out, they were burning. I tried to touch the knob and jerked back, it was too hot, I couldn't touch it. They were screaming inside now, they were burning. I screamed at the door: open up, *God damn you, open you, open, open...*

I woke up sweating and still shouting the word. I was awake, but I had to shout it a couple more times before I got my breath under control. What did it matter? I could shout "open" all I pleased, I wouldn't disturb anyone here.

I was an idiot, I had that stupid dream every time I was too hot, and still I piled too many covers on before going to sleep. I kicked them off now. There was no need to insist on giving myself nightmares. I groaned and heaved myself out of bed, knowing that if I wanted to get back to sleep, only a complete change would do.

The office or the cot in the cellar didn't appeal to me, so I dug my sleeping bag out from under my bed and threw on my dress-

ing gown. It was still pitch dark and raining as I crossed the back garden down to the greenhouse. After transfiguring a wooden bench into a cot and settling myself in the sleeping bag, I listened to the rain pocking against the glass roof above and smelling wet earth and flowering Angel's trumpet. I fell asleep and dreamed of nothing but the night noises of the jungle.

I woke to a pair of crows arguing loudly in one of the pear trees. There was sunlight, pale and silvery, filtering between the clouds and lighting the drops on the glass roof above me. Behind the cawing I could hear the distant roar of the breakers.

My arms and shoulders ached as I pushed myself up. Too much damn broom yesterday, it had been too long. A shower helped. Then tea and food. I stood drinking the last of my tea in the lab contemplating the jar with its pale globes floating suspended in solution.

I could wait. If they were interested, they would contact me through Skeeze, set up another trade, and another, then the same old game would start up. If they wanted to do business with me they would try to cut out the middle man, and Skeeze would try to stay in as long as possible to collect his fees. Eventually he would succumb to threats, or bribes, or both, accept one last exorbitant fee, and set up a meet for us.

However, it was also part of the game to try to cut him out as soon as possible. If I made an attempt to contact them directly, it wouldn't be entirely unexpected, just surprisingly quick.

I looked at the eyes hanging there, so very fresh. It wouldn't do to wait for them to make contact, I decided. I would cut Skeeze out now, but I would choose my moment. I wanted some angle of approach before I rushed in. I still had a day before Kob returned, after all.

I packed myself a sandwich and an apple. I had my calling cards in my sweatshirt pocket; both the heavy and light ointments, as well as my broom, shrunk.

Disillusioned and Silencioed, I apparated to the woods where we had landed last night. I stood for a moment, listening. There was nothing but the occasional soft thud of snow sliding off tree branches. I picked my way to the hillside, turning now and again to obliterate my tracks. I had no idea how heavily traveled the tunnel

might be. I listened carefully at the door before I slipped through.

There was time now, so when I reached the border I stopped and examined the stream that cut across the floor of the tunnel. The cut was shallow; the water ran only a few inches below the level of the floor, and so smoothly that it was clear there were no uneven places in the bed of the stream. There was a narrow strip of some dark glistening material on either side of the stream, and then the borders of the salt wards. I couldn't tell what the dark material was, no matter how close I held my Lumos. All I could see was that it was something thick and tarry. I didn't touch it. Both it and the salt wards continued up the walls and across the ceiling.

For a moment my eyes wouldn't process it; the *water* continued there too. The stream flowed up the wall on one side, across the ceiling, then down to rejoin the stream at the bottom of the other wall. It was a perfect way to disrupt the border wards, but it galled me that I had no idea how it was done. I wanted a sample of the dark substance, it might give me some lead on the mechanism, but I didn't want to chance disturbing it. I needed this way across myself.

I stepped across and kept going. After I left the tunnel I apparated directly to the corner of Estes and Van Allsburg, then turned down the alley. I had already decided to watch the back of the house, since I guessed that the boy used that as his main entrance.

What if I were wrong? He could be off from the front before I had even a hope of following him. The neighbors' yard gave me some options, I decided. I could quickly squeeze myself down the gap between the houses to the front if need be.

I pushed myself over the wooden fence again and made my way through the bushes. An unmistakable smell rose; I looked down and my stomach dropped. *Shit*. Dog, to be specific. I *hate* dogs. There wasn't much help for it; this is where I needed to be. Well there wasn't any dog at the moment and the disillusionment would help to some extent. Animals could see through them better than humans, but if it were an old dog, and short-sighted... and then there was the problem of smell. *Shit*. Maybe it was, what, short-smelled? Hard-of-smelling?

I shook my head. I definitely needed more sleep. Scanning the yard

for a good spot to watch the house my eyes lit on the two garages standing side-by-side and fronting the alley. I had almost forgotten them, but maybe now that it was daylight perhaps I could catch a glimpse inside.

I slipped between the buildings, pressing myself against the near wall to stay clear of the wards. When I came level with the window I realized I could see straight through the opposite window into the yard beyond, but I couldn't see much of the dim interior. All I could make out was the bulk of a vehicle, maybe a lorry. I looked back the way I had come; there wasn't any clear view of the back door or enough room to sit. I would have to find another place to watch.

Eventually I found a fairly good spot and wedged myself between the bushes and the wooden fence that ran along the warded chain-link fence. I still felt a bit uneasy about the possibility of a dog, but if it came to defending myself, I could always put it out with a Consopio, though that wasn't ideal.

I tried to wrest my mind back to the white house. I was quite close to the back of the house here and I could see the door, the back windows, and the short porch. Hopefully I would be able to hear the front door as well, if it opened. I cast a warming charm on myself, sat and waited.

I had a long wait. When I began to get too drowsy after a couple of hours, I dropped the warming charm for a while, letting the sharp cold breeze keep me awake. Still, my mind drifted until a sharp bang jerked me alert, I gripped my wand in front of me and lurched forward. I craned around towards the house I was trespassing on and saw a black-and-white shape barreling down the back steps into the yard. *Dog.* I groaned behind my Silencio. Maybe the wind would blow away my scent, maybe it wouldn't notice me. Maybe I wouldn't be so lucky.

I tried to hold myself perfectly still and stared fixedly at my target's back door, as if by ignoring the dog I could induce it to ignore me. It was perhaps five minutes before it failed.

The dog was standing just on the other side of the bushes from me, making a noise that started like a whine and ended like a 'wow.' It turned in a quick circle around itself then tried to look at me by tilting its head. Pointy little ears swiveled forward and back. It raised its hackles and gave half a growl, but then lowered them

and tilted its head at me again.

"Oh, make up your mind or piss off," I hissed. Of course it couldn't hear me. There was another bang from the gray house and both our heads turned to the noise. A short woman in her fifties was now standing on the back porch with her arms folded, smoking. She was staring absently across the alley, her puffy pink coat and unnaturally red hair stood out as I peered through the yew branches. *Well, hell,* I couldn't throw a Consopio on the dog now; she'd be bound to notice.

The dog turned in a couple of quick circles and barked twice. The woman on the back porch barked out something herself, short and sharp and in what, Russian? The dog barked again. It was getting more excited and I couldn't let this go on. I unwrapped my sandwich. I was going to just toss it a bit to calm it down for a moment when I realized there were voices coming from the house I was trying to watch. Raised voices.

I pushed myself closer to the fence, if that were possible, and tried to listen, but the bloody mutt was making a racket again. "Shut it and piss off," I growled. Of course it couldn't hear me. And I couldn't hear the voices. The dog made a sudden feint at me between the branches and engulfed my sandwich. It didn't even seem to chew. I could only stare at it as it sat drooling at me, apparently completely content. "Flippin' heck," I muttered. Of course it couldn't hear me.

At least it was something like quiet now and I could make out parts of the argument next door. There were, I thought, just two voices, the one I could hear best was a woman's.

"...think *they're* going to sell it? They're not going..." I edged myself along the fence a few feet, trying not to rustle the bushes. I couldn't see the back door as well from here, but it was more important to hear at the moment.

"Alright, so don't keep one, don't keep one, you can just take a little, *listen*, just take a little off each one, yeah?" There was a pause, then a vehement "*weigh them?*" I could hear the other voice, lower, respond, but it was impossible to make out the words. "...have bacon fat..." the woman's voice came in again, "your way, Lee, just... hurt to ask them, yeah? That's..."

Was it a note of desperation in her voice? At once the back door was opening. I pushed myself back along the fence to get a better view. Someone was coming out. Something hot and wet pressed itself against my hand. I lurched against the fence in surprise and looked down. The damn dog was trying to *lick* me! I pushed the dog away with my knee, crossed my arms and tucked my hands in my armpits out of reach.

The boy from last night had come down the stairs and was now heading quickly through the back yard. A young woman was on the back porch, half out the door. I got a glimpse of charmed blond hair, plucked brows, a sullenly angry mouth, and a hungry look directed at the boy's back. She didn't look more than twenty, I thought as she shut the door with a bang.

The boy, Lee, I amended to myself, was pushing his way through the back gate and turned to click it shut. I could see him much better now than last night. Brown hair stuck out from beneath his cap. Brown eyes, a narrow nose. His cheekbones stood out, but his face wasn't as thin as I thought the previous night, it had some roundness to it under his short beard. His jaw was set in irritation.

He turned and started quickly for the end of the alley. I would have to be quick if I were to follow him. I took a step... and ran directly into the dog, who gave a yelp. There was a stream of Russian, or whatever it was, from the red-haired woman. She was stubbing out her cigarette and looking straight at us.

I froze. Normally a muggle shouldn't notice a disillusionment, but if I drew her attention, if I made the bushes move or if she looked too closely, she would undoubtedly sense that something was wrong. If she did something to alert Lee...

The dog looked at her, doing its favorite head-tilt, then turned back to me, in case there were more sandwiches, I supposed. I stood still and tried to will it away. The woman came down the back steps but stopped before she reached the yard. She was in slippers I noticed. Good. She spoke again, sharply, and made a chopping movement with her hand. The dog got up with a wheezing sigh and waddled a few steps backwards. It made a last attempt to sit down again where it could watch me, but it only earned another dose of angry words. It

heaved itself up again and trotted up the steps. The woman followed. When the door closed behind them I let out my breath in relief.

I wasn't so relieved to see that the boy was nowhere in sight. I didn't have a chance of following him now, because of that damn dog. I did have something, however. That hungry look, that note in her voice. I had a weak link

FLYING

I went up the cracked front walk of the white house. The bell was covered with a strip of tape with the word **KNOCK** handwritten on it in block capitals. Possibly formerly a muggle house then, with the electric bell never converted. Or simply a broken bell.

I knocked. I had to knock again before I heard thudding feet inside. The woman I had seen a few minutes before at the back pulled the door open quickly until it caught at the end of its chain.

"What d'ya want?" she said tiredly. In answer I opened my hand to show her one of the sample vials of ointment. For just a moment her eyes widened and the open, hungry look passed across her face. She looked up and peered at me closely.

"I'm the cooker. I want to see if we can make a deal. Just talk alright?" She was holding herself very still. She looked torn. I took my wand out carefully, handle away, set it down near the threshold and stepped back. She bit her lip.

"Alright, just talk." She bent down quickly and picked up my wand. The door swung closed for a moment while the chain rattled off. I wondered why she bothered with it. She had my wand aimed at me as she pulled the door back open a few feet. I felt my back tense. I had to remember that hungry look; I had something she wanted.

Chapter 10 of **THE CLEAR CUT**
BY MOTTNAVE

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"*Accio wand*" she cast. Weak link or not, she wasn't stupid. The spell turned up nothing, of course. She stepped back from the door and jerked her head at me. I followed her into a small living room. A low black coffee table stood in front of a gray sofa on a rose-colored carpet. A stuffed chair was opposite. In the corner a large television sat darkly behind a salt-ward laid over the carpet. The whole room was dim in the yellowish diffuse light behind the closed paper blinds.

"You sit there," she pointed with my wand at the far corner of the gray sofa. I took my seat, leaning forward and carefully depositing my 'heavy' sample vial on the coffee table. She stood in front of the chair, but she was too restless and wary to sit. She kept glancing down at the vial.

"You guys already did a handoff, so what's this?"

"I liked what I got last night. Look, I could go into some bullshit about the quality of the stuff I got from you, try and get some better deal, but that's not why I came out here. I liked what I got; I could use a regular supply. And I know what I gave you is good quality. I don't know if you've got a market for it yet, but you'll get one. Once it gets around that it's the real shit, there'll *be* a market for it." I paused; she waited sullenly for me to go on.

"So, alright, here's how I operate, I'm no big organization, I just want to keep it simple. You've got something, I've got something, I want to deal, maybe you want to deal. I don't see why we've got to have a go-between, slowing everything down, transporting stuff, charging fees."

"How'd you get here?" she demanded.

"I followed the go-between. You're not the one who did the pickup."

"No, he's..." she stopped.

"Can I talk to you? Can I get a deal here or am I wasting my time?" I leaned forward towards the vial.

"No!" she said sharply, "I can talk... but you're not going to get an answer right now. You just give me your offer now. Then we'll tell you later." Her speech gained in confidence as she went along. Finally she sat in the chair across from me.

"Alright, I think I can give you a week turnaround on a dozen like I delivered last night. Depending what kind of market you got for it, we can go up to a couple a week if there's demand. Now the deal last

night was three pairs. If we do this regular, I want to go up to four pairs. We're cutting out the go-between, so you're saving fees right there. And when you start marketing the stuff, your demand's just going to go up. 'Cause you're the only ones I'm dealing with. You're getting this exclusive. That's why I brought you this sample. You can try it; you'll see I'm the same cooker. You *know* no one else's got this."

She was looking down at the vial again. I went on. "But this is only going to work if you've got a real regular supply. I've tried getting parts before. I tell you, it's one part here, one part there, and then it dries up. You've got to have an ongoing supply or it's off."

"Oh yeah, we do," she said eagerly, "it's real regular, we can always get them."

"You doing force breeding? Someone I know tried that, the quality goes right down after two generations."

"No," she was quick to reassure me, "we're getting new ones, real regular."

"Look, I'm not going to give you a lot of run-around. That's why I came out here right away. I think you've got what I want, I think it sounds good."

She was silent for a moment before she realized I was waiting for a response. "I told you, you're not getting an answer now, we'll get back to you."

"Why not, what else do you want to know? Just ask."

"It's not what I need to know, it's just..." her confidence was ebbing again, "he wouldn't like it."

"The one who did the pickup?" She nodded. "He likes paying go-between fees or something? What wouldn't he like?"

"It's... like you said; we don't know the demand yet. I've got to check first," she finished lamely.

"Fine," I shrugged and picked up the vial and started to tuck it away.

"Hey, wait a minute; you said that was a sample... to show you're the same cooker!" She was on her feet again.

"Look, you trust me or you don't, if we're not going to finish a deal..."

"We don't know you, we don't know you from anyone! What's your name?"

"I'm Mark."

"Ok, *Mark*, I've got to test it, I've got to make sure it's the same, like you said."

"Fine." I started to pull the vial back out.

"Uh-uh, uh-uh, you first." She waved my wand at me. I pulled out the light vial.

"I'll do a part-dose, or there won't be much left." She nodded. I let her see me put half a finger-full on the inside of my left wrist while I used my little finger to push the light vial back up my sleeve.

"Ok, now give it to me," she demanded. I handed her the heavy vial. She was looking closely at my eyes. When the room brightened sharply for me she gave a hiss of satisfaction.

"Now show me." I gave a bounce and left the ground. I wasn't very high but even the slight shift of perspective made the room seem like a doll's room far away. Her face broke into a wide smile and the hungry look was back in her eyes. I couldn't keep from smiling myself; I knew I had just won something with her.

At once she was working at the stopper of the vial. She took a considerably heavier dose of two fingers, holding my wand awkwardly under her arm. I began to come back down to the ground. She looked like she weighed about 58 kilos, that dose was going to hit her hard.

I could see her pupils growing wider and wider, to wet black wells. She made a low "oh," that seemed to come from far away. I didn't want her to go too far.

"What's your name?" I asked quietly.

"Jody."

"Jody... what?"

"Just Jody." She wasn't gone far enough to forget she shouldn't give her whole name.

"Ok, Jody," I brought her back to our earlier conversation. "If we do a deal, I need to know you have a regular supply. How are you

getting them?" I asked her slowly.

"They all sign up with us, it's so easy because they want a family," she gave a short laugh.

"Who's the family?"

"I am. I mean we are."

"You and..."

"Lee, Lee and me. I've got hair, I saved lots of hair from back then."

"What?"

"I just juice up and I'm pregnant again and we're a family. Then they all want to sign up." She laughed again.

"You use hair from when you were pregnant... to polyjuice yourself?"

Her voice dropped to a whisper and she pulled me close by the front of my sweatshirt. "I felt him kick once, really! Lee said I was crazy." She sagged momentarily, then turned the movement into a slow spin. "Flying!" She laughed. I took her by the shoulder to stop her spin.

"After they sign up, Jody, what then?"

"They come across on their own. They want to – we just tell them where to come and they come to us! It's supposed to be our new house, for our family. When they come there, we put them in our service. Then Lee takes them someplace."

"And where is that?"

"I was there once, but I don't go there. It's a big... it's a big warehouse. That's where they are, they set it up." I was getting lost in all the 'theys.'


"Who set it up?"

"Lee's... a whole lot of them." She raised her arms and started to spin again. My wand fell to the carpet. I stooped and grabbed it quickly before she stepped on it. I took her by the shoulder again.

"Hold on, Jody."

"Hold on, hold on, that's what they said to me." She was really losing herself now; she wouldn't be much use at answers. I held her steady by her chin and cast *Legilimens*. Her pupils expanded and expanded and swallowed the world in their black.

"Hold on, hold on!" Lee was saying. He was gripping our hand. A desperate cry forced its way out of us, we were trying but something was going so wrong...



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I pulled hard back to blackness, I had to focus her.

"What's your name, Jody?" My voice came from far away, but it reached us. I saw a woman in a yellow and white skirt next to a mailbox by a front-yard gate, summer. The reflective letters on the mailbox read 'Garner.'

"What's Lee's name?" We were in bed with him, so close, but he wouldn't quite look at us. He was talking, his shoulders hunched up and his head half-turned away.

"It doesn't even matter, it's not like I know them, I don't even remember them. And obviously they didn't want me anyway." We wanted to reach out and hold him...

We were sitting next to him in a waiting room. He was filling out a form 'Lee Smith.' I tried another question.

"Where's the house you use as the new house?"

We were sitting in a bright living room. There was a small table and a few chairs, but mostly a lot of moving boxes. Even though we knew it was fake, it made us so happy; it was a real *family* home. A little house elf bowed in front of us, so pleased, it wanted to be there, everyone was happy there!

"The house, Jody..." I tried to focus her, but I only got a brief glimpse of the outside, a small yellow wood-sided house, before it spun away into darkness.

"Where is the house, where is it?"

We were in the front seat of a moving vehicle. We could see a faded red bonnet in front of us. There was a hollow sound behind us; it was a large vehicle, a van or a lorry. We were on a narrow road through the woods. Lee was driving. We swung left onto a one-lane gravel drive. We had to stop briefly at a green metal gate with 'No Trespassing' signs. We got out and opened it while Lee drove through, then latched it shut and ran to get back in the lorry.

An uneasy feeling was growing in us. It blossomed into dread as we came up a short rise to a graveled lot in front of a small warehouse. We hated it, its white cinderblock walls and sloping metal roof. "I don't like it," we said to Lee.

"Alright, so stay in the truck," he said with an edge of irritation in his

voice, "*you* don't have to go in, we're just dropping it off, they'll take care of it." He slammed the door and started towards the back of the lorry. We leaned back and closed our eyes. In the darkness we weren't in the lorry anymore, we could feel the soft spinning lightness of flying.

I didn't think I could get much more out of her, but I had to try one more question. "Who are they, Jody, the ones who set up the warehouse?"

We were in a dim corridor, a cinderblock wall near our shoulder. There was a short dark shape ahead of us, moving so very fast. I could just see long, pointed ears. Then it was past us.

"No, Jody, not the house elves, who are the ones who *set up* the warehouse?"

We were sitting at the kitchen table and Lee was speaking. "They're keeping Anno with them."

"What, for how long?" Lee shrugged.

"But your... Anno's all right, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, Anno's fine, they won't *do* anything." He tugged at a lock of his hair. He looked, all at once, like a little boy.

"Anno?" I asked, "Jody, who's Anno?"

But then we were just back in that summer day with the mailbox and the bright grass, and we were flying above it, above a little girl with her mother, wheeling high in the sky.

I forced myself to pull away. There was the black pool, then the gray iris, like a ring of bright water. Her lashes were the reeds on the shore, then I was out again, standing above her, holding her chin. She was staring up at me with a look of open hope on her face.

"We're *flying*," she said.

"Yes." I let go of her and she started to spin.

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When I left she was still spinning. She had been completely unaware of me as I picked up the 'heavy' vial she had left on the coffee table and replaced it with the light one. After a moment of thought, I placed a protean-charmed card under the vial. I had the mate of it in my pocket. If they decided to contact me, it would better be directly, rather than through Skeeze.

I didn't try to hide my movements. I even plucked a stray hair from her without suspicion, which I tucked away carefully. It was very unlikely that she would remember anything at all after taking the dose, aside from her flight and a few confused images.

I didn't have much from her aside from confused images myself. However the alternative, to overpower her, Legilimens and then Obliviate her, even if I were entirely successful, would have left tell-tale gaps in her memory. As it was, I did have a hope that she would pass on my offer, and that it would be well-received. I had to rely on that, I didn't have very much to go on for the location of the model house and the warehouse.

All I had was a memory of a gravel road and that it was somewhere in Canada. It must be, if they were relying on the house elves being easy to handle because they were bound into service. It was also probable that it was located at not too great a distance from the model house, since it seemed that they dove between the two.

And why drive? If they were transporting something bulky it would be inconvenient to apparate. Perhaps that was it. I apparated home, by way of the tunnel. All I could do now was hope that Lee would make contact. I decided to prepare as if I were certain that he would. I was counting on it, and if he did, I wanted to be ready.

The rest of the afternoon and evening I spent in brewing another light batch. I had a few hours to sleep during the infusion, then a

Chapter II of **THE CLEAR CUT**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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few more when the batch was done. I woke in the late morning, felling better rested than I had in days.

I was bottling and weighing the batch when Kob returned. I caught sight of him bowing at me out of the corner of my eye as I wiped off the lid of a jar. How long had he been there? He straightened when he saw that I knew he was there.

"You have found them?" He was almost bouncing with eagerness.

"Possibly. You tell me," I replied. I took the jar of six eyes from the store cupboard and put it on the counter. He stared at the jar in silence.

"Oh *no*, oh *no*, you weren't supposed to... oh *no*, oh *no*, oh *no*," he repeated like some kind of litany in a low voice. He had taken a step back. I felt an instant hot rage building.

"You think *I* did this? I did this? Why would you think that?" He shook his head at me dumbly.

"*I* didn't do this, I never laid a hand on... you *told* me to find them, this is what I found!" My voice was rising. I slammed my fist against the counter. "Is it them, do you recognize them?"

I had never seen quite that color on an elf before. He was clutching his tea towel in his hands. Ears back he stared at me and shook his head. "Look at them!" His eyes dropped to the floor.

"Oh no, it's not going to be like this, not *ever* again!" I snarled at him. "You told me to find them. *I* had to look at them; *I* had to work for them! Now *you* have to *look at them!*" I hit my fist against the counter again with my last words. It was all I could do to keep from grabbing the tea towel and forcing his head up.

"Don't you *dare* think you can just tell me to dirty my hands so you can keep yours clean." My voice was shaking at the end of it. I forced myself to push away from the counter and head up the stairs without looking back.

I went directly out the back door and down the few steps into the long grass. I kicked ineffectually at the turf. *Damn him*, hadn't he thought, hadn't he at least considered that something could have happened to them? Why even come to me if he hadn't thought that? Why should he be shocked?

I had looked at the eyes... I didn't go into some... *state*. They were just



Art by Mottsnave

dead things now, like so much else. Did he think he was so pure... he could go through life without looking at something dead? If *I* had to... I kicked at the grass again. It was getting too long. *Damn*. I would have to do a trade with the neighbors again, get them to bring the goats over to eat everything down. As if I didn't have enough to deal with.

It was fairly calm except for a small breeze coming in from the west with the smell of the ocean on it knocking drops off the bare branches. It was too cold to stay out, and I didn't feel like casting a warming charm. I went back inside.

I put the kettle on, and was rinsing out the pot when it started to whistle. The rising noise was cut off abruptly, and I turned to see Kob taking the kettle off the flame.

"Leave it, just leave it," I said shortly.

He set it on the counter and stood quietly for a moment before taking a seat at the table. His color still wasn't good, but he looked a bit contrite as well.

"I look at them. I think it is not them, I think the color is wrong." He paused, then continued reluctantly, "is this a good thing?"

I sighed. "I doubt they are still alive."

"Who does this?" He asked. He was starting to sound like my kettle again.

"A young couple is luring house elves to work for them in Canada. After they bind themselves into service they are delivered to a group who runs a warehouse. It seems that the group is processing the elves for parts and selling them on the Dark Market." He made a small high-pitched sound and put his head down on top of his hands flat on the table. I wasn't going to wait for him to listen. I went on.

"I haven't yet met the rest of the organization, but I suspect it's not very large." I filled the teapot and set it on the table. He had pulled his head up a few inches, but he still wasn't looking at me. I took a seat at the table.

"Perhaps," he ventured, "perhaps they keep some to serve? Perhaps they do not kill them all?"

I shrugged. "What reason would they have?"

"To *serve*! It's possible!"

"You're delusional." He ignored my comment.

"How do you get these – " he waved his hand at the cellar stairs.

"I made a deal with them for a potion."

"You don't deal with them, no!" He jumped off his chair again.

"Of course I deal with them! How the hell else would I get close to them? How could I get them to trust me?"

"But then they... then they kill them for you! They kill them for you!"

Not this again! I could feel my anger surging; I had to keep it under control.

"Now you listen to me. They are dealers, *dealers*, do you understand? So I had to be a buyer. Obviously they've been in business for at least three months and probably longer. I have done business with them for *four days*." I punctuated the words by slapping my hand on the table. "If they didn't have other buyers they would have been out of business long ago! Those three weren't killed *for me*; they were killed for a buyer, *any buyer*. If they weren't killed last week, they would have been killed next week. It doesn't matter."

"It matters! It matters to them! Every day matters to them!" The little idiot was too upset to listen to reason.

"Very well. I will cut all ties with them. If they should contact me I will not respond."

"They contact you? Why?"

"I have a possible deal with them..." I began.

"No, you must not! There must be no deals! They will kill more!"

"I already said I will not respond. You would do well to listen. I agree. I'm done."

"What?" Now he was listening to me again.

"Since you wish me to cut off all contact with them, I'm quite happy to do so. I think that concludes our business." I poured myself some tea.

"No! You must find them, you agreed!" No matter what I said, he wasn't happy with it.

"I agreed to cut off all contact. Do try to keep up. I'm sure you can see that it's quite impossible for me to proceed if I burn my one lead." I drank. He sputtered for a moment, then gathered and drew himself up.

"You will continue without contacting them, you will find some

way to do it... or we will say your name!" he declared in triumph. After all this, after all I did for him, he thought he could threaten me? I leaned forward.

"If you reveal my name, I will make sure they know it. They'll go so far underground that you'll never find them." He paled in shock at my words.

"But you *must* find them, you *must*," he said desperately.

"Then I *must* deal with them. It is the only link I have with them, the only possibility of gaining their trust and getting closer to the warehouse location."

"Make some other deal..." As he began I felt a small movement in my breast pocket. I slapped my hand against it, then remembered; the protean card I had left with Jody. I pulled it out. Words were appearing across the surface one by one: *My house, today, 2:00 pm*. Kob was watching me watching the card. I looked up at the clock. It read 1:12.

"What is that?" he asked suspiciously.

"An appointment. I'm leaving now." I got up and started for the cellar stairs. I would want to have some sample vials along.

"It is them," he said shrewdly, "you are trying to do a deal with them."

I rounded on him. "You have to decide *now*. Am I to continue to deal with them or do I cut off all contact? It can't be *both*."

He hesitated, gripping the edge of the table. He took a long breath. "Yes, you deal," he finally said reluctantly. "If there is a chance they live, and if it is the only way they will talk to you... it must be this way." He spoke deliberately, as if he were trying to convince himself. I nodded.

After I retrieved my sample vials and returned upstairs, I was surprised to see that he was still there. "I haven't dealt with the boy before; I don't know how long it will take. There will probably be no news for a few days."

"I am coming," he asserted.

"What?" I couldn't believe the little idiot.

"I come with you now."

"No, you will *not*. I will meet him alone. It would be more than a little suspicious if I were to arrive with a house elf in tow. It would be very dangerous for both of us. You are nothing more than a product to them!"

"I will not be seen."

"You will not be there at all, do you understand?" He dropped his head and nodded, chastened. "If you are so anxious you can remain here, but I warn you; there will likely be no news." He nodded again. I sighed; finally he was listening to me.

It only took a few moments to change from my glasses to contacts and yank on my sweatshirt. I was mostly dressed as Mark already. I packed my pockets with my usual gear of shrunken broom, emergency potions, magic marker. A few more minutes and I was up in the mountains.

FOOTHOLD

A fine snow was misting down. There were no tracks this time through the trees. I obliterated my own once I got to the door. When I apparated disillusioned to Lee and Jody's house, it was just ten till two. Good, I was get-

ting much faster on the route now that I was familiar with it. I had landed near the two pines on the street. I dropped my disillusionment and turned the corner to approach by the front of the house this time.

It was Lee who opened the door at my knock. He held his wand in his left hand along the side of his leg, pointing down at the floor. His right hand was behind the door. I let him see my own empty hands.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm Mark, you want to talk?" He gave a short nod and stepped back to let me in. He followed me to the living room, which was much as before except that the blinds were now half-drawn, spilling grayish light over the opposite wall. He indicated the same sofa I had used before. I sat and he took the armchair across from me.

"You followed me." There was an edge of accusation in his voice.

Chapter 12 of **THE CLEAR CUT** BY MOTTSSNAVE

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There was also a trace of accent that I couldn't place. It had been in Jody's memories, I realized, but faded by her familiarity.

"Yeah, I didn't plan to, exactly, but I never like working with go-betweens. I thought I'd give it a shot. I never expected it would be so easy to follow him."

"I was told that you want to deal direct." He was hunched forward a bit, his arms crossed. His closed face, short words, everything about him read a wall of defensiveness. I had expected wariness, suspicion, but this... I would have to find some foothold to break down the wall between us.

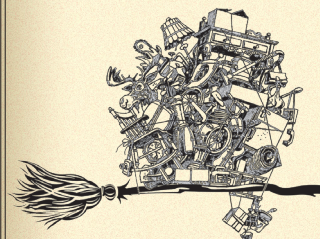
"I don't like go-betweens, charging fees, slowing everything down. If you don't want to deal direct, alright, but this one you've got, who's so easy to follow... you can see that's no good. I wouldn't want a go-between anyone could just follow around, yeah?" He gave me a grudging nod. "And look, I'm talking to you now, right? Might as well deal direct."

His posture was softening to me a bit, good. "What kind of deal are you looking for?" he asked carefully.

"I think I can give you a week turnaround. But like I told Jody, I want to go up to four pairs. Since we're cutting out the middle, it'll be a good deal on both ends." His expression, which had been relaxing, quickly hardened again. *Shit*, it was Jody. I shouldn't have mentioned Jody's name, either she had forgotten that she had told me or decided not to tell Lee. Well, there was nothing to do but go on and try to find some other foothold.

"You've got a regular supply, right? That's what I'm looking for. If you've got that, I'm willing to deal with you exclusively."

"Yeah, we've got a supply all right," he said shortly.



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"You getting buyers for my stuff, you can do a week turnaround?" He lifted one shoulder, then leaned forward sharply.

"What do you want it for, why do *you* need a regular supply?"

"I'm not reselling, if that's what you're worried about." He regarded me suspiciously.

I lifted my eyebrows and let my breath out in exasperation.

"Hell, you're no cooker!"

"What does that mean?"

"I'm working on something. I'm trying to get a new mix together. Like I did with that ointment. You've got to run through a hell of a lot of ingredients before you get anything that isn't crap, that halfway works. And then you go through a lot more before you get it any good. And maybe you've got buyers waiting. So yeah, I need a regular supply."

"What are you working on?"

"Nothing... yet."

"You've got some buyers lined up? So you've already told someone about it," he said shrewdly.

I pulled my mouth to the side in a show of reluctance while I ran through in my head all the experimental potions in which I could conceivably use the eyes. "It's not where I want it yet, but in theory... it'll be a good ward-breaker. A bond-breaker if I can get it right." It had been something I had worked on once, in another life. It was never strong enough to break the bonds I needed it to, however.

The boy's eyes had another life in them now, he leaned forward again with no trace of his reserved suspicion.

"A bond-breaker," he said eagerly.

"If I can get it right," I repeated. I would be damned if Lee didn't want that himself, very much, but I didn't want to show him that I knew. "You think you can get buyers? You think you want to deal on that?"

"We'll deal on what we've got now. When you get somewhere on that bond-breaker, we'll talk."

I felt a rush of triumph. I had my foothold; I was in.

The rest of the deal went smoothly. After all, we both knew that Skeeze had undercut me with the three pairs. It was agreed that Lee would contact me in a week and send me a location by note. We

shook on it in good faith. I left another sample vial with him before I walked around to the alley and disappeared.

I knew it would not have gone so smoothly if I hadn't happened to hit on something he wanted. I wondered what he wanted with a bond-breaker. More to the point, could I use his desire to get closer to the warehouse?

I was mulling over possible stories of needing to see or choose a particular product, so I almost missed the tracks in the snow as I left the tunnel. They were small, and blurred by the still-falling snow. I stood and stared at them and tried to convince myself they were animal tracks, but no, they were from a regular, two-legged gait. They came from the exact direction of my apparition point in the woods.

I picked my way along carefully so as not to miss the small impressions in the dim light. I sighed when I got to the apparition point; the tracks ended, or rather began there. I turned around and cast to obliterate both sets of tracks, then took myself back home.

The house *felt* empty; I knew he wasn't there, but I looked anyway, from the cellar lab where the jar of eyes still stood staring on the counter, up to my room on the first floor. Nothing. The little shit followed me. He hadn't agreed to stay behind, of course, not really, he had just nodded at me when I asked if he understood, and like an idiot I assumed he would obey me. And where was he now? I had no way to track him. There were no footprints on the Canada side of the tunnel, I was almost certain of it. He might have followed me all the way to Lee's house, but I had no other destination, so why hadn't he simply returned here? If he had, he might have been able to hide from me the fact that he had followed me at all. I had to think; I couldn't go rushing out without any idea where to go.

I busied myself making dinner while I thought. It was too early, but I hadn't had anything all day but a cup of tea, and I was ravenous. Once I was full though, restless thought gripped me again. Kob had been gone for hours now. If he had simply wanted to follow me, to monitor my conversation, then where the hell was he now?

The possibility that he had been detected or caught by Lee... if he had, he wouldn't be the only one in danger. I would be absolutely com-

promised and I could expect my scheduled meeting with Lee to be a trap. If I couldn't find out what happened then I couldn't protect myself.

It was also possible that he had simply taken himself back to the school to report. The tracks could have been another house elf's, if Lee and Jody had the elves use the tunnel. It wasn't likely, House elf travel was unregulated, they could cross the border wherever they pleased.

I felt half-paralyzed; I didn't want to leave my house. I had no real way to track Kob but I had to try to find out what had happened. Everything was slipping out of control, if he did come back to the house, how would I know about it?

I decided to leave a note. I had used up my freshest note on Lee. I rummaged through my desk and found a small stack of old protean notes that Dick had given me to use around the lab. I pulled out a pair and wrote '*Stay here. Write back.*' on one of them. My words appeared one by one on the other note. Good, it still worked.

I left one note on the kitchen table and slid the other into my wallet. Wallet – I might need cash, I didn't know how long this would take. I extracted two hundred dollars from my emergency supply behind the baseboard in my office. It wasn't Canadian money; I had never planned to go to Canada. There was no help for it; I would simply have to get it changed there.

I got my coat and my shrunken broom and left.

FIND IT

I checked the vicinity of the tunnel on both sides for any new tracks, but there were none. Wherever he had gone, he hadn't come back this way yet. He had left no physical trace for me to use to track him, even if that would work on a house elf.

I only had one possible destination to check. I apparated disil-

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lusioned to the alley and made my way to Lee and Jody's house. I didn't know what I expected, but the minute I saw the house I felt my heart sink. There was no light, no sound, no movement. It looked deserted. I would bet it was deserted. I vaulted the neighbor's fence again. I worked my way between the two houses, only to see there were no lights at the front either. I went back to the back, to the two garages. Wedging myself between them, I tried to peer through the window. The only thing I could see in the shadowy interior was that the vehicle was gone.

What could I do now? Elves are not affected by any detection spell that I knew. If I tried to break the wards and force my way in the house, I really would give myself away. And for what? An empty house certainly wasn't conclusive proof of anything. Furthermore, Kob wasn't bound into service with Lee and Jody; I couldn't imagine that he would willingly be taken. Would it even be possible for them to take him unwillingly? At the moment I had no way of knowing what had happened.

I was panting. I could feel saliva gathering at the back of my mouth. I leaned over and gripped my knees and tried to get my breathing to slow down.

You don't know that he was captured or spotted, you don't know anything. But my thoughts kept slipping out of control back to the worst. Everything was slipping out of control. God damn him! If I had been found out now, even if I were able to keep myself out of any trap they set for me, I would have to burn Mark, at the very least. I didn't want to burn Mark, he was useful. I'd never be able to show my face on the Seattle Dark Market again. If I wanted to have another name in reserve, I would have to get new cards, new papers... *Damn it!*



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I slammed a fist against the wooden fence. It rattled. I did it again. The sting brought me back to myself. If I hit that fence again, I could knock it into the wards, I could ruin everything for myself. I had to get away from there; there wasn't anything I could do.

I got out of the neighbor's yard and cut through the alley in the opposite direction. When I reached the street I struck out choosing a direction at random. The neighborhood I was walking through was becoming more built up, small stores with apartments above, four-and five-storey brick and concrete apartment buildings, corner gas stations and neon-lit convenience stores, taquerias, thrift stores, churches, laundromats, a cinema. For a while I just let the blocks roll away behind me.

The walking helped to calm me. In ordinary circumstances I enjoyed walking under disillusionment, as long as I could stay alert about other pedestrians and vehicles. Tonight that was easy, it was a rainy Sunday evening and the streets were fairly quiet. Dick was right, whenever I felt my thoughts circling out of control I had to physically remove myself from the situation.

I hoped I had regained rational thought, but when I tried to plan what to do next, to think about apparating home, to an empty house, and no trace of Kob and no way to find him, my gorge started to rise again. I leaned against a parked car and concentrated on slowing my breaths. I wasn't going to be apparating like this; it would be a sure way to get splinched. I pulled myself up from the car and kept walking.

The street I was on angled and joined a larger busier road, Hor-



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vath Boulevard. I stepped back into a shadowed store entrance and dropped my disillusionment. The more cars around, the more likely disillusionment will get you killed. I continued down Horvath Boulevard. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, a pub or an all-night restaurant, but I knew it when I finally saw it: a run-down white two-storied building, horseshoed around an asphalt courtyard, pink neon spelling out PINKWATER INN. Sleep, I wanted sleep.

The manager's office was decidedly shabby; a framed poster with the word CANADA! spilling across it, so faded that the moose on it had a distinctly blue tinge. A big orange splot marred the carpet and the basket of muffins on a small table next to a coffee maker looked rather dodgy.

The manager himself was quite a contrast to the sad surroundings; a large pink bald head, pink arms, a fat round body; he was like an enormous jovial baby. He gave me a room key with immense good cheer and cheerfully charged me an extra ten dollars for only having American money. I couldn't raise enough ire against his glee to bargain or even protest.

He put away my money and gave me the register to sign. I noticed that the ten dollar bill went straight to his pocket. I had already written an 'M' but I didn't want to use Mark here. It became 'Melvin.... Bradbury.' I scrawled the name so it was barely legible. Hopefully he wouldn't ask for ID, I only had Mark's on me. As he turned the book towards himself though, he only said "Melvin, I knew a Melvin once..." He directed me to my room with a cherubic smile. "Checkout is eleven am, sweet dreams!" he called after me as I fled the office.

When I opened the door and flipped the switch, yellowish electric light spilled over a tiny room crowded with a bed, nightstand, a TV on a chest of drawers, a mini-fridge, a table and chair. I could see a closet-sized WC with a shower through another door. A painting of a large chicken hung above the bed. Glowing green numbers of a clock on the nightstand said it was 8:45. It was hard to believe it was so early, I felt completely wrung out. My feeling of triumph after talking to Lee now felt like a hollow thing from a hundred years ago.

What was wrong with me? I had gone on for years without this crawling panic, now the littlest thing out of my control was more

than I could handle. The thought of *not knowing* was too much for me. I pulled out the card from my wallet. If Kob did go back to my house, I decided, I didn't want to be left not knowing. I scratched out 'Stay here. Write back.' Below it I wrote 'Pinkwater Inn, Horvath Blvd, Vancouver BC.'

I left my clothes in a heap on the chair by the bed, took a shower, then crawled beneath the covers. I was asleep almost instantly.

I dreamt that night of being in a thick forest surrounded by warm darkness. It had the close feeling of enormous trees, like the jungle in Brazil, but it was much too quiet for the jungle at night. It was completely silent in fact, but there was movement. Tiny colored lights floated in the air in front of me forming shapes and patterns. They were beautiful; pale green, blue, pink and gold. It was a special day, my lucky day and the lights had something to show me.

They led me to a tree, the biggest one, the oldest. They took me around to where there was a way inside. I went down; I was in a small round chamber, completely black except for the floating lights. They were starting to make a shape. Everything was alright, I was safe and they were going to show me something very important. "What?" I asked.

"Wake up!" the voice said again. Someone was touching my shoulder. *What was touching me?* I grabbed at it; it was a hand. I got my wand with my other hand. I was pushing it away from me; I kept pushing and I fell out of bed, my knees hitting the carpet. I was holding it hard against the floor. "Wait!" it was saying in a choked high voice. Why couldn't I see anything?

"Lumos," I cast. I blinked in the sudden glare. I was holding Kob against the carpet. "Wait," he was squeaking, "it is Kob, I find it, you tell me to come here!" He was waving my note at me excitedly.

"How dare you?" All my fear and worry of the evening had distilled into anger. I was fuming.

"You leave me a note, I am to come here!" he protested. I cast muffliato and started in on him.

"Not that, you little shit, *you followed me!* I told you to stay at the house and you followed me. I've been looking for you all evening. I thought... Don't you understand? You could have got us both

killed!" I gave him a shove and pushed myself away in disgust.

"I didn't, I find –"

"Shut up! You nodded, you pretended to obey me, instead you put us both in danger, you could have alerted them! And if I had decided to break his wards, to search his house for you, it would have been all over, do you understand?" His ears were back and his eyes were wide. He nodded.

"Oh no, you don't, you don't just nod at me, say it!"

"I understand," he said quietly.

"And understand this; if you ever go behind my back again, if you ever go against my direct orders in this, it is over, we are *done!*"

"I understand."

"You promise me now, or we are through. Say it!"

He sat up, then said softly, "I promise, I do not go behind your back, I do not break your orders."

I turned away from him. I was shaking, partly from anger, but mostly from cold. I realized I had been standing yelling at him in my smalls. I yanked the bedspread free and wrapped myself in it.

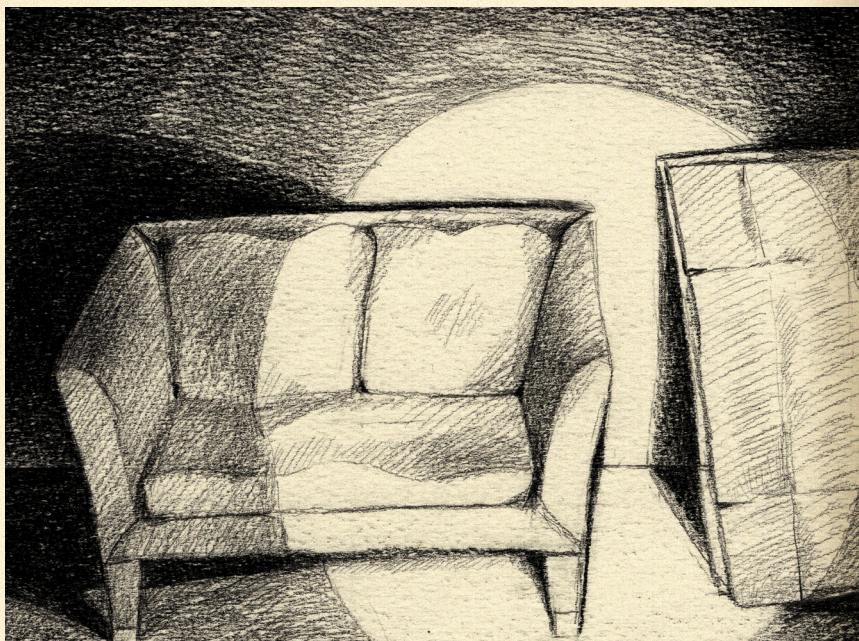
"Why don't you piss off? I need some sleep."

"No! But I come here to tell you, I find it, I find the warehouse!"

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THE WAREHOUSE

“You what?”
 “I find the warehouse! Kob finds it!” He was bouncing on his heels, brimming with smug triumph.

“I know who you are,” I said, vainly trying to put a damper on him. “If you found it, how did you find it?”

“I follow you, yes, then I see the house has wards and alarms so I wait hidden. After you leave I wait and wait, then the man who lets you in comes out with a crate, closes doors, *slam!* He gets out... a moving automobile!”

“Yes, and?” He seemed disappointed that the lorry wasn’t a shock.

Chapter 14 of **THE CLEAR CUT**
 by Mottsnave

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“He is driving it, but slow, so I jump up and catch hold to the special numbers at the back. We go for a long way, very wet, then he stops and gets out, slam! I jump off and make myself not seen in the trees. But I see a gate and a warehouse, like you say!”

“He drives through a gate and I watch. I go up to the gate to see better, but there are wards against elves crossing, made from... it’s very heavy, I can’t go any closer. I wait for a long time, but there is nothing, even when I go all the way around. I go back to your house and I look for you, up and down. When I find the note, I bring it to you. Is it the right one?”

“I’ll have to see it; you’ll have to take me there.”

“Now?” He jumped up, his eyes shining. Why should he be so eager to rush into danger? *Little fool.*

“In a moment,” I snapped, “I have to get dressed; it’s not a bloody toga party.”

The bedside clock was flashing meaninglessly; my casting must have disrupted it. All I could tell through a crack in the blinds was that it was still full night. I dressed quickly and packed everything in my pockets except for the room key. I didn’t exactly need it to get in and out, after all. I cast a disillusionment on myself. It probably wouldn’t work on Kob and he could do better on his own. I kept the Muffliato on us both. I nodded at him; he took my wrist and we were gone.

I couldn’t see a thing at first when we landed. I crouched in place until my eyes began to adjust. I could just see a lighter area off to my right through the trees. I pulled Kob closer and asked “what’s that?”

“There’s the road. The fence is behind.”

I turned on my heels and saw the glint of the metal chain-link only about 5 meters away. I picked my way over to it, Kob dogging my steps. I held my hand close to the metal. Strangely I couldn’t feel anything. I cast Specialis Revelio to be sure. Nothing.

“You said it was warded,” I hissed at him, “heavily warded.” How could he have made such a blunder?

“Yes, I can’t get through.”

“I don’t feel any wards.” He looked at me doubtfully, then reached towards the fence.

"Careful!" I almost yanked him away, but he drew his hand back on his own. He was shaking his head at me.

"No wards now, we can go in!" I could just make out a pale shape beyond the fence, through the trees. It was hard to be sure in the dim light reflected from the cloudy sky, but it could be the same warehouse from Jody's memory. Heavy wards against elves, if they really had existed, would support that. I wasn't sure if the dread I felt was my own or a reflection of what I felt in her mind.

"No," I said, "you are to go back to my house and wait. I will contact you by note if I can't make it back by morning."

"But with no wards, I can come in, I can help! It is better with two!"

"No, I don't know why they would have dropped the wards. If it is a trap – I can explain my presence. There's no explanation for you, unless you think I should be bringing you as an offering." He shuddered a 'no' to that. "Go back, now." Finally he seemed to remember our agreement. He nodded reluctantly and disappeared without another word.

I followed the fence line down to the gravel road and the heavy metal grate. There was a padlock fastening the gate to the fence on the side, but its main purpose seemed to be to stop vehicles. It was only a little over a meter tall, and with no wards...

I paused and looked into the darkness. There was no one I could see, but then I couldn't see very far. I cast *Hominem Revelio*. Nothing. I dropped the *Muffliato* and replaced it with a *Silencio* on myself; it would be much more effective. I clambered over the fence and hurried up to the warehouse.

Everything about it spoke of abandonment and emptiness. The heavy metal door in front of me was half open; darkness and silence were beyond. Yet Kob said the boy had driven up here – it must have only been a few hours ago. I cast *Hominem Revelio* through the gap in the door. Nothing. The same for *Specialis Revelio*. I ducked inside without touching the door.

I stood for a few moments against the inside wall in the darkness. I could see nothing but there was no sound or movement around me. I cast *Lumos*. I was in a small entryway with ratty gray carpeting and bare cinderblock walls. There were two metal doors

opposite me, closed. There was nothing else of note aside from a cardboard box against a side wall. I nudged it with my foot; empty. I leaned my head against the left-hand door. I doused my *Lumos* and listened in the darkness. Nothing. I eased the door open and cast my two *Revelios* again. And again, nothing.

My *Lumos* revealed an office. There was a light-green metal desk that looked to be circa 1965, a wooden swivel chair halfway across the room, a low wooden fruit crate in the desk's knee-hole. The top of the desk was scratched, but bare. I pulled open all the drawers quickly, one after another. All I found were paperclips, a roll of tape and blank, empty envelopes.

I went back to the entryway and approached the other door. I went through my little routine again, beginning to feel a bit foolish, but not willing to drop it yet. When I cast *Lumos* on the other side, I realized I was in a much larger space. The weight of the darkness above made me want to duck.

I strengthened the spell and in the new light I could see that I was in the body of the warehouse. There was the metal roof above, smashed electric lights hung down from it. It must have been a muggle building originally. The room stretched about twenty-five meters long, mostly empty.

There were five low wood tables, two set against a corner, the other three in rows. Near the middle of the floor was a blue and silver formica-topped kitchen table, leaves extended, about the same vintage as the desk in the other room. A few wooden fruit crates and cardboard boxes were scattered near the walls of the room. Some large glass jars stood on the tables in the corner. They were much of a piece with the jar in my lab. A metal rack bearing a roll of brown butcher paper stood next to the tables. A packing station, clearly enough. As for the other tables, well I couldn't be sure.

I tipped up the cardboard boxes and crates carefully. One box held lids and jars but the rest were empty. The whole place was abandoned and stripped out.

The formica table was spotlessly clean. Some markings on the floor nearby caught my eye. White paint precisely marked out a square,

about a meter on all sides, and a small circle inside the square, near the middle of one side. I had no idea what it meant, if anything. I supposed it could be something to do with the original purpose of the building.

There was a door in the far wall of the room. I went over to it, extinguished my light and went through my routine again. When I stepped through and cast Lumos I saw that I was in a short corridor of identical proportions to the entryway, and like the entryway, there were two doors leading off. One I could tell would lead to the outside. I tried the other one. It was a closet-sized WC. I scowled at the dirty mirror in disgust. I wasn't getting anywhere. It was looking very much like I was too late, again.

Why had this place been abandoned when Kob had seen Lee visit it just a few hours ago? The first reason that came to mind, that they had somehow caught wind of Kob, made my heart begin to race. *But no*, I tried to convince myself, wouldn't they have tried to capture him or trap the place? I wanted to hurry and finish here.

I left the WC to examine the corridor. The layout was the same as the entryway, but here the floor was bare concrete. An incongruous sagging pink loveseat slouched against one wall, and leaning near it were a stack of flattened cardboard boxes.

I saw it when I shoved aside the stack of cardboard; a small white hand lay on its side, clenched, severed at the wrist.

My heart was pounding again and I felt a rush of cold that went out to my fingertips. I could smell dark wet grass, vomit, mud and metal. I slid down and sat with my back against the wall. All at once I was covered with sweat and I vomited on the floor. *It's not the same*, I tried to tell myself, *that's not how it happened, you couldn't see any hand there*. I couldn't shake the feeling of overwhelming powerlessness and dread. I was two hours late, too late, I was always too late. I put my head on my knees and tried to take deep breaths. The smell of vomit wasn't helping. I cast to clean it up, my hand shaking.

I groaned and put my head on my knees again. When I squeezed my eyes shut I could see a circle around me, I flinched like they were about to cast on me. I tried to pull myself from the past and see where I was now. I was sitting on concrete, not grass, I was dry

and unhurt, there was a wall behind me.

This wouldn't do! I forced myself to stagger up and get myself into the WC. The tap worked, thankfully. I splashed some water over my face and rinsed out my mouth, thought the rusty iron taste made my stomach roil again.

I knew I needed to finish up and get out. This place wasn't exactly secure; they could very well come back at any time. And the hand; I needed to track that hand. What I told Kob went for me as well; if I was going to see this through I had to *look* at it.

I let the cold water run across my hands until my joints ached with it. At least they weren't shaking anymore. I returned to the corridor. I could see the waxy little hand just where I had found it. I forced myself to look at it closely.

The long knobby fingers marked it as a house elf's. The wrist was cut through the joint at an angle, clean, very clean. I sat down while I examined it. It was perfect, like looking at an anatomical diagram, every tendon, vessel, bone and muscle in its place. It had a perfect terrible beauty. It finally struck me what was so wrong about it, the same as with the eyes in my cellar: there was no blood, no fluid at all had spilled, yet the hand didn't seem to be anemic. The muscles were red and the veins stood up on the back of the hand.

The hand was clenched around something. I made myself pick it up and work on opening the fingers. What it had been holding was just a scrap of tan fabric with a ragged edge. I folded the scrap carefully into my pocket.

This time I had much more than a single drop of blood in the belly of a fly. I made a small nick on the back of the hand near the wrist and squeezed several drops of blood out on the floor, then added a few of my own. I wrapped the hand carefully in my handkerchief and placed it reluctantly in my coat pocket. I would have to remember not to put my own hand in there.

I took out my marker and once again cast a Venio. The hand's owner must have been gone for some time; it started out quite slowly. I just had enough time to obliterate the marks on the floor with my wand before the dark line shot off out the back door. I hurried after it.

LONG NIGHT

The shadow of the Venio bolted into the trees just beyond the warehouse. I had to sprint to stay with it, but then it thankfully slowed and crept along through the ferns and brush. It didn't stay that way, after about eight meters it sped off again quickly. I struggled to keep up while holding a Lumos above. When the shadow came to the fence it turned sharply and skirted along it before shinning up a tree. It hung there for a long moment, then jumped over and sped away on the opposite side. I had to hurriedly unshrink my broom to follow suit. Unfortunately the trees were much too thick for me to stay on the broom, so soon I was struggling through the undergrowth and over slippery logs again.

At times the shadow would pull up sharply under cover, then quickly dash off in a new direction. I completely lost track of where the warehouse was. All I could do was try to keep up with the shadow's zig-zag route. There was no way I could be following the route of Lee and the truck; I was tracking someone desperately trying to get away. The question was: had they been successful? Somehow, a house elf had managed to break free. I wondered if that was tied to the abandonment of the warehouse. I hoped so, it was much better for me than if Kob had been spotted. I didn't know if they had recaptured the house elf; if so, my Venio could still lead me to them. I would have to be careful.

That is, if I could just manage to follow the Venio. We had been heading haphazardly down a gentle slope, but now the ground dropped away in a steep hill and the shadow ahead of me cut sharply across its side. I started after it though I could barely keep up with its nimble route. I leapt over a small log and on the other side my feet met nothing and I went down, sliding and crashing through the

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branches. All I could think of was keeping a grip on my wand; I could afford to break an arm or leg better than I could afford to lose it.

Luckily I was caught up in thick brush before I had to break anything. I made sure I wasn't going to slide further, then passed my wand over to my other hand so I could shake out my aching fingers.

I recast the Lumos that I had lost track of in my slide. I was in a clump of narrow light-brown bare branches rising crookedly from the hillside. I grabbed one to pull myself up and let it go quickly as needle fine thorns sank into my palm. Hell, I *would* find a stand of devil's club to slide into. I worked my way around cautiously to face the slope, held my wand between my teeth and started to crawl.

When I reached the top of my swath of destruction and got on firm ground again, I strengthened the Lumos and looked around. The Venio was long gone and there wasn't any sign of a track or trail. I cast Finite on the Venio; I didn't want it to reach its target if I wasn't there to disable it. I couldn't recast the Venio from here; it needed to start from the location where the body part separated from its source. Well, the only chance I had now was to head in the same direction I had been going and hope I would see some sort of trace. I examined my footing carefully this time and picked my way carefully along the slope.

After several meters of struggling through the brush I came across a deer trail that obliquely crossed my route. I stopped and looked around me. There was nothing but green darkness around, the gray glimmer of the sky above and the trail below. I stood listening to the sighing trees for a moment. I could return in the day and look for physical signs, or return to the warehouse and try to find some other clue. I didn't have much hope of that; they had stripped the place out very efficiently.

Even to find this spot again was doubtful, I was so disoriented from my zig-zag sprint. I wouldn't want to try to apparate back here without a better idea of where I was; I needed a landmark.

I followed the trail downhill. Even deer trails go somewhere, and perhaps, if I were lucky, my quarry had gone this way as well.

The trail wound through scratchy brush as it angled its way down the slope. A rushing sound emerged and I could see a gray

light between the trees at the bottom of the descent. I had my landmark. At the bottom I dropped my Lumos and stood near the little river foaming white on the rocks below. I turned in place slowly, trying to fix the spot in my mind.

There was a noise above me on the hillside, a soft *whump*. It was followed a second later by an answering noise higher up and further along. I froze. It wasn't some accidental movement of branches. It came again, from a different spot and again was answered. Whatever it was, it was moving steadily across the hillside above me, completely silent save for that soft whumping. I tightened my grip on my wand and listened.

However, it wasn't my ears that enlightened me. A drifting breeze from the hill brought a sharp rank animal smell down to me. I had never needed to use sasquatch fur in a potion before, but I had seen it in the apothecary's, and the smell was completely, horribly unmistakable. They are called 'skunk-ape' for a reason. I relaxed slightly. By all reports the creatures were shy and retiring, not inclined to violence unless you were wearing a boy-scout uniform.* Well, as far as anyone knew... hikers and mushroom-hunters did go missing every year, though most would blame that on forest trolls or cannibal woman.

The noises were growing fainter in the distance. I had the spot fixed in my mind now; there was nothing else for me to do here. Another dead end. I disappeared.

Back in the motel room, the yellow lamp-lit walls seemed like a pathetic attempt at homely comfort after the immense darkness of the woods. I supposed I had better take my comfort wherever I could get it. I stretched myself out on the bed and turned off the light. I closed my eyes and tried to imag-

*No one is sure why sasquatch seem to hate boy scouts. The most widely accepted hypothesis comes from Professor E. E. Wormburg's definitive *WILD MEN OF THE NORTH; SASQUATCH AND THEIR HABITS, A FIELD STUDY*. "Sasquatch do not actively seek out or hunt boy-scouts; the rock-throwing response seems to be a defensive behavior. As the sasquatch's normal defense relies on their offensive smell, we may hypothesize that the young male human's natural resistance to this defense prompts the sasquatch to this uncharacteristic behavior. Due to the difficulty of testing this response in the wild, any answer must remain as sheer speculation."

ine away the cold little hand wrapped up in a towel in the mini-fridge, the dingy motel walls, the distant sighing trees, the dead-end trails in the woods. My breath slowed and I could hear my heartbeat *whump*.

I sat up again immediately. It took a great force of will to put myself back into my clothes still chilly from the outside air. I splashed water over my face in the cramped WC. I had to get moving, I could feel my last slim chance evaporating.

I apparated back to my spot next to the river. Surrounded again by night noises of moving air and water I waited, but that was all, the soft whumps were gone now. I cast a disillusionment over myself and a Silencio, then I cast 'Point Me sasquatch.'

My wand wavered then pointed off upstream and away from the river. I began to climb. I caught up with them three ridges later. I heard that whumping noise in a shallow bowl of a hollow below me. I started down the side, but quickly stopped again. I was rushing in, but what plan did I have? No kind of plan at all, just an idiotic idea – who could say if they could even speak or understand me? Idiotic as it was, it was all I had; I slowly went down into the hollow.

The noises had stopped, but my wand still pointed resolutely forward. I had almost reached the bottom when my wand twisted sharply in my hand. The stench overcame me; I choked and my eyes watered. I gasped through my mouth, the stench burned my throat. My disillusionment and Silencio were gone, how had they gone? There was a light slapping noise above me. I looked up.

I couldn't make sense of it at first, but the long shaggy forms were not mossy branches but arms raised high, dark looming heads above me. Bloody hell, they had clasped their hands together over their heads above me, leaning towards each other, their bodies on either side. I could barely breathe; they had caught me and they were waiting.

What was my idiotic idea again? Was I going to ask them "excuse me, have you seen a one-handed elf passing through?" How could they possibly understand? I didn't even want to draw enough breath to speak, but they were definitely waiting. "I – " My voice seemed shockingly loud between their waiting silence and it died in my throat. All I could see in front of me was the locked room from my

dream, the dark door with the screams behind it, and then I was sitting in my empty room reading the newspaper and pounding my fist on the floor gasping “no, no, no — ”

The words came pushing out into the rank air: “I *tried*, I *tried* but I couldn’t stop him, I was too late. The idiot burned himself, the idiot burned himself to death, I couldn’t save any of them.” The words ran themselves out. What the hell was I talking about? I needed to ask them about the elf, where had that come from? How could they possibly understand?

I stood there breathing shallowly through my mouth. The darkness above me lightened; I looked up to see that one of them was gone. There was a soft whump off to my right. I spun to face it. *Idiot*, I couldn’t see a thing, of course. The answering whump came, deep and resonant and just centimeters from my back. I flinched forward and *moved*, jerkily stepping forward.

They herded me through the dark forest. My heart lurched every time the whump came from behind, always only about a meter away. I tried to think about escape routes, but I was certain they could run me down in seconds, even if I could see where I was going. If I tried to apparate or fight... all I could think of was how they had effortlessly stripped all my spells. At least we were going somewhere; at least the stench had eased.

My stumbling through the darkness ended when both whumps sounded together at once, about five meters ahead of me. The one behind me had gone around in front and I hadn’t heard or seen a thing, I realized with a shudder. I paused, if I wanted to try to apparate, this was probably my chance, but they had brought me here for some reason. I went forward gingerly, and after a few steps I ran into something with my right shoulder. I could feel mud and exposed roots of a huge fallen tree. The ground was cut away beneath me where the roots had pulled free of the earth. There was something pale tucked into the hollow. Hoping that my spell would work, I cast Lumos.

It was a house elf curled up tightly as far as it could get under the roots, naked and very pale. I yanked off my coat and clambered into the hole. It was a female, her eyes squeezed shut. Her skin was

cold and clammy when I pulled her from the hole and wrapped her in my coat. I stuck my wand in my teeth again to carry her out of the pit. The sasquatch were nowhere to be seen. I disappeared.

I had to get her to a hospital, but first I could only take her back to the motel room. I deposited her on the bed and accioed the towels from the bath. I cast several warming charms on them, peeled my damp coat away from her and wrapped her in the towels. Her gaze was too glassy and her skin was still too cold, but I only knew enough magical creature first aid to know that that I didn’t know enough to cast directly on her; the warmed towels would have to do.

At least the stump of her right wrist was clean and not bleeding. Eerily clean, just like the hand and the eyes. I didn’t know what could cut like that. I filled the cup on the bedside table with water while I accioed the phone book. I tried to flip the pages while I held the cup to her mouth. I knew there would be a wizarding section hidden somewhere. I tried the purple government pages first, and there it was, a small box ad for FAYLON MOVERS. I touched my wand to it and cast Specialis Revelio and it expanded into the several pages of the wizarding directory.

Emergency services were in front with the apparition coordinates for the VANCOUVER ASCLEPIAN GENERAL HOSPITAL. I accioed the hand from the mini-fridge. I was about to pick her up and apparate when I remembered my appearance. I didn’t want Mark to be seen. I quickly dug out my bag of emergency potions and found my vial of polyjuice. I still needed a hair. I was going to start searching the rug, but it wasn’t ideal. A strange hair could put me into a handicapped body, or the body of a child who wouldn’t be believed by the hospital staff.

Then I remembered the hair I had from Jody; a stranger’s might have been better, but I didn’t want to chance finding one and I didn’t have time to waste. I put the hair in the vial and watched the disgusting stuff bubble. Grimacing, I downed it in one. I waited out the unpleasant effects then turned to pick up the elf. Her glazed look was replaced by one of horror as she recognized me. As I hurriedly transfigured my clothing to fit and changed its color, I hissed at her: “don’t be a fool, it’s not me. You saw me take the potion, it’s just a disguise.”

She didn't exactly relax, but she made no sound or struggle when I picked her up and disappeared.

COINCIDENCE

I delivered the elf and wrapped hand to the emergency department along with a very thin story about finding her while out camping in the woods. I could tell that the nurse didn't quite believe me by the hard look she gave, but it was five in the morning by the lobby clock and it seemed they were seriously short-staffed. So she merely told me to stay in the miserable waiting room and fill out forms while the healers swept through a swinging set of doors, leaving me alone.

I didn't stay, of course. I watched at the center crack of the doors until they disappeared around the first corner, then slipped through. I found the stairwell quickly and took it down to the basement. I wanted someplace I could hole up until the juice wore off and the nurses wouldn't recognize me. There was a dim corner under the lowest risers. I sat beneath them and fished the protean note to Kob out of my pocket. I didn't want him to do anything stupid. Anything *else* stupid. I wrote "*following trail, will return later.*" Hopefully that would be enough to keep him in place.

Done, I leaned back against the wall, closed my eyes and waited. I could feel the heavy weariness at the back of my head and the echo of trees in the wind.

I must have drifted off, because I was awakened by the unpleasant sensation of the polyjuice wearing off and my body returning to its original dimensions. I had to quickly reverse the transfiguration on my clothes to accommodate it.

Stiffly getting to my feet, I was starting to feel all my scrapes

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and bruises from the slide down the hillside. I stepped out of the stairwell into the basement.

The doors, helpfully labeled, showed that the basement was full of labs and offices, closed and dark, and storerooms and supplies. The hospital wards made it impossible to simply disillusion myself. I wasn't looking for a disguise exactly, just an excuse. I found one in the supplies: a stack of bedpans. I could be a volunteer, or a new temporary worker... it didn't much matter. I knew from experience, as long as you walk around confidently looking busy, people will seldom challenge you. Add to that something distasteful, that they don't want to deal with themselves, you were practically invisible. No one wants to involve themselves with bedpans.

I ducked out on the ground floor just long enough to look at the map and directory posted on the wall. The magical creatures ward was half of the east wing on the fourth floor. Back in the stairwell I climbed, wishing my stack wouldn't rattle. When I stepped out on four, I realized my reprieve from nurses was over; there was a staffed desk where the wings of the building met and a little movement in the corridors. I set my face into *busy* and *absorbed* and marched into the east wing. The few people about avoided me and my distasteful burden.

When I entered the magical creatures ward I slowed and started examining the rooms as I passed. I saw the elf as I passed one of the lit and open rooms. I kept going until I reached the restroom halfway down the corridor. I dumped the pans there and walked back to her room, stepping in quickly and shutting the door behind me.

She was sitting up in bed, the stump of her right arm bandaged heavily. She stared at me as I stepped in. Her glazed expression was gone, replaced by resigned weariness, but she came alert as she recognized me. She cut her gaze over to the right side of the room. Part of my mind realized that there was someone else in the room with us just as a voice to my right gasped "Snapel!"

I had the figure pressed back against the wall with my forearm against its sternum, my wand pressed into its throat. "Not another word," I hissed.

I was a few inches from a woman's face, her eyes wide with

shock. Did I know her? Who could recognize me? Brown hair, in a short pixie cut, a short straight nose, brown eyes very wide, straight eyebrows raised, fear running across her face... I knew that expression. I glanced down for a second at her white healer's coat. A name tag read 'Hlr. Amy Banks.' *Oh for fuck's sake.* With that almost but not quite right name, her face sprung into place. I knew her.

I moved my wand away from her neck briefly to lock the door and put a Muffliato on the room. I turned it back on her but removed my arm from her chest and stepped back. I supposed I had to. "Not that name, understand?" Her eyes flashed in irritation but she nodded.

"You're..." she began, but thankfully she didn't finish whatever blindingly obvious statement she had been about to make. She started again. "What *should* I call you?" she asked carefully.

"Mark will do, Healer *Banks*."

"Did you track – " She gave her head a little shake and started yet again, "look, if you've come to... be sure of me, I didn't even think you were alive, much less know anything!"

"What?" I didn't follow.

"I mean, even if I did know, uh *Mark*, I don't have any reason to try to... you saved my life, after all!"

"What?" She really had lost me. I cut her off before she could confuse me further. "Enough, I need to talk to her, what's her condition?"

"What?"

"Her *condition*." Sure a healer shouldn't be so dense? I tried to speak slowly and clearly.

"You came here to..."

"Talk to her, I need to talk to her." I waved impatiently at the elf watching us. *Amy*, as I had to think of her now, put her hand to her mouth and her eyes widened again.

"Her hand," she said hesitantly, "you didn't..."

"No, of course I didn't," I snapped, "I don't go around cutting elves!"

"Of course not," she said looking contrite, "I just meant, I've never seen any cut like that, I don't know what could make it."

I sighed. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"Knife," came a small voice from the bed, "it is a knife." We both

turned to the elf who was watching us, completely still as if she hadn't spoken. Amy took a breath and seemed to gather her thoughts.

"You didn't come here to find me, this is just a... a *coincidence*?"

"Yes, *fucking felix*," I muttered.

"What?"

"Never mind. I came here to talk to her. If I could have a moment?" Amy was disinclined to take my hint.

"Look, if this isn't about me talking, or some shit, could you please?" She gestured at the wand I was still holding on her. I pushed it back up my sleeve. She sagged and let out a gust of breath as if her strings had been cut. Had she been so afraid of me?

"You *startled* me," I snapped defensively.

"Yes, that makes two of us!" she retorted.

"Fine, if you'll excuse us..."

"She needs to rest."

If I had to go over her head, well, so be it. I turned to the elf. "Will you speak with me, now? I may need to move quickly." She nodded at me. "Alright," I said to Amy, "if I could have a moment?" She was staring at me stubbornly.

"Oh no, I'm going to be monitoring the patient." I glanced towards the door and sighed. It was hardly ideal, but perhaps she would do less harm in than out As long as I could be sure she would cooperate...

"This is important; nothing leaves this room, yes?"

"Yes, and you will stop any questioning if I think she needs to stop."

"You watch the door and make sure no one enters," I countered. She grudgingly leaned against the door with her arms crossed. I finally turned to the waiting elf.

"What are you called?"

"Avi."

"Who picked you up, to start with?" She looked down and plucked at the sheet. I dug in my pocket and found the ripped scrap of fabric I had taken from her hand. I let it fall to the sheet in front of her. "I presume this means you are free, now." She held the scrap tightly in her remaining hand.

"They seem so like a good family, especially mistress, and she with

child. At first I don't even listen, I don't even think about the warning."

"What warning?"

"Nimmo of Seattle is passing word that there is a family taking elves and they don't come back. That they are going to move north and have a child. I don't think it is them, but when they bind me, something makes me... I don't lay my mark right. I know I don't make it stick, I am not bound, not free, but I don't say anything, I don't know why until he took me to that place." She took a deep breath.

"The warehouse?" She nodded. "When did you go to the warehouse?"

"I think only one day? We are in boxes in a store room. The only thing in it is a pink chair. The goblins use it sometimes."

Goblins. Jody had tried to show me this, I suddenly realized, but the memory was so dark that I had thought she was showing me a house elf.

"How many were there?"

"There are seven of us," she answered, misunderstanding me, "but one is taken into the other room, and then we are six."

I wanted to ask more about them, but she was shaking a little, so I changed the subject for the moment. "How many goblins?"

"I only see three, but the others say they have seen two more."

"Do you know their names?"

"I speak no Gobbledygook, but some of the others say three are called Grithix, Glern and Trollusk. We don't know the others. One of the other elves tells me they cut us up to sell."

"How did you get out?"

"Yesterday my master comes with a box. There are two goblins; the one called Grithix is talking to him in Gobbledygook. The other one, I think it is Trollusk, he takes me out of my box and takes my pillowcase. I think something bad will... I know I have to be free. I know the binding isn't proper, I can do the rest. I go up quick to my master and I take hold of his cuff and it rips. I already see my master's cuff needs mending. I am free, but the goblin he is talking to is very angry. He has a knife out very fast... I don't feel it right away, I just see it..." she licked her lips.

"Then you got out?"

"Yes, he tries to grab me but I get outside and run. They are not

hurrying after me, I can hear them, they are just talking to each other in Gobbledygook, I think they think I can't cross the wards. But the wards are for bound elves and I am free," she said with a certain satisfaction. "I have to *push* but I can cross them."

"An elf told me that the wards were for elves, not just bound ones."

"Was it a bound elf who told you?" I supposed she had a point.

"Why did you run and not apparate?"

"I can't in the fence, there is no apparating there. After... I don't know, I am running, I just keep running."

"What time did you get away?"

"It is just started to be dark outside."

"When I got to the warehouse, it was empty. Did any of you hear any plans to move?" She shook her head.

"What are the names of the other elves?" She rubbed her hand holding the scrap of fabric against her forehead.

"Tove, Cove, Ille, Eenes, Bit... and Hoeye they took into the other room." She made a helpless little sound at the end. Amy started towards us, "alright..."

I cut her off before she could stop us.

"Before you were in the warehouse, you were in another house, a yellow house?" Avi drew herself up.

"Yes, just for part of a day. I bound to them there."

"Can you take me there?" She nodded, but Amy was protesting, "no, she's not going anywhere!" I rounded on her.

"Did you hear what she's been saying? Or did you fail to understand? There are still five others –"

She broke in, "yes, I do, alright? I might not understand what you have to do with it, but I understand what she's been saying. It doesn't matter because she's not in any shape to apparate anywhere!"

"Those five could be –"

"I have a *vow*, understand? *Could* be doesn't cut it when I have a patient who definitely needs to stay put. I have a healer's vow to protect her health!"

Damn it! She was backing me into a corner! I didn't want to do anything to her. "If I have to –" I started warningly.

"Oh don't you get dramatic with me. I've had enough of that, and you know it! Look," she said with a sigh, "I get it, I really do, but she's not physically or magically capable of apparating right now, much less taking someone else along. If you can look at it *rationally*, you'll see that it's not going to happen, not this instant."

I clenched my hands and let out a frustrated breath. "Not this instant, then *when?*"

"At the very least, after we get a cup of coffee and talk this over. Just give me ten minutes; I do have a patient to take care of. Meet me in the café. It's down on the ground floor. My shift's been over for half an hour, at least." That last she said almost to herself. She studied my face, and must have seen my reluctance. "Go on! *I will* meet you there, I promise," she said more softly. She went around me to get to Avi.

I had trusted her, in a way, for the past three years, I could probably trust her as far as the café. Amy was bending over the side table. I could see Avi looking down silently at the scrap of fabric in her hand as I went out.

THE WOMAN

The café, I found after several wrong turns, was actually more of a cafeteria, with trays of food under warming charms on a buffet. When the smell of food hit me I at once felt hollow, my last meal was just a distant memory. To hell with waiting for Amy, I needed to get myself breakfast straight away. I loaded a plate with scrambled eggs, sausages and toast. And coffee, I needed coffee. I found the largest size mug and filled it from the carafe. Thankfully, it was quite hot. I shoved my tray up to the register and took out my wallet. As I opened it my heart sank. Hell, I still hadn't changed any money.

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"I'll get that." Amy was at my elbow holding a cup of coffee. How had she snuck up on me? I must have been more tired than I thought.

"No," I started, with no real idea of how I was going to pay for it, but she continued over me: "I've got a staff card, it's cheaper and breakfast is the least that I owe you."

I wanted breakfast even more than I wanted to argue. She stepped around me to the impatient clerk and paid. We made our way over to a small table away from the other few patrons, staff just getting off or about to go on their shifts. She seemed disinclined to speak and just sipped her coffee. I took the opportunity to do away with a good portion of the eggs.

"Been awhile?" she asked, eyeing my emptying plate.

"I've been running after her all damn night." It came out a harder then I intended. She sighed.

"I'm not going to stand in your way, do you know that? If what you're trying to do... I don't know, but if you're trying to stop an elf parts dealer, I'm all for it. If she can apparate you somewhere and that will help you, and she is willing, I'll support it. But I have to look out for her physical well-being, and at the moment she's not capable of it. She will need a few hours of rest at least."

I wasn't sure I was resigned to waiting just yet, but it seemed pointless to argue on it. If I was going to try to smuggle Avi out of the hospital, I could do with Amy's help. I tried for the next best.

"I'll need you to let me know as soon as she's able. I have to move quickly."

"Of course. *Is* it a parts ring?" I didn't want to go into it any more than I had already. She took my silence as her answer.

"If it is, then shouldn't you tell someone, turn it over to the Aurors?"

Oh, shouldn't I? "No!" I said sharply.

"But... why not? Surely they can..." she dropped her head and leaned in. "You do know that you've been pardoned? They had a posthumous hearing."

"Yes, I know. I don't trust them."

"You think they're out to get you?" she asked with a disbelieving chuckle.

"Not that," I said impatiently, "not entirely. I don't trust them to be able to do anything about it. Or want to. They haven't done anything so far."

"Do they know anything about it? Have you told them?"

"Certainly not. They'd muck it up." Was she so naïve? I changed the subject.

"Can you do anything with that hand?"

"Reattach it, you mean? We're not sure. When a body part has been cursed off, no. If something has been cut off, and the cut is clean and all the parts are fresh, well, sometimes we can. But this seems like a charmed or cursed knife that leaves both surfaces of the cut under a sort of... stasis, for lack of a better word. We haven't seen anything quite like it. I assume it's a goblin-made knife, I can't imagine they would use anything else."

I nodded. "That's probably safe to say."

"We would have to get past that stasis somehow if the two parts have any hope of growing together. There's one possibility we've discussed, but it is a bit drastic and we'd prefer to know more about that knife before trying it. If we were to cut off a thin section from the wrist and hand to remove the part under stasis, perhaps we could then reattach the remainder, but it's chancy. If we could examine that knife..." she trailed off.

She went back to sipping her coffee silently for a moment.

"What did you mean, 'fucking felix'?"

"What?" Her sudden change of tack threw me.

"I asked if your meeting me was a coincidence and you said 'fucking felix.'" I hadn't known that she had caught that. I grunted, it wasn't exactly a glorious moment in my past. She was looking at me over the rim of her cup. I just wanted her to get Avi moving.

"Most potioners go through a period of... inadvisable experimentation. In my reckless youth I was taken with trying new variants of Felix Felicis. One of the versions I developed – it still gives me, well, flashbacks, I suppose you could say."

"What on earth is a Felix Felicis flashback?"

I winced.

"In my case, it means that I'm subject to unfortunate coincidences."

"So I'm an unfortunate coincidence?" She sounded a bit put out.

"Meeting *anyone* who recognizes me and shouts out my name is an unfortunate coincidence."

"Well, if you'd step forward, it wouldn't be. You'd be hailed as a hero, surely. They gave you a posthumous Order of Merlin, after all."

"No, out of the question."

"Don't mistake me; I won't say anything of course. It just seems... ridiculous." I felt my irritation swell. That was rich coming from her.

"Just as you say, Healer *Banks*." She flushed.

"That's for professional purposes! I have an established practice, and so much of a healer's art is based on trust. It simply wouldn't do to switch back to Vance at this late date, and have my patients think they don't know who I am. I have told some people, some close friends, my real name, but it's not exactly a picnic rehashing all those memories every time I tell someone new. If I made some kind of grand announcement now there would probably be no end of stupid interview requests and letters and calls..." She trailed off looking at me.

"Alright, it would be a hundred times worse for you, wouldn't it? I take it back, forget ridiculous."

"What were we talking about?"

"If you don't want to come forward, well I could go to the authorities. As a healer, I'm protected from questioning to a certain extent because of my vows. You could give me information –"

"No, absolutely not."

"Or someone you're working with – is the young woman who brought in the elf working with you?" I thought of her laughter when she spoke of luring the elves.

"No, she's not," I said vehemently.

"I just wish you'd consider it." I didn't answer that, there was nothing to consider.

"Do you live near here?" she asked suddenly.

"No," I said warily.

"Oh, for gods' sake, I'm not trying to pry anything out of you. Do you have any place to go while we wait for Avi to rest?" I didn't

respond immediately, so she went on. "I'll set you up with an empty room. If I put up a quarantine sign no one will bother you." As much as I hated to wait, the idea of sleep was irresistible. If Avi really couldn't apparate at the moment, what else could I do? I nodded. She didn't rise, however, just looked down at her empty cup and gave it a little push along the table with her fingertips.

"I still have dreams about that time...especially about that woman," she said deliberately. I really didn't want to follow this line of conversation, but she was plainly waiting for me.

"What woman?" I asked. I knew very well what woman.

"The one you put in my cell," she said quietly. What the hell did she want me to say about that? She had to know as well as I. If she wanted anything from me, I couldn't give it to her.

"She's dead," I answered shortly.

"Yes, I know, I just... never mind."

"The room?" She nodded and rose.

COPY

I woke abruptly to a sharp knocking. My first thought was that I had slept past checkout time at the Pinkwater Inn and the rotund manager was about to burst in with a cheery smile and extra charges. The idea made me sit up quickly, but the sight of the bright hospital room around me brought me back to the present. The knock came again.

"Yes?" I croaked. My mouth felt sticky and dry. I drew my wand to be safe, but it was Amy who opened the door. After she had closed it carefully behind her, I asked "she's ready?" The clock on the white wall read 12:12.

"Yes, I just needed an excuse to check her out of the room, so

we're headed to the basement for some lab tests. We'll meet you outside, at the southwest corner of the building, then you can walk past the anti-apparition wards. Alright?"

"I'll meet you there." She ducked out again. I could hear her brisk steps down the hall. I used Aguamenti to fill the glass on the stand next to the bed and drank it down twice before the sticky dryness of my mouth dissipated.

When I left the room this time, I didn't need any bedpan errands to disguise my presence. The halls bustled with visitors, patients, assistants and healers. I left through the main moving stairwell and stepped out into a light rain. I was looking carefully when I came around the southwest corner of the building and I could just see the shifting edge where the raindrops met a disillusionment. Amy dropped it and shimmered into view as I approached. Avi was standing close to her dressed in a hospital pillowcase that was probably standard issue to the house elves who worked there.

Amy spoke quickly: "you'll be past the wards when you get to those trees," she said, making a short gesture at a few pines about ten meters from the corner of the building. "Only stay long enough to get your bearings, then *you* side-along *her* back, yes?"

"Of course." This would be the kind of thing that could cost her her job. "Now?" I asked Avi pointedly. She nodded and trotted after me. When we got to the pines and I had cast a disillusionment over us, she gripped my sleeve in her hand and there was a sudden wrench.

I recognized the small yellow house from Jody's memory, but it didn't hold any of the warm light that her emotions had cast on it. It was just a neglected wooden house with a postage-stamp yard on a street full of the same. It looked empty and dead. I looked around carefully to fix the spot in my mind, then reached down for Avi.

To my surprise she was looking up at the peeling walls with wistful longing. After all that, the idiot thought there was something for her there? I snatched her hand angrily and wrenched her away.

Amy noticed the elf's dragging downcast look as soon as I dropped the disillusionment. "I'll get you right back up to your room," she said with some self-reproach. I dogged their steps back

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to the building. "If she happens to remember anything else, names, places..." I was digging another protean note out of my pocket. Amy took it and tucked it with care into the pocket behind her ID.

"Yes, I'll let you know right away. And before you tell me, no, I won't say anything, I mean it." She looked at me steadily, as if it were of the utmost importance to convince me. I found myself wondering if she were afraid I would oblivate her. She cast her own disillusionment over both of them and they were gone.

When I apparated back to the house I spent a little more time examining the street. It was mostly quiet, being the middle of the day on a Monday. At the end of the block two young black men were peering under the bonnet of a parked car, trying to repair it, I supposed. A few houses down across the street an old woman in a plastic rain hat sat on her covered porch watching the street. She probably wouldn't notice me under my disillusionment, but would she notice the front door opening? I decided to go around to the back of the house, out of her view.

I couldn't see any signs of life in her windows as I went around to the back. The place had the usual anti-apparition and anti-intruder wards, but I couldn't detect anything very strong or linked or name or blood. They probably couldn't be bothered with something complicated that would have to be re-keyed every time they brought in a new elf. I could force the wards without too much trouble. There was no finesse to it, just brute casting until I wore down the wards with layers of Finites, Reversios, and Farthum stills.

Finally the door shuddered open. I leaned against the jamb and cast a *Hominem* and *Specialis Revelio*. Nothing, beyond the usual cooling charms on the cold cupboard and heating charms on the tap. It was a little kitchen with dark green lino floor and wood cupboards. I opened them one by one. They were almost entirely bare except for a few packets of instant coffee and some mugs. The

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drawers were mostly empty as well. The cupboard under the sink held some cleaning solutions and sponges.

I stepped through to the living room. It was just as in Jody's memory, but now with a cool gray light seeping through the curtains rather than the bright sunlight she remembered. This was the room of set-dressing, I realized. Moving boxes, packing tape and shrinkable cartons lay about. This must be the room the elves saw before being bound. The one personal touch was a small framed photo on the mantel. It was just Jody, leaning on a picnic table. There was a metal guardrail behind her and an endless view of blue ocean. She was smiling into the sunlight, her eyes squinting against the light. The shadow of the photographer, Lee I supposed, fell across her knees. Her hair blew around her face in the ocean breeze.

I pulled the cardboard backing off the frame and slid the picture free. I held the picture up and tried to transfigure the cardboard to match it. Copying pictures is not one of my strengths. The copy-Jody looked stiff and doll-like, her movement jerky, and somehow she had acquired a sneering expression rather than her happy smile. It wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny, but it would have to do. I slid my cardboard copy back into the frame and the picture into my pocket.

One of the boxes held a few cushions; the rest were empty. There was nothing else of interest in the room so I headed upstairs. There were only two rooms under the sloping roof; one was completely bare. The other held the beginnings of a nursery: a crib with no blankets and a changing table against the wall.

I left the room waiting behind me and returned to the ground floor. The bath was next. There were no towels hung on the rack and the shower and tub didn't even have a curtain. I opened the medicine cabinet with a squeak. Something hairy fell into the sink. I started back before I saw that it was a thick hank of straight brown hair held together in the center by an elastic hair band. No doubt it was Jody's without the blond charm on it. She really had a lifetime supply; there must have been tens of thousands of hairs in the bundle.

The cabinet also held a large jar of a dark sickly substance that I knew it on sight as polyjuice, and a small dosing cup with measure-

ments marked up the side. I picked up the hank of hair and worked a portion of the hairs free of the band. I tucked them away carefully alongside the photo and closed the hank of hair back in the cabinet.

The last room in the house was the cellar. It held nothing but stacks and stacks of empty wooden crates. I looked through them one by one until it was all I could do to keep myself from kicking them, but there was nothing, no trace that could lead me to the elves.

I left by the back door, throwing up the same sort of shoddy wards that I had taken down on the way in. I could only hope that Lee of whoever came in next would drop them without noticing they had been cast by another wand.

The disappointment was a bitter pall on me as I apparated back to the tunnel mouth. I had been hoping to find some physical trace of Lee or the elves, anything so I could track them. Instead the only things I had found were from Jody, the one who by her own memory only went to the warehouse once, who might never go to the new location.

I didn't have many courses open to me now. I quickly put aside the thought of ambushing, overpowering and using legilimency on Lee. Far too many things could go wrong, and if I missed my one shot at it, everything would be ruined. Following Lee was still a slim possibility if I could stake out his house. However he was careful, far more careful than Jody, and the sudden relocation of the warehouse suggested that he would be even more careful now. I would have to be very lucky to be able to track him without any physical tie to him, such as I had for Jody.

The thought struck me so abruptly that I paused and leaned against the tunnel support. I didn't need to track Jody, but I had parts of her, her hairs, enough to make a ward-breaker for any wards keyed to her, such as the ones on Lee's house. Once I was in, surely I could find something to track Lee.

My renewed hope sped me on my way back home. I banished from my mind the thought that it was my only hope. When I stepped through the back door into the kitchen, a wave of warm food smells washed over me. Kob was in front of me, bowing.

"Dinner, sir?"

"It's not even three in the afternoon!" I peered past him to see the table set and an entire roast chicken steaming on a platter with vegetables set around it.

"No dinner?" His ears began to droop.

"I didn't say that." I shrugged out of my coat and went to the table. How had he known I was coming? And where did he get the chicken? Hopefully not from the neighbors' hen house. I decided that it smelled too good to care about its provenance. As I set to the food, Kob flitted around restlessly. When I had only a few bites left on the plate he couldn't contain himself any longer.

"You have a trail, you find them?" he burst out.

"I found one of them, an elf named Avi. Unfortunately she couldn't tell me the location of the others. She told me a group of goblins ran the warehouse, but they must have changed their location sometime after she escaped. The place was cleaned out before I arrived."

"Goblins." He almost spat the word. I didn't want to get into inter-species politics.

"The problem is to find where they moved the others."

"Why do they move?"

"I don't know, but it could be simply that she escaped and they feared she could spread the word of their location." I related what she told me about her capture and escape. Kob's expression was set and determined by the end.

"I go and see her. She will tell me more."

"More than what?"

"More than you. Elves will speak to elves of many things they will not speak to people."

I didn't doubt that, and I had to admit it was a fair idea. Besides, it would keep Kob out of the way while I brewed. He wouldn't like what I was going to try and I didn't want to waste time arguing with him.

"Very well, but it is important that you not be seen, by anyone except for her healer, Healer Banks." Kob nodded and went at once, disappearing where he stood. I headed straight for the cellar, barring the door behind me.

SACKED

If I had been trying for a universal ward-and-bond-breaker as I had described to Lee I wouldn't have got very far in a single day. But all I needed now was a specific pass to any wards keyed to Jody, and I had a start by possessing her hair as well. I had my memories of my bond-breaking experiments, though it was years ago. More importantly, I had house elf eyes. Their very presence is something like the physical manifestation of a broken contract between master and elf, so they could be a very powerful component in a breaking spell or potion.

By ten pm I had something that wasn't by any means a polished potion, but I was satisfied that it could muscle its way through any wards that Jody had access to. It was just rather unfortunate that Kob ignored my locked lab door and apparated directly into the cellar. It was much more unfortunate that the jar of house elf eyes was standing open next to my cutting board with one pair of eyes conspicuously missing. He must have seen it immediately; he started in on me before I even turned around from bottling the finished potion.

"You, *you* have done this? You have cut them?" *Damn*, I was going to have to waste time arguing with him now.

"I merely..." I started, but he shrieked over me.

"*You!* They are right, what they say! Your hands are full of blood and shit! You are up to your elbows! Dirty, rotten, foul one!"

"Shut up!" I tried to shout over him but he kept on.

"Stained, stinking! Dust bunny!"

"What?"

"Drain slime, grout grime!"

Obviously I would have to be the reasonable one. I tried to explain. "If *you* want me to try to track them, I *have* to..."

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"No, no, *I* don't ask you to do this, you don't lay this on me, this is what *you* do. You don't have to do this, you *want* to!"

"Want? I don't *want* to do any of this; I never wanted any of it!" I shouted, slamming my hand on the counter.

"Filthy skid-mark! It is permanent, it doesn't come clean!" His voice seemed to resonate off the house foundations until my head rang with it. I hunched forward, pressing my hands over my ears. Impossibly, his voice got even louder. "It is enough, *you have no home!*"

I felt a wave of cold hit me. Somehow I had lost my footing and I was on my back on the floor trying to catch my breath. I saw Kob grab the jar off the counter and set off up the cellar steps. Did he think he could steal from me? I scrabbled for my wand.

Just as I got my fingers around it, the cupboard door next to me flew open, cracking against my elbow. My fingers went senseless, sending my wand skittering away. I scrambled after it and got it with my other hand, just in time for another cupboard door to get me in the shin.

I staggered away, swearing. What had Kob done? Backing into the middle of the room, I looked around myself carefully. From the corner of my eye I saw my stool scuttle crablike at me from the corner of the workbench. I sent a Reducto at it, but somehow both it and the spell veered away. The spell streaked out one of the half-light windows which opened for its passage and closed with a snap once it had gone.

The large store cabinet across the cellar peeled away from the wall and moved towards me with a resounding thud. *Hell*, it was almost three meters tall; if it fell on me, it would kill me.

I made for the stairs, the stool zigzagging across the floor behind me. I tried to rush up them, but the wood twisted and writhed beneath my feet. A riser somehow got itself around my left ankle and ground viciously into my flesh. I yelled and kicked as hard as I could with my right foot. I could hear the stool skittering on the lower steps.

I kicked out again in a panic. My foot connected and after a painful wrench I was free. I lunged up the bucking treads and got myself halfway through the door when it slammed on my shoulders, crushing my chest against the jamb. When it swung back open, no doubt to deal me another blow, I staggered into the kitchen.

"Kob, dammit!" I coughed. He was nowhere to be seen. The oven door swung wide with a heavy clank and I saw a drawer start to slide open. *Bloody hell*, that was the knife drawer! I cast Protego behind me and started for the back door. As I was grasping at the handle I saw the shield, which should have been behind me, fly in shreds out through the window over the sink which had obligingly opened to let it pass.

The back door wasn't about to offer me the same courtesy. I pulled frantically on the knob. It finally yielded a few inches as a knife thunked solidly into the wood. I wedged my shoulder into the gap and shoved back with my legs in an attempt to get it open. My coat on the hook next to the door took that opportunity to twine tightly around my arms and start to work its way up my torso in a tight embrace. I just had time for a gulp of air before it pushed over my face and started to smother me.

In the darkness I arched myself sharply backward trying to get my face free, but the wool clung tightly to my nose and mouth. My chest heaved and it was like I was back on the floor of the damn shack trying to breathe through my blood. Lights flashed and exploded behind my eyes, and behind that was a wall of darkness with the weight of my own death sitting in it. My legs gave way and I could feel myself sliding down the doorjamb and keeling over in a long fall.

The next thing I knew, I was lying in the grass at the foot of the back steps, gasping in the cold air. My coat was lying half-across me, still and lifeless. I flung it away and crawled a few feet before I lay back down on my side in the wet grass. A steady cool rain was running over my face.

The throbbing pain in my left ankle finally spurred me up. I staggered to my feet and reluctantly picked up my now-inert coat. I didn't really want to touch it, but as I couldn't go back into the house, I would probably need the emergency supplies I had packed in the pockets.

A last look back at the house showed it surprisingly dark, quiet, completely still. No doubt it would be happy to throw me out again or kill me if I ventured back inside. I limped down to the greenhouse, shut the door behind me and put up the heaviest wards I could manage in my current state. I especially weighted the wards against house elves. The little sod thought he could throw me out of my own

home! I tried to avoid thinking about the fact that he had succeeded.

At last I sank onto the cot that I thankfully hadn't bothered to transfigure back two days ago. I peeled back my sock and examined my ankle. The skin was torn and I was bleeding into my shoe, the ankle bruised and swollen, but I didn't think it was sprained. I cast to clean it up and seal the wounds, then worked on the rest of my scrapes and bruises.

I tried to concentrate on the healing. Whenever my thoughts veered back to being thrown out of my home, *my own home*, I felt my wand hand start to shake. How could he do that, just because he didn't approve of some potion? At least I had a place to sleep at the moment, but what if I truly couldn't go back inside, to my equipment, my business orders, my records, the rest of my emergency money? My just finished potion... but that was moot now, of course. Kob had a sacking technique that was surprisingly similar to the Dark Lord's.

It seemed strange to think that I didn't have to track Lee now, or think about Avi or Amy again. Instead of relief I just felt empty exhaustion. Whatever I did or didn't have to do, there was nothing I could do, tonight. I cast some final warming and drying charms on myself, scourgified the blood out of my sock, climbed into the sleeping bag and went to sleep.

NEWS

I was in a large dark house. There were two women there, who told me that we were moving, quickly, and I had to pack anything I wanted to keep. I went upstairs to my room, it was up three steps that were very high, but I just managed to pull myself up. When I got to the room, it was already empty. The only piece of furniture was a large bedstead, stripped to

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the mattress. Something told me that I had to look under the bed. I knelt by it with a crawling dread, but what I pulled from beneath was a game. It was a paper and cardboard playing board, like the cheapest sort of chess set, but it was printed not with squares, but with a bird's-eye-view of a round pond in a delicate blue, surrounded by brilliant green grass.

Peering closer at the board I could see there were detailed drawings of the pond's plants, all in the right places; reeds, rushes, sedges, horsetails, water lilies, bog orchids, and wild flag. And in and around the pond there were small circles where wooden playing pieces sat. On the grass above the pond was a picnicking family; in amongst the reeds was a young boy with a collecting net; in the shallows was a tiny carved eel. An eel! Then I saw the most perfect piece, a kingfisher. I picked up the bird, entranced by the painted gray, blue and white feathers, by the tiny black v across the chest. It was perfect.

When I woke, the image was still so clear in my mind that I felt a pang of loss that I couldn't hold the little bird in my hand. I turned it over in my mind's eye instead. It wouldn't be too hard to reproduce; transfigure a small piece of wood or carve it, then paint it... I hadn't painted anything since I was a child, but if I could see the colors so clearly in my head, surely it couldn't be too difficult.

I sat up and almost started casting around for a bit of wood I could use when I remembered where I was and why. I gave a bitter laugh. I had just been thrown out of my house with nothing but my wand and my coat, and here I was trying to start up a sideline in carved wooden animals!

The thing to do, I decided, was to find someplace to have some tea and breakfast so I could think things through and plan how to get my home back. I took my broom out of my coat pocket, unshrunk it and disillusioned myself, and flew to my favorite coffee shop on the island. I landed out of sight and dropped the disillusionment.

I grimaced at the almond croissants in the pastry display, ordered tea and a bagel, and mulled over my options as I chewed. I saw two main possibilities. If this were some common, easily reversible sort of curse or ban, though I hadn't heard of it myself, surely a bit of

research at the library could give me a solution or point me in the right direction. If it wasn't, well, I wasn't keen on the long trip, but I had a standing invitation to go back to Brazil and visit the lab. I could stay there at least temporarily, and perhaps hire someone to retrieve my belongings and even sell the house, if worse came to worst. The thought made me groan a bit. I finally had a home, and now I was to be chased out again?

I drank again and almost spilled my tea when I felt a sudden twitch in my pocket. I pulled out my little stack of protean notes. Could it be Kob telling me he had reversed his curse on the house; or Lee making contact again? I supposed I could ignore the latter now. However it was the mate to Amy's note that had words appearing across it. It was surprisingly legible for a healer: *'Vancouver Stryer, Monday evening edition, page 3. I'm sorry, A.B.'*

It wasn't very informative, but then there wasn't much room for details on the note. The 'I'm sorry' troubled me a bit, especially with the reference to a newspaper. I wondered with a queasy feeling if Kob had let my name slip already. I had to get a copy of the paper to see.

There wasn't enough of a wizarding population on the island even to support a newsstand, one of its main selling points to me. I would have to go into the city to get the paper, but since I planned to go to the library anyway, I would simply combine the trips.

Leaving the coffee shop I found a secluded spot and apparated to the undercity near the library. The closest newsstand only had today's VANCOUVER SCRYER on the stacks, but the vendor dug out a copy of yesterday's from the back. I ducked around the corner and commandeered a chair from a street café as I flipped to page three. It was on the first page of the local section; a disturbingly accurate sketch of Jody's face stared out from alternating front and profile views under the headline **MYSTERIOUS HOUSE ELF MUTILATION.**

Vancouver, BC

A mutilated house elf was delivered anonymously to Vancouver Asclepian General Hospital early Monday. The young woman who brought the elf to the hospital claimed to have found her while camping, but left the emergency department without giving her name or other details.

Aurors are seeking the woman for questioning and welcome any information on her location or identity. The elf, a 53 year old female, has not recovered enough to give a statement, though she is reported to be in stable condition. Hospital officials have not released information on her specific injuries, except to state that they "are not consistent with a household or workplace accident or a self-punishment injury." The Vancouver Auror department would not comment on the progress of the investigations, but Sergeant Wally Tripp said "we take any reports of possible house elf abuse very seriously and will be conducting a thorough investigation."

My stomach sank as I read. I glanced up at the clock above the bank across the street. It was nearly 9:30. And this had been published yesterday? I pulled out Amy's note and added to it. "*Meet me in lobby 15 minutes,*" I scrawled. I wasn't sure I could make it there that quickly, but I would try.

After two apparitions and a dash through the tunnel I arrived breathless in the hospital lobby. Amy was waiting for me as I had instructed.

"We have to go up to her room, now," I said, drawing her by her elbow out of sight of the admitting desk.

"It's not exactly visiting..."

"Now, we have to go now!"

"Alright!" She pulled me further out of sight near a bank of phones and transfigured my clothes into a light-blue healer's robe.

"That's not the same as yours."

"No, you're an intern, you're new. Come on."

She led me briskly past admitting and up the moving staircase. As we rode up, I asked, "what happened?"

"The Aurors came after my shift yesterday. They must have questioned admitting. Everything suspicious like that is supposed to be reported. I left instructions that Avi couldn't be questioned yet, but you said the woman wasn't working with you, so I didn't tell them not to talk about that..."

"She wasn't working with me, she *was* me," I hissed.

"What?"

"I disguised myself so I wouldn't be recognized when I brought Avi."

"Polyjuice?" I nodded. She sighed. "You didn't tell me. Well, if

she's not working with you, she won't be recognized."

"She's working with *them*," I said tightly. She put her hand over her mouth. We were in the corridor outside Avi's room. What the hell had I been thinking? Using Jody's hair had been the worst possible decision. Any stranger's hair would have done; then if Lee or the goblins saw the news article they might possibly have believed the camping story. With Jody's picture attached, there was no way in hell they would believe it. I hadn't been thinking at all, and now everything was falling apart.

"I didn't know," she began.

"Just stop trying to *help*," I said. I could see the side of her face as she opened the door. Her expression was almost the same as I remembered it; I was opening her cell door and she looked up at me in hurt and fear. I had been furious with her then. Albus had said he would be very clear, everyone understood they had to be out by three am. He didn't tell them why, but what did that matter? He was their commander, if he said clear the post, they should have cleared out. And she had what, thought it didn't apply to her? Just lost track of time, left it too late? I let myself sneer at her, it was a safe enough expression, the Dark Lord could see it all he liked. When she saw it, the drained shock on her face changed into naked fear.

Had she thought until then that it was some sort of ploy, she wasn't really captured, that I was going to pull some sort of switch, and get her out? Oh hell, I realized then that of course I would have to get her out. I just managed to keep my expression a sneer; otherwise it would have been a perfect match to hers. I had no idea how I would get her out.

That look of hurt and fear, I couldn't stand to see on her face again, now. "It doesn't matter, it's done," I said, trying to make it go away. "Now I just have to get them out, Avi first." Amy closed the door behind us. Avi was sitting up in bed, looking at us questioningly.

"Get her out? The Aurors were here, there was a news story about her; she'll definitely be noticed if I try to take her anywhere. I can hardly sneak her out of the basement again."

"She can apparate –"

"Not through the wards, not in her condition."

"Can you drop the wards?"

She snorted. "Only the head of security or the head of the hospital can do that."

I tried to think. There still was a chance, if I could rebuild a burnt bridge. I didn't want to, but just long enough to get Avi out, it would be worth it. I fished out Kob's protean note and started to write: '*Urgent, Avi in danger, must move her to safety immediately. Come to hospital room now.*' There was no response.

"Who are you writing to?" asked Amy.

"Another elf, he may be able to apparate her out through the wards, but he's not answering." I scribbled smaller, straining to fit all the words on the note. '*You want to save them? Forget me, come now idiot!*'

"Is it the same one who visits me before?" Avi asked.

"Yes."

"I will call him. Kob!"

All at once, he was there. He was also staring at me furiously. "You!" he snarled, starting towards me.

"Listen to me," I cut in, "you have to take Avi now and get her to safety," I took a few steps back, "take her to the school..."

"I don't follow your orders!" I didn't like how close he was getting. I took another step back.

"Now, wait a minute!" Amy got between us and addressed Kob. "I don't know what's happened between you two, but he saved Avi's life yesterday, and that's what he's trying to do now! Her location was published in the paper, and if the people who hurt her read it – she has to be moved. Will you do that, right away?"

He looked at her grimly, but nodded. He started towards the bed. It was probably the wrong time for me to put my foot in, but I didn't have any other time.

"I have to track them. I'm *going* to track them down, but to do that I have to get back in my house."

He didn't acknowledge me. He clambered up the side of the bed and took Avi's hand.

"I have to use that potion so I can pass their wards and track them, it's the only way." I wasn't being completely honest with him. At the moment

I only needed Jody's hair to track her; the potion would come later.

"The potion is wrong, it is the wrong way," he said.

"It might be the wrong way, but it's the only way I know!" I have to get back in my house!" He didn't deign to look my way, only studying Avi's face for a moment.

"I do not follow your orders again. You may return to your house by my pleasure. You remember it is by *my* pleasure," he said vehemently. I didn't think I could forget it. He and Avi were gone. Amy looked at me.

"What was that all about?"

"He doesn't like my methods. Look, I can't stay. I have some more hair from that woman at home. I'll need to make a directional charm to track her."

"Don't you know her name? Why don't you just use a point me? If time's important, that's the quickest."

"Don't be ridiculous; that's the easiest thing to block."

"What's her name?" Amy asked stubbornly. I was silent. "Does it really matter now?" she asked.

"Jody Garner."

"Point me Jody Garner," she cast. To my surprise, her wand swung in a small arc of about twenty degrees between north and north-east. "Not bad," she said, pleased. She was right, twenty degrees wasn't bad at all for a point me at distance.

"All right, I'm going. No word to anyone." She looked much less pleased at that. "At least not until I get Jody out and get the elves' location from her. I can't let them go to ground again."

"Just that long," she agreed reluctantly. I didn't mention that I wasn't sure at all I *could* get the elves' location from Jody. I might very well still have to use the potion to break into the house and find something to use to track Lee.

"Clear that note and keep it on you. I may have to contact you later." She nodded. I left. I used a restroom on the ground floor to transfigure my clothes back to their usual form. When I got out of the hospital I tried the point me myself. It gave me the same directions as Amy's. Disillusioning myself, I got on my broom and set out into the cloudy sky to follow it.

THE CLEARCUT

The wind was behind me, thankfully, but I still had to renew my warming charms several times as I left Vancouver behind and flew over the dark forest of the crumpled foothills. The clouds were getting thicker; sometimes I could only catch glimpses of waving treetops below. I kept correcting my course as the point me got stronger; after several hours the 20 degrees of play had narrowed to a beeline course. I was getting close.

I dipped towards the tops of the trees. She was quite near now, but ahead I could see that my cover was ending; the trees abruptly stopped on the sharp edge of a clearcut. I didn't want to chance being noticed despite my disillusionment, and I certainly didn't want to blunder across any wards or alerts before I knew what I was walking into, so I landed at the edge of the trees and began to pick my way up the hillside.

It was hard going. The clearcut wasn't new; the raw ends of the stumps were a weathered gray, and tough-leaved salal and mahonia and bright fireweed had begun to spring up. It must have been cut about three years ago from the size of the shrubs. The ground was littered with a chaotic mess of bleached snapped branches and rejected logs. The land fell away in deep furrows between the stumps. In the swath of destruction, there were a few living trees standing alone, mysteriously spared. They were naked and windswept, most of their branches gone. What kept those few alive in the midst of all the death? I felt a sort of kinship with their stripped-down forms. I used one three-quarters up the hill as my landmark and climbed.

Somewhere along the way I stumbled upon a narrow deer track leading mostly up and began to follow it. I could see now the far edge of the cut at the crown of the hill, a dark halo of trees barred

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by the lines of the light trunks. There was a tall pile of discarded fallen trunks and branches at their foot. The point me focused on it. I knew that this was my destination. I somehow knew that there was no one to see me here.

When I scrambled over the edge of the barrier, I found myself on a relatively flat and clear piece of ground just before the shelter of the trees. It must have been cleared with magic from the center out, each stick and trunk for a fifteen meter radius had been swept forcefully into the pile that formed the wall of the clearing. I couldn't detect any wards or alerts. At the lower end, furthest from the trees was disturbed ground, lumpy and uneven. At the upper end was Jody.

She was lying on her back with her head near the trees. Her eyes bulged and her tongue was pushed up just behind her bared teeth. There was a dark line pressed into her neck just below her chin, and the skin had broken in a few places. The tips of her fingers were bloody. No doubt she had struggled as they were garroting her. It was a fairly effective way to kill a witch; no verbalized spells, and the hands would be too busy to try to cast.

Her jeans by her right knee were discolored. I took a branch from the pile, wedged it below her hip and levered her up. The back of her knee was discolored with blood and there was a short horizontal cut. Stabbed from behind to bring her down, then quickly slipping the garrote around – it would have been quite simple. Simple enough that they hadn't bothered to use their special knife, whatever it was. I used my wand to turn out her pockets. Nothing.

I clambered to the top of the pile and sat on a log. The clearcut left me with an open vista to the west. Rumbled hills stretched away, their dark cloaks of forest occasionally broken by other cuts. The low clouds decapitated the tallest hills to the northwest just above the snowline. I looked down at Jody. Her clothes weren't very wet and she still had her eyes. She had probably only been dead since last night. She was fresh. I had her name. I still needed to talk to her; I could still make her talk.

I jumped back down into the clearing. Jody stared peacefully up at the clouds as I began to prepare the ground. I cut a wide circle

into the ground around me. Thankfully I had my salt with me; you never know when you might have to build a ward, and this would need to be a strong one. I poured salt into my cut circle, and then made another circle inside it and filled it with salt as well. Preparing the symbols between the two circles took up more than an hour and the light was fading as I finished. The Dee-Kelley method* was really intended for two casters, but theoretically it was perfectly possible for one to manage, and I didn't have a choice.

I said the words and cast and called her name at the end of it.

It is one of the oldest unaltered spells, and probably the clearest example of Frazier's second principle; all energy must have a source. Immediately after the words left me the color and light flattened. It began just outside the outer ring and ebbed away from me. My vision was collapsing into grainy dull shades when I looked outside. In comparison the unremarkable ground within the circles seemed to be a riot of color and detail. I could feel the cold weight of the spell just outside the circle. I had done it with two, but somehow it was more than twice as heavy now without Lucius standing next to me. The weight of it forced me to my knees. The sound of wind and moving branches had been pulled away and all I could hear was my own breath, my own heart, and my knees shifting on the earth.

What little light there was left was gathering densely above her chest in a vertical line. The connection wasn't good. I closed my eyes against the sickening wavering light for a moment and called her name again. I could feel the spell strengthen. I opened my eyes.

She was standing above me just outside the outer circle, absolutely still, fish white and gray and solid as a stump. I had pinned the snapshot of her between two of my symbols between the circles. I knew that it was strengthening the spell, but now I wished I couldn't catch a glimpse of the bright color of her face in front of that clay-like thing. I wanted to be quick.

"Jody Garner." I said her name a third time.

*John Dee and Edward Kelley were astrologers, alchemists and advisers to Queen Elizabeth and several rulers in central Europe in the mid-late 1500s. They were known for speaking to spirits.



Art by Mottsnave

"Yes." Her voice was as dead as she was.

"Who killed you?"

"Grithix... and Trollusk too."

"And Lee?"

"He wasn't there, I don't know if he knew."

"Why did they kill you?"

"They thought I helped an elf escape." I clenched my fists. Idiot!

The spell was eating away at the outer circle; I could see the grains of salt diminishing rapidly. The spell was getting heavier, too. I needed to get to the point.

"Where do they have the elves now?"

"They took us to a building... an abandoned school in a town called Kastner."

"Are there wards on it?"

"Yes."

"How are they keyed?"

"To our blood."

"Have the wards been keyed to you?"

"Yes." That was a relief; I could use my potion to get in.

"How many goblins are working with you and Lee?"

"Three. There are others they sell with."

"Were there two more?"

"Two helped them build, but I think they were killed and sold."

"Are there any other humans working with you?"

"No."

"What is the knife they are using?" She was silent for a moment.

"Lee said the name means 'clean cutting.'"

"Is it goblin-made?"

"I think so."

"Did they make the tunnel?"

"They make... tunnels." I didn't think that was the right question, but I was out of time. My heart was pounding. I felt cold and short of breath, and the outer circle was almost gone.

"I dismiss you, Jody Garner, go." I barely got the words out. The spell released with a snap as light, sound and color came back into

place. I could see Jody's body lying undisturbed as before. I lay down myself, I was shaking hard and I couldn't seem to catch my breath. I held that spell too long. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again it was almost full dark; the pale trunks and stumps and Jody's white face were just blotches in the dim light. Had I fallen asleep or fainted? I staggered to my feet groggily, cold all the way through.

I cast warming charms on myself first, cast a Lumos, then worked on obliterating my circles and symbols. I picked up the photo again. The paper was yellow and brittle now, especially around the edges, and the image had faded to nothing more than a ghost of a smile. I put it away carefully. At last I was satisfied that I had left no traces.

I climbed to the top of the log pile and unshrunk my broom. I wasn't up for a long apparition just now. Despite the warming charms a deep cold lingered and I felt weak.

I flew low, just splitting the difference between the clouds and the waving treetops. I would need to find someplace to warm up soon. It took me about an hour to find a place to stop. A small cluster of lights threw up an orange glow against the clouds. I flew straight for it and landed in cover, my arms shaking as I dismounted. I leaned against a trunk in the darkness and stared across at the small group of buildings set on the edge of the road. The lit one was a bar called BUSCH'S MILL.

Probably it would have food. I hoped it would have food, I was almost desperate for that, but that old feeling had come rushing back, keeping me on the other side of the road in the shadows. If I went in there, everyone would see it at once, how wrong I was, a twisted, crooked thing, a walking dead man among the living. I would have to put on a face and pretend to belong, like I always did, and they would put on their faces and pretend they couldn't see anything wrong with me... I shook myself free from the inertia that seized me. Waiting wouldn't make it easier, and I had to have food.

I cleaned the streaks of dirt off my knees and coat then crossed the road. There was still the wrong money in my pocket, damn it, but there hadn't been any time to change it. They could refuse to serve me, but they couldn't get the food back once I had eaten it. I

determined to say nothing until the bill came.

I got a table by myself away from the bar. I thought I would be grateful for the light and warmth, but somehow it made me feel even more set apart and awkward. I had to force myself to look the waitress in the eye as she called me 'Hon' and gave me the menu. I ordered coffee and the largest thing I could find listed, a steak and baked potato. I could hardly focus enough to choose a salad dressing. Her second time through reciting the meaningless names I stopped her at random: "that one."

Finally she bustled away. Thankfully the coffee came almost instantly. I dosed it with as much cream and sugar as the cup would hold. When I was done the saucer was stacked high with a pile of paper and plastic packets. When I lifted the cup they were left in a high ring around it like the ring of logs. I downed the sickly sweet stuff in a couple of gulps.

It helped a bit. The food helped more. I didn't taste it much, but by the end I was almost ready to rejoin the living. I still didn't feel enough part of the living to argue, negotiate or wheedle over the wrong bills I carried. When she left the bill I placed a pile of money, enough to cover it and more for my wrongness. I left, back out into the cold night. It was time to go.

MESSAGES

I apparated directly up to the tunnel, staggering hard against a tree as I landed. I would need to rest somehow before I went to Kastner, if a simple apparition was too much for me. First of all, I had to go back to my house to get the ward-breaker. After yet another apparition, I crossed my yard anxious to get in, but when I got to the back steps I stopped, sud-

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denly conscious of the weight of my wool coat and the memory of its scratching pressure over my nose and mouth. I took it off and hung it on the corner of the window box.

Standing a bit more than arm's length from the door, I spelled it open. The interior was dark and still. I set my shoulder against the door and cast Lumos within. Everything was in order, the oven door closed, all the drawers shut, no knives behind the door or on the floor. I cautiously took a step forward.

A loud thumping, and heavy slapping steps followed by a stuttering keening cry, rang out above me. I flinched convulsively back against the doorjamb as I cast a Protego around me. A huge white angular shape dropped towards me from the roof. I flung myself fully inside the kitchen and slammed the door as inconceivably long double-jointed arms seemed to reach out to me. Wedging my shoulder against the door, I raced through a locking spell. The assault on the door that I expected never came. My ear pressed to the door, I could hear only a hesitant slapping on the back steps followed by a short high call. *What the hell?*

I flicked back the curtains over the kitchen sink and craned over against the window to catch a glimpse of the back steps and a black-and-white feathered back. I went back to the door, dropped the locking charm and yanked it open. A bloody albatross stood there, stinking of low tide, with one gangly webbed foot raised. There was an aluminum letter tube strapped to his raised foot. Dick didn't like to bluff.

Undoubtedly there would be messages from him on my phone, which I realized I hadn't checked in days. I would have to answer him tonight or he would send me more albatrosses. My neighbors could overlook a lot, but a flock of albatrosses would have the local bird club tramping around the yard. The thought made me shudder.

I leaned forward to undo the metal tube from its leg, but the bloody bird gave a squawk and skipped back down a step. It wanted its payment first. "You're lucky I don't have a crossbow," I told it as I shut the door. What sort of fish did I have in the house anyway? Some tins would have to do. I started towards the cellar steps, but

then checked myself. I would answer Dick by phone first to head off any more bird deliveries, and I could look up the location of Kastner at the same time. When I entered the office I was a little shocked to see that it was only eight pm. I had felt like the session in the clearcut had lasted all night.

There were four messages from Dick. The first skirted the subject, asking if I had any false hellebore I could send him and inquiring after my research. The next two reminded me pointedly that he was expecting a return call, and the last tersely told me to expect a delivery. I sighed and dialed.

Valeria's voice came through cheerfully announcing the lab. "Is Doutor Stoltz available?"

"Doutor Ramson!" she said reproachfully, "he is waiting for your call. Finally! I connect you." I winced at her tone. I had to appreciate that muggle phones have no visual component.

"Cyril! Are you alright?" I was a little surprised that Dick sounded more concerned than angry.

"Yes, Dick, I'm fine." I tried to keep my voice relaxed and even, to keep the weariness out of it. "I seem to have a bird of yours."

"If you had bothered to answer my messages, you wouldn't have a bird. What is going on?"

"It wasn't that I didn't bother," I said, skirting his question, "I was away from home, I just got them now." There was a silence anchored by his suspicion on the other end of the line.

"What is going on?" He repeated.

"Nothing, Dick, I'm fine."

"You're lying." This wasn't going well at all. He was going to cut me off. What could I do? Try to plead my case? It wouldn't work, it never did. I didn't say anything at all.

"As long as I've known you, even before we met except through letters, every time, *every time* you stop answering messages, it is always because something very bad is happening in your life. Am I right?" I didn't answer.

"Are you... mixed up in something with that *ingredient* we spoke about last time?" Was he accusing me?

"I told you before, I wouldn't touch it." But I had touched it, of course, I had to.

"Are you..." he trailed off and started again. "If you tell me about what is going on, would it put you into danger? Or someone else?" It was a reasonable question, I hadn't even considered it. It was hard to conceive how it could put Dick into danger, with all the protections on the lab, and he certainly wouldn't speak about it without my say.

"No," I said carefully.

"Then will you please tell me what's happening?"

"It's not over yet, you can't spread this."

"I accept the terms." I was silent for a moment. Perhaps, after all, it would be better not to have all the information in one head. How often had I cursed Albus for that very thing? It was still a struggle to start speaking.

"I'm looking into the disappearance of some house elves. I think I've located some who are being held by a parts ring, but I haven't confirmed it."

"What are you planning?" I could hear the suspicion again in his voice. At once I felt a flash of irritation at his paternal questioning. *I didn't answer to him!*

"I don't need a minder!"

"Alright, you don't have to tell me; just tell me, do you want to do this?"

"What?"

"Whatever it is you're planning. Is someone *forcing* you to do this, or do you *want* to do it? Is that why you're doing it?" *I hadn't wanted to do any of it*, I felt like raging. There were the blackmail and the threats, but for everything that I hadn't wanted to do, how I had questioned Jody, cut up the eyes, bargained with Lee, I had wanted to keep going.

"Yes, I want to," I said finally. His sigh came over the line faintly, thousands of miles away.

"Then I won't tell you not to do it. Did I tell you about my friend, Professor Aiken?"

"Yes." I remembered the story. He had been assassinated in a café in Rio by three gunmen who had probably been hired by cattle ranchers or a logging company. Dick still wasn't sure who was behind it.

"If I could go back, knowing what I know now, I wouldn't tell him not to advocate for expanding the Xingu Reserve or work with the tribes. That's what he wanted to do. I would just tell him not to sit with his back to the door."

"I never sit with my back to the door."

He gave a dry chuckle. "And some people have tried to tell me I'm too old to go up the river. To hell with that! I'll be too old when I'm dead."

Something in his confidence inspired me. "It's a town called Kastner, in Canada, British Columbia, I think. I'm going there. I need you to have the location."

He was serious at once. "What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing for now; I need to confirm it's the right location. They've already gone to ground once and I don't want to lose them. After I confirm it, I may need your help getting the tip to the authorities." I had to admit to myself that I couldn't go up against the whole ring alone without potentially putting the elves in jeopardy.

"Yes, just tell me when."

"I will contact you when I return. Or," I took a breath, "if you don't hear from me in two days, then pass it along."

"No backs to the door, yes?"

"Yes, never."

"Good." He rang off. I stared at the receiver before setting it back down. He hadn't cut me off, how many times hadn't he cut me off now? And somehow that led me to spilling to him. Perhaps it was for the best. It wasn't how I liked to work, but tactically it might be better. Well, if I was going to change tactics, it didn't make sense to only go halfway. As I waited for the computer to warm up I wrote every fact and location I had on a piece of waterproof parchment. Hopefully it was small enough to fit in the letter tube to Dick, otherwise I would have to shrink it.

Despite the salt ward that kept it from crashing, my computer was glacially slow. Finally I was able to connect to search for Kastner. On the map it appeared as a small dot in the mountains north of Prince George. I zoomed in on the satellite view. Only a few buildings stood, surrounded by bare dirt lots. Strange. I returned

to the larger view and printed the satellite map, then went back to the main search page. I tried a site called "Remembering Kastner."

Kastner, it appeared, was a company town centered around a copper mine. When the mine closed several years ago, the company shut down the town as well, bulldozing personal homes and businesses, only leaving public and government buildings untouched. Undoubtedly it would suit the goblins to the ground. The website was designed to allow the scattered families and neighbors to stay in touch. There was a gallery of photos; I leaned in eagerly. If there were photos of the school I could get a sense of the lay of the building before I arrived.

As I clicked on the link, my screen froze, then went black. My desk lamp went out with a pop and the computer's fan shuddered to a stop. Kob was standing in the doorway silhouetted against the light in the kitchen. I stood up and stepped back from my desk quickly. I wondered if his pleasure had run out.

"You find them?" His voice was tight.

"I was given their location. Where is Avi?"

"Safe. Where are they?"

"I'm trying to find that out. You broke my office wards."

"You say you have their location, now you say you are trying to find out?" He was blocking the doorway, the only doorway.

"I haven't confirmed it. I need to go there to be sure that they haven't moved again."

"What is the location, *what is it?*" His voice rose and he stepped forward.

"It is a town called Kastner, in Canada," I said reluctantly. I could have lied, I supposed, but I did want him to be able to get the other elves out, if necessary, and I didn't want his pleasure to run out.

"You know where this is?"

"Yes, I did manage to look it up before *you* made my computer crash." He ignored my tone.

"You will take me there now."

"Will I? Do you intend to cross their wards? Or have you changed your mind about taking the potion?"

"Take it?" His face twisted with revulsion.

"It will allow the taker to cross their wards."

"No! That would make me..." he was unable to continue. It was a bad idea in any case, I had no clue how to figure a dose for him or what effect it might have on a house elf. My suggestion had done its work; the odious thought had made him ease his threatening posture.

"You will take it, you will cross the wards," he ordered. Fine, let it be his idea.

"Yes."

"We go, now!" So much for resting before the long trip to Kastner. I could hear a shuffling thumping from the back steps. The albatross was getting impatient for its payment. I pushed passed Kob into the kitchen.

"I need to prepare first. Feed that damn bird!" He at once seemed to recall that we were supposed to be adversaries and he wanted to hold the upper hand.

"I don't take orders from you!"

I slapped my parchment to Dick on the counter and started down the cellar steps. "Very well, don't feed the bird, don't give it the reply, don't make yourself useful!" I slammed the door behind me. I could hear cupboards opening in the kitchen above me. *Little bastard*, if he wanted to get on the way, he would have to do some of the work. I would have to reset all the office wards, but not now, I couldn't think of that now.

The cellar was all in order, the bottled potion where I had left it, the stool in its usual place, the cupboards all shut. I drew off two doses of the potion into small vials and stoppered them. Anything else? I had given word to Dick, but the albatross would take more than a day to reach him. I decided to send him a note as well. Making my way up through the kitchen, I saw Kob's small form at the back door, empty tins of sardines piling up by his feet. Good.

I continued to my workroom. I rifled through the drawers of the desk until I finally found my last protean note to Dick. It was mostly filled with his neat tiny lettering giving me details of the last variant trials. I vanished the words and wrote *'Kastner, BC'* across the top. I couldn't fit everything on it, but the location would do, for now. I

pulled out all the other notes I was carrying and left them in the drawer. I would only need the one if I had to send word quickly to Dick. There was a piece of paper crumbling in my pocket; I pulled it out to see the disintegrating photo of Jody. There wasn't much left of her now. I left it in the drawer as well.

I opened another drawer and dug up my slightly outdated copy of the NORTHWEST COAST WIZARDING ATLAS AND GAZETTEER. As I had hoped, there was a general apparition point listed for Prince George. A few vials lay at the bottom of the drawer. I sifted through them and found an invigoration draught. I sighed, and took it. I needed to have all my wits about me.

Back in the kitchen, Kob was alone. The tins had already been tidied away. "You sent it off?" He answered with a curt nod. "Let's go," I said.

LIT UP

It had been drizzling in Prince George, but it was snowing in the mountains. I welcomed the cold air at first when we started to fly out of the town, still feeling a bit ill from the several apparitions it had taken to get there. Soon I

cursed it as it bit into my fingers clutching the map and my wand, trying to keep both a point me on the town and to steer clear of any obstacles. Finally I shoved the damp pages back at Kob. "You read it!" I warmed one hand at a time in my sleeve and wondered if he would have us crash into a cliff. The visibility was none too good. I recast the point me when I could feel my fingers again.

Following the point me and Kob's directions, which came in the form of sharp jabs into my right or left side, I found myself flying over the lip of a ridge at the edge of a wide bowl-shaped valley. The reflected light of the cloudy sky dimly lit patches of snow on the valley floor. A

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half-obscured moon lent a little light. I dropped quickly, sticking along the tree line as we approached the edge of the cleared land.

The landing was admittedly rough as I tried to come in mostly straight down in the cover of the trees. That Kob fell off as I touched down wasn't intentional, but part of me still relished his accusing glare as he brushed off snow.

"Where is it?"

"Somewhere in town, in an old school," I answered, "but I'm not going to walk in without cover." I shrunk my broom, then cast a disillusionment on myself.

"You won't be seen?" I asked him. He nodded. I stepped out in the open, Kob trailing close behind.

The town had only been about four kilometers square. Now it was a senseless grid of buckling tarmac with empty lots between. Here and there the dark shape of a building stood out against the snowy ground. The first one we passed was a filling station with corrugated metal walls already peeling away from wood studs. Next a white wooden church in fairly good repair aside from boarded-up windows, and then a long row of sheds whose purpose I couldn't guess.

We came across the school after about twenty minutes of walking. It was a two-story rectangle in blond brick with white-framed windows. A stubby clock tower was appended to the center-front. I could feel the deep thrum of the wards as we approached. Kob almost ran into me as I stopped. I cast a *Muffliato* around us.

"Here it is, keep back."

"This is a school?" He looked at the plain building dubiously.

"They're not all built in castles, you know." He gave a huff.

I checked the wards. They were anti-apparition wards, then just behind them, alert wards, strong ones. Those would be the ones keyed to blood, I assumed. There weren't any physical wards here; those not keyed to them would be able to cross, but the alerts would be activated. I assumed there would be physical wards on the building itself. I fished out my vial and looked at it. I usually made a practice of testing a potion thoroughly before ingesting it. Well, it couldn't be helped.

Kob muttered something under his breath that I couldn't under-

stand. He was looking at the glass tube with revulsion. The sooner I went through, the sooner I would be rid of him. "I'll confirm whether they are still here, then report back," I said, working the stopper loose. I downed it quickly.

I had braced myself for the kind of uncomfortable wrenching change that came with polyjuice, but aside from a creeping nausea, the effect was mild. I felt a cold stiff numbness spread across my skin. When I was as certain as I could be that the effect was complete, I stepped across the ward. I could feel it dragging against me, but my numb mask parted it. I was through. When I looked back there was no sign of Kob. Whatever house elves do to make themselves unnoticeable, he had done it.

I came at the building from the corner where no window would have a direct view of my disillusioned form. Not that many of the windows had a direct view of anything. Once I got to the brick wall I craned my head back. The first floor's windows were clear, but dark. The ground floor windows were completely blocked by full sheets of plywood. If there was any light or movement behind them I couldn't see it. At my feet there were half windows to a daylight basement. Too small to be covered with full sheets of plywood, they only had a few boards nailed across them.

I started with the basement windows, crouching next to each one and listening carefully, then casting a *Hominem Revelio* through the glass. When that turned up nothing, I held my wand close to the glass to shine a *Lumos* through. This close to the building I could feel the physical wards that prevented any entry or exit. The first eight rooms were empty or piled high with abandoned desks and chairs. The ninth was a ruined toilet. I worked my way three-quarters of the width of the back of the building when a noise brought me up short. There was a loud unsteady snoring coming from the pane next to me. I cast a *Hominem Revelio*. Again, nothing, but how much did that mean with goblins in charge?

I had to try to see inside. I cast a dim *Lumos* through the glass. The light didn't cast far within, but just below the window I could make out wood slats covered with chicken wire, pale skin, a long pointed

ear. That was enough. I dropped the Lumos and tested the window gingerly. The wards on it were not keyed to anyone at all, even with the potion, I couldn't get through. There was probably only an entrance by the doors so they could keep track of comings and goings. I didn't think I would attempt entry now. I had the location, better to leave without being detected and pass word before the elves could be moved again. With the location, everything could be wrapped up nicely.

I made my way carefully back around the corner of the building, obliterating my tracks as I went. I was a little less than halfway back to the wards from the building when the spell found me. I felt it attach itself to me just an instant before I saw it; a cold clinging followed by brilliant blue-white light playing over my disillusioned form. It was a very strong Hominem Revelio. *Shit.* I started to run for the wards where I could disappear. I didn't make it.

There was a sharp jangling pull to my left. Someone was crossing the wards without the benefit of being keyed to them and the alerts were letting the world know, lighting him up like a candle. The glimmering light was outlining the form of a tall, dark man... I almost fell over myself trying to bring myself to a stop as I recognized him: Kingsley Shacklebolt. *What the bloody hell?*

He saw me at once, little wonder, and stretched up a hand: "wait!" For fuck's sake, he had just set off their wards, they would be out here any second, he would send them to ground again; the elves would be as good as dead then. I changed my course towards him. "Get down, get away!" I hissed, 'quickly, *now!*' There wasn't any excuse for him to be here. There must be one for me; I *had* to have one, if only I could find it. I could hear a sound now, behind me. They were coming. I cast Nox at him. It didn't completely cancel the wardlight, but it was considerably dimmed. Hopefully my own glowing form would be enough to obscure him. Hopefully he would have the sense to disillusion himself. *What was he thinking?* I canceled my own disillusionment and turned toward the school. I could hear Shacklebolt drop to the ground behind me.

I walked as casually as I could towards the front door which was just opening. An Expelliarmus hit me before it was even a quarter

open, sending my wand sailing away and knocking me a few steps back. I got my footing under me and just stood with my hands held out to the side and open. The light playing across me was dimming quickly. I hoped the same was true for Shacklebolt.

Another spell hit me, Petrificus Totalis. I could just see Lee emerging from the door, but he disappeared out of my limited range of vision as he ran down the steps. Nothing else to do; I waited. His voice came near my left ear, ferocious. "What the hell are you doing here?" He came into view again in front of me, holding my wand and his in a tight grip.

A flick; I was free again. "What?" I answered, indignant. I didn't move my hands.

"What are you doing here – you followed me?"

"Followed you? *You* called *me*, so I came!"

"Called you, why would I call you?"

"You tell me, you sent me a note. I thought you wanted a sample, where I am on the ward-breaker so far, so I busted my ass –"

"Note, what note?"

I moved my right hand a few inches. "In my wallet." He nodded. I reached into my coat slowly and pulled it out. He accioed it from my hand and rifled through, then yanked out my note to Dick. *Kastner, BC.* His eyes came up. "I didn't write this."

"Wait, *what?*" I swallowed, my eyes wide. "This is a fucking setup! You fucking mallomar, you set me up!"

"Set us –" he started, but he was interrupted by a grinding voice from a squat dark shape. There was a goblin standing behind him a couple of meters away. How long had it been there? I couldn't make out much of its features with its head tipped forward in shadow. It was speaking rapidly to Lee in Gobbledygook.

Lee turned back to me. I didn't like his look, not at all. He was pale



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and staring, his hand clenched white over my card and the wands.

"Where is Jody?" he asked in a shaking voice. *Oh shit.*

"Hell if I know. I came here to do business with you; I don't keep tabs on your women." What had that goblin said to him? It knew very well where she was.

"What did you do with her?"

"Nothing, I'm not doing business with her; I'm doing business with you. Do you want the ward-breaker or not?" It would be much better for me if I could get him back to the topic of deals and away from Jody, but the goblin was already speaking to him again, low and intense. Lee raised his wand.

"Drop it." Shacklebolt's voice rang out behind me. *Idiot!*

"What?" I gasped, dropping to the ground to give Shacklebolt a clear shot. Lee was fast. Lee was very fast. There was a flash and a heavy thud behind me. I tried to scramble to the side, but a spell caught me and a wave of blackness swallowed me.

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Art by Mottsnave

HEAVY, SHARP

A throbbing ache at the back of my head told me that the spell that knocked me out had been a stunner. My left side was stinging with cold; I was lying on my side at the lowest step of the main entrance to the school, snow soaking through my clothes.

"Get up." Lee was standing just above me with my wand trained on me. I rolled over and staggered to my feet.

"What the hell?" I said aggrievedly. I couldn't say for sure if he was still buying my act, but I wouldn't drop it without knowing.

"Up." He ushered me into the school. The corridor inside was spell-lit, revealing a tall ceiling, sagging cork bulletin boards and glass-

Chapter 24 of **THE CLEAR CUT**
by Mottsnave

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fronted classroom doors. Shacklebolt was waiting inside rubbing his wrists and staring at the two goblins guarding him with knife and wand. Was that the knife? This was bad. It could have been worse, I supposed, but there was no indication that they had recognized Shacklebolt. Thank god he wasn't wearing official robes. All I needed was a little time; I hoped I could convince him to give it to us.

"What the hell is this?" I half-turned on Lee. He shoved me forward sharply.

"Shut up, keep moving!" There was an edge of hysteria in his voice. Not good. I moved.

I was herded down a stairwell into a dim basement corridor. I could hear other steps behind us. I didn't like not being able to see any of them. I concentrated on trying to see the details of the corridor and keeping my breath even.

All I needed was a little time.

A door swung open on my left and Lee elbowed me in, hard. I stumbled in, barking my shin against something in the darkness. There was a scuffle by the doorway behind me. I turned just in time to catch Shacklebolt's headlong rush into the room full against my chest. I swore.

The door slammed closed and I could hear a locking spell being set. Footsteps moved away outside. Shacklebolt caught himself and moved back. At last there was silence beyond the door.

"Moron," I whispered.

"Mallomar? What's that, dark on the outside, light on the inside? That reminds me of someone..."

"Shut up."

"Nice accent back there. Where are you from?"

"Shut up." My eyes were starting to adjust to the darkness. Some moonlight was filtering in through the half-boarded window high in the wall opposite the door. There was a low white shape against one wall, and a taller white shape across from it. I put my hands out and felt a low round seat: a toilet. Undoubtedly it was what my shin had discovered in the dark. I had seen this room from the outside, I realized, it was the disused WC. The taller white shape would be the basin sink. I remembered that it had a flyspecked mirror above it. I couldn't recall any other objects in the room. *Shit*, I needed something sharp. I started going through my pockets.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked him in a low voice. I was coming up empty; they must have searched us thoroughly. Shacklebolt had pushed past me and was examining the window.

"I got your letter; I came, and just in time for you."

"What letter?"

"Very informative, names, places. I appreciate you being so forthcoming." It had to be my letter to Dick.

"That little shit," I muttered.

"That little shit did what you should have done a long time ago and gave us the information we needed."

"And what a good job you're doing with it too."

He huffed. "That kid was about to kill you."

"The hell he was, I have something he wants," I said, thinking of his eagerness at the thought of a bond-beaker.

"You speak Gobbledygook? I do. They've got him convinced that you killed his girlfriend." He paused. "Did you?"

"Hell no, they did."

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I... spoke to a witness."

"Can you produce the witness and convince that kid?"

"No," I admitted.

"Then you're in the shit."

"You may have noticed that *we* are in the shitter. What the hell were you trying to do coming in alone? Did you think you could button them up single-handed?" I sneered at him, though I doubt

he could see it in the darkness. A complete waste.

"The Aurors are set to move in a few hours. I came to get you out first. I guessed you might not want to be swept up in the raid. I was doing *you* a favor."

"Are you fishing for thanks? It might be awhile. If you hadn't lit me up like a bleeding sign I would have been across and gone in five minutes!"

"You already set off the wards, I had to get you out quickly..."

"Imbecile, I didn't go blundering across the wards like you; I had a ward-breaker."

"What?"

"Or didn't the little shit mention that?"

"Well, hell."

Enough, it was time to get to the point. "Do you have anything sharp?" I asked him.

"Just hold on, the Aurors will be here..."

"No, they're jumpy, that kid's jumpy. They'll try to move, they'll try something. *Do you?*"

"I've got nothing, they took – what do you want?" I cast around the room again: basin, tap, drain, mirror...

"Or something heavy?" I started to feel over the toilet. The handle was firmly attached. I shoved against the tank; the tank lid moved. It could be lifted and it was heavy porcelain. I hefted it.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to get out." I edged past him to the basin.

"The window's warded; you won't be able to smash it." I thunked the tank lid against the center of the mirror. There was a heavy crunch. I set the lid down carefully on the floor so it wouldn't clatter. I struggled to get off one shoe and sock, then got my shoe on again. I put the sock over my hand and sifted through the mirror shards. There was a good

one, wedge shaped, sharp. I wrapped the sock around its base.

"What are you doing?" I didn't answer. I tried the tap but it produced nothing but a desultory squeak. Damn, I could have used some water. I rolled up my left sleeve and felt along the inside of my arm until my fingers met the ridge of scar tissue. I would need some light. There was a little moonlight near the wall. I brushed past Shackbolt again and sat sideways on the toilet with my arm resting on the back of the tank. I looked ruefully at the piece of glass. At least it was better than teeth.

"Now wait a minute – " he began.

I set the point of the shard and started to cut along my arm following the scar to my elbow. I gasped, it was much worse than last time. Of course, last time I had pre-dosed myself with painkillers.

"Stop that, you're barking!" He grabbed at my arm; the glass twisted in my grip.

I shoved against him, hard, my bloody hand slipping on his sleeve. "Back off, don't touch me, get away!" My voice was climbing to a shout. I fainted at him with my mirror shard. He stepped away, hands raised.

"Alright, I'm not touching you!"

"I have to finish this!"

"I said alright, just keep your voice down... fucking nutter," he muttered. Why the hell did he have to try to touch me? Now I had to cut twice. I put the glass back in position and cut as quickly as I could to the elbow. I clamped my hand across the cut, my breath huffing, letting the glass slip to the floor.

"You done now?"

I gritted my teeth, put my fingers in the cut and felt inside my arm. The moonlight didn't help at all. My vision went gray and I could hear the blood pounding in my ears. I could feel the muscles jumping then finally something hard under my fingers. I pulled it free, but it immediately slipped out of my grip and clattered on the floor. I knew I had to pick it up, but I was too busy pushing down on my arm and groaning between my teeth.

"Don't, don't..." I hissed to myself.

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"What the hell? *Lumos*." The room was flooded with light. I blinked in the sudden glare. Shackbolt was holding my spare wand, already restored to full size.

"Give it to me," I said.

"Just a moment." Shackbolt was looming over me with a smug look. *Shit*. "Let me close that up for you." Damn him, he wanted my wand.

"Scourgify it first or you'll give me a bloody infection." He pushed my shoulders back against the tank and pulled my hand off the cut.

"Do you think it might be a good idea for the Ministry to give Aurors emergency healer training? You should write them a letter." He was leaning over my arm. I couldn't see what he was doing; his back was in

the way. I wanted to see what he was doing.

"Piss off," I said.

He cast scourgify on my arm and my vision went gray again. *Odd*, I thought vaguely, I couldn't quite feel it. My vision swam back into focus as he recited a healing charm to close the wound. He stood up straight.

"Alright," I put my hand out, "now you can give it to me."

"Oh, I don't think so, you're in no shape..."

"It's *mine*, it's my wand, I carried it in my bloody arm, now give it to me!" How dare he try to take it from me!

"Calm down," he started, but I didn't let him finish.

"Give it to me, I need it, it's *mine*!" I felt a rising panic, he was an Auror, I was locked up and he had my wand. I lunged for it but before I could reach him my vision was submerged in gray, then black. I went down.



Art by Mottsnave

ALLIES

I woke to a throbbing head, much worse than before. When I forced my eyes open I could see the room lit by a faint green glow. I focused; it was coming from a few glowing words inscribed on the floor: "*Stay here, getting help.*"

As I read the glow faded word by word, leaving me in darkness. *Damn him*, if he thought I would just lie here and trust to Ministry, even Canadian Ministry, competence. And couldn't he have transfigured something and filled it with water? I was desperately thirsty. It would have been easy for him; he was the one with the wand, *my wand*.

I pushed myself up and started feeling around on the floor. There was less light seeping in from the window now; either the moon had left

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this side of the building in shadow or the clouds had thickened again.

Finally my fingers closed on the soggy wool of my sock. I picked it up carefully. The glass shard was still intact. I adjusted it until I had a fairly good grip. At the very least I could arm myself, even if I didn't have a way out. When they came for me, perhaps I could get the drop on them. On second thought, when they came for me, I would rather not be here at all.

I leaned against the door. All was quiet. I tried the handle. At least Shackbolt had left it open for me. I held the door closed while I considered. I didn't want to try going up the same stairwell they had brought us down. I could try hiding in another room. At once I realized that I knew where the house elves were being held, if this really was the WC I had seen from the outside. It would be down the corridor about six or seven doors along after the corner of the building. I could use pieces of my clothes, perhaps I could free them. A freed elf could be a formidable ally.

I opened the door and slipped into the pitch-black corridor. I put my left hand on the wall. I would have to feel my way. I couldn't go very quickly, since I couldn't afford to trip and make noise, but I felt a crawling urgency to get to my destination.

The distance to the corner seemed to stretch interminably. I almost laughed with relief when my knee struck the wall of the corner. I ran my hand along the wall as I turned and started counting doors. I thought I would have to try several when I approached my target, but the rumbling snores and the heavy wooden bar indicated the correct door without a doubt. I had been worried that the snoring indicated some sort of guard, but with the bar closing the snorer inside, it must be another captive.

I carefully set the bar against the wall and eased the door open. I pulled it to after me and stood against it motionless while I tried to make out the dim shapes around me.

There was a hissing sputter to my left. I swung around with my glass shard ready. A sharp white light was blooming in the hand of a short figure against the wall. I could barely make it out at first, half-blinded by the glare. I crouched ready with my makeshift

knife, but the figure didn't move. I blinked as my eyes adjusted.

It was a goblin, a female, attached to the wall by some sort of rope threaded through a collar. A prisoner? She watched me without any sign of alarm. The light in her hand came from a small metal ball that continued to hiss and flicker. I hadn't seen a light quite like it; I assumed it was goblin-made. As the figure wasn't moving, I took advantage of the light to examine the rest of the room.

The light revealed a small classroom, no desks, but a dusty chalkboard still mounted on the wall. Slumped against it, snoring heavily and wetly, was a forest troll. I knew they weren't unknown in the northwest, but I hadn't seen one in person. Ever since the Aurora Bridge incident, they stayed well clear of Seattle and its surroundings. It was very large, even folded against the wall it took up most of the room. It didn't look at all well. I walked around it in a wide berth. When I came around its right side, I could see the problem.

Its skull was partially caved in, the shaggy reddish pelt matted with black blood and its right eye forever closed. Its right arm was gone, cut cleanly from the shoulder, the bloodless wound showing the joint and muscles perfectly. I looked away. I doubted it would ever wake again.

Along the back wall, under the window, was a row of wood and wire cages. I could see a quick movement inside one. I went closer and peered in. House elves. The one who had moved was watching me warily from the corner of its cage. Another that I could see in the next cage over took no notice of me. Past that, the cages were lost in shadows, but I could hear some slight movements. I leaned forward and spoke quietly.

"Avi sent me. If I give you clothes to free you, can you get out?" He stared at me for a moment, motionless, then pointed at the front of the cage and the large metal lock that hung from it. I brought my fingers close to the lock. It didn't feel charmed, unlike the cages, but I could guess it was goblin-made from the look of it and that I could see no keyhole or combination at all. It was completely featureless. I hadn't the slightest idea where to start trying to open it.

Goblin-made. The goblin woman was patiently watching me from her spot across the room. I had the uncomfortable feeling that



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she had been waiting for me all along. I went back to her. "If I free you, can you open the locks?" She nodded.

I examined her collar and the ring on the wall; they were both solid metal, I didn't have a chance with them. The rope was another matter; it felt charmed, but I had to try. I sawed at the rope with my shard of glass, but I only succeeded in putting a gash in my thumb when it skipped across the fibers. Even holding it against the wall and bearing down hard with the glass didn't make a nick. The goblin was shaking her head at me. The charm protecting it, whatever it was, was greater than my bit of glass. I would need something resistant to the

magic, something sharp and powerful. A house elf could probably do it, but that just led me in a circle.

I would have to search the room and hope that I could turn up something, but a great deal of the room was covered by the sprawling body of the troll. I didn't really want to try to move it, if it did wake, it could easily reach across the room and tear my throat out. Of course, I mused, as long as it didn't wake, it could do something much more useful. I touched the clammy flesh of its arm. For I moment I felt like I was standing, dizzy, on the lip of one of the rubbish pits, the smell of blood and decay crashing over me, looking down on all the 'raw materials' piled up. I shook my head and pushed the memory away. The troll wasn't dead, not yet anyway, no raw materials here.

I picked up the troll's remaining hand gingerly and waited, but the snores didn't change their cadence. I began to heft the arm towards the goblin.

That finally disturbed her equanimity. She quickly edged away to the end of her rope. That didn't help me at all, I couldn't reach her.

"Get back here!" I hissed at her. She stood back against the wall and watched me warily. I dropped the arm and approached her.

"Do you speak English?" She shook her head decisively. I sighed; this wasn't the time to be literal. "But you understand it, yes?" She shook her head again. *Ridiculous*. I went on.

"I'm trying to cut your rope. I don't have anything else to use! I need you to get back in reach. Do you really think that troll is going anywhere?" Somehow, despite her total lack on English, she miraculously seemed to understand me. She pushed away from the wall and came inching back toward the arm. I hefted the hand up and positioned the thumb and index claw on each side of the rope. The claws were metallic and razor-sharp. I hoped the troll would not wake. The claws slipped off twice before the goblin pulled her rope tight and held the index finger in place while I sawed away with the thumb. Finally the strands of the rope frayed and parted. She was free.

The troll was still snoring deeply. "Locks," I said. She shook her head mutely. "Locks," I repeated, gesturing to the cages. The goblin woman looked up at me and then pointed at the ceiling. She closed her hand over the metal sphere. The hissing stopped with a snap and the room plunged into darkness. I could hear the door opening.

"What? Wait!" I lunged for the door and out into the corridor. The hallway was black. I stopped dead; there was a scuttling sound to my left. I went after it as quickly as I could in the dark, running one hand along the wall, my other out in front of me.

I stumbled into a corner once, but when I pushed myself back off the wall I could see a faint glow from a staircase to my right. A small shadowy figure was disappearing up the treads. I sprinted after it. The stairs put me back in the spell-lit ground-floor corridors, the light stinging my eyes. I could see the goblin woman ten meters down the hall, doing something to one of the classroom doors. I ran towards her.

As I neared, I could hear voices behind the door, raised, arguing in Gobbledygook. If she got the door open she would raise the alarm. I had to stop her. My hand fell on her shoulder. As usual I was too late; the door was already swinging open.

Lee and one of the goblins were in the middle of the classroom

arguing, Lee leaning across a small table. They turned towards us as the goblin woman slipped under my hand and started to run to them. I snatched at her, too slow. There was a movement on my right at the corner of my eye; a goblin was coming at me very fast along the wall.

I grabbed the still-moving door to hold it between us, but Lee must have cast on it. It wrenched out of my grasp and slammed behind me. *Shit.*

I backed away from the goblin, pulling out my glass shard. The goblin had a knife. Was it *that* knife? My stomach dropped. Whatever it was, my sliver of glass looked pathetic against it.

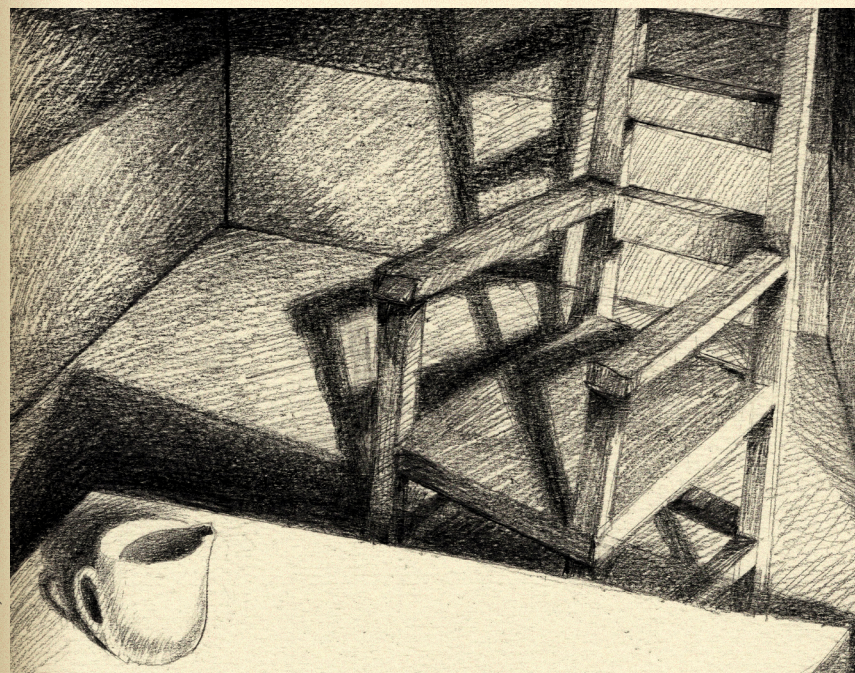
There was a thud from the middle of the room. I glanced over, still backing up. The goblin in the middle of the room was pulling a knife free from the goblin woman's neck. There wasn't any blood. She was on the floor, bucking and clawing at her throat. Lee was shrieking, "Anno, Anno!" I didn't look again.

The goblin closest to me made a dash to the side. It was trying to get behind me, I realized; if it could get me at the back of my knee, it could bring me down... I slashed at it with my glass shard. It scuttled out of the way then made a move to the side again. This time it ducked beneath my swing and slashed the side of my calf. I staggered back. The door came open then, slamming against the wall. Incredibly, the long bony head of a thestral was coming through, and another. I couldn't make any sense of it at first, until I saw the red-robed Canadian Aurors mounted on them. There was a wand pointed at me and then there was nothing.

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Art by Mottsnave

INTEROGATION

It was too much. It was exactly the same, like one of my nightmares had finally come to life. It was the same square room, the same walls somewhere between puce and beige, the same glaring lighting, the same cold metal table rooted to the floor, the same pitcher of water they could push towards you and pull away again. And the chair, the same chair that I loathed, that would always come to me in my dreams. Had some sadistic colorblind idiot gone around the world in the seventies and redesigned all the Auror departments to look alike?

I sat and tried not to clench my hands or rub my fingers. If I moved too much they might activate the bindings on the chair and

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if they did that I knew I would vomit. Then they would know they had me. I didn't want to hand them that advantage.

"Mark Anderson, from Watertown, Massachusetts." The older one, Inspector Hoke, or so his badge said, tapped my ID card which was lying on the table between us. His partner, or assistant, or whatever he was supposed to be, tried to stare me down. He was a square-jawed, square-shouldered, square-headed wanker who sat like the stick up his arse went all the way into his brain. His badge read Sergeant Preston. I decided to make a hobby out of hating him. It helped me feel a little calmer. Every time he caught my eye he tried to read me. I slid him off every time, fucking amateur.

"You a citizen of the United States, Mark?" My head was still pounding from when they lifted the stunner, though someone had healed my leg. I decided I might stay calmer if I concentrated on what was different, rather than what was the same. Red robes, to start with, and no bindings, or at least not yet. No Crouch, no Moody, no Longbottom. No one pointing a wand at my fingers. I felt sick again. Bad idea, it wasn't working.

"Visiting Canada on business, Mark? Vacation?" I had to get my thoughts back under control, so I went back to my hobby of hating Sergeant Preston. That helped.

"Does the name Avi mean anything to you?" *Shit*. Did they get that from the elf I spoke to in the basement, or did they have Avi herself? I didn't answer; I might learn something about what they knew from their questions.

I didn't learn much. They went in circles, prying at me from different angles. Strangely, they didn't threaten me with any charges or supposed evidence against me. At the least they had my illegal border crossing and my presence in the school with the goblins. I couldn't think why they didn't bring it up. I said nothing.

At great length they gave up on me, at least for the moment. Hoke ushered a stiffly angry Sergeant Preston out, then went through the door himself, running a hand through his sparse gray hair. Two officers I hadn't seen before led me back to a cell. I drank water from the tap until I was finally sated, then rolled myself onto

the narrow cot and went to sleep.

I was looking for someone in a large building, hurrying through a maze of empty rooms and corridors. There was one tall door finally; I could hear loud snoring behind it. I eased the door open silently. There were two beds in the room. The snoring sleeping figure was completely covered by the white sheets. I couldn't tell who it was, but I knew that I must not wake it, at all costs. On the other bed sat Reg, as young as when I had last seen him. He motioned me over urgently.

"Sev, I need your help," he whispered, "I'm making a weapon, but I can't do it right alone." I saw that he was holding a knife out to me. As I took it, he held out his left arm. "I need you to make it into a sharp point." I started to weep.

"Oh no, Reg, oh no..."

He gave me his arm again. "You have to do it, Sev." I started to carve from his elbow to his wrist, cutting deep so it would come to a point.

When I woke I dragged myself over to the tap and washed my face. My head wasn't pounding any longer.

About an hour later I was sitting on the cot, simultaneously fighting boredom and trying not to think about the situation. I had resorted to running ingredient substitutions in my mind when the door slid open. It was Shacklebolt. He came in and leaned on the wall. The door slid shut behind him. He was holding Mark's ID card, tapping it against his palm.

"*Mark Ian Anderson*." He gave me a look. "You know, someone once told me you have no sense of humor. I defended you. I told them you make jokes all the time, but only a Slytherin would find them funny."

"They tell me you're not talking. No tearful confessions?" he asked. I snorted in response.

"They're not looking for a confession, you know." I looked up at him. "They don't have you pegged for the mastermind behind the elf parts ring. For one thing, it would be hard to square that with why you were wandering around the basement armed only with a sliver of glass, trying desperately to free captives." So they had got that from the house elves. It also meant that at least one elf was still alive. I wondered how much Shacklebolt had told them.

"They aren't interested in your fake ID or your immigration status. What they want from you is a statement, a complete statement. They need it to prosecute, since the house elf testimony can't be admitted. They are quite determined to get your statement." I didn't reply or look up. Had they asked me for a statement, specifically? I couldn't remember, I had spent most of their questioning trying to block everything out.

"Do you know what my security clearance is now?" It sounded like a rhetorical question. I didn't bother with it. "My clearance is everything. One of the first things I did after that little visit from your friends a few years ago was to look at your sealed files and *all* the pensieve records. I understand that you didn't want to talk to them, particularly not in that room. But it's not 1979 anymore, and they aren't Crouch and Moody. I can probably get them to take your statement in a different room, and I can get you an independent witness. If you like I can witness it myself. Look, I can go so far as to personally guarantee that they won't do anything in there but ask you questions."

"No," I said. His jaw clenched.

"I'm not standing here because of the vow I took. I'm here because I feel that I personally owe you and I'm happy... I want to help you if I can. But you have to work with me! I can't just open these doors for you to walk out! I am *far* outside of my jurisdiction. You *are* going to give a statement. All I can do is make it easier, understand?"

"My name stays off it." His breath huffed out. He didn't look obliging. I went on anyway.

"And I want immunity." He came over to me slowly and leaned close, one hand on the wall near my head.

"What did you do?" He took a turn at staring me down.

"Do you know me or not?"

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"Do you really want me to answer that? Any unforgivables?"

"No."

"Did you kill anyone?"

"No."

"Assault or theft?"

"No and no... well, nothing of value."

He studied me for a long moment then pushed himself off the wall. "We'll see." The door slid shut behind him and I was alone.

IMMUNITY

After an interminable wait they brought me some terrible food. Finally I slept again, though I kept waking. Then more food, just as bad. I was lying on the cot trying to sleep again when Shackbolt returned. I sat up quickly. He was looking determined, tapping a sheath of papers against his leg.

"I'm not here to negotiate with you. I'm informing you of the deal you've got, understand?"

"Well?"

"Limited immunity. No unforgivables, no killings, assault or bodily harm. I have your assurance on this?"

"Yes."

"You will use the name Mark Ian Anderson. You will be giving them a complete statement and answering *any* questions they may have or the deal is off." I nodded.

"And you are going to release me from my vow."

"What?"

"Yes, you are. I have no interest in your name coming out. At the very least it makes the Ministry look like idiots, and I have no reason to risk your safety, but if they're going to take this deal, I have to give

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your name to the head of the Auror department here and the inspector in charge of the case. It will still be protected by Fidelius."

"Who is to be the secret keeper?"

"I am." He handed me the papers. "You'll sign it now."

I read it first, carefully. I fell within the scope of the immunity. I could feel Shackbolt's eyes on me as I read. I took my time and checked the wording of what I was to provide: "...a true and complete account of all events and facts pertaining or necessary to the prosecution of those arrested for involvement in the house elf ring in Kastner, British Columbia, to the best of my knowledge."

Aside from being a terrible construction, it left me a little scope for my own judgment, but it was also somewhat vague. Who exactly was I giving evidence against? I jabbed at the paper.

"Who was arrested?"

"Two goblins and the boy called Lee."

"They missed a goblin."

"Those were the only ones there. That's why they want your statement as quickly as possible."

"There was a goblin woman there, was she killed? The one called 'Anno.'" He gave me a curious look.

"Called Anno by whom?"

"By Lee."

"It means 'mother.' She was dead on arrival of the Aurors."

Mother. Jody had been showing me exactly what I asked when I read her, I just hadn't been able to interpret it correctly. I signed the papers. He took them back quickly, then pulled out two wands. "And now, that vow."

"They haven't signed yet," I pointed out.

"They're not going to until I speak to them about you, and for that..." He indicated my wand. I felt more trepidation with this than the signing.

"If you start spreading my name around – "

He gave me an exasperated look. "I told you, I have no interest – "

"– I'll give the Prophet a full account of how you Confounded a minor."

"I'm so glad we've reached this level of trust."

I picked up my wand. I noticed that he kept his trained on me. *Level of trust, indeed.* I released him from the vow. As the glow of the spell faded he took back my wand. He had that smug look again that I had last seen when we were locked in the WC. I hoped I hadn't made a mistake to release him.

I was left alone again for a little under an hour. A couple of robes I hadn't seen before marched me down several corridors and into a different room, a cluttered file room. I wondered if Shackbolt had told them to keep me out of the other room. There was a battered wooden desk that looked hastily cleared and four wooden chairs. In the three of them facing the desk were Shackbolt, Inspector Hoke and Sergeant Preston. They turned and watched me as I came in. I had to edge around the side of the room past Sergeant Preston to get to the waiting chair.

As I was about to sit, Inspector Hoke surprised me by standing and sticking out his hand to me. Was he trying to initiate a Good Faith with me on top of what I had already signed? I took the hand reluctantly, doubting that we would get anywhere until I did. But he merely shook it and said "Thank you for your help on this, Mark. It's an honor to work with you."

I sat, feeling bewildered by his attitude. Shackbolt looked amused. What had he told Hoke? I glared at him.

"Inspector Hoke will be directing your statement and asking questions," he said. "I'm here as a witness, and to advise if your statement will need to be constrained at any point to protect classified information..." *My identity I supposed.* "...and Sergeant Preston will be recording the statement so it will be admissible as testimony."

"Fine," I said. I just wanted to get it over with.

"Mark, why don't you start with how you were approached?"

I did, skirting the issue of how Kob knew me and where he was from. Hoke didn't question me about it; Shackbolt must have filled him in already so it wouldn't go on the record. I left Dick out of it as well; he had nothing to do with the case. Unfortunately I did have to mention that I had a contact on the Dark Market or the account wouldn't hold together. Of course they couldn't leave that

alone. Any mention of the Dark Market to an Auror is like putting bacon in front of a dog's nose.

"Name?" asked Inspector Hoke.

"I don't know," I said truthfully.

"Nickname, then."

"It's irrelevant."

"I'll be the judge of that," he said without rancor.

"No, to the best of my knowledge it's not pertaining or necessary to the prosecution of those arrested..."

Shacklebolt interrupted: "the facts necessary for the prosecution are not for you to determine."

"The contract doesn't specify who determines what is necessary, aside from 'the best of *my* knowledge.'"

"To the best of my knowledge' refers to your account of the facts and events, not to which facts are necessary."

"If that were true, why on earth wouldn't you separate the clauses into two sentences? As it is written, I have no choice but to infer that 'to the best of my knowledge' refers to both my account and what is necessary for the prosecution."

Shacklebolt leaned towards me, hands flat on the desk. "I expect your full cooperation with us, *Mark*."

"You'll get it, in everything that is *relevant*." Inspector Hoke looked like he was heartily regretting his friendly gesture to me earlier. The sergeant looked ready to punch me. "If you'll allow me to continue," I went on, "I have reason to believe that the ring was no longer using my contact as a go-between as of one week ago. And he was only a go-between. He would have no current or inside information on the organization."

"Are you sure it's 'not relevant' because you don't want to cut your ties to the Dark Market?" Inspector Hoke asked. *Damn*, he was quicker than he looked. I avoided the question.

"Can you demonstrate to me that it *is* relevant?"

"If I can, you'll hear from me, and then you'll give me his name." I shrugged. I didn't want to agree with him outright. They finally allowed me to continue. Inspector Hoke and Shacklebolt listened

impassively, asking a few questions, but Sergeant Preston acquired an expression of disgust as I described making the spindle. It deepened when I told of trading for the eyes.

All three of their manners changed when I came to my first questioning of Jody. Under Hoke's intent inquiries I had to repeat her words and memories several times. Finally he looked at Preston and said: "a sold child."

It took me a moment to realize what he meant, but then it fell into place; Lee's accent, his lack of a name, his fluency in Gobbledygook, and his 'Anno.' There were always stories, but I hadn't heard of any actual account of a child being sold to the goblins in decades.

When I came to my conversation with Lee, his interest in a bond-breaker clinched it. Inspector Hoke told Sergeant Preston in an aside, "put someone on tracking his birth family."

I left Amy out of my account. They would probably get her name from Kob or Avi, but it didn't have to come from me. They would certainly get Avi's location from Kob. I wished that I could have skipped how I had set Jody up to be killed, but there was no way to conceal it, even from myself.

They had me describe Jody's body and how I found it several times. When they finally had enough I continued.

"I needed to question her so I raised her." Hoke's head came up sharply from where he had been jotting notes.

"You what?"

"I called and raised her." Shacklebolt rubbed his forehead wearily. Preston looked ill.

"And just how did you do that?"

"A Dee-Kelley circle."

"That's a class three banned dark magic!" Sergeant Preston broke in.

I glanced over at Shacklebolt. He was resting his hand over his mouth staring at me. So he wasn't going to step in?

"It's within the scope of my immunity," I said.

"It's – " began Preston, outraged, but Hoke cut him off.

"It's meant for two casters," he said.

"It can be done by one, but it can't be held for long."

"Go on."

I went on, addressing myself mainly to Preston, describing how I raised her and her raised form in exquisite detail until he was sweating and Shacklebolt snapped "*Mark!*" He was glaring. "Get on with it." He would step in for that wanker Preston but he wouldn't bother to step in for me? Fine, if that's where we stood.

I recounted Jody's words.

"Anything else about how she was killed?" asked Hoke.

"I couldn't hold the circle any longer. I was most concerned with getting the house elves' location." Hoke was looking at Preston, who was fuming.

"Let's take a break, get some food in here." He pushed himself heavily up from the desk and jerked his head at Preston. They left the room. I could hear Preston's voice from the hall as the officer outside shut the door behind them: "he arranged to have her killed then raised her from the dead to question her!" Hoke rumbled something in reply as they moved out of range. Shacklebolt was rubbing his face.

"Well, that explains why you wanted immunity." He sighed. "At your 'posthumous' trial I testified that in my opinion you didn't perform dark magic of your own will, but that you were forced by your position to do so against your will. Was I right?"

"What would you have me do then? Drop the matter? Not question her? Let the house elves take care of themselves?"

"I would rather you had brought the matter to us as soon as you made contact with them."

"No," I said vehemently.

"Goddamn it, maybe we could have..." he shook his head. "I didn't say I expected you to. You were working exactly the way you always work. I wouldn't expect anything else. Not with the way you were trained, by us as much as anyone." He paused. "But what the hell was that with the sergeant? Do you enjoy making enemies?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"What? You don't think I'm in your corner on this? I told you right at the start that I'm here as a witness. I can't be seen taking your side. And you are quite capable of defending yourself." He was working

himself up from irritation to anger. "If you knew what strings I had to pull, what favors I called in to get you this deal... I now owe the head of the CMLE and she's not happy about this! I wish you would get it through your head that I am on your side!" He took a deep breath and gave me a considering look. Unexpectedly, he chuckled.

"You know, I have never changed in my opinion of you. I've always thought you a paranoid unpleasant prick. Only now that I've seen your file, perhaps you have a reason to be."

There it was, probably the closest thing to an apology I would ever get from the Ministry. I couldn't let it go to waste. "Will you release me from *my*..." I left the last word unspoken. I couldn't say it, but he knew what I meant. His half-smile disappeared as his face hardened.

"I can't do that, Mark."

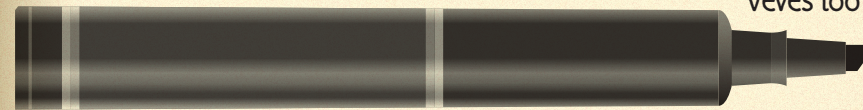
The door opened and Hoke and Preston entered. Preston was wearing a professional face again. Damn, that meant I would have to be professional too, or he would show me up. At least they had food with them. There were sandwiches and coffee. I devoured mine, it was the first food I had in days that was worthy of the name.

The rest of my account went quickly. They had half of it already from Shacklebolt. When I described the last words I heard from Lee I could see Hoke giving Preston a meaningful look. I didn't need legilimency to know what they were thinking. In that ever-shifting calculation of advantage the position of weak link had moved from Jody to Lee. The goblins had killed both his lover and his adopted mother. They could certainly get him to talk.

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REVISIT

There was nothing left but a long series of apparitions followed by interminable waiting. The clearcut was first. I sat on the log pile while Hoke directed the Aurors examining the body. Sergeant Preston moved slowly through the cleared area, his wand dipping periodically over concealed remains. An officer followed behind him marking the sites until the ground was crowded with small red flags. No wonder my circle wouldn't hold, it must have crossed several graves.

Why hadn't the goblins concealed Jody's body? Was it some sort of trap? If they thought Jody was working with someone else and wanted to draw them out, it would at least explain why she wasn't protected against a Point Me. Or were they planning to bring Lee here as a warning? Perhaps they knew that he was looking to me for a bond-breaker, for a way out. It didn't matter now, of course.

Shacklebolt was watching me watching them. I wished he wouldn't.

"You think you got her killed?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"You don't look like you regret it much." His voice was questioning rather than accusing. I supposed that inspired me to answer.

"I didn't think when I used her hair, it wasn't... planned." I looked over at her still form. "She laughed when she told me how they lured and bound the elves. I regret using the hair, but this?" I shrugged. "She's not alone here." Shacklebolt looked out on the forest of red flags.

"When this is done – " Shacklebolt began, but Hoke was coming over to us. A couple of examiners were levitating the body away, and more officers were coming down the log pile to start excavating.

"The warehouse next," Hoke said.

I took him in a side-along, then there was another long wait as a

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BY MOTTNAVE

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squad of Aurors was brought in to secure it. It looked much smaller in the late-afternoon light, and peacefully drab. There was little for me to do here but walk through and point out the place I had found the hand. When we exited out the back of the building and I had led them to where Avi had left through the woods, Hoke pulled me aside.

"Is everything the same as you left it?" He must have been trying to determine if the goblins had returned after I had been through. I started to nod, then stopped and looked back at the warehouse. I went straight back in to the main room. Something was missing. I walked slowly over and stared down at the floor next to the blue formica table. Nothing.

"What are we looking at?" asked Hoke as he came up.

"Nothing." He stared at me. "There was a painted square on the floor here, it's gone now."

"Painted square?" He had me draw it into his notebook. He stood there staring at it, looking as blank as I felt. I had thought it was part of the original purpose of the building, but the fact that it was gone now, it must mean that someone had returned purposefully to remove it.

We left the Aurors searching the building and grounds. I took Hoke to the tunnel and the model house, and then finally I was done. I would have liked to keep the tunnel to myself, it could be very useful, but of course I had to give it to them. I had no other way to explain my ability to cross the border. They still might pick up Skeeze if he was using the tunnel for other clients and the Aurors bothered to stake it out. I didn't suggest it.

Thankfully there wasn't much for me to do at Lee's house since I was exhausted. I simply brought them into the front room after their ward breakers had opened the door, then one of the officers apparated me back to the Prince George Auror station.

They gave me food and my belongings and a request to stay until the inspector returned. I agreed. I suspected that it would only be a request so long as I did, and I didn't want to have to surrender my wand again now that I had it back. Only the wand that Lee had taken from me was returned, there was no sign of the spare that Shacklebolt took from me. Since it was an illegal unregistered

wand from the Dark Market, I decided not to mention it. There was a chance as well that Shacklebolt had never turned it over to the Canadian Aurors. I sighed; the Seattle Dark Market was decidedly limited, I would probably have to take a trip to San Francisco to get a good-quality replacement. Still, even having just this one was a comfort. I tucked it away in my sleeve, reassured by its presence.

As soon as I was alone, back in 'my' cell, I pulled out my protean note to Dick. It still read *'Kastner, BC'* across the top, but now below that was a question mark. Underneath that I wrote *"All is well, ring arrested."* He must have been carrying the note on him; only a few minutes later his reply appeared letter by letter: *"Glad you are well, call when possible."* That done, everything done, I went to sleep.

I woke to the door opening. I had my wand half out, but I managed to catch myself at once as I saw the intruders were Hoke and Shacklebolt. Hoke had clearly been up all night. If the same was true for Shacklebolt, he was carrying it well.

"Mark, I'm reasonably certain that your statement is complete, so I'm going to thank you for your cooperation and let you walk out of here now. However, I may need to contact you again as the case progresses. For security purposes all our contact will go through Mr. Shacklebolt. We have discussed this; I'm going to ask you to carry a protean note at all times. We also need you to reveal your current residence to Mr. Shacklebolt."

I didn't like that, but if I refused he could probably get it anyway from Kob. Shacklebolt saw my reluctance.

"As I said before, I have no interest in revealing your name or compromising your safety."

"Fine, Marietta." He sighed in exasperation.

"If it makes you feel better," he said. If Hoke was puzzled by our exchange he didn't show it. Instead he went on wearily.

"I have been asked by the head of the CMLE, Commissioner Patricia Stevenson, to instruct you that you are not to cross the border again or otherwise enter Canada by any magical or non-magical means, under any name, unless specifically requested and escorted by a representative of the CMLE." So I was being kicked out.

"My pleasure," I said.

Shacklebolt was my escort for this trip. We were given a portkey to Bellingham, and from there he apparated us to Seattle. I took us the rest of the way, landing just beyond my wards at the back of the greenhouse. I could see the house, pale in the pre-dawn light. Shacklebolt turned and looked around carefully, fixing the spot in his mind. I waited, not moving to drop the wards.

"Mark, there are still a few things for us to discuss," he said, examining my face, "but not now, I think." Then he was gone.

I brushed my way through the long grass, wet with misting rain, up to the back door of the house. I dimly remembered that I had to talk to neighbors about something, something about the grass – I couldn't remember.

The house was still, it felt as empty and still as my head. There was nothing to do now, nothing at all that I had to do. I felt like I couldn't quite fathom the depths of that. I took a shower, as hot as I could stand it. It was light when I was done. I didn't care, I went back to bed.

NOTES

I had been trying to catch up on my orders, all the ship-ping. I restored my office wards and finally got my computer working again. I had been trying to get somewhere, anywhere in my research. I was hampered by my inability to sleep through the night. My Ministry dreams were coming back with a vengeance now. Moody's dead stomping footsteps would pace back and forth at the foot of my bed. And then there was the room, that Ministry room was everywhere I went in my dreams; in a warehouse in the woods, deep beneath my house, in the middle of endless tunnels. Longbottom's voice would ring in my head on waking, "I have a ter-

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rible memory, it would be so easy to just lock this room and forget...”

Fine for him, why couldn't I forget? I went in to the city to be away from the thoughts and dreams that seemed to be around every corner in my house, and there it was, the most exciting news the SEATTLE DIVINER had to report in months. **ELF PARTS RING BUST 3 ARRESTED.** I had come in to the periodicals room to look up an article in POTIONS MONTHLY, but the headline caught my eye instead. It was front page news.

Early Wednesday morning a team of Canadian Aurors raided an abandoned school in Kastner, BC. A 23 year-old man and two goblins, 108 and 79, were arrested. Aurors discovered 5 house elves being held captive, who were pronounced in a stable condition. Evidence at the scene led the Aurors to a mass grave site near Macallister. There, Aurors discovered the body of a 21 year-old woman and many house elf remains. A Prince George Auror spokesman, Sergeant Bruce Preston, reported that 'we are still in the processing remains. Due to their condition, we are not able to give an accurate count of the victims of the ring. However, at this time we can estimate at least 40 individual remains.' The Auror spokesman would not comment on the possibility of a connection between the ring and the mutilated elf delivered to the Vancouver Hospital last week. Based on the estimated number of remains, this may be the largest elf parts ring uncovered since the ban of 1895. Asked to comment on the scope of the ring, the Auror spokesman said, 'our investigation is ongoing.'

The five, at least, had got out. There was no mention of the troll or Anno, but I already knew that Anno was dead, and suspected that the troll was as well. Obviously the Aurors were keeping me well out of it. I supposed I could thank Shackbolt for that.

I rifled through the stack of VANCOUVER SCRYERS. They had broken the story the day before, but there was only one more piece of information; the Aurors had been led to Kastner by an anonymous tip. There I was. I read the articles again, trying to see between the lines, but there was nothing I didn't already know. So much for an escape from my thoughts. I left the papers and went home.

The rest of the day was no better; I couldn't focus on my research. One thing after another bothered me. Currently it was my pen nib. I was rifling through my desk drawer looking for a replacement

when I unearthed my stack of protean notes. I laid them out in a row. My note to Lee, I could destroy that one. There was my note to Kob, also rubbish. My note to Amy, but this one had something new written on it: *'Need to speak to you, can you please come? AB.'*

How long ago had that been written? I could let it sit, but instead I picked up my pen with the unsatisfactory nib and wrote a reply: *'Border closed to me.'*

I didn't feel the card move until a few hours later when I was fixing dinner. She had answered, *'I can come across. You name the place.'* I didn't answer straight away. I spent dinner turning the card over and over. Before washing up I wrote *'Momo's Café, Bellingham, 7 pm.'*

It was a muggle café. Over the past few days, almost every time I tried to eat or purchase something in a wizarding establishment in Seattle, I found that my money was no good there. The bill would disappear and be paid before I finished or would even fail to show up. It was probably Nimmo's doing. As Kob said, elves will speak to elves. I shouldn't be surprised. Nimmo had already proven to be a great spreader of news. It saved me a bit of pocket money, but I wanted to avoid wizarding stores when possible. It was only a matter of time before someone noticed. I would have to speak to Nimmo.

So I dressed as Dr. Ramson, arrived on Dark wizard standard time and ordered, then sat with my coffee with my back to the wall, watching the door and the people with laptops and dates and novels. Amy arrived on Light wizard standard time, five minutes late, looking around for me. She didn't order, but came straight over and sat.

"Well, it's a relief." I must have looked puzzled. She went on.

"When I saw the headlines, I thought you must have gone to the authorities, but when there was no mention of you... I just didn't know if you had got out or not, or just stayed anonymous. When you answered my note, well, I'm glad you did."

"Have they questioned you?"

"No, should I expect them to?"

"It's possible, they'll talk to Kob and Avi soon enough if they haven't already."

"That's partially why I wrote. Do I need to – is there anything I

shouldn't say? I want to be clear this time." I was reminded uncomfortably of my sharp words to her before, but she didn't seem angry now.

"No, they know about me."

"They know who you are?"

"One does. You should still call me Mark."

"You haven't been mentioned in the papers yet; they're going to keep you out of it?"

I winced. "So they tell me."

"There is something else." I waited. "I need to get in touch with Avi, as soon as possible. I managed to get her on record as leaving the hospital voluntarily into family care, but her hand is still being held in stasis on the ward. If there's a chance we can re-attach it... I want to make sure she is aware of all her options, and not staying away out of fear for her safety."

"I don't think Kob will respond to a note from me."

"You don't know where he took her?"

I considered. "I may be able to get in touch with her through another party."

"Please do try. And please let me know if you hear anything. I want to give her a choice in this, if that makes any sense." She looked at me as if she was trying to decide what could or couldn't make sense to me.

"Of course I understand," I said sharply.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that you were the one..." she stopped like she was holding herself back. "I want to thank you for answering my note. It was more than a relief. I want to stay in touch. Will you let me know about Avi?" I nodded. "Do you know the condition of the other five?" she asked.

"Only what I've seen in the papers. So they weren't taken to Vancouver Hospital?"

"There's a Healers' Center in Prince George, they must be there. You saved them." I didn't have her certainty. Did I save them, or did Kob's bringing my letter to Shacklebolt save them?

"Thank you, Mark." I stayed seated as she left. I took out my pro-tean note to Shacklebolt and began to write. If Avi was on the hospital records as being voluntarily released, Amy's job shouldn't be in

jeopardy for assisting her exit. I didn't need to hold her name back.

'Need to contact Avi per Hlr. Banks Vanc. Hosp. Pass message ASAP.' There was no immediate reply. Of course, it would be the middle of the night in England.

It didn't stop him from calling me when it was the middle of the night my time. I was sleeping in the office again after a dream in which Jody's body was trying to tunnel her way through the pile of logs around the clearing. I had to go in after her, though I was sure it would collapse and bury us both forever. It felt like I had just managed to drift off on my narrow office couch when the phone jarred me awake. The desk light was still on. The clock read 2:25. I grabbed the receiver on the third ring.

"Good morning!" Shacklebolt's voice was bright.

"It's bloody two!"

"Is it? You said ASAP, and since I'm your message boy now, I thought I'd better jump to it." I couldn't manage anything more intelligent than a grunt.

"I've got someone here to speak to you..." I wasn't really listening.

"How did you get this number?"

"If you're going to keep yourself off the Floo network, I have to contact you somehow." That wasn't really an answer. He went on, "so I contacted Miss. Bulstrode. She's not very happy about you calling her 'that little shit.'" What was he talking about? I felt muddled, at a disadvantage. Typical Auror tactic, to wake you up in the middle of the night then keep you wrong-footed.

"What?" I managed.

"You awake, Snape? I don't know where you stashed Avi, and Bulstrode says she won't tell me without your permission. Bloody typical. Here she is." There was a click as someone picked up an extension.

"Hello, sir." It was Bulstrode's guarded voice. I shoved a couple of books off my office chair and sat down. Of course she was the one who sent Kob to me. Of course. There had been more than one person I had trusted with my life that last year, after all. I had just assumed... I tried to get my voice in order.

"What is the meaning of this, Miss. Bulstrode?"

"Your standing orders, sir. I am to take care of things here, in your absence, and pass information to the Order as necessary, at my discretion," she recited in her plodding way.

"And just how is passing the job on to me 'taking care of things there?'"

"You were better placed to look for them... and I can't stand working with hobs, those voices give me a headache," she admitted, sounding a bit apologetic.

"You give *me* a headache. How did you know where to find me?"

"Kob found you."

"*You* knew I was alive."

"Obvious, whole House knows." The scorn was heavy in her voice.

"Obvious?"

"Idiot Ministry said Eaters took your body, but all the Eater kids say their parents said no." I could hear Shacklebolt sigh on the line.

"Thank you, Shacklebolt," I said.

"That wasn't my doing," he replied.

"Besides," Bulstrode went on, "how many life-debts does Potter owe you now? He said himself that he walked away and let you die. Everyone in the House kept an eye on him. Perfect health, not even a sniffle." She sounded regretful. "So, obvious."

I addressed the little shit. "Bulstrode," I ordered, "you are to contact the elf Avi as quickly as possible, through Kob if necessary, and pass on the message that Healer Banks at Vancouver Hospital wishes to see her at once. The healers think that there may be a chance to repair her hand."

"Sir," she said. I noticed that it wasn't a 'yes, sir.'

"What?"

"The House wants a favor."

"They imagine that I owe them a favor?"

"Yes." I didn't have anything to say to that, unfortunately. Bulstrode continued. "Maxwell died in November." I was surprised at the impact of the words on me. The fat ancient snake had already been firmly ensconced in the common room terrarium years before I started school. There were rumors that a student had bought him on the Maxwell Street Dark Market on a summer trip to the states

in the 1920's then smuggled him into the school, but there was no way a rattlesnake would naturally live so long. I don't know why I felt nostalgic for a beast whose greatest talent was not moving for hours on end. I wondered how long it took them to notice he had expired.

"The kids could use something to take care of," she went on, sounding sentimental herself. *Bulstrode sentimental?* It must be the end of days. Well, she was probably right.

"I'll see what I can do."

"The message will be passed today," she said in return. There was a click as she hung up her extension. All business, that was more like her.

"Fine," I muttered to the empty line. But Shacklebolt was still there. "There's another message to pass."

"I do seem to be your message boy."

"For Hoke. I had a – " *dream* wouldn't do, " – thought. Tell him, regarding the painted square, Jody said 'they make tunnels.'"

"He'll know what you're talking about, I suppose." I could hear him writing. "We still have some matters to discuss, but it needs to be in person, and not when it's two in the morning on your end." I sighed. I doubted there was a way I could get out of this.


"Will ten am on Tuesday, April tenth be convenient?" he asked.

"Convenient?"


"April tenth it is, then. Sweet dreams."

"Sod – " I began, but the click came before I finished " – off!" I hung up on the dial tone.


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FORTUNATE

I was at loose ends. I spent a part of each day in the library periodicals room following the case. Over the next week the number of remains was finally settled at forty-four. I wondered if they had recovered my jar of eyes from Kob and added them to the other remains. It was, as one journal remarked, the largest slaughter of elves since the discovery of Chicago's 'murder castle' in 1894. It was international news, spreading from one cover story to the next throughout the periodical room.

The connection was drawn between Jody and the woman who delivered Avi to the Vancouver hospital. Various papers suggested her as the source of the anonymous tip. It was as good a suggestion as any.

Lee had begun to talk, and was pleading coercion on the part of the goblins. He claimed he had been raised from childhood to be a human front for the goblins and had no choice but to work for them. It was a clever defense; he would undoubtedly garner some sympathy as a sold child, and he could easily point to Jody and Anno as evidence of what would have happened had he not cooperated. Was it true? He had seemed only somewhat apprehensive when he told Jody that they were holding Anno. I supposed he could have been hiding the real danger from her.

Lee's birth name had been discovered and released: Allan Goscinnny. The family was claiming that Lee had been stolen from them as an infant and that they had never reported it because the goblins had made threats against the child's life. There was an ongoing investigation into the family's finances, but nothing on that front had been released yet and there was no word if charges would be pressed against them.

The high Jareth of the goblins in Canada was pressuring the Canadian government to turn over the two captured goblins, Grithix and

Chapter 30 of **THE CLEAR CUT**

BY MOTTNAVE

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Trollusk, for an internal goblin trial. With the level of outrage the case was generating in the human press it didn't seem likely. I kept looking for any mention of Glern, the third goblin, but there was none. Perhaps the Aurors were trying to lure him out through a false sense of security, or perhaps he was one of the goblin remains. I wondered if Hoke was looking into the possibility of other tunnels. It seemed that everyone was keeping their word and keeping me out of it.

Opinion pieces were beginning to crop up. Some advocated for the admission of house elf testimony in court. Others countered that that would lead to an increase in elf abuse and killings by masters who feared their own elves would incriminate them. A few radical voices called for the end of elf ownership altogether, only to be met with a flood of replies calling them "blind to two-thousand years of elf culture and history," or "against house elf self-determination," or citing statistics that the majority of American freed elves were unsatisfied in their employment. As if anyone was satisfied in their employment. I wondered what the statistics would show if someone made a study of American human job satisfaction.

There was some new information among all the dross. The CMLE had arrested two go-betweens, neither of them Skeeze, thankfully, as well as the ring's largest buyer, a Mr. Pearce Baum. He had apparently been attempting to set up a large-scale banned artifacts manufactory in Montana. He had fled to Mexico on the news of the ring bust, but the Aurors were able to track the parts he had taken with him by association with the remains uncovered in the clearcut. Classic first principle. It was perhaps just as well that Kob had taken the remaining eyes. I had destroyed all of the remaining ward breaker on my return home.

Of course, now that Baum's arrest had been published, I doubted that they would get many more. A buyer or go-between with any sense would burn all ties they had with the ring.

I visited the Seattle Dark Market once, just to see if Mark was still in good standing. There wasn't any fuss about giving him the location or letting him in, but I could see that the whole market was jumpy. Guards were turning away anyone who showed signs of juice,

so there were whores arguing loudly with them at the edges of the market. Sellers were keeping the worst banned items under wraps, and Skeeze was nowhere to be seen, no doubt laying low. I expected the market would be back to business as usual in a couple of months.

It would also be months before much came of Lee's or the goblins' trials. The venue and evidence hearings were only just beginning and promised to drag on for some time. I stopped coming in to the city daily.

It was early in the afternoon on the Tuesday after I returned home. I was upstairs getting somewhere on my theory. Where I was getting, that was another question. When I opened my desk drawer for another paper pad I saw Jody's face looking up from her crumbling photo. There wasn't much left now; I could barely distinguish her smile from the sky.

The alert wards at my fence line went off. I sat staring at the yellowed photo for a minute before I realized that I had already heard the alerts for the mailman, this was something else. By that time I could hear some steps, then soft voices from the porch. I froze, listening. The date was a more than a week early for Shackbolt, unless he deliberately wanted to catch me off guard. It could be the neighbors, but what use were alert wards if I didn't check on them?

I slipped from my chair and made my way to the window at the corner of the room. There was a knock at the door. I could see two figures reflected in the rain-speckled mirror propped against the ash trunk near the walk; a woman and an elf. The woman knocked again.

I had tried to cut myself free of my old life, but it seemed that whatever I did, the edges were continually trying to grow together. I hadn't asked them here, I hadn't told them they were welcome, but I could hardly have elves hanging about on my front porch. I went down to the door and pulled it open to reveal Amy and Avi. I didn't say anything. Amy began awkwardly, "Avi told me she needed to speak to you and I agreed to come; I didn't know she was going to bring us right away, unannounced. I'm sorry, but may we talk to you?" As Avi was already halfway across the living room, it seemed pointless to refuse.

"Fine," I said, holding the door open for Amy to enter. After I reset the wards I turned to see Amy alone.

"Where?"

"She just went through there," she said, indicating the door that led to the kitchen, still standing half-open. I went through quickly. What did she think she was doing? There she was on a stool at the counter, messing about with the kettle. Typical.

Amy followed us into the kitchen. Avi apparently had the kettle to her satisfaction. She jumped off her stool and pushed it over to the table. I took the chair opposite and Amy pulled up the one I kept next to the back door. Avi, I saw, still only had her left hand. She saw me looking.

"It is dead, that one."

Amy joined in: "We left it too long, I'm afraid." I winced. If I hadn't used that damned hair...

Avi went on: "Kob asks me to give you a message. The Aurors speak to him; they have found parts of Wilia and Mayni. He says your job is over. He does not forget you cutting the eyes, but he says that your home is your home. He will not speak to you again."

"But you will?"

"Maybe cutting the eyes is wrong, but now the five are alive. I can't make a choice for them, not to live. I don't know if Kob thinks he could." Amy made a noise; she looked about to speak. At that moment I didn't want to hear her agreeing or disagreeing with Avi. There almost seemed to be some confidence between them. I decided to head her off.

"You are working at the school?" I asked quickly.

"I am working for only three months there to get references. There they are always saying things about free elves and ones who are free on purpose. I am always hearing it. I am free on purpose." Her hand came out from somewhere and opened on the table releasing the small scrap of fabric. "It's for my life."

"And just what is your life in three months?" I felt absurdly like I was back in my role as Head-of-House.

"I take another position. Somewhere else."

"Speak to Nimmo. They will find you something." It was an easy favor to give, and if Nimmo really was the center of house elf information in the city, as I suspected, I could use someone placed with him. Besides, if he did me this favor, maybe the elves would stop paying my way.

The kettle was starting to whistle. Avi pushed her stool back over to the stove and set to filling up the teapot.

Amy began, a bit awkwardly, "I saw what the papers said about that woman, the one you looked like, Jody Garner. Is she really the same one?"

"Yes."

"Did they kill her because of the article in the paper?"

"They killed her because I used her hair in the polyjuice when I brought you in," I said, looking at Avi.

"But if there hadn't been an article – " Amy protested.

"What does it matter? You might as well say 'if she hadn't chosen to be part of an elf parts ring.'"

"Did she really choose it? They say the other one, Allan Goscinnny, is claiming they were forced into it."

I shrugged. "I don't know, but part of her wanted to do it. Does it really matter, the reason she joined? The damage was done, the elves still died. She still died, whether she was forced into it or not." Avi was back at the table, with the full pot. I turned to her. "Well, does it matter why she did it?"

She gave an angry little hiss. "You don't ask me this!" She turned her back on us and stomped over to the cupboard. Amy looked at me reproachfully.

"That wasn't a fair question."

"Since when have I been fair?"

"Oh, should I lower my expectations for you?" Avi was setting out some of my mismatched mugs on the table. "I've decided to go back to my name." I looked at her in silence.

"While I was giving the Aurors my statement, I was just thinking how much easier it would be, no evasions, no half-truths. And if I do it now, well, the news is so full of everything else, it's probably

my best chance of avoiding a fuss."

"I wanted to tell you first, before I go ahead. I'm not going to mention meeting you now, of course, but your name is going to come up in how I managed to get out. If it does get into the news, you might see your name too. I just wanted you to be prepared for the possibility." She looked at me closely. "Are you alright with that?"

Why did she ask? "It's your choice to make."

"But it affects you too. It – " She cut off with an expression of trying to twist her mouth around something unpleasant. "It's been bothering me," she finished.

"Alright, so you go back to your name then."

"It's not that, it's not just that!" She looked over at Avi, who nodded at her. I had the uncomfortable sense that they had been discussing me, that they had come to some decision that I didn't know of.

"I know you don't want to talk about it. I don't want to either, but I think I have to, if I want to get past it, and I do." I winced; she couldn't just let it alone.

"We both – " she glanced at Avi, "you made some choices for us, to save our lives, so we are responsible too, even though we didn't have a say in it. There isn't any way to make it right." She sighed. I was tired, far too tired of backhanded hindsight judgments.

"And what exactly should I have done then? Please tell me, I do wish to know," I said, gripping the edge of the table and leaning forward towards her. She looked up at me surprised, and that look was back, the one I never wanted to see again.

"But I'm not blaming you! I'm not trying to," she protested. "I don't know anything else you could have done! What I'm trying to say – " She stopped for a moment to gather herself.

"You were in that position, what else could you do? I don't know, I can't claim to know what kind of choice you had. I'm thinking of myself, and what I did. So many, hundreds of times I think about that other woman. If you had given me a choice, would I have let her take my place? I could kid myself, try to pretend that I would have refused. But I wanted to live, I always wanted to live, so maybe I would have said yes."

I stared at the kitchen table.

"Does it really matter who had to make the choice, you or I? It's the same thing now. I have my life, she doesn't, I have to figure out a way to live with that. This is the best way I can think of right now."

She looked at me like she expected an answer. I didn't have any to give her.

"The woman, how did you choose her?" How could she ask me that, did she think I picked her out?

"I didn't choose, she was the first person I found close to your weight and height. That was all."

"You don't know then, who she was?" I shook my head, I didn't want to speak.

"I keep thinking about if her family..."

I cut in to stop her.

"I don't know, I don't know anything about her! What does it matter, it doesn't change anything!"

"Alright, alright, I shouldn't have –"

"What, were you hoping she was a criminal, that she deserved it? So *you* could ease your conscience? I'll tell you, she deserved it exactly as much as you did, exactly as much as *anyone* did!"

"No, no, that's not it!" She was half-standing, her voice rose to match mine.

"Isn't it?"

"No! I – it's because I – Listen to me!"

"You think you – "I started, but she spoke over me, "Just listen, please, a minute, just listen!" I sat, fuming a bit.

"I didn't ask because of *that*; it's because I've been, well, hiding. As far as I know no one knows what happened to her, no one even knows that she's dead. Working as a healer for the past few years, I've seen what it does to families, not knowing. Knowing might be bad, but not knowing is worse. If I come forward, maybe the Ministry can find her family, give me a variance to speak to them, *something*. I have to try to explain and apologize. It's not enough, but what could be enough? But it's all I can do, I have to do it."

"Apologize?"

"All because I was late! It was so bloody stupid! So I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry that I got caught, sorry that she died for my mistake, and I don't even know her name and I can't tell her. And I'm sorry you had to... do that. You didn't deserve it either."

"Sorry, you're sorry? Sorry doesn't mean you're responsible – what the hell good is sorry? Sorry doesn't do anything."

She laughed, with no humor in it. "No, it doesn't, it's good for nothing, but I've got plenty of it. It just keeps me up at night. And since I'm up at night anyway, I always sign up for the night shift, which makes me run into you."

"Fucking Felix."

She gave another short laugh. "Yes, fucking Felix."

"Just a fortunate coincidence," I said. If she noticed my slip, she didn't say anything. Avi was pouring the tea.

THE END

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Art by Mottsnave

A SHORT HISTORY OF MAGIC

The door itself was terrifying. *Don't be ridiculous*, Sarah thought to herself, *it's just a door*. Still, it was tall, dark, and imposing. And decidedly shut. It was the kind of door that always turned up in the occult thrillers she liked to read. Usually some hapless wizard would wander in like a fool and come to a sticky end, like Eustace Brocklehurst in *THE DARK SECRET OF STONECROFT MANOR*. It was also nothing like her own Head of House's door. Professor Flitwick had a bright, airy office with a view over the Forbidden Forest towards the mountains. He generally kept

by Mottsnave

Bonus Story: Never before printed

Written especially for:

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the door open and the tea on, even when it wasn't technically office hours. And for all that, she hadn't got any good explanation.

She considered opening the door. That was probably a terrible idea. Knock first, at the very least. It *was* his office hours. True, he had never actually announced them during a lesson, but the tiny code in alchemical symbols along the margins of his first potions assignment had clearly stated the hours. Sarah was no great shakes at alchemical symbols, but she saw them and *had* to look them up. The code had been in every first assignment of the year since her first year, but she never thought of approaching him until now. She had never needed to.

And perhaps she didn't need to now. Couldn't she just leave the door and the looming darkness of the dungeon corridor and run back up to the lovely Ravenclaw tower? Perhaps she could write to her mum instead. That was terrifying in its own way. Sarah had been a bit terrified to write her just after her sorting. She knew her dad would be pleased, he was always pleased with anything she did. Mum might have other feelings about it. But her mum had simply replied, "Well, of course. It suits you, dear." And then there was that surprising postscript, "If Professor Flitwick ever can't help you with something you need..." But more to the point, it would probably be useless to write her mum now. Her mum had always told her, "If you want to know something, you'll need to find a way to find out."

And she always *did* find a way to find out. It was what had cost her points when Professor Snape caught her and Stebbins 'experimenting' in the rose bushes at the Yule Ball. And what led to that embarrassing incident with the Goblet of Fire. Well, she *had* to find out if there was a way to get around the age restrictions. Whenever she needed to know something she *did* find a way. She wanted to know. She *needed* to know, with everything that had been happening. And he *would* know. *As good as his word*.

She knocked. The door swung open immediately. Professor Snape was looking down at her.

"Fawcett."

He was about as imposing as the door. Also he was waiting.

"It's, uh, your office hours, sir." She felt like a fool.

"And how would you know that?"

"It's written out in your assignments, sir."

He studied her. "Having *trouble* with your parchment on cheering charms, are you?"

"No!" Now he was being insulting. But he was still waiting.

"What's dark magic?" she blurted.

He swung the door open further. "*Get in.*" He didn't sound pleased. She got in. The door shut behind her with a very final thud. This was a terrible mistake.

"*Sit.*"

There was a low chair in front of his desk. When she sat, she felt as tiny as a first-year. The office was full of things. It wouldn't do to look at them.

He was studying her again. It was a very uncomfortable feeling to be studied.

"Your Head of House has office hours."

"Yes, sir."

"And yet here you are, bothering me."

"He... he wouldn't answer the question."

"What, *precisely*, did he say?"

"Well, he asked why I wanted to know." Professor Flitwick had looked so uncomfortable. It was really unlike him.

"*And?*"

"Our defense textbooks. I told him that they talk about the types of curses, and they say that dark wizards are 'the most pernicious threat to wizard society,' but they don't *define* it. Nobody ever says exactly what dark magic is! I don't know how we can learn defense against something unless we know what it *is*."

Professor Snape almost looked amused. "And Professor Flitwick's answer?"

"He said that the Ministry forbids instruction in dark magic and he couldn't say any more."

"Did he now?"

Professor Flitwick often answered student questions with other

questions, but Sarah understood that his technique was to lead students to their own conclusions. Professor Snape's technique was different. It was an interrogation.

"And then, you came to me?"

Sarah nodded.

"And *why* would you do that?" There was a dangerous note in his voice.

"My mum."

That wasn't the answer he was expecting.

"Your – what?"

"My mum, she said –"

"Who is your mum?" he interrupted.

"Helena Fawcett. Oh, it was Helena Marsh, then. She said that her seventh year was your first year as her Head of House. She said you delegated some things to her. You trusted her."

He remembered her mum, she could tell. Anyway, mum always took care to be memorable.

"She said that... you're as good as your word."

It had made that strange postscript so much stranger. *If Professor Flitwick ever can't help you with something you need, you might call on Professor Snape. He's as good as his word.* Sarah's mum didn't *ever* go about just praising people like that. It had to mean something.

Professor Snape was sitting back in his chair. He was studying her again, but it didn't feel quite so uncomfortable, as if she had moved from one category to another in his regard.

"Some knowledge has a cost, do you understand?"

She nodded. Her mum had told her as much.

"Someday you will pay for it." But his voice wasn't threatening or demanding now.

She nodded again.

"There is a technical definition of dark magic. It refers to any magic that abides by at least two of Frazier's three principles of Dark Magic."

Sarah leaned forward. This was exactly what she was looking for. A definition. *The* definition.

"First principle: the part may stand for the whole, and the whole

the part. Corollary: a symbol may stand for the object and an object for the symbol.

"Second: all energy must have a source.

"Third: the caster may affect the spell and the spell the caster."

He stopped. She stared at him. She had expecting something that might be more of a 'pernicious threat.'

"Well, Fawcett. You have your definition. When you are quite done gaping like a fish you may shut the door behind you."

It was no good; she had to speak to him again. The definition alone without any explanation – it was as bad as just smelling a roast without being able to eat any of it. And she *had* tried to find out on her own. She had looked up Frazier under every spelling she could guess. She found a G. J. Frazier in *WORBLETHORPE'S NOTABLE WIZARDS*, a 'groundbreaking scholar in comparative magic systems.' But the library didn't have any books by him or anything that explained his definition. When she had asked Madam Pince, the librarian gave her a hard looked and stalked away muttering about 'nosy Nellies.' It was maddening.

So there she was a week later in front of the door again. The door stood between her and her roast. She knocked.

"Fawcett."

He had opened the door just as quickly, but this time her let her in without the interrogation. She sat.

"Sir, could you... explain the definition?"

He regarded her. "You still understand that there may be a cost."

She nodded.

"I am not currently asking for payment, but when I do, I expect you to remember."

"I – what?"

"You *said* you understood."

She had said it, but it was now clear to her that she had exactly misunderstood. She thought the 'knowledge has a cost' bit was the same stuff the occult thrillers trotted out about people going mad from learning the wrong spell. Like what had happened to Dogred

Weary in *THE CURSE OF THE BLACK DOLL*. But that didn't matter to her because she always felt more like going mad when she *couldn't* find something out. She didn't realize that Professor Snape was asking her to pay him. She felt like a fool. And her mum had said he was as good as his word. Was this some kind of weird sex thing? It didn't seem likely. He was glaring at her with ill-disguised irritation. It was nothing close to a leer. She didn't know what he would want from her.

Worst of all, now she was so much closer to her answers. She could see the roast as well as smell it. She didn't want to turn back now. Whenever she wanted something, she had to keep going till she got it. She must have got that from her mum.

Sarah nodded. "I understand."

He looked at her keenly, making sure she did.

"Very well. The first principle. The part may stand for the whole and the whole the part. In your so-called Defense class, have they covered effigy dolls?"

"Yes, uh, briefly. The textbook said they're not used much."

"But you understand the principle. A figure made of wood, wax, cloth, or so on. A hair or other physical piece of the target is added, and any harm visited upon the doll affects the target. The part, the piece of hair, stands for the whole, the body of the target. Clear?"

"Yes."

"Through the corollary, a symbol my stand for an object and an object for a symbol, non-physical parts and wholes are also included. When a necromancer summons a spirit, the spirit's name is an integral part of the incantation. The name is the symbol which stands for the object, the spirit."

"But a spirit isn't an object."

"Object in the sense of goal or target, it doesn't need to be a physical thing," he said impatiently.

"Oh."

"Second principle, all energy must have a source. Do you ever get tired casting Lumos? Or holding it active?"

"No, sir."

"No. Light magic does not require energy in the same way as

dark magic. The energy of a dark magic spell may come from the caster, who will need an effort to cast. It may also come from the target of the spell, as in the Unforgivables, or from the ingredients, a sacrifice, or the environment."

"For example, every potion requires energy. The energy comes from the fire that heats it, the physical material of the ingredients, and the chemical reactions between them."

"Chemical – "

"We are *not* getting into that, Fawcett. Is the principle clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Third; the caster may affect the spell and the spell the caster. In the most basic sense, this refers to anything which requires any special concentration, effort, intent, mood, or mindset on the part of the caster. Back to Lumos. You do not need to visualize light or will it into being; all you need is the correctly executed word and gesture. You could probably cast it in your sleep. With the Unforgivables, on the other hand, you have to *mean* it."

"And the spell affecting the caster, when does that happen?"

"In dark magic, whatever effect can occur in an outward direction can also occur inward. But the principle can also refer to physical changes. An animagus requires strong intent for their transformation, and they themselves are transformed by the spell."

"So the animagus transformation is dark magic?"

"To be classified as dark, it must meet at least two of the three principles."

"But surely an animal form could be a symbol – "

He raised his eyebrows in a mocking manner. "Are you suggesting that Professor McGonagall dabbles in dark magic?"

"No, of course not!" But he hadn't really answered the question.

"Then why would anyone use dark magic? I mean, if it takes all this energy and effort and special concentration."

"Cast Lumos"

"What"

"You heard me, go on." He was watching her.

Sarah had been relaxing as Professor Snape went on, but now

she felt ridiculously nervous. He could probably find fault with her technique. But it would be worse if she kept him waiting.

"*Lumos*" The light bloomed.

"*Nox*," he cast. The light went out.

"Easy come, easy go, Fawcett."

"Er, yes."

"And you may have heard in your defense class that there is no way to block the Unforgivables, for example. The power behind a spell that is based on nothing but a word and a gesture is little compared to one that draws on a symbol or great intent and an energy source. And since the mindset or intent of the caster can change the spell it is much more flexible in effect, as well as harder to block or counteract. It is also longer-lasting. 'All spells die with the caster' refers only to anything not cast on an external power source."

"Oh."

"The definition is *perfectly* clear to you, Fawcett?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I believe we are done here. Shut the door behind you."

She knocked again, harder.

"Office hours are cancelled!" The voice came through muffled, but no less threatening for that.

Still, still! It all matched, but it didn't make sense. She leaned against the door and pounded this time.

"The Patronus charm!" she said indignantly.

He pulled the door open at last. "*What about it?*" he asked, very low. He was not at all pleased. Sarah was too upset to care.

"It meets all three principles! It's dark – "

He did not let her finish, pulling her in sharply by the shoulder of her robe and slamming the door behind her. He stalked back around his desk, which was piled very high with mid-term parchments. Some unlucky student was currently getting dense paragraphs of corrections in red ink.

"Fawcett, I do not have *time* to entertain any half-baked theories."

"But sir, it meets the first principle – the symbol of a happy

memory stands for the spirit of the caster. And the second, it takes energy, I've felt it! You can't keep it up for long. And the third – it requires both a mindset and concentration from the caster. It meets all three principles – it's dark magic!"

"Well, what of it?"

"But it can't be!"

"I thought you just convinced yourself that it is."

"It's not... bad," she said weakly.

"*That* is not a requirement of the definition."

"But, I mean, it's not forbidden. And Professor Flitwick said –"

"The Ministry definition of forbidden dark magic and the technical definition are two different things. Spells are categorized into different classes – *look*, you can pull up and read the idiot statute, it's public knowledge!" He was looking back at his stack of parchments now. His eye twitched.

"But sir, if dark magic is not all bad and it's so powerful, then why do we use light magic? I mean, how –"

"*No*, no you don't! That is an hours-long – *no!* Fawcett, get out *now!*"

He was coming round the desk; she got up very quickly and headed for the door.

"I am *not* giving you a history of magic, you *have* history classes!"

The door nearly clipped her heels.

"Do *not* get paid enough for –" she thought she heard him mutter as the door thudded closed.

She would not get it from her history classes; she knew that almost from the moment his door had shut behind her. In fact, all of her classes – she sighed. She supposed it was fine for first-years to just be taught the basic mechanics, the 'how' of spells, but now she was a fifth year and she was still getting little else. History was one of the worst. Nothing but dates, and what good were dates, for Merlin's sake? More and more she felt like classes at Hogwarts were a very pretty tapestry, but the minute you plucked at a thread, it all unraveled into a great dark hole beneath. How could they say they were teaching students magic without giving them any depth of knowledge of how or why magic

worked? Professor Flitwick would go on theoretical rambles if you gave him an open-ended question during his office hours, but often Sarah would be stumped to try to find any practical application. Professor Snape at least gave concrete examples. And he *knew* how it worked, she was sure of it. But she clearly needed to be much smarter in asking.

Sarah chose a sleepy week. Quidditch had been called on account of storms, no long parchments were due in Potions, and no one's cauldron had exploded all week. She went to his door and knocked. Professor Snape opened the door and regarded her wearily.

"Fawcett," he said. He sounded resigned.

"I will *not* get anything from my history classes, they're rubbish," she said. "And the defense classes are rubbish too."

He stood aside and let her in.

"I will not answer any open-ended, ill-formed –"

She was shaking her head. He came around and sat behind his desk.

"Sir, light magic and dark magic, they *have* to overlap. I mean, there are spells that meet just one of the principles, or two, or even three, so it's more like a – a spectrum. And good or bad, it's not..."

Sarah realized she was coming dangerously close to rambling. She took a breath and started again.

"Are they *related*? Dark magic and light magic? And how?"

He frowned at her. "It's a large question. Do you understand that the payment may be greater?"

Sarah nodded. She was probably a fool.

Professor Snape settled back.

"Records of early magical history are very incomplete. Before the Statute of Secrecy in 1689, the majority of magical records were destroyed, either by Muggles who at the time were trying to wipe us out, or by our own people, in an effort to hide our existence. Most surviving records were written by Muggles, who of course had very imperfect knowledge of magic.

"However, we do know that most early magic can be classified as dark. The exceptions were mostly in passive observational magic, such as divination, astrology, scrying, and so on. Those fields are classified as 'Receptive Magic,' and are not regarded as light or dark. At the time,

other major branches of magic included healing, charms, potions, transfiguration, and alchemy. There was also weather-working and environmental magic. Since the purpose of that was cooperation with Muggle agriculture and travel, it mostly fell out of favor as wizards began to be actively persecuted. It survives today in the field of herbology.

"In all these fields, any cast spells were in the form of incantations. That could be recited poetry, as in the Welsh bardic traditions, chants or songs. Since all incantations take *time*, when Muggles began persecuting wizards, it was very hard for us to mount an effective defense.

"However, a new branch of magic began to be developed quickly at the time of the witch-hunts. Necromancy. Now it did exist before in a very primitive form – bowls of blood and milk and so on – "

Sarah had no idea what 'and so on' meant, but Professor Snape was hitting his stride and she didn't dare interrupt.

"But it was refined in earnest during the burning times. Partly as a weapon against Muggle persecution, since animated corpses, revenants, can be sent against an enemy, but also as a defense. At that time, it was very dangerous to write down or communicate any magical information. As witches and wizards were being quickly rounded up and killed without a chance to pass along their knowledge, there was a fear that we would be completely wiped out, along with our culture, history, skills, and lore. Summoning the spirit of an executed wizard and questioning it was a way to ensure that the knowledge would not also perish."

It was so different – Sarah had always thought that necromancers were the lowest of the low. Well, at least all the occult thrillers portrayed them as mad villains with very unhealthy interests. Like Baron Despard in *THE UNHALLOWED TOMB*.

"Necromancy of course follows all three principles of dark magic. Casters use the name or an object associated with a spirit to summon it. The spells need energy – the amount of energy required to even temporarily draw a spirit back from the dead is tremendous. And all necromantic spells can definitely affect the caster. If the caster slips or loses control in any way, the spell can rebound and kill the caster or loose an angry spirit on them. So necromancers use certain safeguards: an inscribed warding circle fortified with alchemical

symbols and objects associated with the spirit. They would inscribe the circle with a bit of charcoal, chalk, or colored wax on the end of a long stylus so they wouldn't have to constantly kneel as they drew out the circle. Thus protected, they would then sing or recite their incantation to summon the spirit and bind it to their will. By the 1570s, the method was highly refined and widely studied.

"Now of course, there are no verified records, but the accepted theory is that it all comes down to some careless necromancer who fudged his circle. Perhaps he scuffed a symbol; perhaps he failed to connect a line – little matter. In any case, he was in a sticky situation with an angry spirit and a rebounding spell. He had his stylus to inscribe symbols, and he had his incantations to cast his spells, but what he didn't have was any *time*.

"So, using Frazier's first principle of dark magic, the *part* may stand for the *whole*, he used his stylus to inscribe *one* symbol in the air, and he spoke *one* word of the incantation, and it *worked*. The *one* symbol and the *one* word became the *whole* circle and the *whole* incantation, and the first wand-based spell was cast."

Sarah felt a chill go right through her. This was even better than the duel between Fenton Fortesque and Lord Meadowcroft in *THE PERIL OF THE RED HOUND*.

"*That's* how it happened?" She felt like the pretty tapestry was long gone and she was plunging headlong down the hole beneath.

"It's the accepted theory. Some Houses take care to preserve their traditions. It *can* be verified that the earliest known single-word spells were cast with a stylus and are in the field of necromancy."

"But then – "

"But *then*," he said firmly, "as time went on, other branches of magic began to adopt the same method. The ability to cast a spell *quickly* was a necessity of defense against Muggle persecution. It was then that our losses began to slow and our population stabilize. The long bulky stylus became shorter and shorter so it could easily be concealed and used in defense."

"But our wands – they're different, and the core – "

"Yes, the first wands were a simple piece of wood of no special quality and with no core. Since wizards would use a stylus for years

inscribing alchemical symbols, even a quite ordinary stick could become imbued, accustomed to being a conduit for magical power. Modern wands simply use the shortcut of a magical core to speed the process. Any wizard can make their own wand with time, practice, and determination. The first spells cast with it would be quite weak until the conduit is established."

"But they say that the wand chooses –"

"*Marketing*," he said with deep scorn.

But they were dancing around the edge of the hole now, ignoring it gaping in front of them and it was *important*.

"So a light magic spell is a dark magic symbol and incantation that have been shortened and work by the principles of dark magic." She felt like she was teetering on the edge of the forbidden now. But she had to keep going. "*Is light magic dark magic?*"

Professor Snape didn't answer, but raised his eyebrows at her.

Yes, the answer was yes, she knew it.

"But then, it's all the same, it all abides by the same principles, it's all connected!"

"Congratulations, you have just invented holistic magic theory." He was being insulting. Again.

"But –" she said, still feeling like she was teetering.

"And as I believe your question is answered –" He stood and walked towards the door.

"No," she said quietly.

"It's time for you to go."

"*No*," she said as she backed out. *It couldn't be like that!*

"We are done, Fawcett."

"*No*," she said helplessly.

But the door had shut.

Sarah had gone through her classes all week, but in a kind of daze that was very unlike her. Professor Flitwick noticed and pulled her aside after dinner one evening.

"You know, my dear, if anything is troubling you, my door is always open."

And it was, after all. But how could she tell him that every charm

she learned now, every transfiguration and countercurse, sent her mind on a long spiral down a dark hole. *What was the dark magic incantation it had come from? Had it been a song once? What was the full inscription behind the wand movement? What was its original power and purpose? Was every witch and wizard at Hogwarts dark without even realizing it?*

Professor Snape had warned her that knowledge had a cost. All those occult thrillers where someone learned too much and went mad – was this how it started?

She *had* to see him again, she decided, or she really would go mad. She didn't want to end up like Sidney Humphries in WHISPERS AT MIDNIGHT.

So once again she was standing before his door. She knocked.

"Fawcett," he said when he opened the door, "if you ask me what magic is or how it works I will take 50 points from Ravenclaw and give you detention for a month."

"That's not it, sir."

He looked at her hard, but let her in.

"I can see it, how one form of magic grew out of the other. They are related, closely related."

He waited.

"But when you were explaining the three principles, you did contrast them against Lumos. You said it doesn't follow the three principles, and I can see how it doesn't. So even if it *did* come from a dark magic incantation, it's different. So light magic *is* different than dark."

"It has been shortened and standardized, and external energy sources have been removed. It owes its existence to dark magic, but in this shortened form, it no longer abides by the principles. It stands for the original incantation, but it does not have to follow all of its rules. It is faster and more convenient, but it is weaker in particular ways. You can understand how a spell without an energy source doesn't have the power or permanence of one which does."

Sarah nodded. "What do you mean by 'standardized?'"

"Early incantations were invented by and unique to the caster. A poem or song composed to manifest their intent. Many magical traditions in other cultures still use this method. Finnish wizards are famous

for their origin songs, and the Sami are justly proud of their yoiks. After all, a sung spell composed at that moment can't be countered by anything but another incantation specifically composed to undo it."

"So each incantation was invented."

"Yes, of course," he said impatiently, "did you think they were brought down by angels?"

"No, I mean – look, sir, then can anyone just invent new spells? Compose a new incantation, attach a symbol, then shorten them?"

"Yes. It takes a clear intent, a great deal of trial and error, and a *thorough* understanding of magical theory and symbols, of course."

"But Hogwarts doesn't teach magic theory. Or alchemy or symbology. Or incantations. Or even singing!"

Professor Snape leaned in. "*Why would they want to?*" he asked quietly.

"But then we can't..." she trailed off at the look he was giving her.

"A newly invented spell has no countercurse. There is no defense against it. It is unclassified. It is unregulated. It is completely beyond Ministry control."

"They want to control us?"

"Can you blame them? Imagine the over 10,000 adult wizards and witches in Great Britain all simultaneously inventing new spells. It would be chaos."

"But if *no* new spells are ever invented, then we'll never, well, develop!"

"*No*. So those who wish to learn must teach themselves."

It sounded so much like her mum's 'if you want to know something, you'll have to find a way to find out.' *What did Sytherins teach themselves behind closed doors?*

"Is that why the Ministry forbids the teaching of dark magic?"

He raised his eyebrows at her and didn't answer the question.

Yes, the answer was yes.

Finally she realized what it all meant. It wasn't just the teaching of particular dark magic spells that was forbidden. It was everything that Professor Snape had been teaching her for weeks.

"Why do you trust me?" She felt the danger of the question as soon as it was out.

"What did your mother tell you?" he asked quietly.

"That you're as good as your word."

"Yes. And there is still the matter of payment."

She didn't knock on his door again. He didn't ask for payment the rest of that year, nor the next. Sarah read every theory book the library had, every collection of Welsh bardic verses, every riddle incantation in the Exeter book, every Finnish origin song she could find. She still saw that black hole behind it all. Sometimes she toyed with writing incantations, but she didn't quite have the nerve to recite them aloud. Maybe when her knowledge of magic theory and symbols was a little more thorough.

But then, just at the end of her sixth year, the terrible news came. The Headmaster was dead, and Professor Snape was accused of killing him. He was a dark wizard after all, everyone was saying. *Whatever that meant*, Sarah thought. But she burned her little scraps of half-finished incantations. Dark magic was dangerous stuff, just as the occult thrillers said, and the spell could affect the caster. Was that what had happened to Professor Snape?

She thought that she would never see him again. She could hardly believe it when he was appointed as Headmaster, hardly believe it that she had the nerve to go back. But somehow she did.

And so there she was, standing outside the new Headmaster's door. Despite the brightness of the corridor, it felt more intimidating than the dark door of his old office. Of course, this time she had been summoned. And she was quite sure she was going to pay.

She knocked. Headmaster Snape opened the door immediately.

"Fawcett, get in."

She got. To her surprise, they were not alone. Millicent Bulstrode was standing near his desk, watching her glumly. "*Her?*" she said. The Headmaster ignored her and took his seat. There was no chair for her in front of the desk, so Sarah stood there, cursing herself. She had been such a fool.

"Fawcett. Knowledge has a cost. Do you remember?"

She nodded, resigned.

"I am asking for your payment."

"What do you want, sir?" She didn't really want to know, but then again, she could never stand not knowing, could she? It was what had got her into this mess.

"Information. You are going to be one of my eyes in this school. You will observe and report on the actions of any student who resists my or the Carrows' authority."

This was worse, so much worse than she thought. She felt sick. "I can't, no, sir. I won't hurt them. I can't help *Him!*"

"You won't be."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Did he mean to pretend that he would be protecting the students? How on earth could he say that?

"But how – *I can't trust you!*"

He looked at her sharply. "Can't you? Wouldn't you be able to betray me at any time? Don't you think that one word of this to the wrong person would be my death warrant?"

She didn't dare answer that.

"But you won't betray me," he went on. "Am I right, Fawcett?"

She nodded miserably. He was right, of course.

"Why not?"

"Because of what my mum said about you."

He was waiting.

"You're as good as your word."

Bulstrode gave a disgusted snort.

"You will report only to me or Miss Bulstrode. You will not get caught. You know my office hours."

She did.

THE END

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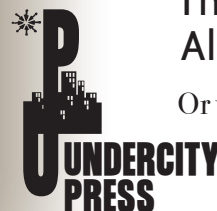
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