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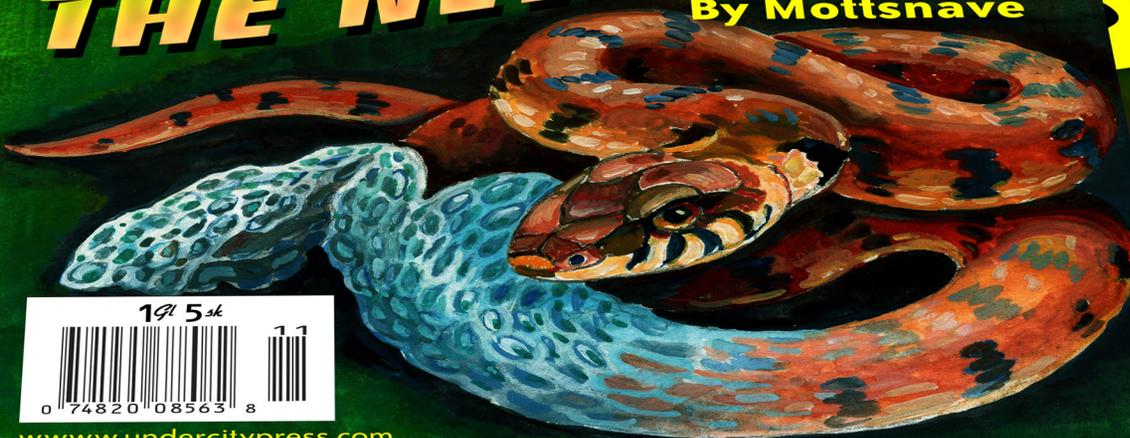
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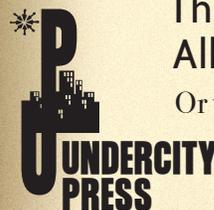
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pg of .pdf

CHAPTER 1: MILLICENT CALLS A MEETING 4
 CHAPTER 2: ASSIGNMENTS..... 9

The New Skin * By Mottsnave

CHAPTER 1: THE REVERSE..... 17
 CHAPTER 2: SANCTUARY 20
 CHAPTER 3: NEWS 24
 CHAPTER 4: DAY TRIPPER..... 30
 CHAPTER 5: WHAT PURPOSE?..... 34
 CHAPTER 6: PARDON 37
 CHAPTER 7: THE WAGER 42
 CHAPTER 8: INITIATIVE..... 47
 CHAPTER 9: DAMAGE..... 51
 CHAPTER 10: TRACES 56
 CHAPTER 11: WRECKER 61
 CHAPTER 12: MEETING..... 64
 CHAPTER 13: TRANSPORTED 67
 CHAPTER 14: INTRODUCTIONS..... 72
 CHAPTER 15: ADRIFT 80
 CHAPTER 16: A GOOD CAUSE 83
 CHAPTER 17: IN ORDER..... 90
 CHAPTER 18: ANOTHER WORLD..... 95
 CHAPTER 19: START OVER 100
 CHAPTER 20: THE MEETING OF THE WATERS 106
 CHAPTER 21: RULES III
 CHAPTER 22: METAMORPHOSIS..... II6

pg of .pdf

CHAPTER 23: SIMPLE..... 120
 CHAPTER 24: THE RETURN..... 126
 CHAPTER 25: ON TRACK..... 131
 CHAPTER 26: REVERSE..... 135
 CHAPTER 27: VOYAGE..... 141
 CHAPTER 28: UPRIVER 145
 CHAPTER 29: FRIENDS..... 153
 CHAPTER 30: BIRDSONG..... 157
 CHAPTER 31: THE JOKE 163
 CHAPTER 32: THE HUNT..... 168
 CHAPTER 33: RESULTS 172
 CHAPTER 34: THAW 178
 CHAPTER 35: TOO LATE..... 182
 CHAPTER 36: DEPARTURE 186

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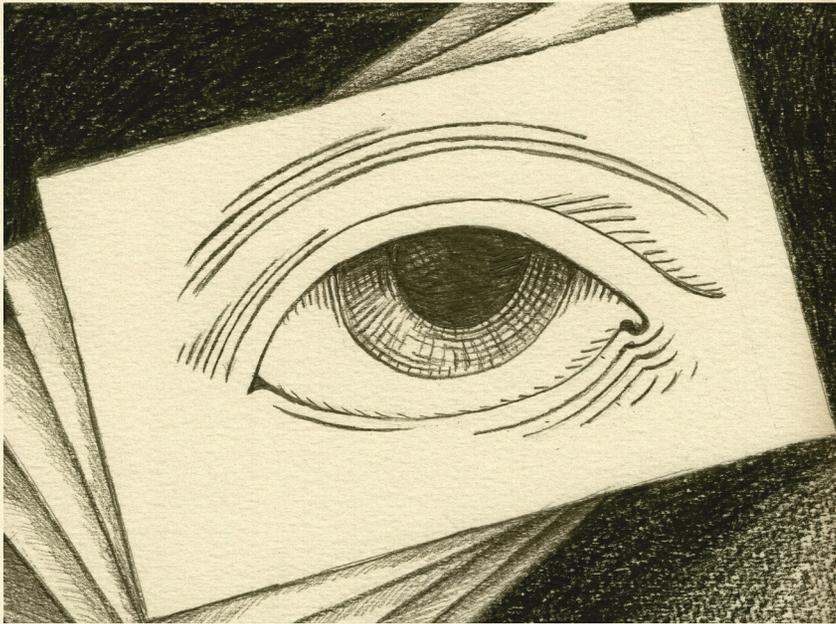
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INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE

by Mottsnave

MILLICENT CALLS A MEETING

O rder! I call the meeting to order!" Nobody was listening. Bulstrode cast a Sonorous and tried again. "Order!"

In the slight lull that followed, Pansy's voice rang out above the rest: "Who died and put you in charge?"

That was the question, wasn't it? Bulstrode gave a tight smile. There was dead quiet now; she ought to thank Pansy for the favor, even though it was obviously not what she

Chapter 1 of **INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE**
by Mottsnave

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 43, No.5

LITHA 2006

THE NEW SKIN

intended. Pansy had developed quite the talent for getting the opposite of what she wanted whenever she opened her mouth, but clearly she still hadn't learned her lesson.

Zabini stood up in the breach. "Point of Inquiry: can you make Pansy shut up?"

There were some giggles and murmurs of agreement at that. Since her big mouth had gotten the whole House smeared, *Pansy* had been stripped of all rank and seventh-year privileges and returned to her old hated nickname, by mutual agreement of the rest of the House. And really, it was her own fault, thought Bulstrode, she ought to have known you can't expect the other Houses to listen to *reason*.

It wasn't a proper Point of Inquiry at all, Zabini was always useless at protocol, but a good idea was a good idea. "I move that Pansy shut up. Is there a second?"

"Seconded!" said Zabini immediately.

"The floor is opened, closed."

"Wait a minute!" yelped Pansy.

"All those in favor?" said Bulstrode.

"AYE!"

"Opposed?"

"Nay!" said Pansy, alone.

"Motion passes."

"No it doesn't!"

"Yes, it does. Shut up, Pansy, or I'll eject you from the meeting." Inside the meeting meant a locked door, the sanctuary of the room of the Hog's Head that they had rented, almost all the other Slytherins, whatever snacks they could buy off Aberforth, and the temporary safety Bulstrode had managed to buy off the Ministry. Outside the meeting there could be members of the other Houses and Aurors. Pansy finally shut up.

Bulstrode hoped that the Aurors would stay at bay; there was really no telling how much time they had. The current sanctuary had been hard enough to buy in the first place. In fact, everything had started to fall apart at McGonagall's announcement that the Headmaster was gone. She and the other eyes had no one to report to, and then Pansy had opened her stupid mouth. From then on,

THE NEW SKIN

they were all out of it. Millicent and the other eyes in the House had held a brief whispered conference, but without the least idea of where the Headmaster had gone, there was nothing they could do but follow his general instruction of keeping the other students safe.

In the end, she left Theo Nott guarding the door of the back room of the Hog's Head that they had finally managed to secure for the rest of the House, and headed back for the school. Sluggy had long since gone charging off somewhere, like a fool. By now, the Headmaster *must* have everything under control again.

Halfway there she realized that it had been much, much worse than she thought. There were unmoving shapes on the grass that she couldn't look at, part of the walls were down and there was smoke everywhere.

By the time she reached the entrance hall, none of it seemed real anymore. Bulstrode almost missed Sarah Fawcett, the eye from Ravenclaw, sitting against the wall and looking ashen. Finally, someone who could talk to her and would know what was going on.

"What's happening?"

"You-Know-Who is dead, it's over."

"Where's the Headmaster?"

"He's dead," she said woodenly. "He killed him, he just said it in front of everyone."

It couldn't be real, none of it. Well, what could she do but just play along until she found out where everything really stood? If she was playing along, then she could stop looking for the Headmaster and proceed to the next step of his instructions: "if I am unavailable at or after his fall, find a member of the Order and pass along my information immediately."

She left Fawcett without another word and entered the Great Hall. The first members of the Order that she saw were no help at all, as they were lying among the dead. She hurried past them; surely there was someone still standing. There: she just caught a glimpse behind a rank of Aurors: Kingsley Shackbolt.

Getting to him proved difficult. There was no break in the rank of Aurors, and he appeared to be in furious conversation with someone

behind them. "Let me through," she tried, but was only rewarded with a "stand clear." She didn't even rate a 'Miss,' and the color of her robe probably didn't help. Should have remembered to transfigure it. Too late now.

She tried to get through again at another part of the rank, but it was no use and there were so many wands being held ready. This was ridiculous; the Headmaster said 'immediately,' and immediately was quickly slipping away. She could almost hear his voice: "*not* an adequate effort, Miss Bulstrode."

It wasn't really something she should announce in public, but at the moment she could think of no other way to get through to them. She began to recite all the Order passwords that the Headmaster knew, oldest to the newest: "Bumlocus, Uncora, Llewelan, Satay –"

A dark hand reached from between the Auror ranks, seized her shoulder, and pulled her through. Everything happened very quickly then. Her wand was plucked out of her hand, a *Silencio* applied, she was turned this way and that, scanned and relieved of her bag.

When she was finally turned to face Shackbolt and the *Silencio* removed, she came out of it with a gasp. McGonagall was there as well, she saw, looking as surprised as she was.

"Where did you get those passwords?" asked Shackbolt in a low voice.

Damn, if she started answering questions now, she'd be tied up for ages; she just knew it. She ignored the question. "The Headmaster gave me information to pass to you immediately if he should be unavailable –"

"He what?" said McGonagall. She looked as angry as Millicent had ever seen her, angrier than when she threw out the House.

"What information?" asked Shackbolt, more calmly.

"In my bag."

The Auror holding it turned it over at a nod from Shackbolt. Millicent fished out her crumpled first-year parchments from the bottom. Shackbolt looked at the stained parchments with distaste.

"In the corrections, sir. Coordinates and passwords for Snatcher outposts and muggleborn holding facilities. He said you're to go in right away in case they start killing captives. He said to get them out." She had imagined herself controlled and confident passing along the information entrusted to her, but now, in the center of all that scru-

tiny, she could barely get the words out without stammering.

Shacklebolt was scanning the pages intently. "Beckwith! Get this copied and distributed. I want four squads on this, now!"

Millicent wanted to hear more, but she was already being hustled away. After being yanked through two apparitions and a floo, she was left, locked in a bare room, *somewhere*. At least they had left her water and food.

There she was, in calm, silent, *nothing* for the next eight hours. It didn't help that she kept imaging whole teams of Aurors reading her terrible first-year essays with the altered corrections. All her stupid spelling mistakes, and then his notes in the margins: *It would be better to eliminate all unnecessary padding and replace it with actual content at 1605 Willoughby Lane, Clatteringshaw's, password: 'Dido' to enter...*

She had a cry once, much against her will. *It's just because you don't know what's happening*, she told herself. At least there was no one around to see, but she wished that her eyes and nose weren't red when Shacklebolt finally came in. There were other Aurors with him, one bearing tea. The tea was welcome, though she had to work to keep from gulping it down.

Shacklebolt started in on the questions straight away, as she expected. *How had the Headmaster chosen her? How had they passed information? How had she watched the other students? Was there any more information for the Order?*

There wasn't much, really, and the job of keeping students away from the Carrows' scrutiny was all over. It hardly seemed relevant. The questions were easier than she thought until, "and who are the others, Miss Bulstrode?"

"Others?"

Shacklebolt gave her a hard look. "Other 'eyes.' It wasn't just you, was it?"

"Uh, don't know."

Shacklebolt's look got harder.

"Don't know if I can tell you that. *He* didn't tell me to pass it on."

"We aren't going to play games, Miss Bulstrode. If he gave infor-

mation to anyone else, we need to know it, now."

"He didn't. They were just to help communicate and watch out for the other students. He didn't give them anything like *that*." She poked at the abused essays on the table between them.

"Why not?"

This was getting embarrassing. Well, more embarrassing. "Got some troll in the family. Legilimency doesn't work much when you're not all human."

"I see. Nevertheless, we will need the names of the other eyes."

"Need to talk to them first."

"Why?"

"They're not all... in one House. Could be bad for one to be seen getting pulled in for questioning. Could be bad for another to be seen getting *thanked* or something. I talk to them first, then they can come in quietly. Then it's up to them what gets seen." She felt a tad breathless after that; it was the longest speech she'd made since the oral portion of the O.W.L.s.

"I see. In terms of your own House, it won't make much difference. They're all holed up in that pub, yes? Everyone who has family involved will be brought in for questioning."

"I need to talk to them first, and they have to have a chance to talk to their families."

"They don't *have* to have anything, Miss Bulstrode. They *may* have a floo call to their parents or guardians, under supervision, and you may have a few hours to speak with them. But no one will leave the pub and they will be brought in after that. If anyone has the Mark, they will be arrested."

It was probably the best they could get, as things stood now. Bulstrode nodded reluctantly.

"I'll give you some cards. Whoever is one of the eyes can present it when they are brought in. They will be brought to me. We will keep it quiet. How many do you need?"

"Five."

"I expect to see you shortly, Miss. Bulstrode. I will have you brought in myself if I don't see all of the eyes in the next twenty-four hours."

"Yes, sir."

When she arrived back at the pub, she saw that the rest of the House was on the edge of... something. At least Theo had made himself useful by organizing some of the younger students to watch the door and others to pool money to buy food from the pub. That seemed to have gone well enough; there were only the soggy ends of chips in curry sauce left by the time Bulstrode arrived.

Other than that, however, the mood was not good. Someone had found an early-breaking edition of the DAILY PROPHECY, and the lists of the dead, wounded and arrested had struck far too close to home.

"I've been hoping for some good news, Mil," said Theo as she passed him his card. "The paper says he's dead."

"That's what Fawcett said, but *I* don't know."

"Listen, Mil. Something's going on in here. I keep seeing Aberforth tiptoeing around with bowls of soup and candy, and he's just terrible at sneaking, I think –"

"Don't care about soup, Theo. I've got to meet with the others."

As she walked through the crowd to slip a card to Daphne and Graham, she saw that Goyle had turned up from somewhere while she was gone, and was sitting against the wall with his head on his knees. His dad's name was in the paper, and it wasn't under 'Arrests.' Some of the kids were sobbing quietly in a corner. Fine, but Bulstrode didn't like the angry looks on some of the other faces. There was nothing else she could do about the eyes, for now; the three in the House had their cards, and she couldn't get to the two who were in other Houses at the moment. Anyway, the situation here was more urgent.

Ever since third year, it was clear to her that the main job of Slytherin head of House was to keep the Slytherins occupied at all times. Professor Snape had a multifaceted approach of games, contests, assignments, extra lessons and impossibly high work standards that kept most of the House too busy to think of giving him trouble. But now it was clear that they were about to slide into a dangerous state of angry boredom unless someone did something at *once*.

"I call a House meeting!"

The passing of the motion against Pansy had lifted the mood of

the room a fraction. Perhaps it was that they no longer had to listen to Pansy, or perhaps it was that something, *anything*, was finally happening. Now that the attention of the House was focused, it was time to bring them back to the agenda item that had caused the uproar in the first place.

"Has everybody seen the evidence in favor?" Bulstrode didn't really like speaking to a crowd, but it was marginally better now that they were paying attention.

"Yeah," said Harper, giving the mangled *Prophet* a push with his foot. "Don't know why we care, though."

"Cause he's *ours*. We don't get another like that," said Daphne, angrily. There were some noises of agreement, particularly from the upper years.

"Floor is open to present evidence against –"

Quentin Bole was up before she finished. "No *body*," he declared.

"Paper says the Eaters took it," Blaise pointed out.

"Protocol, Zabini!"

"Point of Information," said Astoria, demonstrating the protocol, "Why would anyone drag around a body if they were running?"

"The paper does not explain that, which is why it is evidence against," said Bole.

"Point of Information," said Tracey, "did they name who took him... it?" She hadn't read the paper herself; she had been too intent on worrying over her graduate school applications.

"No, it's nothing but pure speculation. The paper presents no solid explanation for the lack of a body, just that some unnamed Eaters must have taken it."

"Why doesn't someone just *ask* them?" said Terry Higgs. Second-years always thought they were too good for protocol.

"You're out of order," said Bulstrode, "unless you propose the motion that someone go and ask them..."

"Uh, yeah, that's what I propose."

"The House will consider the motion: someone, *Goyle*, will go and ask all available Eaters if they took the body," said Bulstrode.

"What?" Goyle raised his head marginally off his knees. His voice was slurred and muffled, as if he were half-asleep.

“Greg, once you’re arrested – ”

“No!”

“Greg, you’re getting arrested in a few hours. Once you’re in, you can ask around.”

His head back on his knees, his shoulders shook for a moment, but then the head moved in what might have been a nod.

“Once he’s in, how does he get the information out?” asked Higgs.

“I’ll visit,” said Theo. Bulstrode had seen his father’s name in the paper too, under arrests. He wouldn’t just be visiting Goyle.

The motion passed easily without a ‘nay.’ Bole was ready with more evidence when Bulstrode reopened the floor.

“No portrait.”

“Point of Information; the paper says it’s because he left his post, so he was no longer Headmaster,” Astoria pointed out.

Daphne jumped up before Bole could answer. “That’s bollocks. Only the Board of Governors can remove an acting Headmaster after a formal hearing on misconduct. If a Headmaster wants to step down he has to submit a resignation in person or in writing to the Board. A professor can’t just decide that a Headmaster has abdicated in absentia. It doesn’t make sense: otherwise anyone who didn’t like their contract could take over whenever they wanted.” She sat with a smile that probably came as much from shutting down her sister as getting to show off her legal knowledge. Daphne had also apparently shut down any further points on Bole’s evidence.

“Any more evidence?”

Sully Urquhart got up slowly, brushing off his trousers. There were a few groans. Once Urquhart started, he didn’t stop until you had a whole lecture. He picked up the paper and refolded it neatly.

“Get on with it!” someone called.

Sully gave a deliberate cough and began. “To look for evidence for or against, how could we do better than to examine the testimony of the man of the hour, Mr. Harry Potter himself?”

There was a bit of hissing at that. Sully went on, undiscouraged. “Who would expect that his testimony presents such perfect evidence *against?*” Sully loved dramatic pronouncements, but the

House was mostly immune to them by now.

“By his own words, this *Potter* simply watched him die without making any attempt to save or aid him. Note that, honorable members of the House!”

“Noted,” said Harper dryly.

“And yet, in the same article, this same Potter admits that the Headmaster had, on more than one occasion, personally saved his life. His very words: ‘I owe him my life.’ There was a life debt between them, at least one, which Potter deliberately did not pay back.”

“Point of Information,” interrupted Astoria, “what if the Headmaster wasn’t *trying* to save his life but just, uh, happened to whilst he was doing something else?” She looked hopeful.

“A life debt does not depend on the intentions of the creditor, but simply on the acknowledgement of the debtor that his life has been saved, and Potter clearly and publicly acknowledged that.”

“Point of Information; how is that evidence of anything except that Potter’s an arse?” asked Pritchard.

“What are the consequences for failing to pay a life debt?” said Sully.

“It’s not a quiz, Sully. Get on,” warned Bulstrode.

“The consequences vary by the severity of the failure to pay, but they usually include swift and severe nausea and vomiting, fever and headaches, followed by insomnia, depression and remorse lasting several weeks. In short, the body that owes the debt enters into revolt against the person who failed to pay it. And yet we see that this Potter is up and about and giving statements to reporters.”

Sully’s information was unquestionably good; contracts, oaths and debts were his specialty, as many of the lower years had found out the hard way.

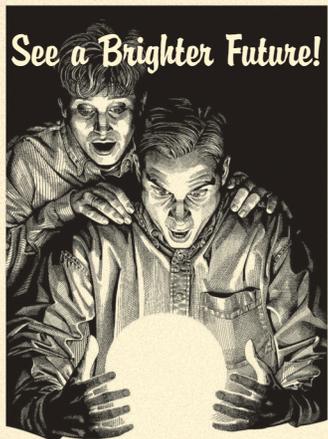
“I therefore propose the motion: Potter should be sought out and observed firsthand to see if he is suffering any effects of a neglected life debt.”

“Point of Information,” said Daphne, “who?”

Bulstrode stepped in. “He dropped out. Won’t recognize a first-year.”

“Oh, Baby...” called Zabini.

The aforementioned ‘Baby’ looked up from where she was sitting among the rest of the first-years and blinked her large brown eyes innocently.



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will go back to the school and gather information under cover of helping the restoration.”

In the silence that greeted that proposal, Pansy’s voice rang out. “They’ll murder us!”

“Shut up, Pansy!” But there were no murmurs of agreement this time.

“We’ll all follow first-year protocol: everyone will stay in groups of three to five at all times and watch for threats.” There was silence to that too. Bulstrode crossed her arms. “Anyone who doesn’t think they can *manage* will come up with an urgent family commitment! Or you can let the Ministry come up with one for you.” There were a few nods. Finally they were getting the idea.

The vote was thirty-eight in favor, twenty against. Bulstrode expected at least twenty urgent family commitments. “We will adjourn for one week.”

They were still cramped in a shabby room, with Aurors and who knew what hostile forces outside, but now there were a few secret smiles being traded. They had assignments and a *plan*.

“That will do nicely, Baby,” said Zabini. “The House will consider the motion: Baby will take any steps necessary to observe Potter at close quarters and determine the state of his health. She will report this information back to the House.”

Zabini gave Bulstrode a “seconded,” and the motion sailed through. No one could think of any more evidence to present after that. Everything had gone smoothly so far, but Bulstrode knew the next item on the agenda would not pass so easily.

“The *Prophet’s* crap. We need better evidence of what happened. I propose the motion: all honorable members of the House, with the exception of those who have urgent family commitments,

ASSIGNMENTS

The first problem, Baby saw, was that she couldn’t allow herself to be collected by family and whisked away, like so many of the first-years, and she couldn’t be brought in for Ministry questioning, which would have been a terrible waste of time. The Bull had informed them that anyone with Eater family would be brought in as soon as they left the sanctuary of the room. She did have a cousin who’d joined last year, but she didn’t think he’d been marked. Did that count? She couldn’t risk it; she’d simply have to be someone else. The problem was she couldn’t be sure who in the House wouldn’t be questioned.

Except for Jenny. The Headmaster had visited the House at the beginning of the year and announced that all Slytherins were purebloods and there would be *no further discussion*, was that clear? The lack of discussion clearly referred to Slytherins like Jenny, who Baby had caught watching the others to tell how to hold her wand, who didn’t pronounce ‘knut’ properly, and who suppressed a giggle every time someone said ‘Hogwarts’ during the first week. Certainly she was pure: pure *something*, but also purely unlikely to be questioned by the Ministry.

“Jenn,” Baby caught her in the press waiting to leave the room, “I need to switch with you.”

“What for?”

“I’m on assignment, remember? I don’t want to waste time talking to the Ministry.”

“They’re going to question *you*, Baby?”

“Probably not, but I don’t want them to even think about it. I’ve got a cousin, but he didn’t even do anything.”

Chapter 2 of **INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE**

BY MOTTNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 43, No.6

LUGHNASADH 2006

"Well, I don't want to talk to them either."

"You won't have to, probably."

"I just want to go home. This isn't even my fight!"

"Do it for the House."

"Pfft. I'll do it for forty galleons."

"Forty!"

By the time Baby and Jenny reached the door, the price had been settled at thirty galleons and they had exchanged names, bags and badges. As she had expected, 'Jennifer Prior' wasn't on any Auror's list, nobody took her wand, and there was no heavy hand on her shoulder steering her to the floor.

Baby stepped out into the late-afternoon sun with a sigh of relief. Other snakes who had made it through were gathering into small groups and heading reluctantly for the castle. She attached herself to Tim Harper, 'the Lieutenant' Phelps, and Dodger Mingus.

"Why don't you stick with your own, firstie?" said Harper

"There's not enough out yet. Anyway, I'm only going with you as far as the castle. I'm on assignment, right?"

"*Special*, aren't you?"

Dodger pulled her next to him as they walked. "Ignore him. He's jealous because he's never had one. Speaking of which, you've got quite a tricky assignment, haven't you? You might find it very useful to have a certain tower password, don't you think?"

It was true, she hadn't lit on any idea for getting into Gryffindor tower, and Potter was probably there. She tried not to look interested.

"It really is the duty of all honorable members of the House to aid and assist in any way we can for such an important assignment. That's why I'll let you have that password."

Let you have? That was begging for a condition. "How much?"

The Lieutenant laughed. "The Babe catches on fast, for a firstie." "Eighteen galleons."

"What? You sold the Puff den password to the Puker for eight."

"That was a month ago, Baby. Times have changed. Everyone's got an eye on security now. Besides, Puff is easy, so it's cheaper. You need the Gryff password. I've got it. It's called supply and demand, sweetheart."

"I don't need it."

"Is that what passes for bargaining with the firsties?"

"I'm not bargaining; I don't need it: it's no good. The Gryffs will have changed their password by now."

"You give them a lot of credit."

"Forget it, I'll find my own way in." Getting an assignment was supposed to be an honor, but Baby had never expected that it took so much ready cash, and Jenny had already mostly cleaned her out.

They had reached the entrance. "Good luck, Baby," said the Dodger, "you'll need it. When you change your mind you'll find us around here somewhere... *restoring* something."

The entry hall was deserted, but it was still full. The floor was covered with broken glass and scattered House hourglass beads. The stair railings were down and there were puddles and smears of *something* on the walls and floor. Broken furniture, a torn tapestry, someone's bookbag, a lone shoe... a bookbag? *That* might be a possibility. Baby scooped it up and tucked herself under the stairs, out of sight.

Aside from the usual textbooks and a small pouch of tampons there was a course planner. 'Cath Briggs' was written on the inside cover along with a sticker of the Hufflepuff arms. The schedule stuck in the front of the planner showed that she was a fifth-year, and the heart drawn around the name 'Graham' showed that she had bad taste. Baby would have to give Pritchard a hard time about that.

Still, the bag was a possibility. Hufflepuff was good; the Gryffs didn't pay much attention to Puffs. She took off Jenny's badge and used a simple color transfiguration on her robes to turn the lining yellow. Daphne had taught all the first-years the transfiguration that year, and it was dead useful. Well, it was time to start searching for her big sister, Cath.

Someone had to come out sometime. Her eyes stung, her nose was runny, her handkerchief was getting disgusting and she was sick of the hiccup spell she had cast on herself. She must look a mess. Well, that was the idea, anyhow.

Footsteps! Baby darted to the other end of the corridor, turned and

started wandering back, sniffing. There were several voices coming, somehow excited and tired at once. Baby didn't look up, but concentrated on her tears and hugging the abandoned bookbag to her chest.

"Hey, hey!" A hand touched her shoulder. She started back and leaned against the wall. "Are you all right?" She tried to catch her breath and hiccupped.

They were three Gryffindors, about fourth-year or so, two girls and a boy.

"Hey, what's wrong? You're all right, aren't you? It's all over now."

Baby looked up and blinked, letting more tears spill.

"Oh, you're just a firstie. I thought you all got evacuated." The girl was patting her on the shoulder kindly.

"I was looking for my sister... and then I went back for her bag... and then everyone was gone, so I hid... and my mum and dad already came and picked her up... but now there's a curfew and they can't come back 'til tomorrow... and the den is all dark, and there's no one there..." she said between gasps.

"Oi, slow down and breathe! It's not so bad now. Your parents will come get you tomorrow, won't they?"

Baby nodded tremulously and sniffed.

"Why don't you come in with us? There's plenty of people around and we've got a fire going. Have you had anything to eat?"

Baby shook her head. The chips and curry sauce had raisins in and she *hated* raisins in curry sauce.

"Well, that's the problem!" said the boy. "You'll be all right as soon as you've had some dinner."

They pulled her over to the portrait and said "fortitude." Baby noted that; it could be worth eighteen galleons.

The scene inside reminded her of the back room in the Hog's Head. The Gryffindors were gathered into small groups around the fire and on the scattered couches. The same edition of the PROPHECY that had caused distress among the Slytherins was being picked over and passed around, leaving tears or angry words in its wake.

The three who had brought her in drew her over to a platter of sandwiches. "Here, eat this right away. What's your name?"

"Barbara Briggs."

"I'm Vickie, and this is Andrew and Demelza."

They all sat on the rug near some other Gryffs and tucked into their sandwiches. One of the boys nearby was telling jokes to pass the time. Baby looked around the room as best as she could. Was that Potter over by the fire? She had never seen him in person, but there had been a few 'wanted' pictures in the paper over the year.

"So, the Wizengamot tells a Ministry clerk to have a garden put in the Ministry courtyard, and he puts out adverts for the job. A Hufflepuff, a Ravenclaw, and a Slytherin turn up for the interview," said the boy next to her. "The Puff comes up first and says, 'I'll put in a lovely garden for you, with pumpkins and tomatoes and flowers and everything you like. It will be two-hundred galleons.' And then the Claw comes up and says, 'I'll plan the perfect garden for you. I'll choose all the plants carefully so there'll be something blooming year-round. It'll be three-hundred galleons.' And the clerk thinks, 'both these sound good, but let's hear this last bloke.' And when the snake steps up, he just says, 'it'll be six-hundred galleons.' 'Six-hundred galleons, but what kind of garden is it?' And the snake says, 'what do you care? Listen, it's two-hundred for you, two-hundred for me, and two-hundred for the Puff to plant it.'"

The Gryffindors laughed over their sandwiches. That was a pretty good one actually, Baby thought, a lot better than the one with the Gryff, the Claw, and the Slytherin in the lifeboat, or all the ones about 'getting some tail.'

"It's your turn," said the boy next to her, turning to Baby.

"That's OK," said Vickie, "we can skip..."

"What, said the boy, "don't Hufflepuffs know any jokes?"

"Don't be mean, Jack."

"I've got one," said Baby, blinking up at them. The redcap one should work, since it didn't have a Puff in it.

"A Gryffindor, a Ravenclaw and a Slytherin were walking in the Forbidden Forest and they got caught by a troop of redcaps. The redcap chief says, 'all right, humans, we're going to kill you, drain your blood for our caps, and make your skins into our blood bags."

But we're not mean; you get to choose how you die."

"Yeah, that's not mean at all," said Jack.

"So the Gryffindor jumps up and grabs a big stick and says, 'I'll fight to the death!' and he goes at it, but there's too many redcaps and they kill him. They take off his skin – *shloop* –"

"*Ew!*" said Demelza.

"– and they fill the skin up with blood. And then it's the Claw's turn, and he says, 'the best way to go is the quickest way. One of you give me a knife.' So they give him a knife and he cuts his neck like that, they take off his skin – *shloop!*" A few of the Gryffindors joined in on the sound-effect.

"– And they fill it up with blood. And then it's the Slytherin's turn, and he says, 'do you have a fork?' and they're all: 'a *fork?*' But they give him one, and he stabs himself all over, like *that*, and says, 'who's going to be a bag now?'"

There was laughter, and Demelza said, "I didn't know Puffs were so *gross!*"

Maybe that hadn't been the best joke to tell after all, but all the ones she knew with Puffs in them were all about how stupid they were, and that wouldn't do at all.

The round had moved on to Vickie, and Baby was done with her sandwich. It was time to start thinking about getting closer to her objective. There was a pitcher of juice on the table by the sandwiches, that was a start. She left her 'sister's' bag and got herself a cup of juice, then started drifting over to the fire.

There was Potter, sitting on a squashy couch and leaning forward, talking to *that* one, her picture had been in the papers too. Oh yes, it was the mud – , it was the muggleborn one. Baby sighed to herself. First you had to train yourself to use the one word to please the Carrows, and now she supposed they'd all have to train to use the other one instead.

She edged in, and saw that she could get closer still by pretending to warm up by the fire. That was it; she gave a little shiver and lingered by the firescreen with her hands outstretched.

"You're a Hufflepuff, aren't you? What are you doing here?" said

Granger. There might have been challenge in the voice, but it was mostly overridden by weariness. The girl was looking at her curiously.

"Vickie said I could stay; the den's kind of a wreck."

"Oh, well, I suppose the House thing doesn't matter much anymore now."

"It doesn't matter as long as you're not one of *them*," said someone on the other couch. Well, as she was just as a Hufflepuff, there was no problem, of course.

Baby looked up at Potter and Granger and blinked. "Are you *them?*" she asked breathlessly.

Granger suppressed a little groan, but Potter simply answered, "yes."

"Sorry," said Baby, still looking up, wide-eyed, "you're probably sick of talking about it... but are you all right?"

"We're perfectly fine. Everyone's a bit tired, that's all," said Granger briskly. It was clearly a brush-off, but Baby decided that as a Puff she could credibly pretend not to notice.

"It must have been terrible. Whenever I get scared about something, I get ill, really *ill*, my stomach hurts something awful. My sister says it's just nerves, but it feels like I'm really sick and I'm going to throw up. I even did, once. But *you* didn't get sick, did you?"

"No, I didn't," said Potter. He didn't look sick either, at least not how Sully described it, but he did seem distant, almost as if he were in a dream.

"You're so *brave*," she said.

Potter shook his head deprecatingly, but he smiled.

Theo had been pulled aside for questioning, of course. He would have expected it even without Millie's announcement. After all, his own father was a follower from the first. Luckily for Theo, the elder Nott had long ago decided that his son was too weak-willed and incompetent for the rigors of the Cause. Well, of course it wasn't exactly luck, since he had been carefully practicing his incompetency since the age of nine.

It hadn't been too difficult; his father generally saw what he wanted to see, so once the idea was planted everything fed into it. Any poor marks at school confirmed his son's limitations, and any good marks confirmed the lax standards that Hogwarts

had adopted under Dumbledore. Theo suspected that if he ever changed his mind and tried to impress his father he would have been doomed to failure. As it was, he had the unique position of a Death Eater's son who had not been forced or indoctrinated into following the cause himself.

Once he stepped through the floo into the Ministry, he gave his card to the Auror who was escorting him. Everything got fast then as he was hustled through a warren of corridors and into a holding room. Shackbolt arrived half an hour later.

"Mr. Nott, where did you get this card?"

"From Miss Bulstrode, sir."

"Why did she give it to you?"

"I'm one of the eyes, like her."

"And who are the others?"

"Don't know."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I just reported to Mill—, Miss Bulstrode or the Headmaster. No one else," he lied.

"Hmm. And what were you doing, exactly?"

"Keeping an eye on the other students, particularly the ones in the resistance, keeping them out of the way of the Carrows, well, as much as possible."

"Just what were your instructions if you had been caught?"

"If that happened, then it was all an attempt to impress my father. The Headmaster was training me by having me gather information on the resistance so we could take them down. Keeping the Carrows out was just to keep all the glory for ourselves."

"Very convincing story. In fact, it occurs to me that you could have easily used that story if the battle had gone another way."

"Yes, I could."

"So why should I believe the 'eye' story over that explanation?"

Theo shrugged. "I haven't got a Mark, and you don't have a reason to arrest me for anything else. So why should I even come to you and turn over that card? It doesn't get me anywhere. I might just as well have lost the card on the way in and never brought it up."

"Hmm."

"Are you going to arrest me?"

"Should I?"

"No," said Theo quickly. Was Shackbolt softening a bit? "Is it true that you didn't find his body?"

Shackbolt winced. "You got that from the *Prophet* no doubt. You should know better than to pay attention to the *Prophet*."

"Yeah. Was there a body?"

"I'm sorry to say that I can't answer that, Mr. Nott." He didn't sound very sorry.

"Can I see my father now?"

Now he did sound sorry. "We aren't allowing visitors at present, but procedures should be normalized in a few days."

It was clear that he wasn't going to get any more information from Shackbolt, particularly as he wouldn't answer any more questions himself, but just grilled Theo about his father for another hour.

When he was finally released he headed back to the Hog's Head. He really had no desire to go home, and he might as well have a go at following Aberforth around and see what he got up to with his soup deliveries. There wasn't much else to keep him busy until the Ministry would allow visitors.

It was all a bit moot now, Theo thought, since he already knew the answer. Still, an assignment was an assignment.

The intervening three days had not treated Greg well. He sat with a thump across from Theo in the DMLE visiting room.

"Well?"

"No, nobody touched any damn bodies. Mostly they hadn't heard about it 'til I asked them. And now they all want to know why *I* would want to know. Everybody's saying he's a bloody traitor." Greg almost spat the last word.

Theo cast a glance significantly up towards the Auror by the door, watching them.

"No, that's not what everybody's saying. What *everybody* is saying is that you and all the rest in here are the traitors, and that *he* was

a member of the Order of the Phoenix all along.”

“That’s not fair, *he* was the one who pretended... wait!” The House always said of Greg that the wheels were bound to turn once you got him pointed downhill and gave him a push. It seemed that the wheels were finally turning now. “You knew! You knew all the time! Damn you!”

Theo shrugged. Greg face reddened and he half stood, but then sat as though his legs were cut from under him.

“Vince died, Theo, he *died!*”

Theo could only nod. It had come out in the PROPHECY two days ago.

“I saw him... I keep seeing him going up, and we couldn’t get him out, and my dad... what am I going to do?”

Theo felt at a loss. Greg’s problems he couldn’t even begin to tackle.

“Do you have any family?” He regretted the question as soon as it was out. His father’s death was very fresh.

“Got an uncle,” Greg said with an effort.

“Stick by Draco, doesn’t he still owe you? Get him or his dad to recommend an advocate, then get your uncle to hire him. Just don’t take any advocate the Ministry gives you, they’re rubbish.”

“Yeah.”

“Now sod off, I’ve got to talk to my dad.”

Greg got up. “You’re going to see the House? Tell them not to forget about Vince. They *can’t* forget about Vince. He didn’t kill himself. It wasn’t like that; he was trying to get out.”

Theo nodded again. The Auror escorted Greg out. It wasn’t good delaying any longer; he had to talk to his dad.

They brought him in a few minutes later. He was drawn, but much more composed than Greg. Unlike Greg, he was in manacles, and the Auror attached them to a ring in the table before stepping back to the door. Theo tried not to look at his wrists.

“Hello dad.”

His father regarded him silently for a moment.

“Theo. I didn’t expect to see you.”

Theo winced. His father always knew exactly what to say.

“Well, I’m here.”

“Why? What is it you want from me?”

“Dad... did you see, or...?”

His father smiled. “Ah, of course. You’re here for information. The Goyle boy already asked me; I suppose you put him up to it. The answer is *no*. I didn’t see, touch, move or hide anyone’s body anywhere, and I wouldn’t have lowered myself to touch that traitor’s corpse if I had seen it. And what would you care?”

Theo dropped his eyes.

“Never mind, I can guess. We all have our little roles to play, after all.”

Theo felt his stomach drop, even with his father chained to the table. He couldn’t know, could he? But the way his father was watching him, he did know, somehow, as if the question about the body alone had been enough to give him the answer about his loyalties.

His father went on. “You might be twice as sharp as you look, but you’re still half as sharp as you think. Do you think he could do something for you? Raise you up somehow, out of your own insignificance? Is that what this stupid hope is about? Don’t put your trust in that one. He used you, and what did you get out of it?”

“I’m out, aren’t I? You’re not.”

His father smiled again. “There is that. But if things had gone another way, you could have been in a very *different position*. Think about that every time you think that he was doing you a favor. Very well, I’m done with you. Auror!” He half-stood, impatient to be gone as the Auror unfastened the manacles from the table and led him away.

It was his father’s hands in the manacles, so why were his own hands shaking under the table?

Bulstrode surveyed the entrance hall. It was such a tip that it was hard to even think where to begin.

“ – and why did they have to take Daph in?” asked Astoria. “I mean, they didn’t want me and they said they’re going by families.”

“Stupid Ministry,” declared Tracey and Blaise grunted in agreement. Bulstrode didn’t say anything; she wasn’t about to mention the card she had given Daphne. She still had two cards she needed to give out, and she wasn’t sure where to start looking for the last two eyes. Faw-

cett wasn't in the entrance hall now, and she hadn't seen Stebbins at all.

"We could check the Pit for damage and start there," suggested Blaise.

"No, the whole point is to be *seen* helping," said Tracey. "Isn't that right?"

Bulstrode nodded and started casting on the broken glass while she thought about her next move. She could either stay here working and hope that the last eyes might happen past or she could break protocol and go looking on her own. Breaking protocol was the much more appealing option. She waited until Blaise was occupied gathering the scattered House beads and Astoria and Tracey were maneuvering the stair rail back into position and slipped into the corridor.

She found Fawcett eventually in the Great Hall eating with some other Ravenclaws on a makeshift picnic blanket made of a torn tablecloth. The tables were all gone, but so were the bodies, Bulstrode noted with relief. She caught Fawcett's eye and jerked her chin up as she stepped back out into the hall.

Fawcett met her a few minutes later. Bulstrode had just passed the card and instructions to report to Shackbolt when she turned to find Professor McGonagall standing with her arms folded, observing her. Damn, it must have been that cat trick.

"Miss Bulstrode, what was that?"

Bulstrode shrugged. "Found some paper with Fawcett's name on it in the entry. Giving it back, that's all."

"And what were you doing in the entry hall?"

"Cleaning up."

"Miss Bulstrode, I need to speak with you, now. Follow me."

They went all the way up to the top. The gargoyles were gone now, and the spiral stair had only been partially repaired; they had to walk up the last flight. The room was much the same as when Bulstrode had last seen it, at her last report to the Headmaster, except that his desk was entirely gone, along with the locked cabinet of all his books and papers. She wondered if the Ministry was now poring over every scrap looking for more hidden information.

With the most imposing furniture gone, Bulstrode and Professor McGonagall were left with the more egalitarian armchairs at the other end of the room. It was unfortunate for Professor McGonagall.

Bulstrode noted that she had to sit bolt upright at the very edge of the chair to get any height of authority over her. Bulstrode decided not to play and slumped comfortably in her chair.

"Miss Bulstrode, how is it that Professor Snape saw fit to put critical information in the hands of a student?"

"Couldn't you just ask him, Professor?" Bulstrode gestured vaguely at the portraits at the other end of the room.

"I am asking *you*, Miss Bulstrode."

She was side-stepping the issue. No matter, they could come back to that.

"Unexpected. Safer."

"Safer to rely on *children*?"

And not her, Bulstrode supposed. Perhaps that was why she was so angry.

"Said that we could better keep the other students out of it unobserved. He knew who he could trust."

The last dig might have been unnecessary, but Professor McGonagall was holding something back and Bulstrode would rather just have it all out.

"He couldn't trust the staff?"

"Didn't mean that. He knew us pretty well, I guess. Knew we weren't all the same."

McGonagall's lips thinned. "Is there something you care to say to me, Miss Bulstrode?"

"Are you Headmistress now, Professor?"

"As I was Deputy Head previous to this year, I have taken that position until the Board of Governors can meet and decide on a course of action."

"Headmistress or three-quarters Headmistress?"

"The decisions I made while Hogwarts was under attack will not be questioned. Not by *you*, Miss Bulstrode, not when I did not have the benefit of all the information you could have brought me!"

"Didn't have a chance, ma'am, got kicked out."

"I did not enjoy that, nor did I want to take that step. You may not believe me, but I did not think that most of your House deserved it. However, at that moment, I simply could not put the lives of the major-

ity of students at risk for the good of a few. Do you understand me?"

"Sorry, but isn't that just what Pansy said?"

The older woman reddened. "That is not exactly what she said, Miss Bulstrode, as you know very well. There is a significant difference between removing students from where they might do harm or be harmed and intentionally sending a student to his death. No matter what the risk, I would *never* do that."

"You're not like *him*, then, ma'am," Bulstrode said, tipping her head to the large portrait near where the desk once stood. "That's good."

"No, there are several ways in which I am not like him, you may be pleased to hear. Am I correct in thinking that you have something to do with the clean-up crews I've been seeing today?"

Bulstrode shrugged. "Just a suggestion."

"Not part of some long-range plan of yours?" Perhaps Professor McGonagall really did know the Slytherins, after all.

"Don't know who might come back next year. Depends on what the school will be like then."

"At this moment, Miss Bulstrode, none of us know that. Am I also correct that you are now the leader of Slytherin House and anything I say to you will be passed on to the rest of your House?"

"If you like, Professor."

"Are you the leader of Slytherin House or three-quarters leader? Will they follow you?"

Bulstrode gave a slight smile. If McGonagall knew the House that well, she should know that the leader couldn't be guaranteed to lead for long, if the House didn't want to follow.

"If I can show them the course of their best interests, they'll follow it."

Professor McGonagall studied her for a moment.

"I intend to be Headmistress of this school and not three-quarters Headmistress. You may tell them that. No one will be excluded from this school on the basis of their House. However, anyone who has taken the Mark or who has attacked any other student will be unable to return. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor."

"There will be no tolerance for violence or threatening language,

and such actions from a student of any House will result in expulsion. Anyone who chooses to return must be on exemplary behavior at all times."

"Yes, ma'am. Some in the House will wonder about having to defend themselves."

"That, Miss Bulstrode, is a primary concern for myself as well. I do not wish any student to believe that they may have to defend themselves simply to attend this school. The staff and I will be discussing at length how to ensure the safety of our students. I cannot promise your House that their time here will be easy or that they will be welcomed by the other students. I can promise that I and the staff will be united in protecting their safety."

Bulstrode nodded slowly.

"You will pass on that message to your House?"

"Yes."

McGonagall stood. The interview was coming to an end, Bulstrode saw.

"Uh, Professor, may I speak to his portrait?"

A momentary flash of some pain crossed McGonagall's face. "Unfortunately, you cannot, Miss. Bulstrode. There isn't one."

Bulstrode took a few steps to the far end of the room to examine the portraits. The old Headmaster was apparently sleeping peacefully.

"They say it is some sort of technicality in that I had already begun exercising my duties as Deputy Headmistress at the time of... at the time."

"Is that so?" Bulstrode said in the direction of Dumbledore's portrait. "Interesting." It was interesting; she had never seen anyone wink in their sleep before. Well, maybe that settled it.

She turned and headed back to the door that the Headmistress was holding open for her.

"Miss Bulstrode, there are many things over the past year... several years, that we may have cause to regret. I believe it is the best course for all of us to put the past behind us as quickly as possible and concentrate on moving forward. Will you be pursuing the same course?"

"Yes, Professor."

The meeting was drawing to a close. Bulstrode had already given them McGonagall's speech. There hadn't been much verbal response beyond Harper's "nice *words*." Well, there wasn't much to do about it at this point but wait and see.

Baby had presented her findings along with a red couch cushion as trophy and proof of her illicit entry into Gryffindor tower. This was met with glares of jealous admiration from the rest of the first-years, then solemnly burned in the hearth.

Theo's report from Greg was met with a long silence. No one wanted to think about what happened to Vince. It was too awful, particularly with the stench of burnt couch cushion lingering in the air. Even if it brought the meeting to a halt, Bulstrode should be thankful that Theo brought up that point. If she wanted to set the House on a new course, there couldn't be a better example of where the old course had taken them.

Bulstrode herself had no evidence to offer. What was a wink, after all? If it even was a wink and not some muscle twitching in sleep. It didn't matter much, one way or another, and it didn't change what she knew. It wouldn't change any other minds either. If they didn't think they knew already, they wouldn't know it from that. It was time, as McGonagall had said, to move forward.

"I propose the motion: as all evidence in this matter is inconclusive, we will consider the case closed and not mention any part of this case or its evidence outside the honorable members of the House."

"Seconded," said Theo.

She saw the smiles then, spreading through the tattered remains of the House. They had their secret.

"All those in favor?"

THE END

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Art by Mottsnave

THE NEW SKIN

by Mottsnave

THE REVERSE

I was in another place. I didn't even notice it at first, too occupied with the pain in my chest and neck as I tried to draw a breath. When I finally stopped trying to breathe I could see it clearly. It was another place, another world, upside-down and backwards.

Chapter I of **THE NEW SKIN**
by Mottsnave

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 38, No.7
MABON 2001

My blood had grown into a disturbingly large dark pool in front of me, but in that other place it was bright and white against black floorboards. Before the walls had risen up to a dim ceiling, but here they sank in darkness to a glimmering river somewhere below me. I was sinking too, slowly pulling away from my bright pool above.

I wasn't alone. A tall dark figure was walking through the river below me. It was hard to distinguish his features in the dark planes of his face. He stood directly below me and stretched a withered hand up.

I watched it come towards me in horrified anticipation. It came close, but it didn't touch me, veering off to my pool of blood. The bright liquid fled away from his fingers leaving dark boards behind. The boards weren't completely bare: his finger was pointing at a bright circle, like a coin, so bright that it hurt to look at it. He was going to pick it up, I knew it.

Some part of me objected; it was *mine*, I wanted it even without knowing what it was. I tried to move my hands to get it, but they felt so far away now, dipped in the cool pool of blood. I could barely feel them, much less move them, they only twitched.

He picked up the coin and left. I was bereft, I felt that I would have cried out and pleaded if I could, but all I could do was slowly sink towards the river.

There was another shape coming out of the glimmering water, a horrible dark thing I couldn't make sense of, an angular complicated letter from another alphabet, a broken concertina opening and closing. It gave out some sort of discordant clanging song that pierced through me. It was flying up at me with a strange frantic jerking movement. It clenched my shoulder in a sharp grip and shoved me roughly back up to the ceiling and poured something burning over my neck.

I was breathing.

"Get up now," the voice interrupted. I was trying to... what was it? Yes, yes it was *important*.

"Get them out," I said. Only I didn't properly *say* it. I had no voice, there was only rasping breath behind the words.

"Oh bloody... not this again," the voice muttered. A hand took my shoulder and pulled at me. I winced away from it; it was like that clawing shape that I remembered. Did I remember? Everything felt like a dream. I tried to get my eyes to clear.

"Time to get up, up with you now."

"Get them out... please," I said as loudly as I could.

"We've been through this and through this," the voice said. Hands took both my shoulders firmly; there was no wincing away for me.

"Please, he's coming..."

They pulled at me, and I came up in a dizzying rush. My head gave a tremendous throb of pain; I heard myself gasp at it.

"They're out, they've been out, and they're out yet," the voice recited, barely patient. "*Veni, vidi, vale*, over and done with but the shouting." One hand held me up, the other was busy elsewhere. "Want to be shouted at, do you?" I didn't, my head hurt, I didn't think I could take shouting unless I were the one doing it. Unfortunately my voice didn't seem to be up to the task.

"Drink up now." He steadied my head, which was good, since I could hardly hold it up. A glass vial clinked against my teeth and something went down. I recognized the taste, strengthening solution. Swallowing hurt like hell.

"You up now?" I was sitting on a bed in a white room, looking down at a rag rug on top of wood floorboards. My own bare feet were down there, looking far away. Helpless, pale, thin-skinned things.

"Let's have a look, then." The owner of the voice tipped my head up, and I was looking into Aberforth's blue eyes and grizzled face. He peered at me appraisingly, then turned towards a dresser at our side. I caught sight of a perch next to it occupied by that damn bird. Fawkes stretched his wings and settled. *A broken concertina*. I shuddered.

"Another one of these wouldn't hurt," he muttered to himself as he fumbled one-handed on the dresser top. Did he know what he was doing, or even what he was dosing me with? I saw a pitcher of water on the dresser and my outrage fled as quickly as it had come. *Water*, I wanted water. He turned around with another vial for me. I waved my hand at the pitcher, a high-pitched wheeze forcing itself out of my throat.

"Huh, what now?" he asked. I waved at the pitcher again. "Wait a tic, you'll get it..." he fed me the other vial. I knew the taste: blood replenisher. No wonder I was thirsty, blood replenisher had to be taken with a very large quantity of water. *Idiot!* If he had fed me some of that already but no water, he would have me overdosing. I waved at the water again, more urgently as the dry heat of the potion swept over me. The damn fool would do me in just as well as the snake if this kept up!

"Yeah, all right then, don't get all in a twist!" He poured a pint glass full and raised it to my lips. My fingers scrabbled against the glass, but he swatted my hands away and tipped it up. I didn't care that swallowing hurt like hell, it was the most delicious thing I had ever had. He tried to put the glass down when I drained it, but I flapped my hands and wheezed until I got more than four pints out of him.

Finally sated, I tried to lie back on the bed I was sitting on. "Oh, no you don't, you've got to get up now." Was he crazy? I wanted to lie back down. He kept me upright with a hand on my shoulder as he summoned a dark bundle from a chair. He shook it open: clothes. He dressed me as the strengthening solution took effect. I could hold my head up now on my own, though turning it was another matter; a sharp pain lanced up into my skull when I tried. I kept my head still.

The clothes were enormous, trailing off my legs, flopping over my hands. Aberforth was taller than me, but not that tall. I wondered dully where the clothes had come from. Had he rolled a drunk for them? Thankfully Aberforth shrunk them so they almost fit. Where did he think I was going? I wasn't going anywhere. I couldn't leave, not when I didn't know. He was half-turned back to the dresser. I had to be sure, it was more than my life...

I clutched at his elbow. "They're out? All of them?" My voice was nothing but a wheeze with a ridiculous quack at the end. He gave an exasperated sigh and peered at me again. "They're out, they're all out, it's over. Do you believe me or am I lying to you?" I didn't venture to answer that. If he was lying, he was good enough to pause in his speech or let his eyes flick up. I supposed that he wasn't lying, but I couldn't seem to keep my crawling anxiety from spilling

over. Wasn't there something that I still had to do?

As if he had some part of his brother's gift, he said, "you're all done, they're out. It's your turn now. Ready or not, you've got to get out. If they find you here... I don't want any part of it." He put a box down on the coverlet next to me and muttered, "*have* to be ready."

"Said you've got a spare." I looked at him blankly. "Wand, spare wand, we left the other one to cool your tracks." I trailed my finger along the newly-smooth skin of my left arm. It was strange not to see the mark there. "Inside," I managed. He looked disgusted when he understood me. "*Bloody typical.*"

He helped me shift over and put my arm on the dresser top. He cast Scourgify on it, then a cold stasis, not quite freezing. I clenched my teeth as the ache of the cold set in. "Show me," he said. I drew my finger along where he should cut.

He was quick; I had to give him that. He pulled the bluish skin away from his cut, but when he couldn't see the spare at once, he grabbed my other hand and pulled it over. "Right, you know where it is. Pull it out." My arm felt like a frozen log. I found the shrunken wand and extracted it. Aberforth moved my hand away impatiently, Scourgified the cut and healed it. My head swam a bit as warmth and feeling flooded back out to my fingertips. He was holding me by my shoulders again and turned me to face the box on the bed.

It was a WHITE OWL cigar box; gilded paper covers peeling at the edges. He opened the lid to reveal a chipped, stained ashtray taking up half the box. I wasn't sure what that was, but I recognized the rest of the contents. Two parchment-wrapped bundles were my emergency muggle money supply from my office. Then there was a roll of shiny light-blue fabric that made my heart sink. It was my sleeping-bag, shrunken. Top of the line, all the bells and whistles, automatic warming- and cooling-charms, built-in padding and pillow, completely weatherproof and windproof, self-shrinking. RECREATIONAL ENCHANTERS, INC, the very best. I hated the sight of it.

It had been the headmaster's last birthday present to me. He had presented it with ill-disguised childish glee and wanted to show me all the features. I still couldn't put a name to the source of the anger that had

bubbled up and overwhelmed me as he demonstrated the self-sealing flap over the zippers. He saw it on my face before I said anything.

"Now, now, it's the wrong color I'm sure it can be adjusted..." He must have known that color had nothing to do with it. That and his disappointed look, his conciliatory tone, pushed me too far. "Do you think I camp? When have you ever known me to camp?" I snapped. Ungrateful, ungracious, a right bastard, as usual.

"I haven't," he said calmly, "I thought it might be useful."

"Useful! It's useless, utterly useless! I'll *never* use it!" I recognized his hurt look with equal parts satisfaction and guilt.

"You may use it..." he said after a pause.

"Never, I'll *never*," I couldn't go on without putting a name to it, and I didn't know it well enough to name it. Was it that I thought I might live, or was it the thought that I wouldn't? Was it that *he* thought that I might live, or that he knew that I wouldn't? Whatever it was, I couldn't approach it without anger flooding me. I couldn't quite look at Albus or his present, his last present.

"I'll just put it away then," he said, disappointed. I didn't look up when he left my quarters. I hadn't seen it since then, until now when it was sitting smugly in its self-compacting sack next to my money.

Aberforth was placing the objects from the box one-by-one on the coverlet next to me. The bag, my two bundles of money, and the knife I had been carrying. Underneath was a heavy parchment envelope that I knew held my false ID and supporting papers that I obtained years ago. Dr. Cyril Ramson DMA still submitted occasional articles to POTIONS MONTHLY, just to keep his hand in.

A small leather case held about 15 vials of assorted emergency and healing potions, then there was a bag of holding, folded flat. Finally, he used his wand to lift out the ashtray. "Touch activated," he said. He packed the other objects back in the box and handed it to me along with my spare wand.

"You can stand now, yeah?" I wasn't as sure as he seemed to be, but the strengthening solution had done its work. I stood, balanced by one hand on the dresser while I waited for the pain in my head to ease.

"Useless," I rasped. Aberforth ignored me.

"I'll send word to you later, understand? You've got to be gone now. You ready?"

I knew what I was supposed to answer to that. Ready or not, I *had* to be ready, always. My neck wouldn't quite nod so I just wheezed my assent. He motioned to the ashtray. I touched it and was gone.

SANCTUARY

I landed and immediately fell over. My balance had been none too good when I left, and now combined with the spinning of the portkey and the pitch-darkness in which I landed, it deserted me altogether. I caught my breath sprawled on a cold bare floor. When I could hold my wand steady, I cast Lumos.

My spare wand felt strange to my hand, and the room was certainly strange to me as well. It was small, roughly four meters square, with bare plaster walls and cement floor. The walls had been painted a cheery yellow once, now streaked with water stains and nitre. Ragged bare wires poked from the middle of the ceiling and two spots on the wall. A half-collapsed disreputable sofa with mildewed floral upholstery leaned against the wall opposite me, a cardboard box on one sagging cushion.

Across from me in the left corner was the only opening, a grey battered door with a brass knob. I could just see chalk markings on the floor across the threshold. Someone had set physical wards here. I couldn't muster the energy to go examine them. I wanted what Aberforth had denied me: more sleep. I crawled towards the sofa. It didn't look long enough to sleep on comfortably, but I could take its cushions and lay them on the floor.

The box I had taken for rubbish was unexpectedly hard to shift. It

Chapter 2 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSHAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 38, No.8
SAMHAIN 2001

didn't move at first then came crashing down in a rush, bruising my knee. Tins, it was full of tins of food. There must have been at least forty of them. I was dreamily lining them up on the floor before I caught myself; that could wait. The cushions were easy to move now. I laid them on the floor between the near arm of the sofa and the wall. I took the sleeping bag, *my* sleeping bag, out of the cigar-box.

When I released it from the shrink-sack it expanded immediately, the charms apparently in perfect working order. I took off my shoes and climbed into it fully-clothed. I barely felt the warming charms begin to work as I fell asleep.

I was worse when I woke. I came out of a dream shivering and sweating. My head was pounding and all my joints ached. I didn't want to move, I wanted to go back to sleep, but a sense of urgency had infected me from my dream and I could not. I had been in the Headmaster's office. Albus was there with me, but he was unlike I had ever seen him. He was singing and dancing around the room, transported with joy. He spun with his arms open, then plucked at my sleeves and elbows to try to get me to join him. I knew I should be happy for him, but I couldn't, I couldn't dance; I was filled with a crawling anxiety until I almost shook with panic. *I had to get them out...*

Ridiculous, I knew it was just a dream. Besides, Aberforth had told me that it was over and everyone was out. If I could believe him, that was, but why should he lie to me? If he thought I was a loyal Death Eater and wanted to trick me, but then why heal me and send me away? Well it would be possible, if he were secretly a Death Eater... I shook my head despite the pain. Ridiculous!

The problem was that I didn't know what happened and I had to know, to find out where I stood and what I had to do next. Surely there was something I had to do?

The first thing I had to do was to get something to drink. I was desperately thirsty again. I cast Lumos. For a moment I didn't recognize the room at all before it came flooding back. There wasn't a tap, or any other source of water. I could cast Aguamenti and hope there was a source for the spell to draw on nearby, but I didn't have anything to catch the water in. Sod it all, I dragged myself half out

of the bag and cast directly into my mouth.

I had to stop myself after a few swallows. I was still thirsty, but I had no idea how long it had been since I had eaten and I knew I could make myself sick on too much water alone. I looked over my collection of tins. It was heavy on soups: tomato, beef and barley, chicken... there were also several tins of beans and sardines, though no toast to eat them with.

The plain chicken broth sounded best for my throat. I sliced off the top with a quick spell and heated it in the tin with warming charms. I hadn't been hungry before, but at the smell of it I was ravenous. I tried to drink it too fast and promptly burned my lips on the rim. I forced myself to take careful sips. I ate half a tin of beans when the broth was gone, though swallowing those was much more painful. I used the broth tin for more water when I was done.

Exhausted, I fell back in the sleeping bag. I had to find out where I stood, but it seemed impossible while I was too weak to stand. Well, there was one thing I could investigate from where I was. I opened the cigar box and sorted through the contents, setting them out on the floor in front of me one by one.

First, my two bundles of cash. I wasn't sure how Aberforth had retrieved them; I thought I had them very well hidden under a stack of the most boring paperwork imaginable. Of course, Albus' portrait had seen me put them there. It was 2,000 pounds in all in 50 and 20 pound notes. I had a second stash in my house in the End, but I could probably consider that lost to me now. Well, I could make 2,000 pounds stretch for quite some time as long as I didn't have any rent to pay.

I peeled open my parchment envelope where I kept Dr. Ramson. The ID and passport were all in order. My old resume was even there. There was something else in the envelope, a small white card with the words 'Last Call' in a scrawled hand. Was that Aberforth's hand? What did he mean? I replaced the card in the envelope.

Finally I set out the potions' vials, one by one. There was more blood replenisher. I didn't think I needed any more at the moment. Two fever reducers. I could probably do with one straight away, but I didn't know how sick I was. I decided to save it, I might need it later.

Several doses of Polyjuice. I recognized the vials as the ones I had been carrying on me. Aberforth must have salvaged them from my cloak. A few pepperups and four healing draughts completed the store.

I decided to take one of the healing draughts as I didn't want to start to slip and get worse. I felt quite horrible already. As the warmth of the draught flooded me I slipped into sleep.

I don't know how long I drifted in and out of sleep. There was no way to tell day from night and my fever confused my thoughts. I lay for long hours trembling as every seam between walls, ceiling and floor split and expanded to reveal the endless darkness beyond. I couldn't seem to be able to hold a Lumos bright enough to keep it at bay.

Once when I woke I thought I saw a gray figure pacing back and forth by the door, a constant muttering voice barely audible; I knew, shaking, that it wanted to kill me. I took the first fever-reducer then, the figure dissolving as the cool calm of the potion settled over me.

That seemed to break my illness, though I couldn't shake the feeling of something watching and stalking me. The next time I woke I could walk unsteadily, rather than crawl over to the corner I used to relieve myself. I was still shaky but triumphant that I could finally stand. I sat on the cushionless couch for a while, just for variety, before I surrendered to sleep again in my makeshift bed.

When I woke again I was thoroughly sick of the room. For the first time I ventured to approach the door. The door itself looked quite flimsy; it was the chalk-mark wards on the threshold that gave the room its real protection. Anti-apparition, do-not-notice charms and a powerful keyed lock on the door. It would have to be opened by a password, but what was it? I could usually guess Albus' passwords given enough time, but these wards couldn't have been set by Albus, they would have fallen over a year ago, and besides, it wasn't neat enough for his work. It could have been Aberforth, I supposed, if Albus had brought him here. What would Aberforth use for a password; did he have Albus' sweet-tooth? I tried a couple of sweets' names. Nothing.

Was Aberforth planning to hold me captive here? It didn't make sense when he could have easily turned me over to the Ministry.

Perhaps he had left me the password somewhere. I sat again on the sleeping bag and opened the cigar box. Papers began spilling out of the box as soon as I cracked the lid. I jerked back in alarm and trained my wand on the box. I was standing on the end of my bed with my back against the wall, watching it. When the movement stopped, I could see that I was standing guard over a threatening newspaper. I flicked the lid of the box back with my foot. The box was stuffed with pages, now spilling out across the floor. I glanced up at the door. I would be willing to swear that the wards were undisturbed, that no one had entered while I was asleep. I gathered the paper and laid it out on the floor. It was a DAILY PROPHECY, dated May 3rd. Apart from that, the box was empty.

A transfer box, it must be. Aberforth had arranged it so that he could stay in contact as well as knowing my location. Part of me wanted to cast Incendio on it then and there, but I had to know where I stood. I looked at the paper.

If it had been the special speaking edition for the blind, the headline would have been screaming. As it was, the huge black letters took up most of the front page above the fold. **VOLDEMORT DEFEATED.** I sighed with relief. So it was over. My hands shook, so I flattened the paper on the floor and read.

Yesterday, in a clash already being called 'The Battle of Hogwarts,' the Dark wizard formerly known as He Who Must Not Be Named (hereafter the DWFKAHWMNBN) arrayed his forces surrounding the ancient school and demanded the surrender of the Boy Who Lived, Harry Potter. The valiant defenders inside refused to bargain with the forces of darkness. The siege of the school continued for hours, finally ending when the DWFKAHWMNBN produced the supposed corpse of the BWL and declared his victory. However, in a stunning moment, Harry Potter rose again to kill and defeat the DWFKAHWMNBN whose forces were then quickly routed. Details are still emerging...

The rest was hyperbole and useless speculation. I had expected the adulation of Potter as a hero, but this – I had to read the last sentence several times. He had lived. Somehow the Boy Who Lived lived again, and that could only mean that a horcrux lived

with him. Hadn't he looked at my memories? *Damn him*, if only I had found him a little earlier. If I hadn't been too late I could have shown him properly, I could have convinced him to *pay attention*.

Of course he hadn't paid attention, he had simply "killed" the Dark Lord, and now, and now I would have to... I was promptly sick on the floor. *The idiot*, I would have to kill him. I damned the Dumbledore who had come up with the plan and I damned the Dumbledore who had told me it was all over. Most of all, I damned myself that I couldn't think of any way to remove a horcrux. Of course it wasn't over; it could never be so easy. I had to go back and finish it. I didn't want to. I cleaned up the sick, casting with a shaking hand.

The room seemed worse than a cell now. I had to get out, away from that paper, away from the sleeping bag, all of Albus' and Aberforth's dreadful plans for me. Was that why he had trapped me here? To be sure he could call on me to finish the job? What was the password? If Aberforth had set it... suddenly it came to me. "Last call," I said. The door opened.

I found myself blinking in dim greenish light at the bottom of a steep concrete stairway. The treads were crumbling at the edges and littered with debris. There was a distant rushing noise from above, but no human sound. I picked my way up the steps warily. At the top I was in a tiny concrete box of a room with a low square opening opposite me. I ducked through. I was in a sort of open courtyard, all grown over with trees buckling the concrete-slab floor. The opening I had come through was tucked beneath a crumbling staircase that reached the top of the three-meter walls around.

I pushed my way through the branches to find that the courtyard opened out into a sort of concrete trough littered with leaves and overhung with trees in late spring dress. The light was silvery and weak, either early morning or dusk. It was strange not to know which. The vague rushing noise settled into the unmistakable sound of waves; the light breeze carried the rank smell of low tide. I must be close to a shore.

The walls of the trough had crumbled down in places, broken by questing tree roots. One end led out under a square arch. I could

see the gray ocean beyond. I followed the sight out under the arch and down the rocky shore. The waves were breaking lightly on the shingle, then drawing back through the rocks with a hiss. I stepped carefully between clumps of slippery weed on crunching mussel shells and barnacles until I reached the edge of the receding tide.

I watched it for a while, half-hypnotized by the swells. There were dim shapes out across the water: other shores? The light wasn't strong enough to tell. Though the seaweed and smell didn't leave any doubt, I dipped my fingers in the frigid water and tasted the salt. The noise of the water was calming me a bit. Whatever I had to do, it wasn't now. For now, all I could do was find out where I was. I turned back to the trees to fix the spot in my mind, then began to follow the shore.

Rounding the headland, I came to a narrow neck bordered on one side by a brackish marsh, with scrubby shore on the other. A tiny brick hut stood abandoned and roofless in the middle of the neck; a gravel path led away from the hut up to a tree-covered rise. I ducked into the empty hut and disillusioned myself. If there was a cleared path, there could well be people, even if everything I had seen so far had been abandoned. I started up the path, hoping it finally bring me some clue as to my location.

The light was getting stronger as the path leveled through a pleasant open woodland and sumac scrub. It must be morning. The trees opened on a very strange view. An enormously fat black rabbit hopped away from me into the brush as I stepped out into a narrow clearing beneath a tall shear concrete wall, streaked with white mineral deposits and set into the hillside. Staircases climbed to the top of the wall at intervals and dark empty doors and passages led into the recesses of the hill. I couldn't make much sense of it: the grass of the path was short and well-traveled, but these strange buildings were clearly crumbling and abandoned.

I approached the nearest doorway cautiously. A *Hominem Revelio* confirmed that there was no one nearby, so I cast a *Lumos* and entered. The rooms inside were empty concrete, with strange troughs and indentations molded into the walls and floors. A very

bright red and blue bit of plastic wrapper in a dusty corner caught my eye. I picked it up and flattened it. ROCKET POP. It had a picture of a rather obscene-looking ice on the front. I started to read the back: high fructose corn syrup, artificial cherry flavor, guar gum, malic acid, modified cellulose, red 40, blue 1. God, it was worse than Wolfsbane. Albus would have loved it, in all probability. It did tell me I was in an English-speaking country. The “Distributed by Joe Lowe Company of New York” told me I was probably in the States. I doubted any other country would willingly import this rubbish.

I passed through several rooms before emerging back out onto the path, which led me through woods interspersed with other empty structures and finally deposited me on another sloping shingle. This one had a wooden pier and a notice board. A large blue-and-white sign on the dock proclaimed “LOVELLS ISLAND.”

The notice board was more helpful. It let me know of several rules I had been violating, especially camping overnight without a daily permit (available for purchase somewhere called Georges Island). It also told me that I was in the Boston Harbor Islands National Park, and most helpfully of all, it gave me a map.

The abandoned structures were apparently part of an old military installation, out of use since the 1940s. My current residence was part of Battery Terrill, at the furthest point from the dock at this end of the island. I was only about seven miles from the city of Boston. The island was served by a ferry twice a day, but only on weekends until summer, and after that there would be weekday service as well. Clear enough, if I had any inkling of the date or the day of the week.

My body was still unused to all the physical activity. I was beginning to feel tired. I sat by the pier for an hour watching the tide turn and the sky brighten. There wasn't any rush. I had to go back and finish it, true, but at the moment I could do nothing. I was far out of apparition range and I had no other means of transport. Just now there was nothing to do. I began to make my way slowly back to my sanctuary. I struck out a smaller path through the woods and ruins. Why did people come to visit this place? It was just a lot of relics of some pointless war. Completely useless.



Art by Mottsnave

NEWS

I had to sleep again when I returned to my room. When I woke, I lay looking up at the cracked stained ceiling and started to plan. If I had to go back, and I did, both flying and apparating that distance would be far beyond my strength. I would have to go into the city and purchase a Portkey, and to do that, I would have to travel under Dr. Ramson's name, otherwise I was sure to be arrested on sight.

In a few days I would probably be strong enough to apparate the seven miles to Boston, but I couldn't apparate blind; I had never

Chapter 3 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 39, NO.1
JULY 2002

been to Boston and didn't even know which direction it lay in. I would have to wait and see when the ferry would arrive.

It didn't really matter how quickly the ferry came. I still had more than half the tins and I could probably subsist off the island for some time if I had to. I ran across several rabbits on my way back to Battery Terrill, and then there were mussels and probably fish and crabs as well. I didn't like the idea of staying here for long, however. Aberforth, at least, knew where I was. I didn't know exactly where I stood, so that was one person too many.

The ferry might come today. If it did, I wouldn't be quite ready, but I could plan for tomorrow. I would need to pack my few belongings; that wouldn't take long. The larger task would be to change my appearance. I could, and I probably would have to, disillusion myself to ride the ferry, as I didn't have a ticket or even any American money. However, it wouldn't be advisable to walk around a crowded city in the day disillusioned, especially if there was much traffic, and I didn't want to have to hole up for the night. I would need to make myself presentable.

I had already transfigured two of my empty food tins into a single large water basin. I refilled it now, waited until the water stilled, and looked in.

It was worse than I thought. Growing a beard had never been one of my great talents. I had attempted to sport a pencil moustache for a few weeks in 1979, but Lucius threatened to remove it one hair at a time unless I shaved. I shaved. Left to its own devices, my facial hair came in in blotchy patches of uneven stringy quality. That was exactly what it was doing now, at least a week's worth. My hair was longer than it should be, unspeakably greasy, and matted on the right side. My face was sunken and pale, and the clothes that Aberforth had given me, a plain grey shirt, a brown jumper and dark work trousers, hung off me like a scarecrow. Aberforth's application of dittany had been less than thorough; the left side of my throat was puckered with white and pink scar tissue. I also rather suspected that I *stank*. All in all, I was someone to be cursed on sight, just to be safe. I groaned.

There wasn't so much I could do here. I didn't even have a bar of soap. Really I should look like Cyril Ramson, DMA, as much

as possible. I had placed charms on myself when I had the photo taken for the ID, years ago, so Dr. Ramson had short light-brown hair and glasses. The expression was probably the best part of my disguise. I had leant slightly back, raised my eyebrows and plastered an idiot smile across my face. The Headmaster had doubled over laughing when he saw it and declared that I wouldn't be able to keep it up for five minutes. Perhaps he was right.

At the moment I could only affect two of the changes I needed: hair length and beard. I hacked away over the basin. Neither the cutting nor the shaving was a neat job. I was bleeding from two places on my right cheek and the hair on the back of my head felt terribly uneven. I cast a Scourgify over what little hair I had left. I felt shorn and exposed, but at least a little cleaner. I could see the matted hair on the right side of my head had been hiding a scabbed cut. I touched it gingerly. The scab was already flaking off and I could see the bruise beneath. I must have struck my head, but when? I couldn't remember.

I stared at my newly shorn reflection in the basin. Did my ears really stick out like that? I folded them both back with my hands, but when I took my hands away they sprung back, looking shockingly pink. Dear lord.

I could charm my hair color for now I supposed. Muggle hair dye would be better; if they were looking for me they would be checking for charms, glamours or Polyjuice. Much better to change my appearance by physical means, if possible. I summoned all the stray hair and burned it out in the little courtyard. The awful smell clung to me.

All that was left for now was the packing. I sat on my makeshift bed and opened the cigar box. More papers erupted from the box in a confused mess of pages. Aberforth must have been stuffing them through while I was exploring the island. They were more DAILY PROPHETS, two papers dated May fourth and one from the fifth.

I wasn't sure I could stomach reading any more, but I had to know where everything stood, now more than ever. The first May fourth article was merely a rehashing of the headlines the day before. A note at the bottom of the main story directed me to page eight for a list of casualties. There were the dead, sixty-two in all. Only a

few names in I stopped at Vincent Crabbe. *Vincent*. I half-shoved the paper away. "No, no, no..." I couldn't do anything for a while but yell and pound on the floor. The side of my hand hit one of the sardine tins and split open, leaving a splatter of blood on the floor when I hit it again. The pain of it finally made me catch my breath.

I tucked my hand against my side and curled around it. That little idiot! I had watched him plunge in eagerly, stupidly, far over his head. I couldn't do a thing about it. He wasn't inclined to pick up on my hints to keep his head down, concentrate on his studies, *think* for himself. Everything I said simply rolled off him, he had been too excited to reach for what he believed to be his one chance to shine. My last, inadequate attempt to bring him back under control was to take him aside and tell him to report to me. He agreed, but I was the one who had taken him aside. Was that what had got him killed? I sucked on the cut on my hand like a child. I didn't heal it, as if that were some adequate payment for Vincent, for the whole bloody list. Aberforth said they got out! *God damn him!* They were out, completely out of it now. I moaned to myself. There was nothing I wanted less, but I had to keep reading.

Just under Vincent was Colin Creevey. What the hell had he been playing at? He wasn't any fighter, he should have got out. Why hadn't he gotten out? Layton Jugson was there, and Tony Dolohov, and Fenrir Greyback, thank god. Devon Goyle. What would Greg do now?

I recognized a few names as suppliers to the school and shopkeepers from Hogsmead. I could no longer bring myself to wonder how they had been pulled in. By the time I reached my own name at the bottom with Rowle, Selwyn and Travers I was numb and desperately tired. I laughed when I saw it and half-wondered if it was right and I was in some special hell.

Aberforth had said it was over, but of course it wasn't over, not for me. I had to sit there and read the list again and again. Why couldn't I... it was useless, I had to finish it. Halfway through the list the fourth time I threw the paper away in disgust, I couldn't stomach it. All for the one left that I would have to take care of.

I curled over and ground the heels of my palms into my eye sock-

ets. How could I? I would have to just look in his eyes and see the Dark Lord there. Simple, so simple. I deliberately dragged at the cut on my hand until the pain made me gasp again. I had to pull myself together. I knew very well what I had to do and whinging about it wouldn't help. I felt chilled to the bone. I got into the sleeping bag.

The warmth helped a little, but the papers were waiting. Reluctantly I summoned them, propped myself in the bag up against the wall, and resumed.

4 May 1998. **MINISTRY TAKEOVER**, the headline shouted.

After the arrest of Pius Thickness on 2nd May, Kingsley Shacklebolt has taken over as Interim Minister of Magic. At 5:00 pm Sunday evening he issued a decree of Martial Law. A strict curfew of 8:00 pm — 6:00 am is enforced for all but emergency and Ministry personnel. International travel is currently banned, to be enforced by a monitoring charm on all portkeys and official apparition points.

Well that was closing the barn door a bit late, wasn't it? No wonder Aberforth had been eager to get me out. I wondered what date it had been when he'd given me the heave. I supposed I had to be grateful to him, despite his attempted blood replenisher overdose. I certainly did not want to be in that mess.

In addition, the underage monitoring charm will be reactivated on all adult wands. Gingotts is cooperating with the Ministry to freeze the accounts of all suspected Death Eaters and collaborators. The Order of the Phoenix, along with a hand-picked group of loyal Aurors have been conducting arrests. Interim Minister Shacklebolt has appointed a tribunal of known resistance fighters to immediately begin conduction hearings...

Bloody martial law. The word tribunal made me squirm. If they were going to try to arrest all collaborators, hell, that could well be half the Ministry. The country would be paralyzed without anyone to fill their jobs. Perhaps they were counting on the mint they would make off all the confiscated family vaults to hire and train all new personnel.

The docket is already full with over 120 arrests made at the end of the Battle of Hogwarts and subsequent raids on Ministry offices.

More arrests are expected shortly. Interim Minister Shackbolt has promised a 'swift and fair application of justice to allow our country to start on the long road to recovery.'

Justice, my arse. 'Swift and fair?' It sounded like a return to the bad old days of Crouch's kangaroo courts. I looked down the list of arrests on the bottom. The entire Muggleborn Registration Committee was there, even down to the secretaries. I recognized the name of Stephanie Coates, Yaxley's 'personal assistant.' *Very personal.*

Antrim, both the Carrows, Keefer, Lewis, McNair, the elderly Edward Nott and Gregory Goyle had all been taken at the battle. The Snatchers' squad heads, Stan Shunpike, Gallard Mason, Morley Scabior and Geraldine Durrell were arrested the same day. Someone must have given the Aurors the Snatchers' headquarters location. I wondered if Bulstrode had passed on my notes. I had put her in charge of the few eyes I had in the school, and told her to pass on information as necessary in my absence. I had to have some backup in keeping the students out of harm if I were incapacitated. Her name, at least, was not among the dead or arrested. None of my other student eyes were on the list either. That was something, anyway.

Lucius, Draco and Narcissa had all been arrested, of course. Nothing else to expect, but it should just be temporary until the rest of my papers were brought forward. It was a relief that none of them were on the list of the dead. Rabastan Lestrangle had been caught attempting to flee the country. His brother Roddy was found dead by his own wand. Mulciber was killed 'resisting arrest.' I knew what that meant. Either he was cut down or it was another 'suicide by Auror' like Rosier. There were more names on the list that I didn't know, Ministry workers under Yaxley, I guessed.

That was all? Something wasn't right. I took the back pages of the classifieds and cast to lift the printed ink off the cheap paper. A small transfiguration and I had the ink compressed into a stylus. I wrapped a scrap of paper around it to protect my fingers and began to write. I laid the lists of the dead and arrested side by side and started noting down the names of my former colleagues.

Well, well, where were Avery, Crabbe, and Rookwood? Of course,

my source of information was the DAILY PROPHECY, not very reliable at the best of times, and the Ministry might have held back certain names, I wouldn't put it past them. I picked up the last paper, perhaps there would be more details.

6 May, **HARRY POTTER SPEAKS, A FULL ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF HOGWARTS AND THE DEFEAT OF HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED.**

Oh, god. I wasn't sure I wanted to go on tonight, but I doubted I could sleep and I needed the information. I waded into the article.

Information? All I learned was that it had been a disaster. It was so bloody pointless, all those deaths, if I had just got to him a few hours earlier... I didn't even know if I could pinpoint where it had all started to fall apart, when all my safeguards had unraveled. Of course, he hadn't set off any of my alerts by coming in through Aberforth's tunnel. Perhaps that was what had brought us down, or that Minerva had reinforcements when she met me in the hall. Now I could see how close I had been. If I had known how close he was, would I have fought to the end then and risked hurting Minerva or Filius? If only I could have talked to him then, damn him! None of my eyes had been in the right place at the right time to bring him to me until Vincent...

It didn't quite sink in the first time I read the account of what happened to Vincent. He was simply meant to either immobilize Potter and alert me, or bring him to me. Had he already heard that I was no longer in the castle and thought he could handle it himself, or had he decided to go against my orders and try to snatch a little more glory? Had he meant to simply drive them out of the room and into the corridor? Had he forgotten how to stop the Fiendfyre?

Fiendfyre. I had to lay the paper flat; it was shaking. I traced the word with my finger. He had burned to death, they didn't get him out. Draco and Greg saw their friend burn to death.

I could see him too, his first year in the Pit. He had just beat Draco in the Hunt, our House's annual competition, so pleased that he couldn't help hopping up and down on one leg, laughing in triumph. Blaise had tweaked him all that year about the 'ancient and honorable Crabbe dance of victory.' That round dancing eleven year-old was gone now. Sodding victory. All because, all because...

I had managed, barely, to put the parts of it together when Albus said to watch for the Dark Lord protecting Nagini. Along with the Dark Lord's decline in health and sanity and the necessity of Potter's death, not much else made sense but that Nagini and the boy were both horcruxes. I had identified those two myself, but according to the paper, according to Potter, there were so many others; so many and Albus hadn't *told* me. I had a whole year at my disposal, *a whole year*, and barely a ten minute walk from my office was the diadem. Even if Albus hadn't known exactly what or where it was, I had a whole year and I could have been searching for it, for any of them. They hadn't needed to waste that hour, that hour that delayed Potter and led to Vincent's death and so many others. All because when it came down to it, Albus didn't trust me enough to tell me.

I couldn't seem to get enough breath. I kept gasping but it didn't do any good. My fingers were starting to prickle and I saw spots at the edges of my vision. Albus couldn't fucking tell me? He put all that information in Potter's sieve of a skull, with a direct connection to the Dark Lord, but he couldn't trust me? And that was why Vincent burned himself to death? I pulled my sleeve over my nose and mouth and breathed into it until my chest stopped heaving and my vision cleared. That sodding bastard! How many times had I told him? "You trust my occlumency or you don't. If you trust me, tell me what I need to know." He had always hedged, given me drops and clues and reminded me of my pledges. Now at last I had my answer. I had put my life in his hands, he had put his life in mine and he still couldn't trust me. What more could I have done? If I had managed to earn his trust, finally, would I somehow have been able to prevent the battle? Would Crabbe and Creevey and the rest still have died? Whatever my flaw, it ran too deep, I had no idea what I could have done. All I could do now was read about the deaths I had failed to prevent.

I didn't want to go back to pounding on the floor and split my hand open further, but it was all I could do to stop myself. Instead, I forced my attention back to the article and the course of the battle. It was ridiculous; the whole staff had descended into chaos. Throwing mandrakes, Sprout must have mad! Jugson and Selwyn had

been killed by that, but so had Meg Durant and Wallace Nelson from Hogsmead, and Ernie Macmillan, barely beyond killing range, had been treated for burst eardrums and severe concussion.

Had there been any sort of tactics at all? All I could gather was that the heads of Houses and older students had rushed out attacking at random. If reinforcements hadn't arrived... I felt sick. It would have turned into a massacre. What had Minerva been thinking? They had advance warning and a tunnel out, they had a whole hour to evacuate. The Dark Lord would have had an empty building to conquer. Potter had a whole hour to find the damn horcrux, couldn't he...? But he hadn't, it wasn't any use going over what he could have done, or when I might have found and talked to him. It was pointless to think that way.

My death was there. I was reading with a sort of numb detachment. It was hard to match Potter's description with my own recollection. I couldn't remember looking at Nagini at all, strangely. He spoke of receiving my memories. *He wouldn't dare*. But I was dead, and he did dare. He described my memories in awful detail. I read with horrified disbelief. Had I really given him all that? I had been desperately pushing out the memories I had edited and prepared, but it sounded like more, many more were caught up in them and came along. Another disaster.

I had known that when I finally found Potter I would only have a few minutes to completely convince him to follow my directions. I knew how he thought. He would need a clear, simple, black-and-white reason for me to be on his side. A simple reason he could identify with completely.

I knew that he was fixated on his parents, and I had my memories of Lily; it was enough. I didn't even need to fabricate anything, just to simplify with a little editing. I had gone through them with Albus, he knew the boy better than I. He agreed that it might work. We staged a single scene together to make the memory that we hoped would convince him. It was all true of course, as far as it went. He was always ready to leap to conclusions. A little bit of misdirection and he thought he had my whole story. I had been counting on that,

but now that he had given the story to everyone I wished I hadn't.

I felt sick. I really had to be dead now, I couldn't face it. Hadn't I had enough humiliation? Did he have to heap on this last helping? Someone else, I had to be someone else. I pushed myself down in my head. I was a thousand miles away, I had to be, it was the only way I could keep reading. I had to finish it.

I should have felt triumphant. After all, my memories had done their work and miraculously Potter *paid attention*. A second miracle; paid attention and *followed instructions*. All I felt was a hollow sort of dread as I read of the third miracle: Potter had died and the horcrux had been destroyed. Could I believe it? It was the DAILY PROPHECY, after all. Was I truly done?

I read on to be sure. Longbottom had showed a surprising level of competence with a sword, though I wasn't surprised at his nerve. He had been a thorn in my side all year. The more he fought me, the harder it was to keep my cover and keep him safe, despite the help I had from the very few I trusted to be my eyes. On one level, it was perfectly safe. If one of my eyes had been caught, I could have simply told the Dark Lord that I had tricked them, that I was gathering information from them to trap and destroy the rebellion. It hadn't been very safe for *them* however. It was just another terrible bargain, weighing their personal risk against the safety of the others. Minerva, damn her, had been no help at all keeping Longbottom and the others in check. I couldn't let that stand, it put my eyes in too much jeopardy.

I had rehearsed it in my head a hundred times, I remembered. I couldn't be too provoking; if I got her back up she could easily allow her feelings to overrule her good judgment and urge the students into greater danger. Yet I had to warn her without any warning at all.

I had called her in to discuss exam schedules. When she entered I quickly covered the parchment I had been writing on with a loose file. She sat stiffly across from me, looking, as usual these days, thin-lipped and defiant. Even discussing the schedule with her was like pulling teeth. I had a visceral desire to shake her, or to tell her everything and then Obliviate her immediately afterward. If I could have her truly on my side, even if for only a few minutes... I

couldn't risk it; she was intelligent enough to recognize the symptoms of obliviation. Scheduling finally done, I leaned back.

"There is another matter for us to discuss. I regret to say I am disappointed with the level of discipline in your House." Even more of her lips disappeared, if that were possible.

"I don't know what you mean, *Headmaster*." She gave the last word a particular little twist.

"Come now, Minerva, you know quite well that the great majority of insubordination and rule-breaking comes from your House. If the situation does not improve markedly, I will be forced to pick *someone else* to oversee the discipline of your House."

That perhaps pushed her too far. Her eyes flashed and she began heatedly, "As if your Carrows don't already –" I couldn't let her go on or she would force my hand. I clasped my left arm and gave a suppressed hiss. She stopped, eyes widened as she caught my movement. I stood.

"You must excuse me for a moment. No, don't get up, I'll return..." I swept through the side door to my quarters. I closed the door behind me, cast a weak Sonorous and activated the floo. She should be able to clearly hear the rush of air as the connection opened. I dropped the Sonorous, then waited, pacing, hoping that what they said about cats and curiosity held true.

I gave her a good fifteen minutes, plenty of time for her to push aside my file and read the list of names on my parchment. Longbottom, Corner, Weasley, Boot, Finnigan, Patil, all with a tally of disciplinary strikes moving close to the column labeled "Report at meeting." God, I made it obvious enough, she couldn't fail to understand.

I let her hear the rush of the floo again, then rattled the knob before I opened the door. I studied her as I crossed back to my seat. She looked, well, old and pale. Her hands clasped against each other in her lap. She was looking at me with a mixture of rage and fear. So it had worked. She read it.

"We're done here," I said shortly. I didn't look up as she swept out. I felt so goddamned tired. I burned the parchment over a candle, watching it twist and curl and blacken, obliterating the names of the resistance.

The twisting burning form in my mind's eye turned into Vincent for

a an instant . *No, I couldn't think like that!* I made myself look back at the article and keep reading. There wasn't much left, I noted with relief.

It was more than enough, however, to make me shake in rage again. Potter was seemingly unable to keep himself from spilling my true loyalties to the Dark Lord. So carefully hidden by me for years, at huge cost, and then he simply told him? For nothing, and in the middle of a crowd, and now again, published in a paper. He simply told them all. It wasn't his secret to tell!

I felt helpless. The end was there in front of me; the Dark Lord was finally dead, so why did I feel a terrible overpowering dread that he *knew*, he *knew* about me? It was irrational, ridiculous, and it completely overwhelmed me. I could see him standing on the dark grass, I was two hours late to his rebirth and he said so calmly, "Severus, stand before me." A whimper forced its way from my throat and I couldn't seem to get enough air. Blackness closed in around my vision.

DAY TRIPPER

I came to, lying sprawled half-out of the sleeping bag, my exposed chest clammy with cold and sweat and my hand tingling from lack of blood. I was panting and shaking. The image of Potter telling the Dark Lord about my true loyalty hung in the air, the words '*he knows, he knows,*' running like a litany through my mind. I tried to replace the words with '*he's dead, he's dead.*' I pulled the bag around myself and huddled in it. The words ran together ridiculously in my brain: '*he knows he's dead, he knows he's dead...*' With that, my breathing finally slowed. If he knew it, couldn't I know it too?

I felt completely drained. I left the papers lying and got out of the room. I would be useless at planning at the moment. I had to

be able to focus. I took myself back up the stairs, down the trough and out onto the shore. It was early evening, the sun sinking behind the city skyline over the water. The tide was mostly out. I clambered along the rocks towards the waves.

I went out over a maze of slippery weed and pools to where the swells were splashing against the rocks. I hardly knew what I was doing; I had to occupy myself somehow. I set myself to catching crabs. It was a tricky, slippery business and it took all my concentration. I scraped my knuckles open on barnacles more than once as I jammed my hands into cracks in the rocks after my prey. Both my hands were bleeding and stinging from the salt water and my left leg was soaked to the knee where I had lost my footing on the rim of a tide pool. At least I was too busy to think.

In the dying light I made a fire of driftwood at the top of the beach and roasted my catch of two hand-sized crabs. The business of cooking and eating them was terribly fiddly and occupied me for another hour at least. When I was done, when there was really nothing I could invent for myself to do, I lay on my side next to the fire and listened to the waves below. I should get back behind my wards, I was completely exposed and it was getting cold, but I didn't care. I didn't want to see the one Dumbledore's bloody papers or the other Dumbledore's bloody useful present. *Useful*, what was *useful*, what was the bloody *use*?

I must have fallen asleep at some point because I was back in the Great Hall for dinner. The noise of the students was distant somehow. At an even greater distance I could hear a rushing noise building up. He was coming. I had to get them out. Minerva was on my left, leaning over and speaking to Filius. "Minerva, we have to get them out." She didn't seem to hear me, or perhaps she was freezing me out as she had done all year. I took her elbow so she couldn't ignore me. "Listen to me, we have to get them out, now!" She looked at me, irritated, as though I had only half-managed a transfiguration in one of her classes.

"Ridiculous, it's almost curfew." Curfew wasn't important!

"I rescind it, you must help me to get everyone out, at once!" She just

Chapter 4 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 39, No.2
IMBOLC 2002

stared. "Please believe me!" I was almost begging. I would beg, if I had to.

She gave a short laugh. "But really, now? They'll need permission forms signed, and the first-years won't be allowed out at all –"

I interrupted her desperately, "I have the forms, I have them, just get up and get them out!" I was pulling her up bodily, to her great indignation. I didn't care. I was shouting now; the whole hall should have been staring, or rising to their feet, but they all ignored us complacently.

"Get out, all of you get out!" I yelled. The thundering noise was just outside the doors. It was here, it was too late...

I came awake with a start as another wave crashed against the rocks. It was full dark now and I could see city lights beyond the pale forms of the breakers. My fire had burned itself out to embers and I was cold. My wet left leg felt half-frozen.

I scuffed rocks and sand over the remnants of my fire until it was dead out, then made my way back to the room. I didn't particularly want to go back there, in the company of all the dead names, but I wanted the warmth of the sleeping bag. I spell-dried my clothes and shoes, which left them stiff with a white crust of salt. I really did need to go to the city as soon as possible. A change of clothes and a bar of soap at the very least. Scourgify can only take you so far. I shed my clothes and climbed into the sleeping bag. The warming charms came on at once.

I was wrung out. At length, I drifted to sleep. I woke with a start some time later from an uneasy dream of running through school corridors looking for someone. I still felt exhausted, but I knew it would be pointless to try to sleep any longer. I groaned, got up stiffly, and dressed in my stale clothes. The papers were scattered on the floor, all looking a bit abused. Well, they had it easy up until now. I had no desire to ever see them again.

I took them out to the remains of my campfire and burned the pages one by one, all down to ash. Enough, it was more than enough. I was sick of it, the whole bloody, pointless mess. I kicked sand at the drifting ashes. I needed to get away. I was away, a whole ocean away, but I felt trapped in the running circle of my thoughts. I set out, walking briskly along the shore. *My assignment*, I told

myself, *high priority, utmost secrecy; find a way out.*

It now seemed that I wouldn't have to return to Britain to finish any... *work*. However, my own position was still uncertain. I had been reported dead, but Aberforth at least knew that I was alive. I wasn't sure of his purpose in helping me. He also knew my location, and that could not stand. I would need to find a new shelter, as soon as possible.

If the map on the signboard was correct about directions, the sun was now half up in the eastern sky. I must have had a few hours of sleep then, though I didn't feel like it. I worked my way along the island's shore slowly, following winding tracks through the scrubby woods as I tried to think.

I was approaching the part of the island which the information kiosk had called Battery Whipple when I heard it; the heavy rumbling of a motor, metal clanking, and bright high voices. The ferry. I stiffened, then quickly cast a disillusionment over myself. I felt the ragged bite of panic at the edge of my mind.

This is what you're waiting for, I told myself sternly. What had I planned? My mind was frustratingly blank. *Don't just stand there*, I ordered, *move*.

Thankfully, my brain began to work again along with my feet as I strode back to Battery Terrill. The ferry was scheduled to pick up day trippers at three in the afternoon. I would simply pack my belongings, return to the pier, board under a disillusionment and find a protected spot on the ferry to ride to the city.

There really wasn't much packing to do; there wasn't much to pack. Manhandling the sleeping bag into its shrink sack was the worst part. After that, I packed one of the two bundles of cash, the potions vials, my knife, my papers, and after a moment of thought, one empty tin that I had transfigured into a water mug. I left the cigar box. It was empty, and I didn't want to carry it around in case Aberforth was intending to use it to track me. Not that I had any reason to think that he would.

I closed the door behind me and set off across the island. There were only about twenty visitors, but the children had scattered through the ruins and the woods rang with their shouts. I pressed myself into the edge of some wild rose bushes near the pier and

waited under a disillusionment. When the ferry chugged up at three, I joined the tail-end of the ragged mob.

I crossed the boarding plank in close lock-step behind the last visitor just before the crewmen began to cast off lines. I managed to wedge myself under the metal stairs to the upper level after brushing against only a few of the other passengers.

I wasn't noticed in the crush. The ferry stopped at several other islands, Peddocks, Spectacle, and finally a large one, Georges. A large crowd piled on there, and then we were off to our final stop, Boston Harbor.

It was a fine blue day, and though the wind was cutting into my jumper, the day trippers in their brightly-colored jackets were happy to press along the railings, effectively trapping me beneath the stairs. A young boy, about eight, was nearest to me, leaning out over the rail, mesmerized by the water.

"Ma! Ma!" he yelled, "aw, wicked! Ma, lookida shock! Lookida shock!" I couldn't make any sense of it, was there something wrong with him? The woman who was sitting on the bench nearby, one hand clamped on his belt so he wouldn't go over, stood up and craned over him. "Where? Naw, it's just a jelly."

"Naw, it went undadawadda, Ma, it was a *shock!*"

"Siddown now, sweedy." He sat, muttering, "it was a *shock.*" But what was a shock? I sighed silently to myself. I thought Aberforth had sent me somewhere they spoke English.

They cut the main engine as we came into the waiting arms of the wharf. Glass and steel skyscrapers loomed in front of us. I didn't want to step off into their shadow, but as the crowd clanked across the gangplank, I attached myself again to the stragglers and jumped off on the wharf. I hurried to move out of the way, pressing myself against the side of the ticket building while I studied the scene.

The wharf was next to an open brick square on one side, streets and a traffic turnaround on the other, and huge buildings beyond. The square was teeming with people: children racing about at knee-height, vendors selling food, lemonade and balloons from carts. The turnaround in front of a strangely shaped building was clogged with taxis. Beyond that, in the towering forest of buildings,

I could see huge yellow construction cranes dipping and working. There were the high-pitched voices of children, honking horns, and strangely, the honking of seals mixing with the keening voices of gulls. I had been cold on the ferry. Now I was sweating.

I couldn't step out there under a disillusionment. There were simply too many people, moving too quickly. And autos... deadly if they couldn't see you. I would have to drop the disillusionment before I could move. The thought started my heart racing. I would stick out like a sore thumb with my ragged hair and ill-fitting clothes. The thought of all those eyes on me was almost unbearable. *You already did that, all year, every day eating at the high table with everyone staring daggers at you. Here, no one knows who you are.*

I looked at the large clock over the ticket stand. Four thirty-five. I needed to find a chemist's, wait until it closed, then take what I needed. But where to go? I hadn't the slightest idea. I would just have to walk. I edged around behind the ticket building where a narrow walk separated it from the wood railing of the wharf. I was reasonably certain I wouldn't be seen there. I dropped the disillusionment, took a deep breath, and stepped out.

Contrary to my expectations, my ragged appearance was almost as good as a disillusionment; eyes dropped off me as if I didn't exist. Perfect. I wandered narrow streets, gaping construction pits, and dodged murderous traffic. I found a store that I thought might do, a STOP & SHOP. I could see through the large plate windows that it carried groceries, cosmetics and housewares. It would suit me perfectly except that it was open until ten pm. Did Americans really go about in shopping hordes until ten at night? Well, I would simply have to wait. I found a square a few block away with benches and plantings beside a brick-and-wood hall with a strange golden insect weather-vane.

A discarded paper on my bench told me that it was Saturday, 9 May. Was that right? I tried to tally up the days since the battle, but I couldn't be sure how many days I had slept before Aberforth sent me off and when I had first arrived on the island. I sat and waited and watched the crowds thin, the street performers pick up their hats and count their take.

I was in a paradoxical circle. I needed to clean myself up and get better clothes. I certainly had the money for that, but if I walked into a bank to change my pounds to dollars with my vagrant looks I would attract exactly the wrong sort of attention. I had to wait for night to take what I needed.

Eventually a new sort of foot traffic emerged as dinner-guests wandered towards restaurants, then finally that traffic fell away also. I watched the glowing clock at the top of a white tower a street away pass ten, then eleven. Hopefully everyone in the shop would be gone by now. I crouched behind a bench and recast my disillusionment, then went back to the STOP & SHOP.

Looking through the glass doors, I picked my spot just inside and apparated through. I had been working on my mental shopping list while I waited, and now I knew exactly what I wanted. As I headed for the hair dye I saw a rack of reading glasses. I chose a black-rimmed pair that looked reasonably like what Cyril wore in his ID picture. Then bleach and hair dye went into my bag with a couple of cheap plastic framed mirrors, a packet of razors, soap and shampoo. They didn't carry full-sized towels, so I took a couple of dish-towels that I could expand later. Near the registers was a rack of maps. I took one of the city and one of the state with its ridiculous name.

That was my entire list... but there was food here. I hadn't eaten all day and the prospect of something fresh, not tinned, was irresistible. I took a sack of apples, a loaf of bread, a salami, mustard, cheese and butter, and finally a large nut chocolate bar. I could hardly wait.

I apparated outside the shop and began to walk back to the harbor. It would be well to begin learning the streets. My steps slowed as I passed a tourist shop a block from the wharf. There were jumpers and T-shirts displayed in the window.

I really needed a full change of clothes, but just for the purpose of going to a bank, well, nothing would be more natural than a tourist changing money. I apparated in and moved towards the racks of clothes at the back. I passed a rack of historical objects; tricorne hats so out of fashion that even a wizard wouldn't wear them, handbells and history books. A large poster reproduction of what looked like

a woodcut stopped me in my tracks. A snake writhed across it, but severed into eight sections, each labeled cryptically with initials. Across the bottom of the image ran the simple legend 'JOIN, OR DIE.'*

*JOIN OR DIE is a famous political cartoon by Benjamin Franklin, used for recruitment first during the French and Indian War, and later during the American Revolution.

My breath caught. I felt sick enough that I had to swallow. Hell, it could as well be a recruitment poster for *him*. Even the numbers were right, if you counted his raised body as one piece. I ran a hand over my face. I had to get out of there. I forced myself away and hurried to the clothes at the back. I chose the plainest one I could find, a dark-blue pullover with a pocket in the front and the words 'Boston Red Sox' across the back in red. It was dark, it fit well enough and it would cover my more ill-fitting clothes. It would do.

I walked the short distance back to the harbor, carefully checking several times for autos before crossing the street. It wasn't advisable to walk about in a city while under a disillusionment, but I didn't want to drop it now. Back on the wharf, I put the beach at Lovells Island carefully into my head and apparated.

Once I had regained my sanctuary, I couldn't resist; I made myself a cheese and salami sandwich and ate one of the apples. The texture of the bread was disappointing, soft as a sponge, but the fresh sharp taste of the cheese and mustard along with the sweet apple, it was one of the most delicious things I had ever tasted.

I was weary then, it was quite late, but I had soap now and I desperately wanted to be clean. I filled my tub, heated it, and scrubbed and scrubbed. I was finally clean. I dried off with my expanded dish towel, unpacked my sleeping bag and went to sleep.

The dream began innocently enough. I was walking near the edge of a park in the late afternoon, warm sunlight casting long shadows across the path. I was in a lane of trees; I had the impression of a lawn stretching out beside me. Another shadow joined mine as I looked out at it. I turned to the figure next to me; it was the Dark Lord, how he looked before he fell the first time. He was speaking, picking up in the middle of our conversation.

“ – we can speak like this because we have always been friends, Severus. Some seem to think that friends must always speak carefully, politely, spare each others’ feelings, but I feel just the opposite. If you can’t be perfectly open and straightforward with your friends, then who can you be honest with?”

He assumed too much, far too much. I wanted to speak out; after all, what could stop me now? I had a vague recollection that he already knew, but if that were so, why would he speak as if we were friends? I couldn’t seem to think straight. If I *could* speak freely now...

“I – ” I began, and he turned and looked at me, almost hopefully. The words died in my throat.

I woke, whimpering. I felt somehow, terribly, that he was standing just outside my door. Completely ridiculous, of course. I had to get out of here as soon as I could.

WHAT PURPOSE?

I didn’t return to the city the next day. When I was finally able to get back to sleep I slept late. I woke to a far off clanging, and then eventually the noises of visitors drifted to my end of the island. That meant it was Sunday, it wouldn’t be any use to try to change money in the city. Instead, I concentrated on altering my appearance.

The bleach stung my scalp and left me an awful ginger shade on the first round. By the second round the fumes were burning my throat and eyes but my hair was a rather crispy blond. I let it set for a few hours and focused on the glasses. It was a tricky bit of transfiguration, straightening and thinning the lenses until they no longer affected my vision.

Chapter 5 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 39, NO.3
OSTARA 2002

I used the hair dye when I was done. It came out a bit lighter brown than in Cyril’s pictures, but it would do. It certainly looked completely different than it had before. I was helped by how little I had changed my old appearance over the years. Even small changes made me look quite different.

I used sticking charms to affix the two mirrors to the wall and the back of the door, then adjusted the angle until I could see the back of my head. I evened out the ragged hair at the back, then finally with my razors, warm water, soap and mirrors, I gave myself a decent shave. I compared myself in the mirror with my ID cards, both the muggle still photo and the wizarding one which flicked back and forth between front and side views. Close, fairly close. It would have to do.

I spent the rest of the day pouring over the city map. I could see the island, the wharf, Long Wharf, and the streets I walked the night before. I set to memorizing as much as I could, as much to use up time and occupy my mind as any real end. What I needed to find the next day wouldn’t be found on a map.

At the end of the day, when the ferry had carried the day trippers away, I finally emerged into the golden late-afternoon light. The island was quiet except for birdsong and the rush of waves. I wished I could save up that tranquility somehow for the next day when I would plunge back into the noise of the city.

I started early the next morning. I packed my belongings yet again, and made a few sandwiches to take along. I would probably be all day at my search. The wharf and brick square were quieter than they had been on Saturday, but the rest of the city was much busier. I was glad that I had cleaned up and changed my appearance. I found a bank with a currency exchange desk without too much trouble. I handed over 500 pounds. They took a healthy bite in fees, but the exchange rate was still in my favor. I also managed to get a brochure with all their locations in the city. I visited another location a few blocks away and changed more of the money. I was losing ground in fees, I knew, but I didn’t want to change it all in one place.

The next part of my search was more difficult. I rested and ate a sandwich and apple in the large green park that the map told me

was Boston Commons, then I wound and zigzagged my way south for almost an hour before I found a second-hand store. I almost groaned when I stepped in. The feeling of shoddiness and humiliation was not so deeply buried in me that it couldn't come rushing up to the surface at the look and smell of the place. At least now I could choose clothes that fit properly, not castoffs that I would 'grow into.' I couldn't say that I was really pleased when I left, but I was at least satisfied that I had a few decent changes of clothes, a heavy wool navy coat for cold weather, and a pair of trainers.

The last part of my search was the hardest; I needed a place to stay. I propped myself in a corner with the map. I wanted an abandoned building, somewhere I wouldn't need to pay rent, somewhere I could set proper wards. I hadn't seen anything at all in the downtown area. Real estate must be too dear there for anything to stay vacant for long. I would have to look for a poorer area, or an industrial district, someplace where abandoned buildings might stay vacant.

The map showed me that if I continued a little further I would come to loading docks and wharfs. I studied the streets then set out. Sure enough, after passing under a freeway overpass on enormous concrete supports, crossing a bridge over a short stretch of green water, and cutting disillusioned across several rail yards, I reached a dilapidated neighborhood. I saw and passed two boarded buildings. One was too close to a thriving pub; the other was already claimed as a squat, as a *Hominem Revelio* showed me. I found the third as the light was fading, a narrow brick building of three stories that once had a wide bay window in front, now covered with sheets of plywood. It was set slightly apart, a vacant lot on one side and an alley on the other. It would be hard for a muggle to approach it under cover, which perhaps was why it hadn't already been claimed.

Still under my disillusionment, I went down the alley to the back of the house. I raised a *Silencio* and a *Notice-me-not* for cover as I destroyed the plywood covering the back door with a *Reducto*. The door beneath opened easily enough. I took a moment to glamour the outside of the door to mimic a sheet of plywood. Now no one would notice my entrance.

The house had been stripped, every metal fixture removed, even wires ripped out of the plaster walls. Most of the room doors were leaning uselessly in the halls, their hinges and knobs gone. The brass letter slot in the front door had been overlooked, but not much else. Aside from the missing metal, the actual structure was in good repair. The stairs were solid, the floors even. The WC on the top floor had water stains on the walls, but there were no other signs of leaks. For now, it would do. I left my bag in a room at the top of the house that still had a door on its hinges. When I removed the plywood over the window to replace it with a glamour, I could see that it opened straight out onto the metal fire escape. Two exits. This would be my room, I decided.

I laid basic wards that night, along with more *Notice-me-not* charms. I wanted to be sure no one else had the idea of squatting here. This place was mine. Finally, exhausted, I decided the wards were good enough for the night. Tomorrow I would retrieve the rest of my food and belongings from the island, buy some salt and lay some really strong wards. Now I needed sleep.

I woke early, sweating and shaking out of a dream of trying to reach an Order meeting. I was being followed, and I knew it, but I simply couldn't shake the footsteps behind me, coming closer and closer. Waking, I staggered out of the corner where I had laid out my sleeping bag, down the hall to the bath. The exposed pipes and taps had all been removed, but a chipped porcelain sink still stood. I fitted in a rubber plug and filled it with *Aguamenti*. I splashed the cold water over my face to wash away the images from my sleep.

It wasn't quite dawn. Just as well, I could get an early start. I first improved the glamour on the back stoop so the image of the boarded door stood a meter in front of the actual door. Now I could lay anti-apparition wards on the house and have a shielded spot outside the ward to apparate from.

When I was done I put my apparition point to use, first to my spot on the wharf behind the ticket booth, then out to the island. Back in the room under Battery Terrill, I packed the rest of my supplies. Finally, I picked up the cigar box. Surprisingly, I felt something shift inside. A single *DAILY PROPHET* lay there. It had

been folded back to page three, where a bold story headline read

MINISTER PARDONS SNAPE.

I sat down on the creaking couch. The byline was R. Skeeter. *Dear lord.* I read on, with some trepidation.

After a single two-hour hearing on Friday, 8 May, Interim Minister Shackbolt issued a posthumous blanket pardon to Severus Snape "in light of his extraordinary service to the Order of the Phoenix and all of wizarding Britain" with the concurrence of his own appointed War Crimes Tribunal. The announcement marks an interruption of the tribunal's stated purpose of quick dispensation of justice on the scores of captured Death Eaters and collaborators arrested immediately after the fall of the DWFKAHWMNBN. Wizengamot member Graham Turlough commented that the pardon comes as an "unwelcome distraction from the very real and urgent issues we must address to rebuild our society. There is no reason to rush into decisions on the dead when so many of the living need our attention, particularly when, with such a controversial figure, careful review and reflection are indicated." An informal poll by this reporter confirmed that several members of the currently suspended Wizengamot believe that the hearing was rushed through to prevent a thorough review and allow the Interim Minister to issue the pardon without serious opposition. The language chosen by the Interim Minister suggests that the late Professor Snape, short-lived Headmaster of Hogwarts and former Death Eater, may be nominated for an Order of Merlin. If so, the Interim Minister would be well-advised that he must "do much more to state his case if he expects to win the support of the Wizengamot," in the words of one anonymous member of that august body. Another posthumous hearing is scheduled for later this month for Regulus Black.

There it was, but what was I to make of that? My mind felt as blank as a Hufflepuff's. I reread the article, but it hardly made any more sense the second time through. *Why on earth?* If it were true... My eyes went back to the byline. Well, it couldn't be believed, of course. Not on face value. But what would be the end in fabricating it? Did they suspect that I was alive and in hiding? Did they think I would fall for something so transparent and reveal myself? Surely not. None of it made any sense.

Yet what purpose could they have? And why would Aberforth send it to me? Was he trying to trick me? That didn't make any sense either. He had, or at least he thought he had, my location and my alias. If it were some sort of trap, it was an insulting one. I decided that I couldn't give it any credit, it simply did not make any sense.

I carefully tore the byline out of the paper, burned the rest, then left the pile of ashes in the cigar box with the excised byline on top. Let Aberforth make of that what he would. I packed the box to take back with me. Perhaps it was foolish, but I wanted to keep that line of communication open for the moment. I could construct a small ward around it to disrupt tracking charms, if there were any.

Finally, I broke the wards across the threshold. I wanted to remove any trace that there had been a wizard living there. If Aberforth was intending to lead the Ministry there, there would be no evidence to support his story.

On the way back to my new home I stopped for more supplies. Then, armed with a large quantity of salt and some of my own blood drained into an empty tin, I set to laying some really strong wards. I took my time, making sure I didn't cut across the foundation or neglect any part of the building. It also gave me a chance to thoroughly explore my new home. The cellar, it appeared, was already home to a stray cat that disappeared out a cracked window in a black-and-white blur. I patched the window. That and the wards should prevent it from coming back in.

I also found some old wood pallets in the cellar. I broke them down and dragged half the boards into the cramped kitchen, where I transfigured them into a chair and a table. I was fairly exhausted when I was done. I used the kettle, pot and dishes I had bought at the second-hand shop to make myself a supper of toasted cheese and tomato soup. And tea, the first real tea I'd had in weeks. I sat, dumbly staring at the crumbs on my plate and the deadly thought crept in: *'now what?'*

I threw myself into tidying up to avoid it, and finally took myself up to bed, or rather to bag. It was no use. I woke at three in the morning with the deadly thought clear in my mind. *Now what?*

I've had a black hole at the back of my mind for as long as I

could remember. Sometimes it spoke, sometimes it was silent, but at three in the bloody morning it always gaped like a bottomless pit that could swallow the world. *'Now what?'* it asked me.

I'm safe here for now, I thought, but that wasn't an answer and I knew it. The horror was that I didn't have an answer; there was nothing for me to do now. I could lie awake all night, and I was sure I would, and I couldn't name a single reason for me to be alive.

I didn't *have* to do anything now, I had no urgent assignment. I was free. But what was this freedom? I had no purpose, no excuse to exist. I could close the wards from the inside as well and never leave this house again, just let the food run out. I could apparate back to the island and walk into the ocean.

I pulled myself out of the sleeping bag and almost ran down the stairs into the chilly kitchen. I knew, I had done it often enough, I couldn't let the black hole go on talking. I got the kettle on and salvaged the paper label off the tomato soup tin.

I started a list on the back of the label. *Assignment*, I wrote. The food wouldn't last forever, nor would the money. 1.) *Find job*. It would have to be something menial at first. I didn't have the papers or training to get anything better in the muggle world and I wanted to stay out of the wizarding world as much as possible. That did give me an idea however. 2.) *Create new identity*. Aberforth knew about Cyril. It would be good to have a backup. *Backup...* that led me to 2a.) *Find wizarding quarter and Dark Market*. 2b.) *Obtain backup wand and new identity papers*. That would take some thought. The wizarding world was by and large by invitation only. One was invited in as a child, not as an adult. An adult who steps out of the world and doesn't want to go through official channels to get back in would have trouble simply finding it. I had a few ideas, though it would take some time.

I wrote down 3.), but there I stopped. I didn't have a 3.). That elusive thing, a real purpose, was still out of my reach. At least the black hole wasn't gaping at me so viciously now. I drank tea and poured over my map until I could hear the keening cries of gulls. I looked up to see light seeping in around the edges of the plywood

over the windows. I ate some toast and made ready to leave the house. *Assignment number one*.

PARDON

I did my job-searching on foot. It took me over two weeks. I zigzagged through the streets, combing every block and slowly working my way out from my house. I was given many applications that I balled up and binned when I saw that they

asked for ID numbers, work permits, immigration documents, references or job history. I finally came to the conclusion that any job with a written application was effectively closed to me. When I pulled down the HELP WANTED SHORT ORDER COOK sign at HULL'S DINER it was a different game entirely. The manager, Ed Blume, a short rotund man with thinning blond hair, only asked me, "you cook before?" then led me back to the kitchen. He shoved an apron in my hands, then pointed out ingredient locations in the walk-in. "That's Joaquin," he indicated a young dark man almost completely enveloped in a cloud of steam on the grill, "he's usually on evenings and dish, just filling in. He'll get you started. All right, let's see how you do."

It was eleven in the morning and orders were coming in. I put on the apron and washed my hands in an enormous sink. A woman's face appeared in a small window over the counter. She was spinning some metal contraption littered with scraps of paper. "Scramble, hashbrown, two white!" Scramble, that was clear, hashbrowns, I remembered Blume pointing to a bin of shredded potatoes, but two white what? I went to the side of the griddle to pour the eggs which were already mixed. "Oh man, no, no, we're not there yet!" Joaquin caught my wrist before I poured. It was all I could do not to pull away. "Here's the ticket up, two over easy." He pointed at another fluttering

Chapter 6 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 39, No.4
BELTANE 2002

paper on the metal contraption. "Two OE," it read, "Sg, wheat."

"What?"

Joaquin stabbed at it with his finger. "Two over easy, two sausage, wheat toast." Ah, that also explained the 'white.'

The rest of the morning was hell. The toaster was a vicious beast that burned the bread if you turned your back on it, I broke more yolks than I could count trying to flip the eggs evenly, I forgot to salt the hashbrowns, *idiot*, charred strips of bacon went straight into the rubbish, and all that for nothing. I was sure I wouldn't last out the day. But at 2 pm closing, as I was wiping down the cutting boards thinking how quickly it would go with a few Scourgifies, Blume stuck his head in and said, "prep stars at 5 am sharp, you got that? Late or don't show, and you're done. Mondays are off." His head disappeared around the doorway before I could answer. Welcome aboard.

I found prep actually peaceful; two hours of mixing and chopping, bringing in deliveries and stocking the walk-in. The cooking continued to be hell, though after the first few days I knew at least how to decipher the waitresses' incomprehensible scribbling and I knew what was supposed to appear on each plate. I had better, since Joaquin went back on dish and I was on my own after the second day.

The other good points of the job were that I could make myself a breakfast of any eggs whose yolk I had broken or overdone toast and bacon, and lunch from whatever was left over at the end of my shift.

Also, I couldn't think of anything at all while I worked except for the order I was cooking and what orders were coming next. Everything else, past and future, could simply not exist. In some ways it absorbed me like brewing, even though it did not require the same precision. I supposed the scores of hungry patrons made up for that. The black hole that gnawed at me at night was silent in the furious activity of the kitchen.

I didn't need to speak very often, which was fine by me. I didn't like that I could be recognized as British by my accent. Whenever I went home I practiced speaking like the waitresses and patrons, trying to use short, nasal vowels and to drop my Rs. I had changed my accent before; I knew I could do it again, with practice.

Finally, I was paid in cash, though the pay wasn't very much. I was amassing a pile of small bills that I separated into groups of 100 with elastic bands from the produce we brought in, and hid behind a brick I loosened in the cellar.

Every time I went into the cellar I caught sight of the black-and-white stray, usually peering at me from under the stairs. Cats do have a special talent for crossing wards, and maybe this one had been inside when I set them. I would have ignored her if she stayed in the cellar, but after a few days the scent of leftover tuna salad I brought home from the diner proved to be too much for her. She began to venture up into the kitchen. My yelling and snapping the kitchen towel at her only worked a few times before she made herself at home and ignored my protests. If I put her out the back door she was in again in moments. She even made herself free to try to lick my fingers if I had been handling the tuna.

It all would have been insufferable if she hadn't pulled her weight by licking the leftovers containers clean and by being a dedicated cockroach hunter. Dedicated, but not very efficient. She would spend hours by the crack in front of the oven or above the sink until she could nab an unfortunate insect and then torture it slowly to death. Absolutely no conception of a clean kill. I decided to call her Bella.

The first week or so of work I had been too exhausted to do much of anything after my shift, but then I began to think about my next assignment: 2.) *Find Wizarding Quarter*. Every day after I hung up my apron and collected the crumpled bills that were my share of the tips from one of the waitresses (Tyra, who was acceptable, or Shelly, who would let food get cold in the window unless I banged on the bell and yelled at her to *pick up*.) I would walk the streets, discreetly casting *Specialis Revelio* every half-block.

As I worked my way back into better neighborhoods I began to get hits now and again. They were mostly low-level wards and Notice-me-nots on private residences. Short of rapping on the doors and asking, though, it wasn't much of a step towards finding the wizarding quarter.

Over the course of the week I was slowly working my way back towards downtown. I caught my first large grouping of spells a few blocks

from the Commons. I sat on a bench in a small square and worked on pinpointing the spells. They were clustered in a large building of Romanesque design with seated bronze sculptures on either side of a rather grand entrance. BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY. I headed up the steps. I picked up a paper map in the grand marble lobby. There must be a wizarding section. If there was, it would be the perfect place to start; there could be a gazette of the city, papers and maps. First though, I had to find it.

Following the map, I found a deserted side corridor. I quickly cast another Specialis Revelio. Nothing here... I moved down the corridor and tried again. I led myself all over the building, around a courtyard and a fountain. When I stood behind a column and cast there, I got a distant hit, somewhere towards the back of the second floor. Back through the marble lobby, between two guardian stone lions, up a wide staircase, I wandered through long galleries. I found a sheltered spot to cast again behind a shelf; wards appeared across a door at the back of the room. Wiggin Gallery, my map told me. I entered a dim room with lit exhibits along the walls.

I was alone, so I cast again. The walls, exhibits, floor and ceiling were all a web of wards, transfigurations, charms and enchantments. I dropped the spell at once. Well, here I was, apparently, but where was I?

I approached one of the exhibits. It was a light-box with an exquisitely detailed scene in miniature.* A man sat on a city street sketching an enormous excavation below him. I was reminded of the open construction pits and giant cranes I had passed in downtown just a few weeks ago, except that this looked like a scene set at the turn of the century. I was peering at the tiny figures at the bottom of the excavation when I heard a click. A man had entered the gallery. He strolled over to look at the exhibits on the other side of the room. I moved along to the next box, a man in a darkened doorway looking out at a rain-streaked country road with a couple tilting against the wind beneath a black umbrella. I heard a sort of scuff from the other side of the room. The man was gone.

There was an entrance here, somewhere, there had to be. I stepped on to the next box, careful not to look up as

*The Stimson dioramas in the Boston Public Library are real, and open to the public.

two figures entered, a girl of about nine and an older woman, maybe her mother. My next box was a fairly dark interior with two figures and a dog on a tiled floor, a bright window with a red curtain behind them. If I ducked my head a bit and leaned close at an angle I could clearly see my fellow visitors in the reflection on the glass case. The girl was pulling her mother eagerly towards the last box on the opposite wall saying loudly, "I want a book..." Her mother pulled on her hand and shushed her, looking over at me. I remained engrossed in my own exhibit.

They positioned themselves in front of the last case and the mother muttered something, too low to hear. Their image blurred in the glass in front of me and I was alone in the room. I had the entrance.

I went over to the case they were looking at. It was a bright scene; an artist sat at on a folding stool, sketching on the edge of a country road which angled back towards a late-Gothic church. Midway down the road was a farmer leading a horse cart. I gave the glass an experimental tap with my wand. Nothing. It wanted words, I thought. The mother had said something, but what? The young girl's eagerness gave me an idea. "I want a book," I said. Nothing. They were the wrong words. Or... "I want a book, please," I amended. The artist turned his head to look at me. He considered for a moment, then gave his tiny head a tiny jerk. I stepped in.

The sun was hot on the packed-dirt road. I could smell cows and hear birdsong. A door creaked somewhere in the distance. The tranquility of the scene was only broken by the irritated tirade from the artist behind me. "Here now! Can't you see you're in the way? Go along then!" By the sound of him, he was a countryman of mine. He waved his hand at me. "You're blocking my bloody view!" I stepped along the dusty road, easily passing up the farmer who was tugging ineffectively at the horse's halter. I suspected that the horse was not going to move.

I arrived at the arched wooden doors of the church. BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY STIMSON WING was inscribed in the stone above. The doors squeaked dreadfully; that must have been what I heard before. I had to stop and blink in the dim light until my eyes adjusted. There was an information desk in front of me staffed by a middle-aged woman. A pile of paper maps sat on the counter. I

took one as she asked me, "can I help you find anything?" I shook my head and moved off quickly through a side door. I was among wizards now. I didn't even want to open my mouth.

I stepped into a large reading room. Long tables stretched out with green-shaded lamps set along them. Stacks lined the walls and stretched up to a second story balcony running all around the room. Above that at the far end of the vaulted space was a rose window depicting the tree of knowledge. I took a seat and poured over my map. I was in the research library. The main entrance I had come through was labeled GRIGGS' LONE-END. There was another entrance connected to a tube station: EXETER STREET. I had already memorized all the T stops on my Boston map, there was no stop by that name, I was sure of it. I felt a sliver of excitement. That had to be my gate to the wizarding quarter; I was in.

I followed my map to the Carter Room and began to skim down the shelves of travel books. International first: R'LYEH ON 5 DOLLARS A DAY, STAYING SANE IN THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS, then national: ROADS TO OZ, CAPHARNUM CO. MAGICIANS ASSC. GUIDE TO THE U.P., and finally local: DEVILS' STOMPING GROUND, NO EXIT, WEEKENDS ON ROANOKE, BEST FISH SHOPS IN INNSMOUTH. I selected the PURPLE GUIDE TO BOSTON, and THE MAGIC OF MASSACHUSETTS, HISTORY AND PLACES. I sat at an empty table with a stack of note cards and one of the stubby pencils from the reference desk and got to work. I couldn't check any books out; I didn't have a card and didn't want to apply for one. I would have to copy anything I needed.

It was all downhill now, only the work of a few hours to familiarize myself with the layout of the wizarding quarter. There were a few hidden streets in the heart of downtown that were dedicated to it, wedging themselves invisibly between Milk and Water Streets. Honey Street was the main shopping district. I took special note of nearby Vinegar Street, as the guidebook warned casual visitors away. That put it at the top of my list. Honey Street was served by a tube line. I noted that there were several public buildings (such as the library) and stores outside the wizarding quarter that were listed as mixed muggle and wizard establishments. Was that usual here? I

had noticed that the patrons of the library all wore muggle clothes. It made sense if one was constantly moving between both worlds.

I wrote down the entrances and exits for the main streets and some of the shops. It felt strange to be studying again. I had been without books for so long, weeks now.

My immediate business done, I was torn. Any time I spent in the company of wizards was time that I could potentially be recognized, but I was loath to leave already. It was the first place I had been in weeks that I felt a little bit at home. Well, it was about seven in the evening, too late to make much of a start on finding a shop to sell me new papers or an unregistered wand. I decided to explore the rest of the library and find the tube stations instead.

The library was pleasingly extensive, with two floors of smaller rooms served by narrow corridors along both sides of the central reference room I had already visited. I entered a periodical reading room with very comfortable-looking chairs. The room was quiet and empty except for a young sandy-haired clerk who was tidying and refolding stacks of papers.

A headline caught my eye on one of the papers on the rack. It was the NEW YORK PROGNOSTICATOR. I picked it up and settled into a chair near the end of the room. The clerk was glancing over at me; I unfolded the paper and tilted it up until I could no longer see his look. The article was under the 'International' column. **MARTIAL LAW RESTRICTIONS EASED AS VERDICTS REACHED IN DEATH EATER TRIALS.**

June 16th. Interim Minister Kingsley Shackbolt has announced the end of certain Martial Law restrictions including the curfew and total travel ban, though wand monitoring and increased travel security and restrictions continue, for now.

The announcement comes as a welcome sign that the British wizarding society is beginning to stabilize as verdicts are reached in the continuing Death Eater trials. Sentences of life imprisonment have been handed down in the cases of the marked Death Eaters McNair, Lestrangle, Selwyn and Yaxley. Lesser sentences of 60 years were given to Alecto and Amycus Carrow. Other hearings are still pending.

However, the sentences for collaborators and those acting under coer-

cion through fear for their own or families' safety have been less severe. Many Ministry workers in the notorious Muggle Registration office have reduced sentences of 5–10 years, lower-ranking secretaries and officers have mostly been given probation and fines, leading some to consider the tribunal not strict enough. Most controversial have been the trials of the Malfoy family. Narcissa Malfoy has been acquitted as an unmarked and unwilling collaborator. Draco Malfoy, 18, pleading that he took the Mark under coercion and out of fear for his own and his family's lives, received a fine of 5,000 galleons and five-years' probation. Though his father, Lucius Malfoy, used the same plea, the tribunal awarded him 15 years imprisonment and a fine of 25,000 galleons. Though many have criticized the tribunal for the short sentence in comparison to the life sentences received by most other Death Eaters of his rank, several credible witnesses testified that Lucius Malfoy was acting under coercion after 1997.

I realized that I was gripping the paper tightly. Fifteen years. He pled coercion, but what about his cooperation with me? Where was the signed statement, the proof? *Fifteen years. The sodding Ministry, the sodding Order and their worthless promises.*

I shoved the paper back on the rack. The clerk was gone now, I was alone. Just as well, I was thoroughly sick of the company of wizards. I had wanted to locate the tube connection from the library, but now I could hardly wait to be out on the muggle streets and back home. I left the way I came in. The hot sunny day outside the church had turned into a cool blue evening, the artist and the horse cart were gone now. There was a wooden gate just behind where the artist had been sitting. I stepped through and was back in the dim gallery.

I could have disillusioned myself and apparated, but I wanted the walk back home. I thought it would dissipate some of my anger, but instead my thoughts kept circling back to Lucius and the verdict. *Fifteen years in that place.* When I arrived home I slammed the door hard behind me, sending Bella scurrying down the cellar stairs. But what could I do? There was nothing I could do. I calmed myself a little by making dinner. I didn't need to think of anything while I chopped.

Later, as I readied myself for bed, I saw that the cigar box had moved in its warded circle. Did I really want more papers? *News,*

I was thoroughly sick of news, but I knew that if I let it lie I would spend all night wondering what it was. I needed to sleep; I slept little enough as it was, and the less I got, the more likely I was to chop off a finger at work

I flipped the lid back impatiently, but there were no newspapers this time, just a few loose pages folded in half. I was too wary to be relieved. I flattened them out. The first was my pardon, not the original, a copy. *'...for any and all crimes committed while working undercover for the Order of the Phoenix...'* I traced the lines down to the signature, *Kingsley Shacklebolt, Interim Minister of Magic*, and the Ministry seal.

Fifteen years, fifteen years, and I got this. I turned it face-down and looked at the next pages. It was more Ministry paperwork, the release of my estate and appointing Aberforth Dumbledore as executor as successor to Albus. I vaguely remembered naming Albus as my executor years ago, back when I was much surer of his survival than my own.

I skipped over the page listing my property and accounts, it was too pathetic. The last page was a handwritten note: *'Now you've got this, maybe you want me to send you a portkey back, maybe some of your things. Just write it down then. Aberforth.'*

A portkey back? Was he round the bend? As if I could trust those papers, as if I could trust the Ministry. I seized the pardon, at once so furious that it was all I could do to keep from ripping it to bits. Instead I scrawled across it: *'Not worth a bloody sickle,'* my pen ripping the page at the end. Let him make of that what he would. I stuffed all the papers back in the cigar box and flung it to the floor in its warded circle. Fat chance I had of sleeping now.

I spent a good two hours casting Scourgify into every corner of the cellar and ground floor, rousting Bella from her favorite spot near the stove, before I felt exhausted enough to sleep. I was troubled by dreams all night, and the last one before waking was as vivid as a

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PAWN		TRADE

vision. I was in a narrow row-house, alone. There was a gang going down the row, pulling families out, one by one. I could hear them disposing of the family next door. The floo in the front room burst into life. I couldn't quite see the face, but the voice of whoever was calling me came through clearly enough: "I'll tell you once: get *out*." I grabbed a bag that I had ready and left through the back just as I heard a spell smashing into the front door. I walked along the alleyway behind the row as casually as I could. As I came out, a light-haired young man ran up and seized my arm. He was one of them, the most eager one, I somehow knew. He had a great grin on his face and I realized that he thought I was one of them. "Are you ready? We're going to get the next one now," he said excitedly as I woke.

I was still groggy and slow, but I forced myself up. I had to get to work. Work was more hellish than usual. The toaster, which I thought of as 'the Beast,' jammed and I burned my fingers trying to free the smoldering bread before it burst into flames. Joaquin was somehow always underfoot until I finally had a bit of a shout at him. Then he disappeared on an extended smoke break out on the loading dock while the dishes piled in the sink, damn him.

Joaquin and the waitresses were all glaring at me in uneasy silence when they cut up the tips at the end of the day. "What crawled up his ass and died?" said Tyra a little too loudly as I went out the back. Enough, I was glad to be out.

It was a fine blue afternoon, thin clouds scudding high across the sky. I attempted to wipe the hellish day from my mind on the walk home. I had to concentrate. Back in my kitchen I ate my sandwich and laid out my tomato soup label and all my note cards from last night. I tried to ignore Bella's complaints as I made tea, then finally gave in and fed her the ends of my sandwich to shut her up. I looked over my sketch map of the wizarding quarter. It was time for Assignment 2.

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THE WAGER

Chapter 7 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 39, No.5

LITHA 2002

I decided to use the library's tube entrance as my introduction to the wizarding quarter. I thought momentarily of using one of my vials of Polyjuice, but I discarded the idea. I didn't like the hour time-limit when I was traveling into

new territory, and there were tests to detect it. It was an expected disguise, if anyone was checking. It was better to trust to the physical changes to my appearance. I was aided by my efforts over the years to not be photographed. I did however take along a good portion of my emergency money in case I had to apparate away quickly.

I entered the Stimson branch of the library as before, but this time I went straight through to the exit down to the Exeter Street tube station. At the bottom of a scuffed white tile staircase a steel turnstile ate several of my coins with a small snapping brass mouth before it let me onto a dim cement platform. The walls beyond the tracks were white tiles that flickered with moving colors and images; books flew slowly across the wall, flapping their pages.

I looked up at the spiderweb map of tubes lines and stations: Narrow House, Artillery Tower, Herbmarket, Molasses Wharf, Nautilus, The Ladder, Sisters College, and there it was, Honey Street, on the Grey Line. While I was still trying to find the right side of the platform, a deep approaching roar and a stale gust of wind signaled the arrival of a train. Two Amber lines passed before I caught the one I wanted. It was a bit ridiculous; I was only traveling 3 stops and I had probably waited for the train longer than the whole trip. Well, at least now I knew the system. Honey Street was a popular stop. I joined the flock of passengers surging up the steps out in the late afternoon sun.

It was a chic street. The clothes were muggle, but very well made.

I imagined they were fashionable, not that I knew much about that. When I looked up, I could see the brick facades were at least 200 years old, but at street level the storefronts were modernized with plate glass and slick signs. These were definitely not the sorts of shops I was looking for. I glanced at my notes from the guidebooks and cast around for the right direction. I hung close to the buildings and hurried down the street. I almost longed for the invisibility that my ragged looks had granted me a few weeks ago. Still, I had a feeling that my transient disguise would have given me the wrong sort of attention here.

An imposing grey granite building loomed over the narrow street on my right. Bronze letters over the door spelled out THE VINEGAR WORKS. I must be close. Sure enough, Vinegar Street was the next crossing. It was much narrower than Honey Street, and the brick-and-timber buildings looked older as well. Their jutting gables almost met across the cobblestone street in places. When I began to pass storefronts I could see that the guidebook's warning was warranted. They were decidedly sketchy; BLACK STAR BOOKSTORE, BOKOR'S BOUTIQUE, with a sprawling vevé scratched into the window glass, Campbell's second-hand store had a display of desiccated monkeys' paws, and incongruously, AUNT NELLIE RIMS' BAKERY, with rows of custard pies and loaves of bread.

MURDLEY'S PAWN AND TRADE had brown paper blocking out the windows and a heavy door with protection wards carved deep into the threshold. I decided to try it first. I had to wade through several aisles of battered cabinets and boxes, racks of cursed swords and masks, until I finally found the collection of unregistered wands stuffed unceremoniously into a child's plastic sand bucket printed with shells and gulls.

After going through about 20 of them I found one that was acceptable. It was reserved and stiff at first, but once I got it started it cast accurately without holding back or dragging. It would do. There were some used brooms, but I didn't like the looks of them at all. I picked up a used but solid cauldron, some stirring rods and vials, a set of brass scales and a simple knife, and brought everything up to the counter, where the grim-faced clerk began to tot them up. She had a round wrinkled face and short-bobbed white hair. She was not the

picture of someone who would know how to pick up false papers on the Dark Market, but her inventory told another story. I had to try.

"Maybe you can tell me..." she didn't look up from trying to read the smudged price-tag on the cauldron. "I've got to register that," I went on, gesturing at the wand, "but I've lost my ID. Where can I get a replacement?"

"Try City Hall," she said shortly. That didn't do me any good.

"Anywhere else?" She gave me a disapproving glare over the tops of her spectacles. I thought she was going to tell me to remove my criminal self from her respectable establishment, but her hand snaked below the counter and dropped a small white card into my sack of purchases. I must not look like an Auror.

"That's \$285."

"Shouldn't that be \$250?"

"References come extra."

Back out on the street I fished out and examined the card. It simply read 'William Pulcifer, Spiritual Power Rock, Dogtown.' *Dogtown*, I had seen that somewhere, perhaps in one of the guidebooks. I would have to go back and look it up. Still, it was a start.

I stopped at HAGOPIAN POTIONS AND HERBAL EMPORIUM next. I was going to need a pain-reliever before I put my wand back in place, and I knew it would be much cheaper if I bought the ingredients and brewed it myself rather than purchasing it ready-made. The shop looked like an unkempt hole from the outside, but the selection was surprisingly good and cheap. Of course, one had to track down stock numbers in a hard-to-read registry book and then serve oneself from the bulk bins, which had to keep down their staffing costs.

I was about to exit when I saw a cork board by the door crowded with paper notices, mostly potions companies' adverts. Some were for actual shops, but others seemed to be individuals. Only a few were marked 'licensed and bonded,' the other notices looked no more official than someone hawking their dog-walking skills. Were things so unregulated here? I peered closer. '*REDDI-BRU, tinctures, salves, philters and potions, you can't beat our prices! Online orders only.*' A strip of tear-off labels at the bottom held a strange sort of code. All very well, but if you couldn't spell your own business name, how could you possibly

be trusted to be a competent brewer? A more respectable and certainly more legible notice read 'CAPRONA POTIONS. Quality ingredients, quality results. Full catalog available online.' Again, there was a sort of code. It had to do with the 'online,' I supposed.

There were also some jobs notices on the board. *Work from home as a Debunker! Part-time positions available. Will train. Positions: Photoshop 'expert', Devil's Advocate, Fake and gay, Conspiracy Theorist. Get started today!* I had heard of Debunkers;* they were America's version of Obliviators, ever since obliviation was ruled as a physical assault by their courts, back in the 1950s if I remembered correctly. It seemed like a slipshod way to keep the Statute. I wondered if it actually worked.

I pulled off one of the strips from the Caprona Potions' advert and added it to my bag as I went out the door. I wanted to find out what that code meant when I visited the library again.

It was a week before I returned to the library. I spent the intervening time setting up the cellar as a makeshift lab, brewing the pain-reliever, and the unpleasant task of placing the (now) spare wand back in my arm. I was glad when that was over. I felt much better when I had two wands at hand, so to speak.

I had been putting off my return to the library and the company of other wizards when another reason came to make me hurry back. I was moving my bed down to a lower room. Every day a sticky wet heat was settling further over the city, making my work in the diner almost unbearable. I had cast cooling charms in my bedroom to counteract the stale hot air, but with the high humidity, my casting made the walls of the room run with water and a mildew bloom developed almost immediately. A move to join Bella in the cool cellar was called for. When I picked up the cigar box, something clinked inside. Was Aberforth sending me medals now to try to entice me

*Debunker jobs can be pursued part-time at home, but the American Department of Magical Regulation also employs some high-profile debunkers who work full-time 'revealing' spirit healers, psychics, and other magic users who break the Statute. In fact, some highly successful teams of debunkers have become so well known in the muggle world that they have even had popular television shows, and in one case, a Vegas stage act! Most debunkers prefer to work in a less-flashy way, however.

back? The thought made me a bit ill. Nonetheless, I had to look.

It was a glass vial filled with the unmistakable shifting pearlescent light of a memory. *My memories.* Aberforth must have acquired them as the executor of my estate. I could put them back now... but no, I couldn't be sure that they hadn't been tampered with, or even that they were really my own. There could be some very unpleasant mental effects in trying to replace a memory that was not one's own. I had no way to check at the moment, since I had no Pensieve.

The library here might have one for public use, as did London's library. Besides, it was high time I looked up transportation to Dogtown. I determined to make a trip the next day.

I thought the cooler cellar would ease the stifling urgency of my dreams, but if anything they were worse. I was chained into that chair, that awful chair under the Ministry. Frank Longbottom across the table from me said, so very casually, "if you can't tell me anything, I'll walk out of here now, why, I'll forget all about you." I could feel them below me, in the yawning darkness, all the ones he had ever forgotten. He made a small movement with his hand and I began to fall into the darkness to join them. I woke with a start, shivering. It must have been the wet smell of the cellar that brought on the dream. I went up to the kitchen for tea; it was close enough to when I needed to be up for work anyway.

It was another sweltering day in the diner. I sighed with relief when I was able to escape to the dim cool library. This time I actually approached the woman at the information desk rather than rushing past as quickly as possible.

"Yes, can I help you?" she rattled off.

"Is there a Pensieve for public use here?"

"Yes," she seemed a bit hesitant, "there's just one, so sometimes there's a wait, but on a weekday..." she shrugged. "Check in at the Resources desk," she poked at the paper map, "and they'll get you signed up." *Signed up.* I hoped I wouldn't need a library card or ID.

On the way to the Reference Desk I stopped at the local guidebooks and looked up Dogtown. Apparently, it was a hilly parcel of land northeast of the city not far from the ocean in an area known as

Cape Ann. The guidebook described it as a 'historical refuge for the outcasts of the wizarding world. It gained its name as a haven for werewolves in the early 1800s,* though that colony has long been disbanded.' I shuddered, but read on. 'Residents of the area were known up until 1870 for regularly breaking the Statute of Secrecy in order to extort money and goods from muggles. Today, the remaining homes and businesses are disguised as ruins and boulders among a confusing and overgrown network of trails. Tourists and casual visitors are advised to take care when visiting as muggings and cursings are not unknown after dark.' Wonderful. The guidebook gave many more details on the wizarding sections of the rest of the cape, but at least there was a general area map with the borders of Dogtown marked. It looked like the muggle train line from Boston to Gloucester stopped nearby. It would have to do; I didn't own a broom at the moment. I copied the map as well as I could.

I went on to the Resources desk. There were two men staffing it, a young sandy-haired man and an older one who looked up at my approach. "Yes?"

"I'd like to use the Pensieve." He picked up a clipboard.

"Looks like it's free now. Just sign in here." He pushed the clipboard across. There was a stack of lined cards and a pen attached to the board. The cards had a line for the date, sign-in time, clerk's initials... and my name. I wasn't about to write my name, either of them, so I wrote down a bland J. Williams on the line and filled in the date and time. I pushed the clipboard back across. The younger clerk picked it up quickly. "I'll take you up," he said, tucking the

*Dogtown is an actual place, and in fact the history in the guidebook is mostly correct if you replace 'werewolves' with packs of abandoned and feral dogs. Several self-proclaimed witches really did live there in the 1700s and early 1800s who extorted firewood and food from the locals in exchange for not cursing them. It was also the home to many other outcasts, such as retired prostitutes, a freed slave woman who dressed as a man, a man who wore women's clothing and worked as a nurse and fortune teller, and a former ship's captain turned dentist who refused to walk because he believed that his legs were made of glass. Today you can still see old cellars, stone walls and house foundations from the abandoned town in the woods there.

board under his arm. The older one gave a nod at him, and he led me up along a short corridor with several doors to the last room on the left. He unlocked the door with his wand.

"There's a thirty minute time limit. Check in at the desk when you're done." The door shut behind him. I tried to lock it with my wand, but it was blocked against such spells. There was a simple physical latch to use; I slid it across.

The Pensieve was granite and very thick, clearly meant for heavy use. I poured the memory in and stared for a moment at the swirling cloudy depths. I couldn't see what might lie ahead of me. No use holding back; I leaned forward and in.

Aberforth was standing in a dark-paneled office. He stepped forward and shook hands with... *Kingsley Shacklebolt, Interim Minister* Shacklebolt, who stood to meet him from behind a wide desk. Dear lord, what the hell did Aberforth think he was doing?

"Thanks for meeting with me. I know you're busy, nowadays." What was this awkward, penitent manner? It didn't suit him. Shacklebolt seemed to sense that as well.

"Not at all, I've been meaning to meet with you to thank you for your help evacuating Hogwarts."

"Ah, no problem, no problem at all. There was really nothing to it, just minor damages, on the stairs, you know, a bit of furniture to be replaced, and the one window, not much really..." There was the Aberforth I knew. Shacklebolt looked amused.

"We'll be honored to cover any repairs; you've only to submit the receipts. I'll give you a form," he said smoothly as he rummaged in his desk. He signed a slip and pushed it over to Aberforth, but he just sat, making no move to pick it up. Shacklebolt looked at him sharply. "Was there something else?" Aberforth shrugged.

"Nothing really, just a word from you, if you like. A friend of mine, we've got a little wager on, you see?"

From Shacklebolt's look, he didn't see. I didn't see, myself, but I was getting a bad feeling about this.

"A wager."

"And you're the one to settle it, without a doubt. It will only take

a word from you.” Shacklebolt leaned back and raised his eyebrows at Aberforth.

“We were reading a story in the *Prophet*. ‘Good news, then,’ says I, but my friend, he takes one look and says ‘not worth a sickle.’ Well, it’s written by that Skeeter woman, so you know what he thinks. But as for me, I think it’s true after all.” *Oh hell, he wouldn’t.* Shacklebolt was leaning forward.

“You want me to confirm it?”

“That’s it, one way or the other. You’re the one who’ll know the rights of it. I just need your word.”

“If it’s something I *do* know about...”

“Oh yes, you’ll know.” Shacklebolt was starting to look impatient with Aberforth’s evasiveness.

“The article?” I was clenching my fists on the edge of the desk. Not that I could touch the desk; if I could I would have pounded on it. I had the impossible urge to yell ‘*no!*’ at Aberforth, to stop him, somehow, but this was all in the past, it had already happened. I felt sick.

Aberforth slid a copy of the DAILY PROPHEt across to Shacklebolt. I noticed that he picked the slip off the desk and pocketed it in the same movement. I could probably guess the headline, but I had to see. I stepped behind Shacklebolt and read over his shoulder. I already knew it, but my heart still sank when I saw the familiar words: **MINISTER PARDONS SNAPE.**

Shacklebolt sat dog-earing the corner of the paper and starting at the headline. Finally, he looked up at Aberforth. “This friend of yours —”

“One thing at a time, if you don’t mind,” said Aberforth, quite sharp, “I’ll have your word on that now.”

“The word is yes, it’s quite true. Well, in all that I have knowledge of. I can’t speak to her quotes of the Wizengamot members, but I wouldn’t doubt the gist of them. She is simply biased in *which* members she chose to interview. The pardon: that is true. It’s real.”

Aberforth was pushing a folded piece of parchment across to him. “Well, then it wouldn’t be any trouble for you. Just to make it official.”

Shacklebolt opened the parchment and read, frowning. “Is this really necessary?”

“My friend has a suspicious nature.” Shacklebolt snorted at that. *Damn Aberforth!* How dare he call himself a friend? He was as good as giving away my name! To the Ministry! At that moment I felt I could cheerfully send him to a family reunion with his brother.

Shacklebolt was working on Aberforth’s parchment, scratching out a line and adding one of his own. I went back around to his side but I couldn’t get a clear view. Shacklebolt slid it back. Aberforth read it. I darted back around the desk but I wasn’t quite quick enough; Aberforth was already folding it up, nodding at Shacklebolt.

“I wouldn’t consent to that step, usually,” Shacklebolt told him, “but your friend... is someone I’d also like to thank.” Aberforth was already walking to the door. What was he up to? “Ready now,” he was saying to someone outside.

Theodore Nott came slouching in, much to my surprise. He looked bored, as usual. I wanted to bark at him to stand up straight. Not that it would do any good; he would always straighten for five minutes or so, then go back to looking like a piece of undercooked bacon. Why was he there? He was one of my eyes, but how had Aberforth known that? Perhaps he had already passed some information to the Order. What of my other eyes, were they known as well? Their names hadn’t appeared in any of the papers I had seen. I forced my attention back to the memory around me.

Aberforth and Shacklebolt were kneeling now, right hands joined. Aberforth had his parchment open. Theo touched his wand to create the bond as Aberforth began to read the vow.

“Do you swear that your pardon of Severus Snape is genuine and complete?”

“I do.”

“Do you swear that you and the Ministry of Magic have no plans or intentions to search out or prosecute Severus Snape for any reason, to the best of your knowledge?”

“I do.”

“And will you keep this vow, and the continued life of Severus Snape secret, except in the case of risk of harm or loss of life to himself or others... and except upon the release of this vow by

Aberforth Dumbledore or Severus Snape?”

By the intent way Aberforth was reading from his paper, I suspected the last exceptions had been added by Shackbolt.

“I will,” he finished. A brief flash, and the vow was sealed. They got up, Aberforth clutching his knees and muttering.

“You’ll be telling your friend about this I suppose?”

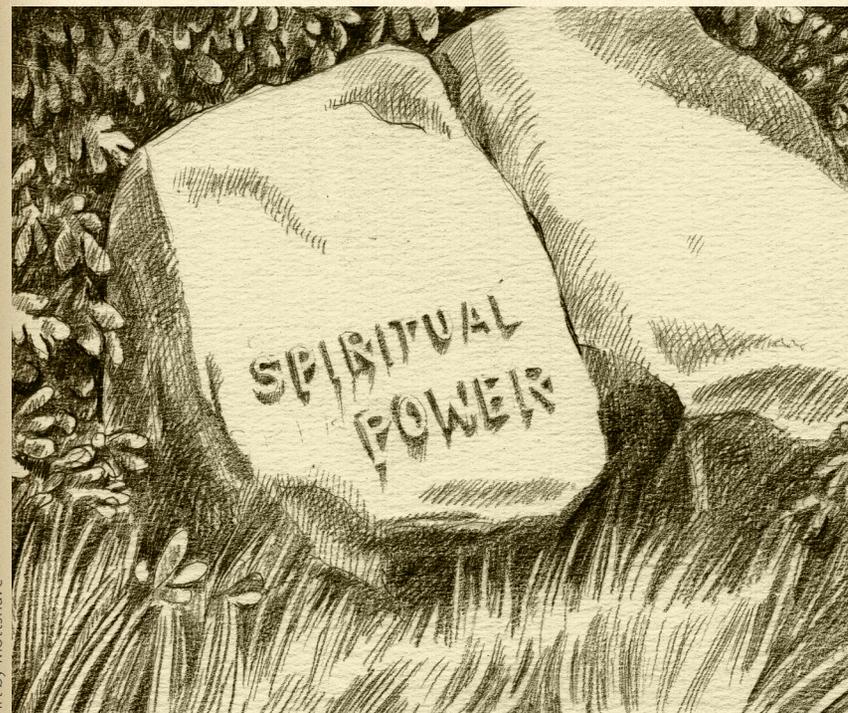
“That’s the point, isn’t it?” snapped Aberforth.

“Tell him... I understand his caution, but at the moment I see no reason for him not to come forward. Despite how Skeeter’s article made it sound, he can expect the support of the Wizengamot. I have enough members on my side; I’ll see to it. I will back him on this.”

If only it were possible to use legilimency in a memory. I would swear that Shackbolt wanted something from me, but what? His mind was closed to me. The vow... it wasn’t quite air-tight. The fact that he and the Ministry had no *current* plans to search me out did not completely preclude *future* plans. Of course the secrecy provision protected me to some extent. The vow was something, I had to admit, but it wasn’t everything. He must think me a fool: step forward before all the trials were complete? When at least three of my former colleagues were still at large, when Lucius had been put away for fifteen years, despite Albus’ assurances? *Damn him*, his word, his so-called protection were worth nothing. Both his and Shackbolt’s. Shackbolt was shaking hands with Aberforth and Nott and showing them the door. The memory ended.

I pulled myself up and out and replaced the memory in its vial. I would have to destroy it as soon as possible. I nodded to the two at the Resources desk as I went out, trying to think of a response to send to Aberforth. It seemed that I couldn’t trust him to be circumspect any longer, but I really had no direct way to influence him at the moment. I would have to bring him along as neutrally as possible until I could cut all contact with him. I needed to make sure I had everything in order until then.

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Art by Mottsnave

INITIATIVE

I went back out to the muggle section of the library, but did not head straight home. I wanted to find out about the train to Gloucester, which would bring me fairly near Dogtown. Not having explored the muggle section, I wasn’t sure where to begin. The woman at the main Reference desk said, “well, you could just look it up online.”

There was that word again. I must have looked blank. She went on: “have you used our computers before?” I shook my head. So it

Chapter 8 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 39, No.6

LUGHNASADH 2002

had to do with computers. I had heard the term and I knew the concept, very generally. I wondered what it could have to do with potions companies and why they would have it on their adverts.

"There's no wait at the moment. I'll get you started." She hefted herself out from behind the desk and led me over to a row of screens that had several visitors staring blankly into their depths. "Usually all the terminals are in use and you have to wait, but as it's early on a weekday, you're in luck. There's a one-hour limit, and you just sign up at the Reference desk when there's a wait," she said. Just like the Pensieve, I thought.

"Here we go, you just click here to get started..." She went through a dizzyingly quick series of manipulations, "...and here's the main search page, all right?"

"Uh," was all I could manage.

"Soooo," she said, giving me an evaluating look, "then you type in what you're looking for, yes? *Train schedule, Boston to Gloucester...*" She typed as fast as she spoke. It was a bit like a scrying bowl, I realized, except for the complicated movements to get it started.

"...And here you are!" And there I was, a train schedule in front of me. "I'll let you take a look at it. One hour limit." She bustled off. I noticed that she had left behind a paper slip advertising the library's free computer classes. I pocketed it.

It took some covert observation of the users at the other computers to learn how to use the appendage to push and pull the picture about and find what I was looking for. The trains were limited on Saturday and Sunday. I decided to go on Monday. As it was my day off, it would give me more time for the long walk in to Dogtown.

What else? I hadn't used up my hour yet. I pulled out the slip of paper I had taken off the Caprona Potions poster. Online, it said, so there must be some way to get to it. It took me almost the full hour. I felt ridiculous when I finally found it. There was that code at the top of the screen, so much like the code on my slip of paper. I just had to change that code to make it like the one on the slip... it was really no different than Frazier's first principle of Dark Magic: * the part may affect the whole, and the whole the part. So you just use the

*** A SHORT 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. 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.

part, the code, to lead you to the whole, just like you might use a drop of blood to track someone. It made perfect sense.

What didn't make sense to me was why a potions company would be 'online.' A muggle would have no reason to order any potions, and only muggles use computers. Unless wizards here used them as well. Was that possible?

It certainly looked like the potions store expected them to, there were sections showing their catalog, how to order... I used my remaining time looking over their price list. A bit limited. I could do better.

The thought made me wince. I had dreamed of opening my own company once, but it seemed impossible now. Even with a false ID, there were brewing permits, inspections, regulations. I assumed it was the same even with this 'online' shop. If I wanted to remain incognito in the wizarding world, it was all out of my reach now. I was probably permanently stuck in menial jobs like the diner. It was a depressing thought.

I went home. With the thought of an endless string of

menial jobs in front of me, the work of the next four days dragged at me more than ever. It didn't help that Saturday was some sort of awful holiday. The sky that night was filled with booming colorful explosions that tore at my nerves. I finally cast an *Inauritus* around the cellar so I could sleep. Something of my anxiety must have infected my dreams, which were endless chasing nightmares. Or, worse, the one where I stepped into my kitchen and found it to be the massive Malfoy banquet hall, the long table set and all the Eaters around it just waiting for me. "Ah, our guest of honor," said the Dark Lord, and I knew, even before Mulciber started to drag me onto the tabletop, that they knew everything.

It was bad enough that Monday morning I opened my kitchen door by slamming it back with a blast from my wand from across the hall. Completely ridiculous and irrational, I knew, and it sent Bella streaking into the cellar, fur bristling. I would have to do something to calm myself, as the rational assurances of my brain didn't seem to be up to the task.

All the way to the train station, I felt the small hairs on the back of my neck hackling up like I was being followed. I was early for the train. I forced myself to look over the table of used paperbacks set out in front of the book stall at the station. Perhaps my problem was that my mind had nothing to occupy itself aside from baseless worries.

I ran my hand over the spines: *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*, *BRIGHTON ROCK*, *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*, *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*, *HELTER SKELTER*, *THE THIRD MAN*... I settled on *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF JOSEPH CONRAD*, a massive tome. That ought to keep me occupied.

Sitting on the train, however, I couldn't make any headway on the book at all. It was a strange feeling to be reading but absorbing absolutely nothing of anything I read. My mind kept going back to Aberforth's memory and the thought that he had given away my name. True, it was protected by the vow to some extent, but Aberforth himself was not bound, nor was Nott. Nott didn't weigh on me. He had kept my name all last year, when revealing it would have been much more damaging. There wasn't any clear advantage to him to reveal it now. Aberforth however, he had just proven him-

self willing to reveal my name for a trivial reason. I simply couldn't trust my existence to remain a secret. I would have to take steps to cut ties with Aberforth and protect myself from my former colleagues. The decision satisfied my subconscious enough to allow my hackles to lower as I left the city behind. I would contact Aberforth for what I needed as soon as I returned home.

When I arrived in Gloucester, my hastily copied map from the guidebook and a few discreet Point Me's brought me to the foot of the wooded rise of Dogtown Commons. The overgrown dirt road dipped across a swampy ditch then began to climb up the rocky hillside under oaks and beeches. It was before noon, but the sky was overcast and milk-white and the air was heavy and still except for the whine of mosquitoes and some far-off mourning doves. It would be a hot day.

The road crested and came out into a small clearing of waist-high grass and enormous boulders. Up here there was at least a breath of air moving; I could smell the ocean, not far off. I pulled out my map, a little soggy now, and examined it while I unstuck my shirt from my back. These must be the first of the boulders. The guidebook had said that inspirational phrases had been carved into them to give jobs and moral instruction to local unemployed stoneworkers during the 1930s. I bushwhacked around the nearest one; sure enough, there was a carved block-letter inscription: NEVER TRY NEVER WIN.

Cloying as it was, it was a helpful landmark to find my way through the maze of rocks. I found my location on the map. There was still some way to go before 'Spiritual Power.' I remembered the guidebook's words that wizarding residences were concealed among the rocks, and cast a quick *Specialis Revelio*. The spell uncovered a crooked shack set on a small patch of flat ground near the boulders, looking quite neglected. I dropped the *Revelio* and moved along the trail quickly.

The road wound among the boulders along the top of the rise, passing *KEEP OUT OF DEBT*, *USE YOUR HEAD*, *INDUSTRY*, *BE ON TIME*, *STUDY*, *INITIATIVE* and *INTEGRITY*, and dipping through a soggy meadow. Finally at the edge of the woods near the north end of the commons was the boulder labeled *SPIRITUAL POWER*, a truly massive monolith. The *revelio* showed me a house set back in the thicker trees,

granite walled, with a slate roof. A wood gate led into the yard. The name 'Pulcifer' was carved into the top bar surprisingly neatly. I took out the card I got at Murdley's Pawn and stepped through the gate.

There was an immediate explosion of barking to my left. I flinched away from it bodily as I saw a brown and white hound leaning out to the end of its lead behind the wall, baying at me until the spittle flew. I barely had a chance to step back when the front door slammed; a weedy-looking man in a tan canvas coat was glaring at me from the steps, wand drawn.

"Can I help you? Can I help you?" His tone was far more aggressive than his words.

"I'm looking for Pulcifer." I took a few steps forward, keeping well clear of the baying dog. Who needed alert wards when you have one of them? I tried not to show any reaction of the presence of its hot breath near my left knee.

"Hold up, you stay right there now!" He started down the steps, with a little bit of a limp, I noticed. "Shut up! You, shut up!" The hound gave two more barks for good measure, then paced back and forth restlessly along the length of its lead.

"And why're you looking for Pulcifer?" How could he stand to wear a coat in this heat? Perhaps that was why he was so irritable. His long face did look a bit red.

"I need a new card. Murdley gave me your name." I held out the white card.

"Murdley, that old toad," he muttered. "A new card? It'll cost you. Those cards, they cost you." I shrugged. "Get on in here then." He had me walk ahead of him into the house. Apparently my willingness to pay was the only credential he needed to do business with me.

The front room was surprisingly cool, a relief. Either he used cooling charms or the thick granite walls did the work. There was a wooden bench seat running almost the length of the room in front of a scratched wooden table. Across from it was a massive stone fireplace, dark at the moment. A painting of hunting dogs on point hung over the mantel. The middle of the floor was occupied by a girl, about eight, sprawled out and busily making a mess with

scraps of colored paper and glitter.

"Scare on out of here, miss. We're talking. You go help your mom until I say." She gave me a tiny glare as the cause of her eviction, then stomped towards the far door, leaving a trail of glitter behind her.

Pulcifer lifted the hinged top of the bench seat and pulled out a wooden box. "OK, what are we looking for here?" He opened the box and dumped out a pile of ID blanks for several states, spreading them across the table top. I sifted through them and pulled aside a muggle and wizard Massachusetts ID card.

"OK, here's how it goes. You write down, uh..." he cast around for some paper and settled for a pink scrap with green glitter on one corner. "You write down your particulars and give me the photos and pay, then we put the cards together, takes about a week."

Photos, *hell*. "I don't have photos yet."

He sighed. "All right, we can take them here, we got one of those cameras."

I thought I should get some of the important details settled finally. "How much for the two cards?"

"Muggle one's \$400, the other one takes more doing. That's \$650."

Shit, I could afford it, but it would wipe out a good portion of my emergency money supply. I grunted.

"I told you they cost, these cards'll cost you."

"How do I know they'll pass? Are they going to come out full of glitter?" He flushed.

"You got it from Murdley, right?" That might mean something to me if I knew more about Murdley. Of course I didn't want to tell him how little I knew Murdley and how little she knew me. Thankfully, Pulcifer went on without waiting for an answer, digging out his wallet and slapping his own ID on the table. "Take a look if you want, go ahead. Cast anything you want on that, it stands up!"

I looked it over carefully. It was surprisingly good. Finites, Revelios, nothing I cast on it touched it. When I was done he snorted and put his ID away.

"Can you do a brew license?" I wasn't sure where the question came from. Surely I was already spending more than enough of my limited

reserves of cash. Yet there it was, a possibility of pulling myself out of the trap of meaningless menial labor. I didn't retract the question.

"Cost you \$400."

"All three for \$1,000."

"Hell no! I'll give you all three for \$1,350. That's knocking off \$100."

"\$1,200."

"\$1,300. You're getting the photos free for godsakes."

"Fine," I surrendered. He started shoveling the blanks back into their box.

"So we're clear, half up front. Cash. You got it?"

I nodded. Everything on the Dark Market was cash or trade, so I had brought a large portion of my cash along with me.

"And, uh, everything I make is for novelty purposes only, like... a souvenir."

"Of course." He stuck out his hand. A *Good Faith* agreement was expected for anything where goods were to be delivered later. I took his hand.

"So, I'm making you the two Mass IDs and one brew permit for \$1,300, and you're paying half now and half when you pick up in about a week, and we're not going to talk to anyone else about this stuff, yeah?" That had to be one of the most sloppily-worded Good Faith agreements I had ever heard. You could fly a dragon through the loopholes in it.

"Yes," I said.

"In Good Faith."

"In Good Faith," I agreed, sealing our vow. I gave him the cash, then started to write out my invented information while he went to set up the camera. I had already thought of a name I wanted and found an address to use from my maps. 'Mark Ian Anderson, 1785 River Rd, Watertown MA.' It suited, it would do.

Pulcifer took me to a small room crowded with surprisingly professional equipment. I wondered if he had stolen it. Probably. He yanked down a pale-blue screen. When I stepped in front of it and turned around I saw the little girl perched on a high stool aiming the camera at me.

"You gotta smile, mister, or I can't take the picture," she said, peering at me around the tripod. *Oh, for god's sake.* I put on my 'disguise

smile' with an effort. She snapped a few muggle pictures, then put on the attachment to take the one for the wizard ID.

"It's a wrap." She jumped off the stool and went scurrying back to her glitter.

I arranged with Pulcifer to return on Sunday. When I left the dog didn't bark or pace, he only lifted his head and watched, panting in the shade. I didn't bother with the train home, as I didn't fancy the long hot walk down. Instead I apparated from the cover of the woods.

Back in the city, the hunted feeling came back at once, reminding me of my decision to take steps to protect myself. As soon as I entered the house I wrote a note and dropped it in the cigar box: *Aarne-Thompson Substitution Manual, 12th Edition. Upper-right desk drawer, Headmaster's office, small black book. Quickly.* I hoped he would check the box soon. I laid alert-wards around the house and strengthened my other wards. It would have to do for now, I didn't want to move again.

DAMAGE

After work the next day I went straight down to the cellar. I hadn't received any reply from Aberforth yet, but I could at least make a start on my preparations. I had a few ingredients left over from my pain-reliever that I could use, but

for the most part I would need to buy everything else. I winced; I would have to start watching my money now. I also needed to purchase a broom as soon as possible. I needed to have all transportation options available to me. Perhaps I could find a decent one second-hand. I would have to be careful; a used broom could have hidden problems.

Bella wound around my ankles as I made a list of my ingredients. A couple of them were common enough, may-apple and white

Chapter 9 of **THE NEW SKIN** by Mottsnave

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 39, No.7
MABON 2002

sumac... I had seen sumac on the island. It hadn't been blooming at the time, so I wasn't sure if it was white or red. I might as well see if I could find some white sumac. It would save me that much at least if I could gather it myself.

I apparated disillusioned out to the point. It was an instant relief from the heat of the city. The shadows were getting long, but there was still plenty of daylight left. The most of the sumac on the island was the common red, but I finally found one of the white variety growing on the swampy neck between Battery Terrill and the body of the island. I put on my gloves and collected the stinging sap until I had a healthy supply. I found may-apple more easily, but the light was still fading as I hurriedly picked a small bag of the fruits. I decided to go back down to my sanctuary to sort the fruits where I could safely cast a Lumos.

I returned to Battery Terrill, then down to my room, the crumbling steps even more worn than I remembered. The door was worn too, like driftwood softened and blurred by the water. The knob and part of the jamb were gone. Strange. I pushed the door open.

It was cool, dark, and as empty as I had left it. No, that wasn't quite right, it was *more* empty... I brightened my Lumos. The cushions on the floor where I had slept were gone. The floor itself was scratched and scraped clean. The far end of the couch was gone, simply gone. Frayed ends of upholstery hung over the wood slats whose ends were worn away.

That was the side of the couch I had sat on, and the floor where I had lain. I turned, the back of my neck prickling. The corner I used to relieve myself was gone as well. The floor was worn away to the substrate, the plaster of the wall scraped off.

My eye fell on the door again. The damaged parts were the knob, completely missing, and the edge of the door and jamb, all worn away. All places that I must have touched. I didn't look again. I left. I lunged up the stairs, noticing scraped spots on the walls where my hands might have rested once.

I didn't apparate directly home. I landed at my old spot on the wharf and started walking. I had to think. I had to reason it out, bring my breathing back down to normal. A scrap of my mind

clung to the possibility that it was just some sort of animal. I had taken the wards down, but I had left the notice-me-nots up. Most animals, particularly small ones, could see through notice-me-nots, but that damage was nothing like what could come from a small animal. It would have taken a plague of mice to wear down that floor. Perhaps it was some other sort of creature, a magical creature native here that I wasn't familiar with. The study of magical creatures was never one of my strengths. Didn't some animals lick salt? Licking salt is one thing, eating half a couch is something else entirely. Any animal that wanted salt that badly had a whole ocean at its disposal, after all. It had to be something else.

I couldn't rationalize away the conclusion that I specifically was being hunted. Of course I didn't really want to convince myself otherwise; I had always found it better to believe in possible danger.

I hadn't been on the island in weeks, so why there? Had I left some trace behind? Blood from my cut hand? The most likely connection, I had to admit, was Aberforth. It didn't make sense that he would intentionally betray me. I was at his complete mercy when he first picked me up; he could have done anything he wanted then. However, he could very well have let something slip to the wrong person. He was the only one that had the location of my sanctuary, as far as I knew. He might have spread it. I already knew that he had given my name to Shackbolt and Nott. Had he given my location to them or to anyone else? I had to cut my ties to him. I had to destroy that box.

I found a secluded spot and apparated home, then went straight to the box. There was something inside. I stood well back and used my wand to open it. It was a small black book. Aberforth had come through. I picked up the substitution manual, tucked the box under my arm and left the house.

I took it to one of the empty lots on the edge of the train yard and burnt the box down to ash. When Aberforth opened the box on his end, he would find nothing but a black charred hole to repay all his favors to me. I watched the ash settle. That made me a vicious, ungrateful bastard again, always. Well that was nothing new. I sighed; it couldn't be helped.

Now my last tie to my old life and anyone who knew my name had gone up in smoke. As much as I had been eager to do it, it was still hard not to feel adrift with the last ropes cast off. I didn't even have any rope on board to tie up again. I was loose.

The heat broke that night. I went back to sleeping in the upstairs bedroom, a breath of salt air coming in through the window. Even without the heat sleeping was a problem. I had set another layer of alert wards around the house. Bella set them off climbing up the fire escape, jerking me back to full attention just as I was drifting off. I had to get up again and reset the wards to allow small animals through or I would never sleep.

Maybe it was Bella's presence stalking around the corners of the room, maybe it was what I had seen at the island, but I dreamt that night of a huge dark animal on my trail, its head swinging side to side after my scent, roving across the ground.

It seemed impossible to me that I should go back to work and spend the day rooted in one spot, but I could use the money, now more than ever. I had another half-payment on the ID coming soon and I had several other purchases to make.

I went to make them directly after work, a second-hand store on Vinegar Street providing me with a used broom, and Hagopian Potions providing me with the beeswax and other ingredients I needed for my project.

Back at home, I went to work. *THE AARNE-THOMPSON SUBSTITUTION MANUAL* was very useful; it could be expected in any potioner's drawer. I had memorized most of it long ago. It had another use to me now. I flipped open the battered cover. A folded paper fell out; what was that? I opened it; it was Dick's last letter to me. I turned it over in my fingers. I thought I had destroyed all of his letters. I must have missed this one. It was, as usual, his rambling account of a new plant species he had stumbled upon and its herbological properties, followed by an inquiry if I had any interesting experiments lately. It made me swallow.

How long had it been since I had simply been able to simply trade experiment results with him? I had stopped answering his letters over a year ago, but he kept on as usual, as if nothing out of the ordi-

nary was occurring. I remembered when it arrived, how hungrily I had read it, pouring over it several times while hunched at the headmaster's desk. It was odd how much it meant to me. After all, I had only met Dick in person twice over the years of our correspondence. It must have been the simple normalcy of his letters that I clung to. It meant everything just to have someone address me so casually; I wasn't above or below him, just another researcher. Somehow this last letter had escaped my purge when I had burnt the others. Well, there was no pressing reason to destroy it now. I set it aside.

I turned back to the book. First I sliced off the covers over the bin, then I sat at the kitchen table carefully dissecting the rest, freeing the signatures from the binding with my knife. *SECTION ONE: ANIMALIA, PART ONE: MAMALIA*. I got the paper free, then cut the thread holding the pages together, carefully untwisting the short coarse grey hair wound tight into the binding thread. Greyback. The paper had reported his death, so perhaps I could leave him out. Then again, the paper had reported my death. I kept the hair, embedding it into a small piece of beeswax, then started on the next section. I cut open the pages and freed Selwyn's hair.

When the last pages were free, (*SECTION 45: BELLADONNA FAMILY*), and I had untangled Bellatrix's long black hair, I had 23 small lumps of beeswax in front of me. Enemies. Possible enemies, I amended. *THE PROPHET* was a terrible rag, but it probably wasn't wrong about every arrest and death. Friends. Some of them were friends once. *Possible friends*, I amended.

It took most of the night and half the next afternoon to make the infusion and imbue each hair one-by-one until I had 23 proximity amulets. I set them to alert me if I came within one square mile of any of the hairs' owners. I couldn't get a much larger range on a single hair.

I lined up the plain little yellow beads. How should I arrange them? They all looked very much alike. I considered alphabetically, but decided to use possible risk instead. The top of my list were the three who were completely unaccounted for: Avery, Crabbe and Rookwood. Next, those reported as in custody: Antrim, the Carrows, Keefer, Lewis, Malfoy, McNair, Nott, Lestrangle, Shunpike. Finally, those who were counted

among the dead: Dolohov, Goyle, Jugson, Bellatrix and her husband, Mulciber, Pettigrew, Rowle, Selwyn and Travers. I threaded them in order on a piece of twine, then went over their names to be sure.

The three who were unaccounted for, Avery, Crabbe and Rookwood, all had reason, good reason to hunt me. Vincent had been under my protection, in my care and he had died. He had burned. I was more responsible than his father knew, having told him to report to me, but he still had plenty to hold against me.

He had pulled me aside at one of the Malfoys' parties the year before Vincent started at Hogwarts. I could see how worried he was about Vincent; he was hesitant and almost pleading, which was very unlike him. "My boy's set to start under you next term. Keep an eye out, all right? Make sure he *applies* himself." I suspected the phrase '*doesn't apply himself*' had been used by many of the tutors the Crabbes had gone through over the years. I hadn't tutored Vincent myself, though I knew him from many occasions at the Malfoys'. He was clever enough in his own way, but he had a deep block with language and especially the written word, much to the endless frustration of his tutors. Benedict knew it would condemn his son to mockery and failure. The Crabbe fortune was not a large one and Vincent would have to find some talent of his own if he hoped to succeed in anything. So I promised to look after him, to make sure he studied and passed at least, to make sure he had some friends who wouldn't mock him. And what had I done? I had let him find the very friends and talents that would lead him to his death.

I touched the Rookwood bead. As the 'other spy' under the Dark Lord, there had always been an undercurrent of hostility between us. We were both well-conscious of the possibility of being replaced or made redundant by the other. The Dark Lord played upon this, of course, setting us against each other constantly. His game was quite transparent, yet neither one of us could break free of it, due to the very real consequences of falling behind.

It had all gone worse after the fall, when he was sent up to the island and I walked free. After he was sprung I could always feel it between us, he was burning with desire to beat me at the game and see me destroyed by it.

Avery had been a good friend once. I had some trouble in the House, especially with the others in my own year. I got on better with some of the upper years after Lucius decided to make a project of making me 'less of a disgrace to the House.'

The first exception in my own year was Joseph Avery. Everything was easy, a game to him which he played for the sheer enjoyment. He picked me as a co-conspirator in the Hunt, on the theory that everyone knew me as such a loner that no one would expect it. It worked brilliantly. We both took out our targets that year and 'lived' through to the end as well. I knew he had simply been using me to get ahead in the Hunt, but by the end of the year he was starting to get my jokes and speak to me about more than just our plans. Once I overheard him tell Wilkes, "Snape's all right. He knows what he's about." It was just an offhand remark, but it was my pass with the others of my year. I wasn't the outsider anymore. It might have been the furthest anyone but Lily had put themselves out for me, up until then. Now I had repaid his friendship with betrayal.

I suppose the ground had been laid a long time ago. It had been Rosier, Evan Rosier the idealist, who got him to join along with Wilkes, Crabbe and Mulciber. Evan was always going on about boycotting the corrupt Ministry, nepotism, the stagnation of society and dilution of power. He made it sound exciting enough that Joseph, Benedict and the others joined for a lark. It wasn't a lark. It was gradual at first. He started getting hardened in his speech, but we all did that, just to get by.

I joined after he did, after my arrest, but I rushed more quickly in, consumed by my hate for the Ministry and everything they stood for. I think we were all in it about the same amount, up to our waists, when Rosier and Wilkes were killed. Looking back on it now, from the way Evan had been talking, I think he had wanted to be killed and pushed the Aurors until there was no choice. Wilkes – I don't know, he had never confided in me.

Whatever it was, it changed all of us. For me, it was the last straw. I started to look for a way to struggle back to shore. For Avery, he was so swallowed by rage that he plunged in up to his neck. Crabbe had got there a little earlier, filled with the thrill of Ministry raids and baiting.

I could almost never see my friend in Avery then, the boy who mooned about over Mary McDonald and pulled stupid pranks trying to get her attention. Now he was something else, a killer.

I ran my fingers over the rest of the beads. How many other former friends did I have to be on the watch for? How many might want to kill me? I didn't want to think about Lucius. He was in custody now; he could very well want revenge on me after what I promised him.

It was after the Dark Lord's second rise. Albus and I both knew that my position was not secure. I had to be so careful that I could only be of the most limited use to the Order. Since I was working alone, I had no way to confirm the truth of any plans I heard. If the Dark Lord ever took it into his head to test me, he had only to feed me a bit of misinformation and see if it leaked. I had to be able to confirm everything before passing it to the Order. As it was, with nothing to check against, I had to let several Eater actions go unchecked. I needed a second on the inside to verify plans, and if the very worst happened, to pass information to the Order. I watched my colleagues carefully and long before coming to a decision and presenting it to Albus.

I hadn't given Lucius a choice. It was the only way, I knew. Albus had blathered away that if I couldn't trust him to make the 'right choice' I shouldn't try to bring him over. Utter nonsense. We needed a second on the inside and I knew Lucius wasn't happy with the Dark Lord rising again. All his careful groundwork to reestablish his influence and reputation was at risk with the Dark Lord's return. His son's future and his family name were in jeopardy, and to Lucius, there was nothing more precious. I had lost enough friends to the killing; if I could pull even one out it was worth the risk to me. The possible advantage to the Order made it worth the risk to Albus. I simply had to convince him that waiting for someone to make the 'right choice' when his family was at risk was ridiculous. I told Albus that I knew him best, so we would do it my way or not at all.

Lucius had agreed to have a drink with me at my house after a meeting. I stalled until it was almost the right time, and handed him his glass exactly as the portkey activated. Albus had him disarmed and bound in

a chair a second after we landed in the Headmaster's office. Albus may have been the one who cast on him, but his gaze landed on me.

"You stupid little hybrid." I smiled at him. I could hear the fear in his voice.

"You're going to work for us now."

"*Us?*" He glanced at Albus, then back at me. "Really, you think there is an '*us*'? You are nothing but a puppet." I had suspected that he suspected before. Now I knew.

"What do you think *you* are, Lucius? At least I haven't dragged in anyone else on my strings."

"Filthy *mongrel!* I helped you *pass* for years!" He tried to spit at me but only managed to get his own sleeve. I caught him by the chin and spoke into his ear.

"You're slipping already. Where will your family be when he falls, Lucius? What will your standing be then?"

"He won't."

"Oh yes, he will."

"He *can't*," he said desperately.

"Do you know how long I've been doing this? Go on." He said nothing. "1980." His eyes got wide for an instant before he mastered his face again.

"Fifteen years of information passed, plans gone wrong, raids an hour off and *he* hasn't seen it. He's looked in my eyes, how many times, Lucius? He looks in my eyes and he's satisfied. He's lost the plot. I know you've seen it. Tactics gone to shit. Morale, that's a fucking joke. The only ones with their hearts in it had their brains rotted by Azkaban. Leadership, priorities – chasing after schoolchildren? *Really?* I'd be a bit more impressed if he ever managed to *catch one*. And maybe he would if he could get his own followers to obey him." Lucius looked pale. I knew that last one hit close to home.

"Tell me, is this the great leader we saw, who would bring about the wizarding renaissance?"

"You'll whore yourself to the Ministry then?"

"The Ministry can fuck themselves. I'll be standing in line with a splintery broomstick. The thing is, Lucius, *he* can go fuck himself

too. He's the first one on my list. Otherwise he'll bring us all down with him, one by one."

"No."

"Oh yes he will. He started on that long ago. He brought down Rosier, you know. Evan told me he was going to do it, just to get out."

"No."

"No other way, not if he cared about his family. Would you go that far to protect them?" He stared at me.

"Well, what is it then? How are you going to get them out?" He shook his head dumbly.

"No plan? None at all? You are content to watch them destroyed with the rest?"

"They won't be."

"They will. What's your excuse now? 'My Lord, he does not have his apparition license...' He'll have it soon. There'll be no more excuses and he'll have to take the mark. Then, when he falls, Draco will be swept up with the rest. That would be hard for you to watch, if you're still around by then. Do you think you could stand to watch Draco get the kiss?" He twisted against the bonds then, panting. I just watched him. He subsided.

"I can't do anything against him, and you know it. He would make sure it was a hell of a lot worse than the kiss."

"You won't be doing anything. You'll be confirming plans to me and passing along information. In return, the Order will guarantee your family's protection and defense at the Dark Lord's fall."

"No!"

"You will, because if you don't I will Obliviate you now, then I will set you up as the mole in his eyes and reveal your treachery."

"You - "

"You *will* be useful to me, one way or another, Lucius. Now don't be an idiot, it won't come to that because I know which way you'll choose. Why do you think I'm giving you this choice?" I didn't bother to Legilimens him. I knew him well enough. Besides, he was a very good occlumens.

"And what prevents me from doing the same to you?"

"Your own intelligence, what little you have. I have enough memories

to sink you too. If you gave me up to him, I would be happy to let him see them. They may be little, but they are enough, the way he is now." There had been several conversations over the years before he rose again, very late at night and after very many drinks, about what our lives were like then, and what they were like now without him.

I nodded at Albus, who released the binding spell. Lucius rubbed his wrists but didn't try to stand.

"Excellent decision," I said. He sat, gritting his teeth.

"What guarantees do I have?" It was finally Albus' turn. He produced the contract for Lucius to sign. And where was that contract now? It should have cleared him from prosecution, yet now he was imprisoned. Hadn't Albus' portrait passed on the contract? Had he forgotten, broken his word, or was there something deeper at work? I had no way to tell now, and no standing to try to help him. At least Draco and Narcissa were safe. That was more than could be said for many of the followers. More than could be said for myself, if it came to that.

I wrapped the string of beads around my upper arm. He would simply have to take care of himself now. We all did.

TRACES

The next morning everything began to fall apart. On my way to work, as I turned into the alley behind the diner to get to the kitchen door, my employer Blume was standing on the back steps, red-faced, shouting into a phone.

"It's not the replacement value,

I'm talking about my business, my business is shut down! We can't serve!" He was so angry he was shaking. The back door was standing open behind him. He hardly saw me as I pushed past him into the kitchen.

The kitchen was destroyed in a very particular way. I noticed the

Chapter 10 of **THE NEW SKIN**

BY MOTTSHAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 39, No.8

SAMHAIN 2002

range first. All the knobs and handles were gone. The oven doors were warped, pulled half off their hinges. The surface of the grill was pushed in. The fry baskets were twisted into tortured shapes, their handles gone. The cutting boards and counter were worn down to splinters

"Gone? It's not what's missing; it's all *wrecked!*" I could hear Blume shouting outside.

The door of the walk-in was half-gone; water had pooled on the floor just in front of the door. The floor was scratched and scraped where I usually stood in front of the grill. I walked out the back door, which I now saw was missing its handle and half the jamb.

"Get them over here, just – now!" Blume finally noticed me. He made some sideways chopping motions with his free hand. I left before he could get off the phone. I wouldn't be back.

My brain only began to work again when I was halfway home. There could be absolutely no doubt now; I was being hunted. The box couldn't be how I was tracked, the box had never been in the diner, this was something else. All the damage in my room on the island and in the kitchen was specifically directed at objects I had touched. It must be some physical trace, my blood or scent that was leading the hunt.

My home... but my home was well warded. Nothing had disturbed the wards or set off the alerts, yet, but I had no doubt that it would be next. Both locations that had been targeted had been places where I had spent quite a bit of time. The house was the only place left. I would have to move.

Where could I go? I stood stock-still for a moment, trying to think. Apparition could allow me to move at a moment's notice and throw a pursuer off my trail, but to use it I needed a destination in mind, somewhere I had been before. I only had a very few places that I knew within apparition range: my house, the island, which was no longer secure, various points in the city, and Dogtown. I should have done more to widen my territory, to give myself refuges further afield. Well, I had a broom now; I could apparate to Dogtown and fly from there to... somewhere. I could purchase a portkey to a distant city, but portkey offices ask for IDs, and I wouldn't have one until Sunday, not one that showed me to be a citizen.

And then what? A constant state of flight? Never able to take any but the most menial of jobs, changing location every few weeks. I didn't want to think of that as my only future, but it was hard to see anything else when I had no idea what was following me.

If it was one of my enemies, why would they waste time destroying objects when they could try to get closer to me without warning? No, something was being *sent* against me, perhaps from afar, and I didn't know what it could be.

I forced myself to start moving again. I would need to prepare to leave and then find a new place to stay very soon. It was Friday; perhaps I could stay until I picked up my new IDs on Sunday. Then I could get a portkey and leave properly.

I noticed when I arrived home that my alerts and wards were not disturbed. Fine, I still had time. It didn't take long to pack. Bella followed me from room to room, complaining over the changes as I shrunk objects and put them in my bag.

I ended up in the kitchen with my bag of holding, trying to decide if it was worth my time shrinking and carrying the transfigured table and chair. There were two loose papers on the table; the tomato-soup label and Dick's letter. I looked down at the label: 1) *Find job.* 2) *Create new identity...* I had found a job and lost it again, and I would be losing my shelter shortly. I was back at the beginning again, and I still had never found a number three to put down, some greater purpose.

I sat at the table. The way it looked now, I would be caught in an endless cycles of numbers one and two, never able to settle long enough to think of anything more. I didn't want that. I wanted a way out, there had to be something, anything.

It wasn't easy, but I knew somehow that if I didn't force myself out now, I would really be caught in a trap of endless flight. I took the second page of Dick's letter and turned it over. It was a risk. What reason did he have to trust me? Yet he had always made it clear as long as I'd known him that he had no interest in any sides or governments. I began to write on the back of the letter.

Dr. Stoltz,

I am writing in response to your previous offer of a research position at your lab. At the time I was under contract and unable to accept. My contract term has now expired and I would be pleased to immediately begin that position. I will need your answer at once by return owl.

It was a shameless demand. I didn't have time to be polite. Instead of a signature, I wrote a formula in the bottom half of the page. It was an experimental version of Felix Felicis, never published or developed to completion. I hoped he would recognize it; it was the cause of my first correspondence with him, when I was still a student.

I had read of his studies into the traditional uses of the yaheshori vine and had written to him for a sample to use in my experimentation. He had replied at great length, with several samples of different parts of the vine and a detailed account of its traditional preparation, and a sincere-sounding request for the results when I was finished. It was the greatest interest anyone had ever shown in my future, and the most respectful way I had ever been addressed, as if I were an equal, a colleague. It had awakened a great hunger in me to be addressed like that, and I wrote back eagerly and often. It didn't even seem to matter that my Felix experiments produced little, he never lost interest in our correspondence. Was it enough to risk everything for now?

I folded my note and transfigured another soup label into an envelope. I addressed it without a return and wrote URGENT on the outside. I took the tube into the wizarding quarter. I was able to get a week rental on a post box without producing an ID. I wrote the box number and address for the reply on the bottom of my letter, sealed it, and paid the extra charge for same-day delivery. I could feel my heart race as I handed the letter over to the clerk. I was plunging into water where I couldn't see the bottom. This could lead to my capture, to the end of everything. Did it matter? My current existence didn't have much to recommend it.

I knew I should start looking for a new squat immediately, but a suffocating exhaustion had settled over me by the time I arrived home. Only it wasn't my home any longer, not really. I couldn't think of any place that way now, I had to keep moving. I didn't feel very

hungry but I forced myself to eat some bread and cheese. I counted my reserves of cash again. I had spent almost \$900 on the broom to make sure I had reliable transportation. I had \$2,115 left, and I had to reserve \$650 of that for what was due on the IDs. It wouldn't last too long, maybe a year if I was very careful and went back to stealing food.

I kept waking that night, every creak of the old house or movement of Bella jerking me awake. I gave up at three in the morning. I had no work ahead of me. I might as well start looking for a new shelter since I was awake. I repacked my sleeping bag; I had my emergency money and all my belongings in my bag aside from a few cans of food and the kitchen table and chair.

I disillusioned myself and stepped out into the cool night air. I apparated first out to the island, then to the train station in Gloucester. It was deserted. I dug out my broom and state map under the flickering orange light of the platform. I was near the northern border of the state here. I could leave the state of course, but then I would have even less of an idea of where I was going. I got my bearings and lifted off into the sky.

I went quite slowly at first as I ascended to above the height of telephone and power lines and trees; it was still full dark. The thought of invisible wires reminded me uncomfortably of the first death I had to announce to the House as head. Peri Travers, a well-liked athletic fourth-year, had been flying with friends near sunset over the holidays and hadn't seen the power lines in the glare. Killed instantly. I could still see the looks on all the faces of my House, sitting at dinner in the Great Hall after my private announcement to them, trying not to *show* anything under all those eyes.

My House always had a talent for hiding our thoughts. I took one hand off the broom handle to rub my forehead. God, all the students of our House, their lives would be hell now, whether they were followers or not. Would they be allowed to finish their educations, would anyone hire them, would they have any kind of future at all? It would be up to the rest of the school staff to protect them now. I groaned to myself. I wasn't sure how far I could count on them to be impartial. I doubted that the other Houses could really

understand the sorts of choices they had to make.

At least Bulstrode was alive and free. She had promised to look after the kids and her standing orders were to watch over the House in my absence as well as passing some critical information to the Order. Just as legitimacy can't be used on non-humans, the slight trace of troll blood in her family tree gave her a natural resistance to any such mental attacks. She was also protected by her reputation as a staunch defender of the House.

She was a natural choice to be the head of my eyes, and I had cultivated her for several years. I knew I had used her, even though it was with her consent. My need for eyes on the ground overrode my concerns about using students. In time, she had identified several other students who could be counted on as well. I couldn't say that I liked putting them at risk, no matter how justified, no matter how it served to keep other students out of the Carrows' clutches. They were walking a very fine line. We all were.

Bulstrode had the added responsibility of holding my information

if it happened that I was in a position to pass it on. I had written out the Muggle Registration Committee holding cell locations and passwords, the Snatcher headquarters, the network of Eater headquarters and safehouses between the lines in my corrections on her first-year essays. The Snatchers and MRC cell locations were crucial to pass along quickly. Some of the more fanatic followers could well try to eliminate captives when they learned of the Dark Lord's fall, and I had been less sure every day that I would be available to pass along the information.

I hoped the Order had listened

to Bulstrode. She would have made them listen; she was quite intractable in stubborn. 'The Bull,' as they called her in the pit. Hopefully she could use her stubbornness and her cooperation with the Order to protect the House now.

I took myself higher. At first I could see little of the ground but the occasional spiderweb tracery of lights of muggle towns. I headed northwest first; after about an hour I found a place to land in a field at the edge of a wooded hill.

I stayed long enough to fix the spot in my mind as an apparition point and used a few Point Me's to find my rough location on the map. The birds were just starting as I took off again, tacking to the southwest.

For the next six hours I zigzagged, landing nine more times in the woods, on rounded granite hills, on the edges of towns and fields, in empty lots and quarries. The broom was good enough, but I could see why it had been traded in. Left to itself, it wanted to pull to the north. Some idiot manufacturer had used wood and bristles from the same location, making a broom that always wanted to head 'home.' Well, it wasn't too hard to deal with if one paid attention to the steering, but it did wear at the arms.

It was almost noon when I realized that I was gripping the broom white-knuckled and there was a shooting pain across my shoulders. It was tricky to find a good landing spot; the ground had begun to crumple up into low mountains an hour ago and I had seen no clear landing places for some time.

The swampy edge of a small pond had to do. I splashed through the shallows and threw down my broom and bag under some young birches. I sat and ate lunch while I tried to pinpoint my location on the map. There weren't a lot of landmarks to cast Point Me on, but I determined that I was somewhere in the Berkshire Hills, close to the border of Vermont.

Well, at least I had a store of a few apparition points now. I had hundreds in my head in Britain, but they were all useless to me now, hopelessly out of range. Ten points wasn't much, but I could at least throw someone off my track temporarily in an emergency.

And if I had to, what then? The back of my map showed me the outline



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of the state in context of the rest of the country. The ground I had covered today was barely a finger's width of the expanse. It was enormous.

If I needed to run I could run. I could keep running for years, get myself a tent, steal food when the money ran out. God it would be like a never-ending camping trip. Bloody ridiculous, I couldn't do that, I would go mad with boredom before a month was out. No, the emergency flight plan was a temporary solution at best. I would either need to move myself out of reach of whatever was hunting me or find some way to stop it. Since I hadn't an inkling of what I was facing, I was inclined to the first solution.

I was only going to rest for a half-hour or so, but I ended up dropping off to sleep. I dreamt that I was looking up into the night sky. The stars were going out one by one. I knew, somehow, that when the last one was gone there would be nothing to hold things down to the earth, everything would fall up into the endless black. As I looked up into the darkening sky, I felt like I was standing on the edge of a chasm. I could feel myself disengaging, beginning to drift up into the sky when I woke with a start, short of breath. I rubbed my face.

The sun was still bright but the shadows were beginning to stretch. A Tempus told me it was two in the afternoon. I needed to head back while the visibility was still good. A nap was one thing, but it would be much better to be behind my wards for the vulnerability of sleep.

I traveled in a wide arc to the south, not zigzagging as before, but stopping another five times to pick up new points. When I got close enough to the city to see the orange glow of its lights thrown up against the clouds, at about eight in the evening, I landed one last time. I didn't fancy flying into such a built-up area without good visibility; too many lines, too many buildings. I apparated to my spot on the wharf, then to the alley behind my house.

Bella was on the back stoop. I wasn't certain at first that it was Bella, the black fur flattened and thin against the steps. Her head was gone, her shoulders ending in a bloody matted clump of fur. The front paws were gone as well, one leg now ending just where it joined the body, the other halfway down, the bone exposed. I reached down and touched her; she was cold and stiff. She must

have been killed earlier in the day, sometime after I had left.

I picked her up. She felt dry and light. There wasn't much to her. As with my room on the island and the diner, whatever it was had taken what I had touched most; I remembered her licking my fingers, rubbing her head on my ankle, putting a paw on my sleeve.

It would be ridiculous if I had let myself get attached to some little creature. It wasn't as if they had much of a lifespan in the best conditions, much less when they were feral. A quick end was better than the disease or starvation that was the alley cat's usual lot. She had a quick end at least.

The dumpster at the end of the alley had just been emptied. The thought of the sound that come if I dropped her in – I didn't want to hear a 'clunk' just then. I used my wand to lower her in.

Whatever it was that had done this was gone now. Revelios and detection charms brought up nothing in or around the house. Here, for once, the knob and jamb were undamaged, protected by my wards, no doubt. I wasn't pleased that I had been tracked here, of course, but at the moment I had no other place that was so strongly warded. I would have to stay until I could set up another secure location.

The house felt somehow twice as empty as usual. Well, no Bella now, of course. I wouldn't be staying here much longer. I went upstairs and spread out my sleeping bag. Another night; tomorrow I would pick up my new ID cards and I would be free to leave the area entirely. I fell asleep with the image of that flattened scrap of fur still before my eyes.

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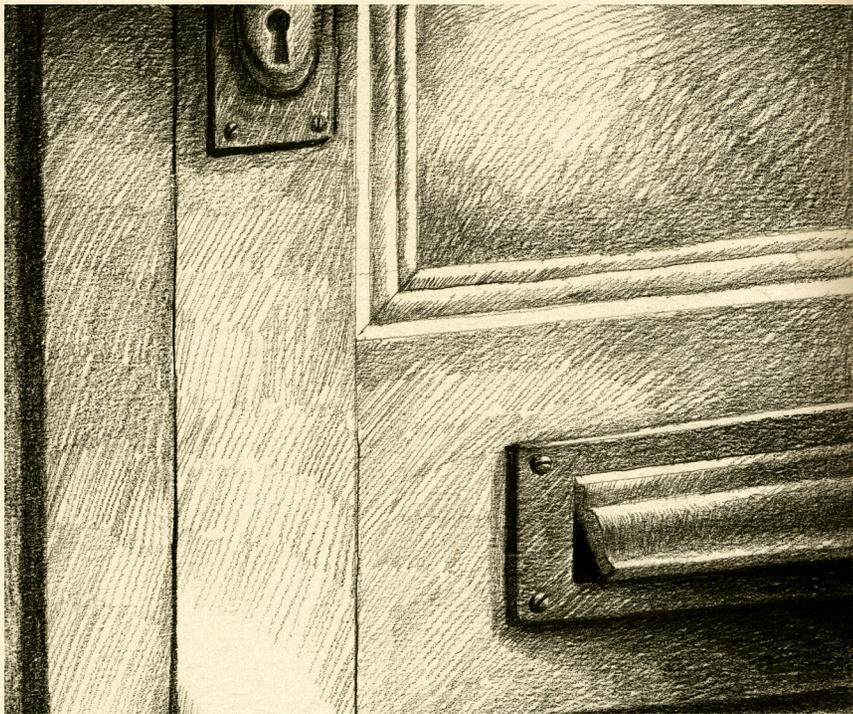
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Art by Mottsnave

WRECKER

The alert wards went off first. I half-woke, groggily thinking that Bella had set them off again. But something was wrong with Bella. Oh yes, she was dead. I sat up sharply, clutching at my wand, then froze in the darkness, listening. Silence, then a soft scabbling at the front door. Nothing more; another animal? I had seen rats around the dumpster in the alley. Perhaps they were getting bolder, sensing Bella's absence.

There was a soft shush, then a distinct metallic squeak. It brought a clear image into my mind; the old brass letter slot on the

Chapter II of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 40, NO.1
YULE 2003

front door. There was plywood nailed over the entire door, there wouldn't be more than an inch of space...

I slipped out of the sleeping bag and padded barefoot over to the bedroom door. I cast a *Silencio* on myself, then eased it open and went to the top of the stairs. I cast *Lumos*.

It was pulling itself through the letter slot, pale, grayish. One arm was fully in, boneless fingers flexing against the floorboards. The head was halfway through. I could only see the back of the head, which was just as well. There was no hair left on the flabby scalp. It swelled slightly, the arm twitched against the floor, and a few more inches of head and part of the shoulder poured in. The letter slot squeaked. The tips of the fingers of the other hand were working their way in now, questing up like blind worms. It was a skin; someone had sent a skin man against me.

The head moved side to side in short jerks to pull itself forward. Of course the shoulders would slow it down. Of course they wouldn't, it didn't have any bones. The head was beginning to twist up.

I staggered backwards down the hallway. It had no problem crossing my wards. Well, a skin wouldn't. It wasn't a living human, not anymore. I slammed the bedroom door. No use for stealth; it had my scent. I couldn't think of any way to stop or destroy an activated skin. I couldn't think. I cast *Colloportus*. Idiot! It didn't matter; the dark crack under the door gaped at me like an abyss.

I didn't need *Aberforth* or any voice from a dream to tell me; I had to get out. I threw my shirt and shoes into my bag. The letter slot clanged shut below. I shrank the sleeping bag and stuffed it into the pocket of my pajama pants. I would need that. I struggled to pull the window up. Why was it moving so slowly? I shattered it with a *Reducto*. I could hear the skin padding down the hallway under the noise of falling glass. I cut my hand on a bit of window glass as I pulled myself over the sill onto the fire escape. I was dripping blood, wonderful, more scent. I looked back once at the door when I was past the anti-apparition wards. There was a quiet sound of skin brushing against wood. I disappeared.

At my second point, out on the island, I put on my shirt and shoes and sealed the cut on my hand. There was no use leaving a

blood trail about. At the seventh apparition point I had to lean over breathing slowly with my hands on my knees for several minutes. At the tenth point I vomited into the bushes. I Evanescoed the mess before I continued. A vomit trail would just as bad as blood. I stopped at my furthest point at the pond up in the mountains. My knees were shaking. I leaned on a tree and waited for my stomach to settle. It would have to do. I needed to rest.

A skin man couldn't apparate, not on its own, but they could travel and I wasn't sure how fast this one was. I had read about skins years ago in GRINNEL'S COMPENDIUM OF REVENGE. They were said to increase in strength, speed and accuracy for the first forty years of their sending, remain constant for the next forty years, then slowly decay over the next forty years. Grinnel was not very optimistic about a target's chances of escape. He had recorded no way to destroy a skin before its term was up or it reached its target. Wasn't there an account of one sorry sod who'd tried Fiendfyre on the thing, only to be hunted down and suffocated by a cloud of its ash? Skins also had the habit of escaping from locked rooms, impenetrable boxes and inescapable traps just when their targets felt secure. No, it was best to stay on the move until I could get completely out of range. Whatever its range was.

Whoever had made the skin was staying out of range, since none of my alert beads had given me any warning. They must be content to let the skin do the work for them. That might change if they were following the skin and found that I had fled. Wards wouldn't stop the skin, apparently, so I wouldn't be safe for long if I didn't get out of range.

Still, I needed to rest now. I couldn't apparate anymore tonight. I was sick enough as it was. I wouldn't be too confident of my broom skills at the moment either. I set an alert ward in a 15 meter circle to go off for any movement so it would pick up even the non-living skin. I couldn't keep it out, but at least I could give myself enough warning to get away. A Tempus told me it was 2:15 am. I could sleep for a few hours and then travel by broom to another point once it got light. As soon as it was a decent hour I would go back to Pulcifer to get my IDs. Then I could put real distance between us, buy the furthest portkey I could afford. Perhaps I could put myself per-

manently out of range. I wished I knew what the range of a skin man was.

Sleep turned out to be too optimistic. Every night-animal noise put me on high alert. The alert ward even went off once; I sprang up holding a Lumos only to see a raccoon down by the shore of the pond arch its back and move off in a swaying lope. Finally, I gave it up as a bad job and tried to make some headway on the Joseph Conrad. It might as well have been written in Polish for all I was able to absorb.

At dawn I couldn't take the waiting any longer. I decided I couldn't take any more apparating either. I boiled water in one of my empty cans and made myself tea as the mist lifted off the pond. When the mist cleared I took down the alerts, unshrunk my broom, and flew off to the east.

The sun was rising hazily; I could already feel that it would be another hot overcast day like the ones that had dragged at me in the city.

On the broom at least, the air movement kept me pleasantly cool. When I landed after an hour to eat some of my stores for breakfast I could feel the sticky heat developing.

I arrived in Dogtown shortly after ten am. Pulcifer hadn't told me when to come on Sunday for my cards. Well, he would have to be ready, I wanted them now. When I stepped around SPIRITUAL POWER rock, I was surprised to see that he was waiting for me, pacing in front of his stone gate. He had his wand pointed at me and ready. I held my hands out to the side, open and empty.

"All right, stay right there, that's enough." He came up to me at the back of the rock. "Good for you I don't ever break a Good Faith, fucking good for you!" *What was he talking about?* He was pacing in a short nervous arc in front of me, but he wasn't holding his wand closely on me. He threw the three cards on the ground, a few feet away.

"You put the money there, now," he said, pointing at the ground in front of him. Good Faith or not, demands or not, I was going to check the goods first. I picked up the cards with one hand while still holding the other hand out and looked them over. A muggle Massachusetts ID card, stiff shiny plastic, then the softer wizard ID card with the photo shifting between front and side views, my ridiculous smile stretched across my face, then finally the brew license.

Pulcifer was fuming at me silently and shifting on his feet. Nervous,

I thought, but he would have to bear it; everyone was nervous these days.

"Drop it, now," he repeated. I got out the cash and tossed it to the ground.

"Take it," I snapped. He rifled through the bills inexpertly.

"Ought to charge you for a doorknob, ought to charge you for a table, a damn *table*," he said.

So the skin man had been here. I could see that he didn't want to shake hands with me. I didn't particularly want to shake his hand either, but we had to finish our Good Faith. Shit. I hadn't touched his daughter, had I? I tried to remember. I hadn't touched the girl or the dog, as far as I could remember.

He saw my reluctance as we shook and recited, "*in Good Faith*."

"Now it worries you, does it?" he asked, holding up his hand. "Don't you worry, I'll keep it on my arm; I have my ways. You're real *special*, all right, wreck whatever you touch, but it won't touch me, I'll see to it. Now get the hell away from here. You come back, I'll set Younger on you and she'll show you *her* ways, you bet." His voice followed me as I walked back around the rock.

"Dogtown looks after its own. You keep out or you better look after yourself!" He held his wand on me until I apparated away.

I landed on the island, walked through the jumble of stones on the shore. The skin man had probably been here already, or it would be here soon. I watched the waves suck at the rocks. *Everything I touched*. It was tracking me physically, by scent or trace. I had to find a way to break the trail or I would lead a path of destruction wherever I went. I doubted a pair of gloves would be enough. I would have to somehow change my scent or... I dug into my bag. There, the pouch of emergency potions with my vials of Polyjuice. That would break the trail of anything tracking me physically, but I would have to time it very carefully. I only had 5 vials. I couldn't take one until I was sure I would have long-distance within an hour or the skin would simply sniff me out again. I would also need some hair.

The hair wasn't difficult. I apparated back to my spot on the wharf and walked into the city. After a few blocks I found a hairdressers'. It looked like it catered to teens up to adults in their 30s,

from the waiting customers. That was fine; it would be best to avoid the very old and the very young, since they could slow my movement. I went in and fumbled with the brochures on the counter, knocking some to the floor. How clumsy of me. I picked up a small lock of light hair along with the scattered papers and left without speaking to the counter girl who was studiously ignoring me.

Next it was back to Honey Street to find a Portkey office. I passed the Owl Post Office first, then turned and doubled-back. There wouldn't be a reply, I was sure of it. I checked anyway. I opened my box with a tap of my wand. There was a single envelope resting diagonally in the box. I stared at it for a long moment before yanking it out.

It was addressed '*To Whom It May Concern*' with a return address from 'Dr. R. E. Stoltz, DH,' in Arkham MA. *Concern* was one word for it. I didn't want to open it here; I felt too observed and I had spent long enough in one place. I stuck it in my pocket and made my way out of the wizarding quarter back to the muggle streets. I found an empty bench on the edge of the Commons and tore open the envelope. There was a single page inside and a small card.

Dear friend,

I can't say how glad I am to hear from you. I saw several troubling reports that made me fear the worst. I will do whatever I can to help you, if you need any assistance. The offer of research position at the lab still stands. I would be happy to meet with you at any time to discuss this. You can use the enclosed protean note if you need to contact me quickly, I'll be carrying the pair.

Dick

I turned the card over in my hand; it was blank. It might be as good as a Portkey, if I could trust Dick. He said he had read reports... the stories about me in the papers, I supposed. Now he would know that I had been deceiving him for years, I was a Death Eater and murderer. It could be a perfect chance for him to wait for me to come to him and then turn me in. I could burn the note and walk away, of course, but if this was my one chance to step out of my cycle of flight, could I really just walk away from it? Which would be a worse fate now: capture or flight?

If I was going to answer, I needed some way to keep the situation under my control, so I could still pull out if I needed to. I began to walk through the Commons and then the Public Gardens. Not a bad spot; it was even a little crowded on a hot Sunday. There were joggers, pushcart vendors, people with dogs and strollers, idiots encouraging the ducks and pigeons with stale bread. It was just the sort of place where Aurors wouldn't want to make a fuss. If I leaned against one of the willow trees on the bank of the swan pond in the Public Gardens I could see through the trailing branches around the curve of the water to a sunny bench by the open lawn. It was almost noon. I pulled out the note.

Meet me now, Boston Public Gardens, bench at N side of swan pond, directly behind lamppost.

Ten minutes later his reply appeared on the card as he wrote it, letter by letter: *Yes. It will take me 15 min to get to an app. point.*

I leaned against the tree, hidden by the shifting, waving branches. Now I only had to wait.

MEETING

I watched the bench. After a few minutes it was taken by a couple with take-away food cartons. Not that it mattered, I wasn't going to use the bench.

It took him twenty minutes. I didn't recognize him immediately; the last time I had actually

seen him was almost ten years ago. He had been in London at a herbological conference and wrote to me that he had a few extra days in the country before he had to Portkey back to the States, and asked if I wanted to meet with him for dinner. I let it drop casually at the staff table that night that an old friend was visiting the country and I would be taking an evening to visit him.

Minerva pounced on it at once, as I had spent all the previous

Chapter 12 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 40, NO. 2
IMBOLC 2003

two terms convincing her that I hadn't any friends.

"Ah, and just who would that be Severus?"

"Oh, just someone I've exchanged a few letters with over the years, an old friend."

"Are you telling me that you have a pen pal?"

"More of a professional correspondence, Minerva," I said repressively, "I do not have a pen pal."

"I thought potions masters never spoke to each other to guard all your *precious* trade secrets."

"Potions masters don't."

"So, not a potions master? All right, I'll bite. Who is it?"

"Hmm? Oh, Richard Stoltz." Pomona made a choked spluttering noise and only just kept from spilling her wine all over the table. She was two places down, but she managed to crane over Filius and around Minerva to face me. I hoped Filius wasn't suffocating under there. Of course, some men would give a lot to be in such a position.

"Dr. Richard Stoltz?"

"Yes."

"Dr. Richard Edward Stoltz?" I had never heard Pomona's voice go up like that.

"Hmm, yes."

"The father of modern herbology? Revolutionized the study of plant uses in traditional magic systems?"

"Is that what they say?"

"Discovered disease-resistant strains of ebony for use in wands? The 'serpent vine' of the Amazon? Bolivian dream-talkers? Woodlore linking wand-based and non-wand-based traditions?"

"That does sound *familiar*."

"*Familiar*? You're *familiar* with him? How long have you known him?"

"We've been corresponding for a few years."

"*Years*?" Somehow she managed to lean around even further.

"Well, 1977."

"1977?"

"It's just a professional correspondence."

"You were *seventeen*, you didn't have a profession."

"The *average* seventeen-year-old doesn't have a profession."

"You've been writing him for over ten years and you never told me?"

"I don't recall that it ever came up."

"Severus, don't tease Pomona," said Albus with a sigh. "When were you thinking of going?"

"His conference is over this week. I'll just nip down on Friday after last class – " It took a lot to push Sprout too far, but I had finally done it.

"Oh, there won't be any *nipping down*!" She pushed out of her chair and stormed around to Albus. She did her best to loom over him, tricky as she wasn't quite up to his height even with him sitting down. Filius seemed none the worse for wear, though his head was now beet-red. He smoothed back his hair.

"I requested time to go down to the conference, well in advance of deadline, which you *denied* – "

"Now, Pomona, you requested a full week, during classes, just before exams..."

"Which you *denied*, and now he is going to just '*nip down*' for a private meeting with Dr. Richard Edward Stoltz, the father of modern herbology?" I could see Filius mouthing the last words along with her. Smartass.

"Well, as it does not interfere with classes..."

"*Interfere?* You are just going to sit by and let a once-in-a-lifetime educational opportunity for Hogwarts students slip away?" This had been entertaining, but now it was getting really interesting.

"Now..." Albus began, but Pomona rolled on over him.

"If he's free on Friday, he can come here, he can give a special lecture. The sixth years are reading one of his books next term."

"Friday night is not much notice..."

"Saturday. Extra class session. I'll *make* them come, I'll make them *all* come!" I had heard of a badger sinking its teeth in, but I had never seen it in person. Very impressive.

"Pomona, this year's budget is already allocated, we can't simply – "

"There's the emergency fund."

"The Governors have to approve any – "

"Tell them it's a Quidditch emergency, they'll spring for it." She was actually wearing him down. I knew the worst was over when he said, "we'll discuss it after dinner."

At a hastily-called meeting in the staff room it was agreed that I would contact the father of modern herbology and find out if he was available to speak and what his lecturer's fee would be. It was strongly hinted that I might use my powers of persuasion and the weight of years of friendship to get a bargain for the school. Albus must have thought me a fool. When I received Dick's reply that he would be happy to come and speak, that he was eager to see the school and would waive any fee, I carefully excised the last part of the letter and lifted the remaining words onto a fresh sheet of parchment and added a lecturer's fee of 350 galleons. It was a decent forgery and in a good cause. If Albus would pay that for a single lecture, he wouldn't have a leg to stand on quibbling over the salaries of us poor sods who lectured day in and out for a pittance.

The whole weekend came off beautifully. I brought Dick up after class on Friday and had a fine time giving him a tour of the school while dashing down corridors and ducking around corners evading Pomona. She finally cornered us in the divination classroom and dragged Dick away for an endless tour of the greenhouses. He even seemed to enjoy it. Pomona's voice went all squeaky a few times when he complemented the century plant in the arid house, and I used that against her for years.

Saturday we spent mucking about in the Forbidden Forest, as Dick was very keen on seeing the devil's snare grove and the acromantula colony. I finally had to drag him away from a long conversation with some centaurs about the best wood for long bows and how the Yanomami made theirs.

Then there was the lecture itself in the evening. It had been agreed at the staff meeting that since the existence of students denied all of us a decent social life that it was only right that they should return the favor. So the student body was packed into the

Great Hall on Saturday evening like a herd of resentful sheep.

Happily, Dick knew his audience and concentrated his lecture on hallucinogenic plants and their effects, disgusting tropical parasites and hair-raising rituals, or drugs, bugs and blood, as I thought of it. It was even worth knowing that I was going to have to beat away the students trying to get into my stores of Ayahuasca, to see all the first through fourth years go pale when he described the Waiwai initiation ceremonies. The whole staff got ammunition from that. I heard a student whinging to Minerva about a parchment deadline shut right up when asked if she would rather strap poisonous ants to her body.

All in all, it was highly satisfactory. I came out with almost the entire staff owing me to some degree, even if for nothing else than the entertainment of seeing Pomona so flustered. With Dick, I came out about even, him agreeing to a lecture at short notice and I getting him a decent fee for it.

Whatever our tab was before, I was going beyond all bounds in the favor I was asking of him now. No, I hadn't even asked, I had virtually demanded. I had lied to him by omission for years and then just expected him to turn up at my beck and call on the weight of some letters.

And yet, here he was. He had less hair now, and he was growing a bit of a paunch, though he would have to settle down to some really serious eating if he wanted to catch up with Sluggo. His gait was just the same, a long-legged stride, his tall form leaning a little forward as if moving against a headwind. When he came in view of the bench he slowed and appeared to lose his assurance. I saw him lean over the couple on the bench awkwardly and speak to them, then step away, looking around at a loss.

I knew I shouldn't leave him hanging there, but I couldn't seem to make myself move. A headache was beginning to bloom at the back of my skull. I cast a discrete *Hominem Revelio* at the end of the pond. As far as I could tell, he had kept his word. He was alone. He really had come just as I asked. He pushed up his glasses and rubbed his forehead. After a few minutes he pulled out a small card,

no doubt checking my directions.

Well, what was I waiting for? I still couldn't seem to move. God, I was such a sodding bastard, what else did I need? Of course, I had spent so much time around other sodding bastards, professional sodding bastards, was it any wonder that it had rubbed off?

Another ten minutes and he pulled out the card again and wrote something on it. I felt its pair in my pocket move as the words came through. Him telling me off, no doubt. But I still couldn't move. How could I be sure I could trust him? How could I ever be sure? Could that couple on the bench be Aurors planted there to arrest me? If they decided to lock me up I would be a sitting duck for the skin. He was rubbing his forehead again, looking down at the water of the pond.

I caught myself clenching and unclenching my hands. Did I think he was going to stand there forever? Or just as long as it would take for the skin to get back on my trail? Even thinking of what the skin would do to me if it caught me didn't seem to be enough to get me off my arse.

He didn't stand there forever. He turned from the water and began to make his way up the slope away from the now-empty bench. The sight of his back finally unfroze me. I fumbled through my pockets for the note. *'Are you all right? Please come,'* he had written.

I caught up with him halfway around the side of the pond. Well, it was better this way anyhow, I told myself, to come up casually while he was walking. I was still a bastard, though. "Keep walking," I told him as I came alongside. He started and glanced at me, but then looked ahead again and went on.

"Oh, thank god," he said quietly. If I could trust his face I would say he looked relieved.

"Are you all right?" he said after a few paces.

"I need you to give me your wand." *A complete fucking bastard.* He kept it in his breast pocket along with some pens. He handed it over, handle towards me. Idiot, why would he trust me? And, more to the point, what now?

"Where are we going?" he asked. A good question, a very good question.

"I need to get out of here." I felt a bit shocked at how desperate I sounded. "Do you want that position at the lab?" he asked, with a quick look at me again. Did I? It did mean that I would get out of here and probably out of the skin's range.

"Yes."

"Do you want to go there now? To Brazil?"

"Do you have a Portkey?"

"Well, something a little better. There's a vanishing cabinet in my offices at the University in Arkham. The powers that be finally approved the budget line for that when I put my foot down three years ago. I'm getting too old for Portkeys twice a week. They got their own back, though, by giving me extra lectures." He was talking to me now easily, as if we were just having a quiet stroll. I had his wand. Wasn't he wary at all?

"How long will it take to get there?"

There's an apparition point between that shed and those yew bushes. We can't apparate directly onto campus, so then there's a little walk at the other end to my office."

"How long will that take?"

"The walk? Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes." We stepped into the lee of the shed, out of direct view of the rest of the park. He reached for my arm.

"Wait!" I said, flinching back. I couldn't have him touch me yet. I pulled out one vial of Polyjuice and added the hair. I gritted my teeth through the unpleasantness of the transformation. Dick made a noise somewhere between a cough and a laugh.

"I won't say it's not an improvement, but you'll have to do something about the clothes." I looked down. I was a young woman, late teens, maybe. A swaying lock of hair in the corner of my eye told me I was blond. My trouser legs were too long now and bunching around my ankles. A quick spell and they shrunk to fit.

"Not a word," I said, in a much higher voice.

"Not at all," said Dick, "you have very good taste."

"Now," I said, handing him back his wand. He took my arm and apparated.

TRANSPORTED

We landed in a narrow alley between wood-sided houses. I had to lean on the wall for a minute to catch my breath before we stepped out into the street. Dick handed his wand back to me on his own. I took it,

mostly out of surprise. We were on the side of a small hill. Looking down its length, the town spread out below. Sagging gambrel roofs leaned together conspiratorially, angling over the dark waters of the river. The whole town had a waiting air, except for the shining concrete and glass blocks of flats that rose up on the opposite side of the water. Dick saw me looking at them.

"Ah, the old industrial district got hit pretty hard by urban renewal in the eighties. We've been mostly spared that on this side of the river, though."

He led me a few blocks down Church Street, then we turned one block over to the main campus entrance through a sally-port in a long brick four-storey building.

The campus was fairly quiet on a Sunday afternoon, with students reading or revising in the shade of the spreading elms on the quad. Dick still managed to be waylaid as we approached the entrance of the 'West Hall of the Sciences' on the far end of the lawn.

"Dr. Stoltz!" A thin, rather sickly-looking man was pattering over to us from the steps of the library. "Dr. Stoltz, if you have a few moments. I'd like to ask you again to look at that herbarium I uncovered..."

"Oh, Armitage, I'm in a bit of a rush now. I have to get my... niece something from my office," he said, flushing.

"Well, whenever you have a minute then," said Armitage, looking at me a little strangely.

Dick hurried me into West Hall. "Shit, that's going straight into

Chapter 13 of **THE NEW SKIN**

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Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 40, No.3

OSTERA 2003

the campus gossip mill. He knows I don't have any siblings."

"You should let me do the lying." I felt uncomfortable the minute I said it; I didn't need to remind Dick what a practiced liar I was, but he only chuckled.

There were only a few people in the white corridors. Dick led me up an echoing back stair to his offices on the third floor. The front room was open and spacious, with double windows looking down on the green lawn of the quad. Framed botanical specimens hung on the wall above the bookcases, along with some long wooden tubes, polished and scored with geometric shapes, small bundles of feathers tied on one end. A terrarium on the windowsill housed a spray of delicate white orchids mounted on a twisted branch. "Nice, yes? Just a front, though. Here's the real office." A door in the corner led into a much smaller crowded space. Every surface was covered with stacks of papers, a side table had piles of dried vines with paper tags and dishes of seeds. There was a single window, bookcases on two walls and the vanishing cabinet took up the third.

"Well, here it is." It was a ringer for the one which almost killed Montague. I stared at it. "Some of these long-distance ones can be tricky, but it's never given me any trouble. Do you want me to go ahead?" He was looking at me expectantly. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Well, all right," he said dubiously. He opened the door of the cabinet. There were a few lab coats hanging inside, nothing more. There was no sound after he closed the door behind himself.

He said that the connecting cabinet was in his lab, but I didn't know that. I couldn't know anything. I still had his wand in hand. That counted for something, I supposed. I Scourgified the handle that I had touched before. My hour was running out, this was my chance. I opened the cabinet door. The lab coats were gone now, as was Dick, of course. I couldn't let this chance go, it didn't matter what was on the other side. Reluctantly I closed myself into the darkness.

The door opened again into a very similar room. It was larger, and the white walls rose to a higher ceiling. The tall windows were covered with slatted blinds shutting out golden light. Other than that, the rooms

were much the same, with papers, books and specimens covering every surface and adorning the walls. There was a comfortable-looking brown sofa against the one wall which was not fronted with bookcases. The lab coats were draped across the back of it. Dick was removing a tottering pile of books from a chair and stacking them on a side table.

"Ah, good, no problem then. Well... welcome to Manaus, the armpit of the Amazon!"

I hung on to the door of the cabinet for a moment before stepping out into the room. The air was scented with... something, I couldn't place it. There were several orchids on the windowsill, perhaps that was it. Here they weren't under glass.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I said I'm fine." A fucking bastard.

"Yes, but I didn't believe you the first time." He took a seat behind his desk. I didn't answer him; what more did he want? I dug into my bag, then slid the Cyril Ramson passport across to him.

He picked it up. "Is this what I should call you?" I nodded. "It's a little disconcerting; you still look like a sixteen year-old girl."

"Not for long."

He was examining the passport. "We can take it over to the Bureau of Magic and get it stamped and get you a work permit. You do really want the job, yes?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any more papers, or is this it?" A little more digging brought out Cyril's resume, fairly out-of-date. Dick flipped over the pages.

"Well, there's a gaping hole of the last few years, but I know someone in Harbin. We can fill that in, no one ever checks with Harbin, what with the time difference, the language and all the red tape. I think they put all the reference checks in a drawer and forget about them until the ice festival bonfire. Sorry, we don't have to do all this now."

"No, I want to get it settled." The Polyjuice began to go then. I just managed to get my trousers returned to their original size before reaching a crisis.

"That's better," Dick said. "Why don't you have a seat?" There was only one cleared chair in front of the desk. "I don't suppose you're on

anti-malarials, are you?" He pushed his chair back to some cupboards under the windows. He opened one. There was a little pop and a breath of mist: a cold cupboard. He brought out a tall bottle of water.

"Having been through a few bouts of malaria myself, let me recommend that you avoid it if you can. Quinine water?" He found a glass in another cupboard and poured me some. I wasn't aware of how thirsty I was until I started to drink. I didn't even mind the medicinal taste. Dick watched the water disappear and poured me another glass.

"I'll find you some proper tablets and you can get started on the real anti-malarials, but they won't be fully effective until they've been in your system for a few days, so I'll give you a bottle of quinine tablets too. Watch the dosage on those, yes?" The second glass of water was gone. He poured another. I hadn't had anything since that cup of tea at dawn, I realized. My headache was finally easing.

"How's your Portuguese?"

"It's... not."

"I'll put you in the immersion course. The lab has a sister-school agreement with the university here. You've had Latin, right? You'll pick it up. The head of research assistants can translate for you until you get caught up."

Dick had pulled a folder of papers from one of the desk drawers and was rifling through it. "Ah!" He pulled out a few pages. "Just a standard contract for a research position..." He began to fill in some blanks on the forms.

"What exactly do you want me to do?" I had been at sea for weeks; if he had a concrete assignment for me it would be something to hang on to.

"Well, it's up to you." My stomach fell a bit at that. He looked at me when I didn't answer. "I'm forgetting you've never had a research position before. Well, I know you've had ideas over the years; you've written to me about some of them. I can pull out your letters if you want a reminder." *He saved my letters?* "I'm sure you've had ideas that you never had a chance to test or develop properly. Maybe there's a problem you want to solve, a variation or an improvement on existing formula, or something new – you get the idea. I would suggest making a list

of several possibilities. I'll review them with you and we can decide which would be most promising, and of course, feasible within the lab's budget. Then you can write up an abstract... well, maybe I'm getting ahead of myself," he said as I shakily poured another glass of water.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked. I waved my hand at my full glass. "I mean a real drink, or maybe..." he extracted a bag of greenery from another desk drawer.

"No, it just gives me a headache and I've already got one."

"You look like you could stand to relax."

"I'll have a drink." Thankfully he didn't ask me to decide; I couldn't think of a preference just then. He poured us both a glass, some sort of white rum, I thought. It was awful, but I drank it. When I sat forward to put the glass back on the desk I could already feel it hitting me. Ridiculous, it was just one glass, but of course I hadn't eaten anything since early that morning. I had some more of the water.

"All right?"

"It's awful."

"Yes, isn't it? Cheap, though. Another?" He wasn't drinking his quickly, I saw.

"I think I... I haven't eaten."

"Oh!" He jumped up from the desk chair again and began rummaging in another cupboard.

"I have – I have crackers!" He sprung up from the cupboard triumphantly, a box in his hand. He looked so absurdly pleased that I had to grit my teeth to keep from making a noise, my breath coming in short huffs.

I bent down to my bag and dug through the last of my stores. "S – uh, Cyril?" Dick asked, concerned.

"I have cheese!" I slapped the last of the wedge on the desk. Dick broke into relieved laughter.

"Perfect, perfect!" he said.

"Huh," I snorted. I had to get my breathing under control. My face kept trying to get away from me. It was all slipping out of control. I gripped the arm of the chair.

"Well," he said quietly, laughter gone now. He went back to the cup-

board more slowly and found a board and knife. He carefully cut a few slices of cheese and then looked up. I would not lose control, not now.

"You know, it's been a hell of a year. Not as bad as yours, nothing close to that."

"Yes," I managed.

"Back in November... there was a good friend of mine, John Aiken, out of the university in Sao Paulo. I've gone on several expeditions with him on the Xingu River, that was his area of expertise. Just fascinating! He'd been working there for years, and working with the government to set aside more land as part of the Xingu Reserve and to enforce protection of the existing reserve.

"There's enough corruption that there's logging and burning in areas that are already set aside, and even now there are massacres and enslavement of tribes if gold prospectors get to them first. John was always working on the government to extend and enforce the protections, but there's too much money in that land.

"He was having lunch with a friend in a café in Rio when three gunmen came in and killed them both. It was too fast for them to cast. Of course the police don't know who was behind it, and there's probably so much behind it that they'll never know. Such a waste, just a damn waste. All his work, his knowledge, his family..." He paused to get hold of himself.

"At the same time, there were such strange reports coming out of England. You weren't answering letters, I understand now that you couldn't, but no one seemed to know what was really going on. Then it all broke, the whole story came out and you were reported dead. All I could think was another damn waste, another friend killed for doing the right thing; it was too much. I didn't ever expect to hear from you, that you survived."

"Neither did I," I said with an effort.

"Please tell me, really, are you all right?"

"I'm... tired." That much was quite true. I felt at a loss. What could I tell him and what had to be secret? I didn't know any more. He knew my name, and everything that had been reported in the papers. But I couldn't just say things, could I? It couldn't be safe.

"That's a start, but I would think that exhausted is more like it."

He pushed a pile of cheese and crackers to me. It wasn't much of a meal, but I didn't care just then. I ate as he worked cutting up the rest of the cheese. "What they said in the papers, was it true?"

"Some of it. Most of it," I admitted.

"Physically, are you recovered? Do you need any help?"

"No, I really am just tired."

"Did anyone help you with your injuries, has anyone looked at them?" There it was, finally, what I had to keep secret. I felt relieved to have it settled. Aberforth helping me, that was his secret to keep, I couldn't give his identity away to others. And my students, the ones who had been my eyes, I had to keep their names safe too. Not that I thought that Dick would betray their names, I couldn't think of interest he would have in that, but it didn't matter, their names were my charge.

"No, I treated myself. I had some emergency potions and a Portkey." I was back in that familiar territory in my thoughts, picking out pieces of the truth and piecing them together to make a new truth. It wasn't perfect; I had just told him that I didn't expect to survive, but Dick didn't seem to see the contradiction. I felt myself relaxing finally.

"Do you want someone to take a look at it?"

"No, that's not necessary. I think I will have another," I said, pushing the empty glass to him. I had food and water. I could have another drink. Dick refilled the glass. I sipped it slowly this time.

"When I met with you on the Commons, you seemed... anxious to be away quickly. And your note was urgent. Do you think you're in danger?"

"I... don't know." True enough, though I was fairly sure that I was out of the skin's range now. Since that was no longer an issue, I didn't want to bring it up with Dick. He knew more than enough of my failings from the newspaper accounts. I didn't see any need to pile on more evidence of the ruin that followed me around.

"You do know that they issued you a pardon? I don't think anyone is looking to arrest you."

"I don't, I don't want to trust them." How could I explain? Even with Shacklebolt's assurance to Aberforth, he was only Interim Minister. Even if I could trust him, *possibly*, someone would succeed him. I

didn't want to be anywhere within the Ministry's reach. Never again.

"Pardon or not, I can expect many people on both sides to wish me ill. I need to keep a new identity now."

"If that's what you want. As long as you're not in any immediate danger. You just seemed..." he picked his words carefully, "...desperate. I want to make sure we take care of it, if there's a problem."

"I..." I trailed off. The alcohol or my short nights were catching up with me. I was tired of trying to think what I needed to keep back. "I haven't had to think about what I wanted, what I should do next for a very long time. And now, this freedom... it's like a hole opening in front of me. Dick, I'm drowning in it. I've always had something to work for, some purpose, and now I just have no idea. I didn't even expect to be alive. I hardly know *how* I managed to be alive, and I still feel like I don't know *why* I should be alive." I wished I could blame my outpour on the drink, but that was hardly it. It was the same edge of desperation that had led me to send the letter to Dick; it hadn't left me yet.

"Listen to me," Dick leaned in, elbows on the desk. "I don't care how, I don't care why! If you had died back there, it would have been nothing but a damn waste. You don't have to be useful to deserve to live; you could lie on a beach for the rest of your life and it would still be better than you dying back there. Maybe I didn't really know your life, but I know your *brain!* Goddamn it! I want that brain to be alive! And somehow it is. All right, if your brain wants something to do, you'll put together your ideas and we'll have a research project. But if your brain doesn't want something to do, honestly I don't care, I would give you a job spreading manure in the greenhouses. It's enough that you're alive." Did he really think that? It seemed like he was telling the truth, but for the moment I couldn't answer.

"You got yourself out of there, you healed yourself, at least part of you wants to live. Don't even think about why; you don't need it, that can come later. If that means you're just going through the motions now, fine, that's enough to get on with."

"I think I need something for my mind to do, but it all seems so empty now, I can't even think..."

"So don't think, not now, at least not tonight. You don't need to. Do you want me... to tell you what to do?" I nodded, feeling ridiculous. He tipped his chair back and looked up at the ceiling for a minute.

"First, I'll get us some real food. Tonight you'll stay here. I don't have any spare rooms made up yet, but the couch is comfortable. I've slept on it many times myself many times waiting out a long experiment. Tomorrow I'll get you some rooms, show you the lab, introduce you to the staff. We'll get your passport stamped at the Bureau and have them issue a work permit."

"Will that be a problem?"

He snorted. "Here, every problem can be fixed. Besides, they are used to me bringing in researchers at short notice. The lab and the university bring Manaus money and prestige. The local officials fall over themselves to accommodate us, for a fee. No problem.

"Then, I'll get you enrolled in the Portuguese immersion class. You'll take a few days to get oriented and put your ideas together, then we'll meet to do your contract and draft an abstract based on your ideas. Let's say one week, next Sunday. There, how's that for a start? We can adjust the times as we go, if necessary."

"Yes," I said. A whole week ahead of me, planned and accounted for. I felt like I was getting my footing back, if only a little.

"Good. I'll go and hunt down some food. No one else will come in here; I told the lab I was taking a long weekend in Arkham. They don't expect me back until after my lecture on Tuesday."

He showed me around the suite of rooms before he left. A small restroom and a sort of conference room both led off from his office. While he was gone I washed my face in the sink. It felt so good I ended up washing my whole head under the tap. I dried my hair with a spell, feeling very much refreshed.

I spent some time examining the orchids on the windowsill and their baroque petals. Through the slats in the blinds I could see I was on the ground floor of the building. Across a short lawn a wall of dark tangled vegetation rose up. In the twilight, I could see the flash of some small birds flying from tree to tree. I thought we were in Manaus, but this looked like the rainforest.

When Dick returned with two covered plates, I asked, “where are we, exactly?” He was uncovering some sort of chicken stew over rice and fried potatoes. It certainly looked more enticing than crackers and cheese.

“In Manaus, on the grounds of the Universidade Federal do Amazonas. Here, I’ll show you.” He spread out a map on the side of the desk and we poured over it as we ate. It was a very good quality map, and he could bring us very close in with a tap of his wand to show me the lab, it’s wings forming three sides of a square, with one outlying building next to the greenhouses. Pulling back, I could see we were in a rather large scrap of jungle surrounded by the city. Dick pointed out the UFAM campus at the other end of the park where I would take the language classes.

Another tap of the wand, another pull back, and I could see what Dick meant about ‘the armpit of the Amazon.’ Manaus was set on the banks of the Rio Negro just where it joined the Amazon, or Rio Solimoes, as he called it, like a massive limb. Dick pointed out the landmarks until the places all ran together in my mind.

The map pulled back again. The rivers glinted between dark trees and drifting clouds. They spread out as far as I could see like twisting snakes, like the veins on the back of a hand, like the veins of an enormous leaf. I couldn’t see the end of them. I stared into the dizzying distance.

“Enough for tonight, maybe? You look like you’re nodding.”

“That heavy food.”

“I’ll get the couch fixed up.” A simple transfiguration and the arms were laid flat. The movement was practiced; I suspected that Dick had used that spell many times. He pulled a pillow and a light blanket from a storage box beneath the couch. Dick said something about his own set of rooms elsewhere in the lab, but I could hardly pay attention. He left by way of the conference room.

I locked the door and laid an alert ward on the threshold. I stretched out on the couch. Almost immediately, I was asleep.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Chapter 14 of **THE NEW SKIN**

BY MOTTSHAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 40, No.4

BELTANE 2003

Something was at the door; there was a soft scrabbling sound at the door. I had to get up and get away, but somehow I couldn’t even move; I was frozen on the couch. Something pushed itself under the door with an effort.

It was Bella. She didn’t have a head, no eyes, no ears, no nose, no senses at all, but she was looking for me. The front of her little body skidded on the floor on the stumps of her front legs as her back legs jerkily pushed her into the room. Her tail was twitching.

I woke with a start, clutching at the wand under my pillow. There was a quiet knock at the door. “Uh, Cyril?” It was Dick’s voice.

“Yes, yes, just a moment.” I tried to shake the dream image from my mind as I pushed myself off the couch. I could see sunlight through the slats of the blinds. I went over to the door barefoot and removed the alert ward and locking spell.

“Good morning!” Dick didn’t seem put out that I had locked him out of his own office. There was a pot of coffee on the conference room table along with plates of toast and fruit. “Have some breakfast. It’s probably best if we get the passport and paperwork over with early; the heat and crowds can be a bit much if you aren’t used to them. I’ve noticed over the years that any staff visiting from England needs some time to get used to the heat.”

“Worse than Boston?”

“Oh yes. Here are your anti-malarial tablets. Take one in the morning and one in the evening every day with food. Stay indoors at dawn and dusk for the first week though while they get in your system. No need to get infected straight away.”

“Lovely.”

“Since we’ll be out in town this morning, is there anything you

need? I noticed you don't have much luggage."

"I shrank everything. I could probably use some lighter clothes if it's hotter than Boston," I admitted, "but you know I haven't changed any money."

"No problem, I'll just take it out of your salary."

"Which we haven't set yet."

"Which we haven't set yet. Yes, I admit it is a bit risky for you, you might be paying me back for years. I hope you're a hard bargainer."

I hoped he was having me on. After I ate and dressed he led me out the main entrance of the lab to an apparition point past the lab's wards, just before the wall of trees.

When we landed, I almost immediately longed to be back in the lab. The sun was overpowering. We stepped out onto a street that was crowded, noisy, and the traffic was even worse than Boston, though I would have thought that was not physically possible. Also there was a smell. I couldn't place it, but I knew I didn't like it.

The smell, thankfully, was localized, and we soon left it behind when we turned a corner. The heat and traffic were everywhere. I had my fill of it a good ten minutes before we reached our destination; a shabby concrete high-rise that seemed to be of 1960's vintage. I sighed with relief in the dimness of the lobby.

"Not far, really," Dick encouraged me. I glared at him; it had been quite far enough. A dingy steel door past the elevators led through to the magical lifts.

On the fourth floor we went through a bland waiting room with the distinct air of Ministry officialdom that always made me uncomfortable. Dick seemed comfortable enough, going straight up to the woman on the reception desk and speaking in Portuguese. She was all smiles and nods and directed us down a rose-colored hallway to a private office. Dick knocked and entered. An older man with a grey walrus moustache sat presiding over ranks of file cabinets. He bounced up eagerly to shake Dick's hand, then mine as well, saying something I didn't understand.

Dick was already unfolding papers for him; my resume and the application we had begun last night. "Your passport, Cyril?" Both of them

were looking at me expectantly. I hurriedly brought it out. Dick pushed everything across to the man, along with a thick sealed envelope.

Well, the wheels were greased now, apparently, we only had to sit back and watch them turn. Turn they did, the man humming happily and occasionally throwing an offhand remark to Dick while he stamped large seals on some papers and filled out others.

Really, it was a bit like visiting the Ministry with Lucius. With a poorly-dressed Lucius, I amended. And of course, Lucius would be treated very differently at the Ministry now. The thought of Lucius without any of the influence he had so prized and cultivated was somehow even more disturbing than the thought of him poorly dressed. There was nothing I could do, not now.

The man behind the desk was pushing papers back at me now, my stamped passport, a larger pinkish card in a paper folder and several other official documents. He popped up again from behind the desk and shook my hand.

"Welcome to Manaus," he said through a heavy accent, "jewel of the Amazonas!" Well, it certainly made a better official slogan than *Armpit of the Amazon*, so I didn't correct him. He shook Dick's hand as well as they exchanged some rapid Portuguese, then we were out the door and making our way back down to the lobby.

"May I see your work permit?" Dick asked. "It's the pink one... yes." He turned it over and handed it back to me with satisfaction. "He said he would extend it. He's already stamped it for six and twelve months, so you won't have to come back in for a year. Excellent."

"How much was that?"

Dick laughed. "Don't ask or I'll have it come out of your salary." I didn't ask.

We stopped off at a clothing store where I acquired some light cotton trousers and shirts before apparating back to campus. This time we landed near the muggle side of campus. When we stepped from under cover of the apparition point, I saw that we were among scattered buildings connected by open-air covered walkways.

There was a little more paperwork here as Dick got me enrolled in the Portuguese immersion class, four hours per day, every morn-

ing for eight weeks. I had already missed the first week of class. Wonderful, I used to have nightmares like that, of walking into a class where everyone was speaking a different language and I couldn't understand a word.

Finally, he took me back to the lab on a winding path through the jungle park that surrounded the university. I was glad of the walk; the morning had been a bit overwhelming. It was ridiculous; all I had to do was follow Dick around. I should be able to handle that; I should be able to handle any situation I landed in. I needed to stay calm and remember that I was in control.

"I think I've got your room sorted out," Dick was saying. "Our head of the magical creatures division is on extended leave, so his rooms are vacant, and they're already furnished as well. They're in the lab extension building, so they'll be very convenient. Once you get settled you can decide if you want to stay there. You could always get yourself an apartment in the city if you like." I didn't think I wanted that, if this morning's traffic and noise were the general rule.

"Extended leave?" How long would I be able to keep the rooms?

"Professor Wormburg left on an expedition up the Rio Negro in '97. Looking for *Anguista pinnatus*, the feathered serpent of the Amazon. There'd been a few sightings in the Mato Grosso area. It was only going to be a year-long expedition, but we haven't had any reports from them since they entered the Mato Grosso. Probably found a lost city or something. There was an explorer with him, a Mr. Flanders, looking for the 'lost valley of the crystal skull,' or some such nonsense. I expect we'll see them in four or five years. If they're still alive. Ah! Look, here's an orthoptera!" he said, dragging me over to examine a brightly-colored grasshopper.

After a few other natural distractions we arrived back at the lab. Dick took me around the side to the extension building. The door opened on a sort of lounge room, two walls of which were composed of windows, all wide open. Up some stair to the first floor and halfway down the corridor was Professor Wormburg's and now my flat. The air was close and stale, no doubt because it had been closed up for a year, but otherwise it was acceptable.

It consisted of three rooms; a large living area combined with a small kitchen and dining area, a bedroom and a full bath. Dick stayed in the living room peering at the bookcases as I put my bag and new clothes in the bedroom, whose walls were adorned with crocodile-tooth necklaces and the jawbones of some enormous fish.

I could hear Dick's "ah ha!" drift in from the other room as I opened the windows to air out. Dick had pulled out a few books and set them on the table.

"Professor Wormburg took the immersion course as well, I knew he would still have the texts. Here you are." There were two beginning Portuguese language books and a Portuguese/English dictionary. I felt a little better about the class then. I could begin reading the texts immediately so I wouldn't walk into the class completely blind. As I flipped through a few pages, Dick was opening the kitchen cupboards.

"There's a little coffee and tea and some canned goods, but you'll need to get yourself some supplies."

"There's tea?" I cut in. I could use a cup after that morning. I found the kettle and started heating some water. Dick was inspecting the cold cupboard.

"Oh dear. No don't look, you don't want to know." He cast evanesco, followed by some cleaning spells. I opened the kitchen windows as the smell drifted out.

"Here, I'll leave you some money so you can restock. Now, not a word, I'll –"

"Take it out of my salary, yes." I finished.

"Yes," he said happily. "Now drink up so I can give you a tour of the lab."

We headed back downstairs, but before we reached the exit, Dick pulled up short. The lounge was occupied now; a young man with curly brown hair and a scruffy unshaven look was sitting on one of the sofas reading a book.

"Ah, Ben! Good; let me introduce you." He stood up as Dick went on, "this is Benjamin Grossman, he's the head of the research assistants. You'll be working pretty closely with him. Ben, this is

Dr. Ramson. I've been asking him for years to hold the potions research position here, and I finally got him to accept this weekend. He'll be starting next week."

"Oh, hey, nice to meet you!" He stuck out his hand.

"Mr. Grossman," I said, giving it a quick shake.

"Oh, just Ben or Benji, whichever." Didn't he care what people called him? I certainly wasn't going to call him Benji, like a dog.

"I go by Dr. Ramson." Best to get our positions established from the start.

"Ben, would you like to come along? I'm giving Dr. Ramson a tour of the labs."

"Sure, sure," he said, quickly regaining his enthusiasm after the damper I put on him. Rather like an over-eager dog, I thought. Perhaps Benji suited him after all.

Dick led us around to the main entrance and showed me the code to enter the lab's wards. At a small room just off the entrance hall, Dick called out something in Portuguese. A moment later, a dark-skinned young woman appeared around the doorjamb. "Dr. Ramson, this is Valeria, our receptionist and office staff, she keeps this place running."

"Oh, English!" She was bubbling with excitement, "more English; I can practice." She shook my hand thoroughly. "You speak English to me, no Portuguese, yes?"

"Very well," I said, as if it were a concession. A strange ringing came from the other room. A muggle phone? Valeria clapped her hands once and rushed back in the office to answer it.

"Valeria is in charge of the phones and computer system," Dick said. "It's much more efficient... well, all you need to remember is not to cast in her office or disturb the salt wards on the threshold."

Dick led us further into the lab, pointing out a storeroom, then the lounge which took up the right front corner of the building.

"No phones or electronics where you worked last?" Grossman asked. A simple shake of the head wasn't enough for him; he had to keep nosing in. "Where was that?"

"Harbin."

"Harbin? That must have been fascinating! Do you speak Chinese?"

"Not a word. Interpreters."

"Still! I've heard they have a very large lab. This'll be a come-down. Why did you leave?" Oh god, he did go on.

"Administrative overhaul. Happens like clockwork every five years, apparently," I improvised, but that was enough; I didn't want to say more. A change of topic was in order. He seemed like the sort to enjoy talking about himself. "Where did you study?"

"UC Berkeley, for undergrad, then I came out to Misk U. Go Pods!" he said with mock enthusiasm, making a strange hand gesture. Was that supposed to be an octopus? Was I supposed to know what that meant or was he insane? He noticed my look.

"Uh, well, old Misk's all right. Good faculty, great library... but Arkham's got to be the whitest place I've ever been. I mean, I'm just a Jew with a tan and I stood out. It not like I had any problem with the staff or other students, but Arkham was starting to get to me. Some parts of town you can just tell that everyone is watching you if you have a little color. So when Dick suggested I come down here and work while I finished my research, I jumped at it."

We had passed Dick's office where I had spent the night before and Dick pulled up and was knocking at another door. "While Professor Wormburg is on leave, we have a visiting professor filling in as head of magical creatures." An extremely tall black man with a youthful face opened the door.

"Hmm?"

Dick spoke to him in Portuguese; I could only catch my name. He turned to me; "this is Professor Henrique da Silva, on loan to us from Interzone University. He specializes in invertebrates."

We shook hands. "Good day," he said in heavily accented English, peering at me from behind thick lenses. I could see in the office behind him a multitude of terrariums. A typewriter stood on his desk; at least, I thought it was a typewriter until it folded its shiny carapace over its keys and scuttled on many legs over to the other side of the desk. Hagrid would have loved it. He said something which Dick translated: "he sees you admiring his *Martinelli burroughensis*. He will be happy to show you his charges, but the

terrariums must never be disturbed.”

“Perhaps later...” He must have understood the English well enough, since he gave a little bow and turned to go back in his office, revealing several enormous dinner-plate-sized moths riding on his shirt and nibbling on the cloth.

We passed three rooms in the magical creature division, birdsong and deep thrumming buzzes drifting from behind the doors, before we reached the alchemy lab which took up the end of the wing.

Dick held open the doors. The lab was full of the kind of ridiculous clutter infests all alchemical labs.* I tended to the view that it reflected the sort of clutter that infests the typical alchemist’s brain.

“Now let me introduce you to Dr. Zosimos, if we can find him,” Dick said. We edged past a large steel contraption that gave a clanking shudder every few seconds and into the main part of the lab.

“Oh Myron, have you got a moment?” Dick called. A short, slightly hunched man looked up from where he was perched on a stool by a lab table. Two female research assistants were engrossed in something on the tabletop, making adjustments to a metal ring. The man jumped down from the stool energetically and came over to us, running his hand through a wild shock of graying hair. “Ah, Myron, this is Dr. Cyril Ramson, he is filling the potions position.”

“Of course, of course. Dr. Myron Zosimos, alchemist of the first order,” he said in a rather nasal voice. *Of the first order...* dear lord, they were always more certifiable the higher they got in the orders; he was probably completely round the bend.

“Hmm, a pleasure,” I said vaguely. It wasn’t much of a pleasure, but he could take it however he wished.

“So glad, such a long time since we’ve had a potions master here,” he said with a slightly forced smile. We dropped hands quickly. Dick was leaning over the metal contraption on the table.

“What have you got here, Myron?”

*While the historical definition of alchemy includes several different fields, it is here defined as the transmutation of elements and the production of magical objects (such as the philosopher’s stone, or the mirror of erised, for example). This stands in contrast to potions, which is the production of magical substances to be ingested and have an effect on the body. The two fields are traditional rivals.

“Oh, just a little device... Henrique asked me to make him a stasis trap. For his insects you know, so he can capture them without damage.” That *could* be quite a useful invention, actually. I wandered over to the table as well.

The two research assistants, Beatriz Vilas Boas and Frieda Borges, Dick informed me, were still adjusting the ring. The taller girl, Beatriz, an ethereal blonde, was giggling nastily. Frieda, who had her black hair tightly braided into two plaits, had a somewhat predatory look. They had, strangely, a stopwatch and a bag of limes next to them. A cage of mice was at the end of the table.

“Well, the trap itself and the motion-activated trigger, they all work beautifully. The stasis is a bit off, though.”

Frieda rolled a lime into the ring as Beatriz started the stopwatch. The lime shuddered to a stop inside the ring, grew a fuzzy white mold, sank in on itself and liquefied in a few seconds.

“More of an accelerated aging process rather than a pure stasis. Needs some tweaking.” As I thought, he was dangerous and certifiable, a typical alchemist. It looked like his assistants were well on their way too. Beatriz cleaned up the mess and they eagerly started in on another lime. I wouldn’t want to be a mouse when they ran out of fruit.

“Is your other assistant around? I’d like to introduce everyone while we’re here,” said Dick.

“Treehorn? Oh, he’s around.” Dr. Zosimos looked around like the rest of us. No Treehorn, whatever that might be. “He’s probably in back. I’ll go with you; there’re a few experiments running right now...”

He began to lead us between tables covered with bubbling retorts and klein bottles and other things I couldn’t begin to guess. Somehow I managed to be right behind him, probably not the safest position.

“Mind your step!” he called back as we passed a perfectly circular hole in the ground, about the diameter of a coffee cup. It went down into unfathomable blackness. Part of me didn’t care to know the details, but the larger part reminded me that it is always best to know as much as possible about one’s enemies.

“What caused that?” I asked.

“Oh, just my whack at creating a universal solvent. Ate through

the beaker of course, then the floor. Not a success, unfortunately." Unfortunately? *Dangerous fool.*

"And just how can you tell it wasn't a success?" I asked dryly.

"No magma." Oh, for god's sake.

"Perhaps it emptied out the earth's core," I said through my teeth. I admit I was getting a bit shirty, but he was very provoking. I heard Grossman snort behind me, then try to turn it into a cough.

"Well, then there would have been a steep drop-off in volcanic activity around the globe, but there's been no appreciable change." God, he sounded perfectly serious. I didn't trust myself to answer just then.

We found Treehorn around several corners, ensconced in a comfortable chair and deeply engrossed in a towering pile of comic books. He looked up at us blankly as Dick introduced me, a pale moon-face beneath perfectly neat slicked-down blond hair. Treehorn nodded at me mutely and turned back to his book.

"That's my idea man," said Zosimos, patting the young man on the shoulder.

Happily, Dick made our excuses and then we were finally out of that death-trap of a lab. I was probably glaring a bit as we headed back up the corridor towards the other wing of the lab. "Now, Cyril," Dick began in a conciliatory tone.

"Dick, I want you to *assure* me that that charlatan is no longer working on a universal solvent."

"Dr. Zosimos might seem a bit alarming, but he's quite harmless. He is brilliant... in his own way."

"Brilliant? Dick, I'm fully convinced that the world will finally end, not because of some – " I just caught myself before I said *Dark Lord*, " – war, or natural disaster, but because some idiot alchemist finally stumbles upon the universal solvent. You think that's funny?" I turned on Grossman, who was snorting again.

"Only the thought of our Dr. Zosimos actually making a universal solvent. He never ends up with what he tries to make."

"He made a hole in the ground."

"Yes, but at his next attempt he made a very powerful glue," said Grossman.

"He's quite proud of that patent, and rightly so. It would have made him a nice profit," said Dick.

"Would have?" I asked. Grossman was snickering again.

"Well, no one can get the lid off to use it," he said.

"Oh for fuck's sake, he's a useless quack!" Grossman was half-doubled over laughing now. At least someone was getting some enjoyment out of the situation.

"Now Cyril, try to keep an open mind. He has managed to strike on some very useful inventions over the years."

"By intent or by mistake?"

"Does the process matter? I won't ask you to like him or to work with him, but try to keep the atmosphere civil."

The best way to keep a civil atmosphere, I determined, would be to not share any atmosphere at all. I would not set foot in the alchemy lab again.

Dick led us to the other wing of the lab, then pulled up and opened a door off the side of the corridor. "Here we are, the Potions lab." It wasn't particularly large, about twice the size of my old classroom at Hogwarts. The real improvement was in the equipment. Actual *professional* equipment. There were eight brewing stations down the middle of the room and five along the wall fitted with fume hoods. There was a distiller, a pulverizer, a dryer, a centrifuge and an aerator, an actual aerator. How many years had I done everything by hand? Dick was opening a couple of side doors that apparently led to the storerooms, the outer one with a second door leading back out to the hall, the inner one containing the cold and freeze cupboards and a stasis chamber.

"We're probably due for another inventory; it looks like we're low on stock," he said. He was right; there were gaps on the shelves. "Ben's in charge of ordering for the lab. Once you get your abstract worked out I'll go over the ingredient list with you and Ben will order what you need."

"What?" Grossman called from the next room. He stuck his head around the door.

"I was just saying you'll help Dr. Ramson with ordering stock."

"Oh yeah, of course."

Dick took me through to the other end of the lab, where there was a small adjoining room with a desk, chairs, and walls covered with ingredient charts. Unlike the lab itself, this room had tall windows. "Your office, if you like."

An office with windows, that was a first. I wondered if the view would distract me.

"Yes," I said. Windows, I decided, I did like. It never hurt to have a second exit.

"Good. You can settle in later. Let's keep going; I'll show you around the rest of the lab." Back out in the corridor we headed for the far end off the wing.

"There are a few more offices this way, and half of the herbology division. You could have an office directly off the corridor like these, you know."

"No, the other room will suit me."

"I thought so." Had he thought about the extra barrier of the lab between my door and visitors? Well, I thought about it. That was much better than being straight off the corridor. It was also one extra barrier between myself and the alchemy lab.

Dick was knocking at a door labeled PF. BRUNA ARUEGO. It was covered with clipped cartoons, mostly of people with large carnivorous plants. The captions were in Portuguese, so I didn't quite get the jokes.

"I think she was going to be out on the test plots with the RAs this afternoon," said Grossman.

"Ah, well, you'll have to be introduced later then. Professor Aruego is the head of the herbology division," said Dick. Grossman had eagerly bounded down the corridor and was already tapping on the doorjamb of an open office two doors along. A woman's voice answered from within.

"Hello, Benji? Can I help?"

He leaned his top half into her office. "Dick's bringing around the new potions researcher, if you'd like to meet him."

"Oh, we have one of those? That's very short notice." She had some sort of accent that didn't sound like the other Brazilians. We arrived at her door just as she came out.

"Cyril, this is Professor Ulrike Funke. She's visiting this year from Heidelberg." She was fairly short, just a bit over five feet, with brown hair pulled simply back. She was beginning to get a bit of grey, though by her face she was only in her thirties. "This is Dr. Cyril Ramson, he's taking the potions position."

The herbologist stuck out her hand. "Dr. Ramson. Welcome to the lab." "Professor Funke." We shook. She turned to Dick.

"But isn't this very unusual, to add staff at this time of the year?"

Dick opened his mouth, but I decided I would have to start answering for myself. I was the better liar, in any case. "We had discussed the possibility of my taking the position before, but I was under contract. When my term came up, Dick invited me to start immediately."

"Ah, so it's that way. Well, when one is in a new lab, one doesn't know how things are done." I wasn't sure if she meant me or herself.

"We're just showing Dr. Ramson around the lab. Would you mind if we take a look at the test rooms?"

"Please, I'll come and open it for you." She left her office open behind us and went efficiently down the corridor. "You have seen the whole lab but this?"

"We just came from the potions and alchemy labs," said Grossman.

"Hmm, Dr. Zosimos," she said disapprovingly.

"Dangerous charlatan," I muttered. She turned and looked at me.

"*This* is a very good word. *Charlatan*." She opened the test room door. "I thought the English never say what they think. Well, well, well."

The test room was full of racks of seedlings under different levels of light, seed sorting tables, one wall covered in crawling vines, and another screened-off corner was awash in drifting mist. Professor Funke headed straight for the vines and began checking them over.

"Hmm, these are a little depressed, I think," she said. *Depressed?*

"There's another test room on the other side of the hall for the arids, but the layout is the same, no need to go in," Dick was saying. "The bulk of the herbology division is really in the greenhouses and test plots outside."

"Professor Aruego has the RAs working in the temperate house today. I will take you out to them," said Professor Funke. We were accumulating quite the entourage. I wouldn't mind losing Gross-

man somewhere, but he kept dogging our steps.

We left by a door on the end of the wing and walked down a dirt path between sunny plots, skirted a fenced-off pool with several large warning signs in Portuguese, and came up to the greenhouses.

"This first is hot arid, then we have cold arid," said Professor Funke, pointing out the houses, "and now temperate and last cold temperate. It is very nice, this last one. Every time I am outside here, I sweat so!" *How interesting.* "We don't need a house for the tropics, as we have all this chungle." She waved her hand at the surrounding trees.

We entered the temperate house, which was quite extensive. Narrow winding cinderblock paths led deep into the vegetation. Only the sight of the metal struts and glass roof far overhead reminded me that I was indoors. "Now let's see if we can hunt them down," she said. After about ten minutes on the trail, Dick at my elbow pointing out various prized specimens, Professor Funke stopped, holding up her hand. A warbling note drifted to us from somewhere to our left. "Ah! That is them. Mr. Carraldo likes to sing for the plants. Now we need only to follow the notes."

It was easier said than done; Carraldo's voice echoed misleadingly from the glass walls and ceiling. After a quarter-hour of wandering down several tracks, Grossman spotted a fresh muddy footprint and plunged down a side path like a dog on the scent. We wound down a short spiral stair to a sunken area of the garden. The musical Mr. Carraldo was trimming a *Codicario ambulationis* as he sang something operatic. A small wiry woman with skin like dark crumpled leather and grey hair pulled back into a bun barked an occasional order at him and pointed out which branches to cut with a walking stick. A young woman was sitting a little apart from them on a rock, short hair swinging in front of her face as she shelled seed pods over a bucket.

"Ola, Professora Aruego!" Dick called out as we descended. The older woman peered up at us, gave a curt nod, and returned to directing the pruning. A much younger black woman emerged from the vegetation and dumped an armload of seed pods at the other woman's feet.

Dick led us over to the older woman and spoke to her in Portu-

guese then introduced us. She didn't extend a hand, but looked me over with a critical eye as if I might be due for a bit of pruning as well. Well, many had tried. Lucius' etiquette lessons came floating back. If a hand is not offered, a bow may be substituted. I gave her only a slight dip; no need to cede ground at this stage.

"Potions. When you want some plant of mine you will come to me and ask. You will not trample in and break branches like a troll, do you understand?"

"Quite." There was no need to argue the point, especially as it would save me the work of harvesting to leave it all up to her. As long as she didn't try to delay or give me substandard ingredients there should be no problem.

Dick introduced the RAs one by one: Felipe Carraldo, Gabriella Hoffman and Inez dos Santos. They shook hands after stripping off their work gloves. As we wound our way back to the greenhouse entrance, Dick asked Grossman: "can you drum up a few likely applicants to be potions RAs? To start in two weeks, let's say. I know we usually have more time."

"Sure, there's bound to be interest, as we haven't had a potions program since Carvalho left. Do you have some applications forms I can use?" Dick nodded.

We left the building. It was late afternoon now and strange birdcalls rang out in the trees "Oh, I must go back to work," said Professor Funke, "there's still so much to do to have the seeds ready for Svalbard." She shook my hand abruptly and disappeared down the plots of saplings. Dick took me back to the staff housing, Grossman finally leaving us at the common room. Dick dropped me off at my room.

"Well, there you are. I'll be back in Arkham for the next few days to cover my lectures and office hours. Is there anything you might need?"

"Just... someplace to buy food."

"Of course! There is a cafeteria at the UFAM campus and off campus there are several markets nearby. Would you like to go now?"

"Actually, not now." I couldn't quite face the idea of going back into the crowds of the city again, especially as I hadn't unpacked yet, nor did I have any idea what I was facing in the language class tomorrow.

"Why don't I bring by some dinner from the cafeteria again? Then you can have a chance to settle in."

"Take it out of my salary."

"Of course."

And then I was alone. It was a relief to simply organize my belongings and think of nothing at all. I could even forget for a moment that the room was only borrowed, that is until I found the pile of animal traps in the closet.

By the time Dick returned with food I was settled at the kitchen table reading the first chapter of the Portuguese text. He set out the food, but my eye was drawn to the ominous folder of papers tucked under his arm.

While we ate he spread out another map of the campus and city, marking the location of the Portuguese classroom, cafeteria and bookstore as well some nearby groceries and markets.

"I'll be back on Friday afternoon, after my office hours. If you need anything, just ask Grossman or the rest of the staff, or use that protean note that I contacted you with. All right?" I nodded.

"Now, you don't have to use them, of course, but I brought along your old letters. They just might give you some ideas of what you'd like to work on." So it was true: he really had saved my letters. I found it a bit hard to imagine. I had saved many of his, certainly, up until I had to return to the fold and I burned them all, but that was different. He had been my one... 'outside' friend, and one of my few bits of proof that someone would willingly seek me out beyond what use I could be to them. He didn't need my letters in that way, surely?

"All right, Cyril?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"I'm... a bit tired."

"Well of course. You'll have plenty to keep you busy in the next few days. Now really, is there anything you think you might need before I go?"

"No." At this point, I simply wanted to be alone.

"All right, settle in and I'll see you this weekend. Boa noite."

I didn't touch the letters that night. I set wards on the flat, then drew a bath and soaked while I poured over the Portuguese text.

Dick was right, I could often guess the meanings of the words from their Latin roots. I got through the first three chapters before I found my head nodding and the book dipping into the bathwater. I quickly cast Tergeo on it before the pages were ruined, then finally dragged myself out of the bath and into bed.

ADRIFT

I was in the alchemy lab. The others had all gone on ahead, looking for Treehorn, and now I was wandering in the aisles of equipment and glassware, hopelessly lost. There, finally, was something I recognized: the hole in the floor

from Zosimos' universal solvent. I walked up to it. I was seized by an irresistible desire to look down. I did, down and down and down, my gaze was drawn deep into the depths. There was something down there, impossibly distant, but it was getting closer. It was crawling up like a mole coming up from its hole; a white face was pushing up through the floor.

I woke with a gasp. I was freezing cold. A tall thin gray shape loomed over the side of the bed. "I know..."

A whimpering cry forced itself out of my throat and I clutched at the side of the bed. But why? The room was empty; I was alone. I was also unfortunately awake. Truly awake this time, and the way my heart was pounding, I didn't expect I would fall asleep again.

I dragged myself into the kitchen. It was a little past three in the morning, but it wasn't silent. I could hear buzzing, humming calls through the kitchen window. The jungle didn't sleep, I supposed. Well, neither did I. I made a large pot of tea and sat at the kitchen table with the Portuguese text. I started looking over what I had read before bed, but my mind kept drifting over to the folder of

Chapter 15 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSHAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 40, No.5

LITHA 2003

letters that Dick had left for me. Finally I surrendered, threw down the book and picked up the folder.

He had really saved them all; it was a thick stack, the topmost ones discolored with age. I picked up the first.

22 February, 1977

Dr. Richard Stoltz

c/o Miskatonic University Press,

1242 Lich Street,

Arkham, MA 01914

USA

Dear Sir,

I read your work "Vines of the Soul" with great interest, particularly your descriptions of the use of Psychotria cipo. I was struck by your choice of words that the Arumbayas use it to 'bring good fortune,' unlike the other tribes who use it only to communicate and see visions. Since you neglected to give a detailed description of this use of Psychotria cipo, could you elaborate on exactly how it is used to bring good fortune, including the preparation on method of ingestion and so on, and what effect this has on the subject?

I am attaining my potions mastery and I am studying the component parts of the Felix Felicis potion, which you may be familiar with. Since your book is limited in scope to the practices of the Americas, I don't know if you have any knowledge of the European tradition and study of potion-making.

Nevertheless, I'm sure you can understand that if I find similar ingredients with the same effect, I can better understand the role of each component part in that potion.

I depend upon your prompt reply, as I have been unable to find any samples of the vine for direct testing.

Yours sincerely,

Severus Snape

Oh god, what a pompous seventeen year-old arse I was. 'I'm sure you can understand...' Of course he could understand, you little idiot, he wrote the bloody book!

The whole thing was oozing with defiant desperate pride. Why

on earth Dick hadn't simply thrown the letter into the nearest open flame was beyond me. Not only had he not destroyed the letter, he had answered it, and very promptly. I was damn lucky that he was more tolerant of seventeen year-old idiocy than I was.

Reluctantly, I picked up the next letter.

14 March, 1977

Dear Sir,

I must thank you for your quick response and the samples of Psychotria cipo which you included, as they were very helpful. However, I did not mean my previous letter to imply that I am in any need of hand-outs of any sort, so I must insist that you tell me the cost of the materials you sent. I insist on this very strongly.

From what you write about its use as a bringer of good fortune, it seems that the Psyc. C. does not alter any external events around the subject, but simply changes his perception to view outside events as fortunate, or to accept misfortunate events and see a good side to them. This does seem to have a slight relationship with the mood-enhancing and calming elements of Felix Felicis that allow the subject to take advantage of the unfolding events around him. However, I believe the relationship ends there.

Dick must have asked further into my research with Felix, because the next letter picked up almost exactly where the previous left off.

Dear Sir,

Though I thank you again for the samples you sent, I still ask that you give me a figure for your fair compensation. Even if, as you say, you have grown the vine yourself, surely there are some material and shipping costs involved. I am not in the habit of accepting charitable handouts.

As to your question, I have deconstructed and catalogued the elements of Felix Felicis. The elements fall into four categories: Physical processes: heating, stirring, etc. Catalyst elements, which only serve to promote reactions between the active elements. Mood enhancers; simply put, the same ingredients which can be found in any cheering or calming draught. Finally, three ingredients which I have identified as timing elements. Since these are the only active components of Felix, this leads me to the hypothesis that the potion acts not by creating external events that are

favorable to the subject, but by enhancing the subject's good timing and by putting him in a mood where he is most able to take advantage of that. These unique timing elements make Felix a rich source of study.

Strangely, the inventor of Felix Felicis, Petrus Auster, was fully convinced that the potion actually created good luck for the subject. I suspect that this optimistic view may have been a symptom of the mood-enhancers in his own invention.

I have begun making test variants of Felix Felicis, with unfortunately very mixed results. However, if my hypothesis is correct, the timing elements could be isolated and utilized for a great many purposes.

I remembered that I had been frustrated for some time in my efforts to test variants of Felix. I didn't want to slip them to my enemies; good luck for them would invariably mean bad luck for myself. My friends had long since stopped allowing me to test variants on them, ever since the incident with Mulciber and my version of an up-all-night potion. Never mind that it had only lasted three days and the hallucinations didn't sound altogether unpleasant, word had spread through the whole House and everyone steadfastly refused to accept any food or beverage that I had touched. I couldn't even pass the pumpkin juice in the Great Hall. As if I would try to dose them during dinner with everyone watching. *Ridiculous.* I wouldn't have been able to properly time or record the effects.

So it happened that I tested the variants on myself. I did have some exceptionally good days as a result; my memory of that dark-haired Ravenclaw still made me smile, but one of my attempts to lengthen the timing had the unfortunate permanent result that my own timing was always a bit off. It was just enough to line me up for a hundred unfortunate coincidences, to see my goals evaporate in front of me, to fall just a little bit short of saving others or myself. I would never test anything on myself ever again.

The next letter had several variant formulas that I had tried, along with an absurd warning to Dick: *I have a record of all the following formulas on a dated authenticating parchment, so it would not profit you to attempt to publish them.* I winced. God, I may have only been a junior fucking bastard then, but I was well on my way. How could

Dick have not taken offense at that? If I was so suspicious of him, why bother giving him the formulas at all? But then I had added a postscript after the formulas: *I haven't been able to test all of them, but I think that at least one will have possibilities. I think that number three has the greatest potential. What do you think? Please reply.* I had been hungry for any response, any acknowledgment of my ideas.

And he had responded, I had a pile of letters to prove it. I reviewed my variant formulas. Looking at them from twenty-years' experience I could see all the glaring faults in them, and they were all in the timing elements. I could even see it staring up at me, the flaw in the third variant that caused the permanent effect on me. It had always been in the timing elements, really. I actually removed the mood-enhancing elements from several of the formulas I had tried on myself, to better observe and record the results.

I flipped several letters forward. There were a few more formulas over the year. I realized I could read the pattern of my life through the dates. The letters fell off during exams, and of course I couldn't write at all during the summer. Then there was that terrible autumn of my seventh year and the four-month gap after I learned of the death of my mother. My next letter was a long catalogue of formulas with hardly a word of greeting. I had been throwing myself into my work then. There were swathes of that year that I could hardly remember, now.

It was the year that I felt closest to my House. For all of our infighting and individual ambitions, there was an unspoken agreement that we could not let any one of us truly fall. It might have been simply to prevent one of us from becoming an easy target for outsiders and lessen the standing of the House, of course. In any case, they pulled together round me, especially Rosier. I suspected that Ames, one of the prefects that year, had assigned him to keep an eye on me. It might have been just another House project, except that he kept checking in on me over the summer.

There was no bar to me writing over that summer. There was no bar to me doing anything really. I had complete freedom. The house was empty now, and it was mine. As a child, I had so wished for a quiet house and the freedom to do what I wished, only to find

it was a terrible curse. I was adrift.

I wrote to Dick every week to fill the emptiness, and then there were the visits from Rosier and the others. Just checking on me, of course, but looking back at it now I couldn't avoid seeing how useful my house must have been to them as well. I had no family to see who came and went, there were no other wizards in my neighborhood, and no one would expect my house to be watched by the Ministry. A perfect place for someone, perhaps newly marked, to meet with others in the same condition.

I might have known, on some level. I knew that some members of the House had been invited and had taken the Mark. I also knew enough that I should not know about it. So, if two of my guests felt the need to have a private conversation in the sitting room. I took care to be in the kitchen where I couldn't hear it.

Then I came on the long gap, no letters at all beginning in September and stretching into the next spring. My arrest and its aftermath. I should have expected it, but I was too wrapped up in my experiments, in applying for an apprenticeship, on finishing the awful paperwork for my mother's estate. I should have been cautious, but I wasn't even aware of what a weak link I was. An associate of suspected Death Eaters, but without the protection of that organization, no money, no influence, no family to speak for my release. I was never charged or processed.

When they had strapped me into that chair and asked me questions I knew I couldn't answer, when Longbottom said they could simply lock the door, walk out and forget me if I didn't talk and make myself useful, I truly believed him. There were always stories in the House of such things happening. It was what we all suspected when Regulus disappeared.

Lucius got me out. I wasn't sure if I really owed him my life, but I certainly owed him something close to it. I had no doubts then. I knew they were right, that the Ministry had to be destroyed. I had to ally myself with the only one who could do it.

The humming, pinging, buzzing calls of the night animals were giving way now to a raucous morning chorus of bird calls. It was dawn.



Art by Mottsnave

A GOOD CAUSE

The next few days were a blur of Portuguese, heat and letters. It had been so long since I was on the other side of a teacher's desk that it came as a bit of a shock to be a student again. That, plus stepping into class a week late, where no English at all was allowed, left me at sea for the first two days. By the third, my ear was finally becoming accustomed to the words and I began to recognize some of the teacher's phrases. After a long four hours of class with only a short coffee break in the middle, I would have a quick lunch at the UFAM cafeteria, then go straight back to

Chapter 16 of **THE NEW SKIN**
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Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 40, No.6
LUGHNASADH 2003

my flat to work on the Portuguese textbook. When my brain could take no more, I would try to get through a few more of the letters.

It was difficult; I had reached the worst time, a two and a half year period broken by terse missives outlining aborted experiments. I could see the mark of my growing desperation in the letters. My experiments still mostly revolved around the timing elements and their possible applications.

I utilized some elements to revise the historically flawed *Laiarum Unguenta*, or flying ointment. Many pointioners had published variants over the years, but they always had the sometimes literally fatal flaw of running out abruptly. With timing elements added, I could control descent to a gradual loss of power. I had dreamed of the success it would bring me, but the idiots at the Ministry banned all flying ointments when the cheap knockoffs of others proved dangerous. I also suspected that the powerful broom lobby had a hand in it.

With that dream quashed, I turned to other experiments. Part of me must have already been looking for a way out. I began a series of variations on Polyjuice, trying to extend the effects. It worked, in a way, but there were permanent and painful physical side effects. It was more of a weapon than a possible escape. No one would willingly take it. I had occasion to use it just once, trading one life for another. I hoped that I would never have to use it again. Finally, there were my useless attempts at a bond-breaker. I looked at the letters in disgust.

My misgivings had begun slowly at first. After I was released from my incarceration, I was eager to destroy the Ministry. Evan Rosier's speeches about the Ministry's corruption, nepotism, greed, arbitrary restrictions on Dark magic, and deeply flawed justice system, had never stirred me to passion like some other members of the House, but now it was all too personal. All the other talk, of purity, protection of the blood, a strong hand to rule, the secret of eternal life, glanced off me, making scarcely any impression. And so, I joined. Rosier was quite happy to bring in a new recruit. I was a model Death Eater, after all.

Soon after I joined, the Dark Lord pulled me aside once for a private talk. It was the first time he had spoken to me alone, and it

was exhilarating, a great honor.

"It would be a mistake to think," he told me quietly, "that I do not observe each one of my followers carefully. I have a great interest in developing each one of your strengths and eliminating every weakness. It is the only way we can rise together." I nodded, with some trepidation. I had a feeling that it was a weakness of mine rather than a strength that he wanted to discuss.

"I have seen your fire, your eagerness to destroy the Ministry. Only natural when what is simply an abstraction for the others is concrete for yourself. However, I have noticed the opposite reaction when talk comes to the other pillar of our cause, the protection of our blood."

"I just don't... see the point of it." There had always been a few in the House who liked to talk about it, but usually with no greater focus than to sling around casual insults.

"No? I would have thought that one of your intellect... Well, perhaps you have been listening too much to the simplified message rather than its true meaning and implications.

"I know how deeply you feel about the overreaching power of the Ministry. Of course you already know how they use the Statute of Secrecy to control every aspect of our lives. A law-abiding wizard is not free to cast where he pleases, travel openly, speak freely, dress according to our customs, or even live where he pleases, if he ever intends to use magic. This cannot stand. Are we not citizens of this country as much as any muggle? Are our rights not to be protected? Are we less than them? No! We who have potential and powers that muggles only dream of cannot be counted as less than them. Yet the Ministry restricts our every action as if we were."

"Of course, I agree with all that. I simply do not see what this has to do with purity of blood. There have been several studies which have proved that percentage of wizard descent has no appreciable effect on amount of magical talent... "

"Ah, now I see the problem. You are a half-blood, and no doubt you have felt the sting of blood-prejudice many times. Naturally you are quick to assume that is the motivation and end when I say 'protection of the blood,' but that is not our aim at all! I have

no desire to deepen these distinctions in our society. It runs very contrary to my purpose; we must unite if we wish to effectively fight for our rights. We are fighting for *all* of our rights, regardless of blood purity. The only way for wizards to achieve true equality is to remove muggle privilege. What is muggle privilege?"

"Freedom of speech."

"Yes! If a muggle chooses to believe in magic, they may speak of it freely, discuss it in public, even publish books on the subject. Yet these same basic rights are denied us, who *know* the truth. Freedom of speech, and what else?"

"As you said, freedom to travel openly, dress and live as we please, and so on."

"Of course, but that is just the surface of it. All these little points are galling to us, but the heart of it is that muggle privilege is the privilege to live as if wizards do not exist. We are less than humans to them, less than animals; we are nothing, nothing more than a figment or a fairy tale.

"The few who do believe in our existence also believe that we should be wiped out. Every town in this country contains a church, often more than one, whose central holy text instructs its followers 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' And it is not simply a relic of a distant time, as some in the Ministry would have it. I know that Yaxley took you with the other recruits to see that muggle entertainment – " *THE WICKER MAN*, it had been sickening seeing all those muggles enjoying it.

"The hate and fear that characterizes the muggle view of us is alive and well. You may speak to any of your colleagues and you will find a story of this hate and fear. I daresay you must have a few yourself.

I nodded; I needn't look any further than my entire childhood.

"Now, I fully believe that our ancestors who instituted the Statute of Secrecy had the very best intentions and little choice. Theirs was an act of desperation, to preserve a populace decimated after losing a war. I have no blame for them. I even honor them through our mark." *The skull for those who died for their blood, the snake for our cause, born from their sacrifice*, I remembered.

"I do however blame the Ministry for attempting to have us ignore the fact that we have lived, defeated, under our conquerors, for nearly

three hundred years, with no advancement in our rights or status, no attempt at equality or recognition, with an antiquated justice system and a corrupt government. We cannot endure this any longer.

"The only way for us to regain our natural rights is to remove the muggle privilege to assume that we do not exist, that we do not matter. We are not fighting to subjugate or enslave. We are not oppressive as are our muggle conquerors. We really seek recognition of our existence, and our powers. However, as a scholar you know it well. Throughout history, if an over-privileged class has their privilege removed or even challenged, they will cry injustice and oppression, they will fight as if it is their very existence which is under attack, rather than a simple leveling of the field. We can expect a vicious fight. We must be prepared and unite in the face of it. That is why I speak of the protection of the blood.

"Our concern with muggleborns is not some ridiculous notion about the quality of their blood or the strength of their powers, it is with the strength and direction of their loyalties. I welcome each and every muggleborn who wishes to join us, who recognizes their own privilege and the privilege of their family and is willing to give it up in the name of equality for all. However, this is not a game. Our lives are on the line, as you know very well. We have to examine their motives and loyalties extremely carefully. Many misguided individuals will place the privilege of their own family above the greater good of society, no matter how unjustly. Except in cases such as yours, where these misplaced loyalties are out of the question, those of mixed blood are naturally more suspect. It saddens me, but we simply must separate these segments of our population until we can be sure of their intentions.

"I wish we could all be treated equally *now*, Severus, but until we are victorious, until we are able to live openly and freely, there must be some practical sacrifices. For the greater good."

"Of course, for the greater good." He smiled at me, a wonderful thing.

"I'm glad we've had this talk, Severus. I knew that one of your intelligence would see it, as long as it was presented and explained properly to you. It is so important that we are all open with one another here,

that there are no doubts between us. You must come to me at once if have doubts about anything else. For all their best intentions, not every one of my followers is equally gifted at explaining our strategy.”

I remembered being so confident then, buoyed up by his confidence in me. I could see no flaw in his words. It all made perfect sense.

I was completely consumed with my single purpose. At first, all our actions seemed to fit with that purpose: destruction of Ministry property, disruption of Ministry events, destroying records rooms and Auror outposts, open casting of spells in muggle areas. The thought of fighting to accomplish our ends didn't bother me; it was clear that the Ministry would never reform on its own. Outside force seemed absolutely essential. I thought myself ready to kill for the cause. I was angry enough. It had been made quite clear to me during my incarceration that the Ministry cared nothing about the loss of *my* life, after all.

If we fell short on our raids, the punishments we suffered also seemed to be justified. It would be no worse, I knew, than what the Ministry would do to any of us who were captured. It was better for us if we were inured to it. If that was what it took for the Dark Lord to maintain discipline among us, well, our purpose was far more important than any individual's fleeting pain.

There was simply *more* to the Dark Lord then. He still had his charming side, and he presented that almost always. We hardly ever saw *the Beast*, and when we did, we knew it was justified. His real genius was in how to motivate us. He always seemed to know exactly what words would inspire us, and how to lead us along, step by step.

It was perfectly natural that I would brew the Veritaserum for testing and training so we could all master the technique of resisting it. Why wouldn't I also provide it when we had captured someone to question? It was obvious that I would eventually be the one to administer it. That first questioning had been bad, though I could tell myself over and over that it was no worse than the Ministry's methods, no worse than the punishment we ourselves suffered when we fell short with the Dark Lord. If we could stand it, why should our enemies be treated better than us? And the end had been fast enough, much faster than my end would have been if Longbot-

tom and Moody had followed through on their threat to leave me to starve. The Dark Lord himself had assured me many times that they would not have hesitated to follow through, that there had been other cases, that I was very lucky to have friends influential enough to get me out. That was what we were fighting against. Someone had to take a stand against the Ministry's brutal methods.

Still, Rosier and I had to go for a drink after that first questioning, just to take the chill off, to settle us. We had stepped across some line together, as it was his first questioning as well.

It was only a first step. The next step wasn't long in coming. Rosier and I, along with Benedict Crabbe and Joseph Avery, were assigned to Dolohov, still several ranks above us then. We were to raid an Auror outpost. The information we had obtained in the last questioning would get us through the wards. There wouldn't be many on post, only a skeleton night shift of three staff; all the others should have been on patrol. We could take the whole building.

Somehow, there was one more. Crabbe and Avery, ahead of us in training, went in first with Tony, then Rosier and I came in the back when they had petrified the three on staff. The one we weren't expecting came bursting out of a side room at me as Rosier made his way to the front. The Auror's curse barely went over my head as I flung myself back against the wall.

I cast Sectumsempra at him in a panic, not even aiming. It wasn't clean; it wasn't good. I had caught him in an arc up his right side and across his shoulder. His arm was hanging half-off and he was bleeding out. I yelled out for Rosier without thinking. We were never to use names, of course. Crazy, I wondered if we had time to get him to hospital. *Idiot, no one would be going to hospital.*

Tony made Evan finish him off. He stuttered his way through the spell, casting twice before the man stopped kicking.

“Right, now,” said Tony, “everyone gets a go. We're all in this the same. When one hand is raised, it's everyone's hand. You got that?”

“Aren't we going to take them back, for questioning?” asked Benny. I felt a little relief at the thought. It would be out of our hands, then.

“No, they're nobody. It's not worth it. We'll send a message, finish

them here. Besides, they may have heard a name.” He slapped me lightly. “We’ll talk about that later. Now let’s clean up.”

In the front room, the other three were lying motionless where they had fallen under the Petrificus. If I wanted any of them, I wanted the one who was laying face-down, but Benny got to him first and cast Avada Kedavra. I could see the eyes of the other two. Rosier was being sick against the wall. I wouldn’t be sick, because it was much better than they deserved, much better than being strapped into a chair and left to starve, wasn’t it?

It didn’t look like Crouch or Moody or Longbottom on the floor in front of me, though; it was just someone I had never seen before. If I didn’t do it, one of the others would, so it didn’t make any difference, did it? Not to the man laying there. I cut his throat with Sectumsempra. I had to; I had to and it was quick, anyhow. Avery couldn’t get Avada to work for him either, until he tried it three times. I was glad I had used a different spell.

Tony was destroying the records and equipment. I cleaned up Rosier’s sick. It was my fault anyway. “It’s all right,” Joseph was telling Evan, “it gets easier.” I hoped it would get easier.

I knew all along that if we were fighting the Ministry, if it really was a war, of course people would be killed. I was a naïve fool if I didn’t realize that. Wasn’t it worth it, throughout history, that lives were given up to a good cause? Wasn’t that the cost of living in a just and free society, of trying to build a better world? But somehow I never imagined I would be cutting the throat of someone petrified on the floor in front of me. It couldn’t be real. Next time it would be a real fight, I told myself. Next time it would be easier.

It didn’t get easier. I had been out on a few ‘baitings.’ It was our strategy to destroy the Statute, after all. We had to be able to cast openly, to use our power among muggles in a way they could not deny or pass off as a trick. Usually it was Leviticorpus. There was no way they could fail to recognize that a magical force had been used against them. But the Ministry obliviators kept up with us, altering scores of memories so our efforts were wasted.

I knew something was wrong. The Dark Lord was showing more

and more temper after every mission; he was the Beast more often than the Lord, now. I knew from the look of revulsion that Lucius wore after captured Auror questionings that I wasn’t the only one who could see it, but somehow I just couldn’t bring myself to accept the Dark Lord’s earlier invitation to share my doubts with him. That feeling of heady confidence in our rightness was ebbing away.

That was when the orders began to change. We had to do something that the Aurors couldn’t fix, that the obliviators couldn’t erase. Our actions had to have permanent consequences, or the muggles would never recognize us, the Ministry would simply keep swatting at us like annoying flies. The Dark Lord began to send us out expressly to kill.

Shouldn’t I have known? He had said from the very beginning that it would be a fight; we would have to fight if we wanted our rights. Wasn’t this simply the logical conclusion? Wasn’t that what I had wanted all along? But it *still* wasn’t Longbottom or Crouch or Moody in front of me. I *still* couldn’t get the face of that Auror petrified on the floor out of my head.

Rosier had taken to stopping by my house to ‘put himself together’ after a mission before going back to report to the Dark Lord. I don’t know how he did it. As for me, my aim got bad. I missed more than I hit, now. It made for much more discipline at the end of each mission, but I couldn’t stand the work, otherwise. I could barely stand the sight of what was going on around me, in any case. Afterwards, I would run the images through my mind, making each one smaller, fainter, taking away all color, sound and smell until it was all so distant that I could almost pretend that it hadn’t happened to me at all.

I was working at that when Evan, nursing his drink, started to speak haltingly, not looking at me. “It’s the only way, isn’t it? If I can’t –” He broke off, breathing hard. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to say. After another gulp he went on. “It’s not like you, Sev. I’ve got my parents and a little brother. I can’t walk out. But what if I can’t go on either?”

I couldn’t answer that. It wasn’t something I could let myself think about.

“The only way, the only way is to make sure I go out fighting. That way it doesn’t touch anyone else.” He didn’t say any more.

He went out fighting a week later. Wilkes went out at the same time. I didn't know if Rosier had ever spoken to Wilkes about his choice. I didn't know if Wilkes had decided he couldn't go on either. It didn't matter.

That was when Avery and Mulciber began to throw themselves more deeply into their missions. It was when the revulsion settled more and more into Lucius' face. It was when I realized I would lose all my friends, one by one, to death or to killing. It was when I realized I couldn't save them. It was when I started my experiments with Polyjuice. I didn't want to take Rosier's way out, but I wasn't sure if I could find a better one.

My letter to Dick about my experiments referred to none of my fears. It was merely a terse list of all my failures with the potion. My next letter, however, had a note of hope in it. The Dark Lord had ordered me to apply for a position at the school.

After my arrest, my dreams of an apprenticeship had evaporated. I had taken my mastery exams and passed, but in the depths of my service to the Dark Lord, I had given up any hope of an academic or research career. Now, finally, there seemed to be a way out, an answer to my problems. If I took a position at the school, I would be out of the killing. It would go on without me, but I wouldn't be betraying the Dark Lord or my friends.

I eagerly wrote to Dick about my intention to apply for a teaching position. I remembered that his reply had been encouraging, as always, though he repeated his offer of a research assistant position in his lab, if I wanted it. What I wanted hardly mattered. I couldn't have taken it without the Dark Lord's permission, and he would never have given me permission to leave the country. But then all my hopes had collapsed, one after another.

I had no idea why Dumbledore would hold staff interviews in a room at the Hogshhead, of all places, but I always knew he was a bit off. So there I was, as instructed. He was more than 'a bit off' to me by the end of the interview. He rejected me. I knew I was qualified, and he rejected me! On account of politics, because of what he suspected about my associations. No matter if he guessed

correctly, there was no reason to keep me from a position I was best qualified for. I was furious to be shown the door. Too furious to leave the pub, too furious to do anything but stand shaking and clenching my fists.

How could he cast me back to *that*, to the Beast? Didn't he know that I couldn't go on that way? Did he want me to have to kill again? I wasn't sure how long I stood there. I couldn't just walk away and give up my one hope.

I leaned back against the wall. Was I so far gone that I would go back in and beg? Even if I was, begging never did any good. Not with my dad, not with Lily, not with our captives who begged *us*... I shook my head, this was getting me nowhere.

A voice was speaking in the other room, I realized. It carried clear through the wall, clear and deep. It made my skin crawl. What was it saying? "*— Born as the seventh month dies —*"

It stopped suddenly, cut off clean. The pub owner was there — *where had he come from?* — grabbing my elbow.

"And what do you think you're doing?"

"I... what?" *Doing?* I was standing in a corridor.

He was swinging me around to face the door that the voice had come from, I felt ridiculously like I had been caught out doing something, but what? He held me by my collar and shoved the door open.

Dumbledore was sitting there, of course, but facing him was a woman I didn't know, glassy-eyed in frozen stillness. What was going on? Dumbledore broke his gaze with her and looked over at us. She sagged like all the air had been let out of her, then looked about in confusion.

Aberforth cleared his throat. "Look what I found nosing about," he said, giving me a shake.

"I, I —" I wasn't sure what to say. What had I just heard?

Dumbledore looked me over without a trace of expression. He gave a slight nod. "Very well. Put him out." *Put me out? What was I, a cat?*

"Here now," I said, but Aberforth was already hauling me along the corridor to the back stairs. Was I really getting thrown out of the Hogshhead for standing in a corridor? No one got thrown out of

the Hogshhead, not unless you broke the furniture, and even then only if you refused to put it back together.

Aberforth shoved me unceremoniously out the back. I barked my shin on the bins next to the door. "Run along now," he said as he shut the door on me firmly. *Run along?* I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was being played, but how?

I didn't have much choice, I had to go back and report my failure to the Dark Lord. I walked for a while as I worked on tamping down and erasing my hopes for escape through the teaching position; the Dark Lord couldn't see that. I left my anger and resentment of Dumbledore swimming across the surface of my mind. It was easy enough to keep that fresh. It was enough.

At first I was relieved as the Dark Lord didn't seem to pay much attention to my failed mission in favor of having me go over that strange voice again and again. My relief soon turned to worry as it became clear that he thought it was a prophecy and he *believed* it. God, didn't everyone know that you couldn't pay attention to prophecies or they try to take over? The only thing to do is to ignore them until they go away. Even the Ministry of Morons knew enough to lock them up until they were safely forgotten.

Yet there he was, talking about rounding up all the children born at the end of July, as if he were Merlin, Arthur, and Herod rolled into one, as if there weren't a hundred loopholes, a hundred ways to read it even if it could be believed. The seventh month from *when*, just to start with. Somehow it was suddenly to most important thing in the world to him. All plans for bringing down the Ministry fell by the wayside as he became consumed with the *one thing*.

I knew then, I had lost the Dark Lord too, and all my hopes of seeing the Ministry fall, and a new fair society to grow from the ruins. It wasn't about that any longer, if it ever was. It was only about the Dark Lord's power and how he could maintain it.

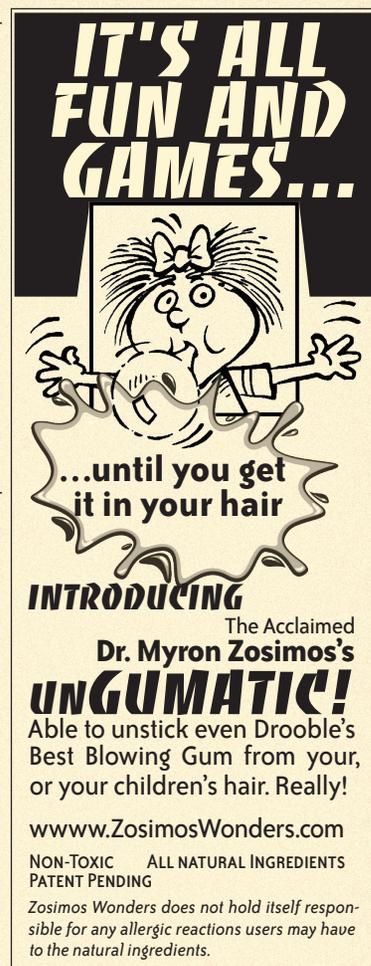
Had he ever meant anything that he told us? Or was it all just lies, telling each one of us what we wanted to hear so we would willingly give our lives for him? A 'leveling of the field,' certainly, with the whole world at his feet and him towering over it.

It was as good as over. I was following a madman and I would be lost as sure as Rosier if I didn't get out. I even thought of using my altered Polyjuice, despite its permanent and painful effects. I also thought about going to Dumbledore, but I doubted that my reception would be good. I had nothing to offer him, and I knew that a Death Eater's fate alone wouldn't move him. I wished I had something to bargain with, some information to offer Dumbledore, to buy my freedom. Then, terribly, I got it.

I threw down the letters. It didn't help of course. It wasn't what I had written that bothered me, it was what I hadn't, the memories of the guilt that had hounded me for years. Just as Pulcifer said, I wrecked everything I touched.

Intellectually, I could tell myself that it had all been worth it, that if I hadn't carried the words that had led to Lily's death, the Dark Lord would never have fallen either time, but it wasn't quite enough to drive away the sting of bringing about the death of someone I had loved once. Besides, it was far too close to Albus' and the Dark Lord's talk of 'the greater good,' and that made me a bit ill.

The thought that it was all over now, all debts paid, felt like a hollow achievement. Was that the sum of my life? I couldn't, as Dick had suggested, be content with just lying on a beach. I needed to accomplish something, anything with a positive balance. I needed to do something besides destroying.



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IN ORDER

Dick returned to the lab on Friday, but I avoided him until our scheduled meeting on Sunday. I needed to have my ideas in order.

{“Good day!”} he called out as I entered his office. {“How is the Portuguese class?”} He was speaking slowly, but I was proud that I could understand him.

{“I have one gold star,!”} I said carefully, holding up the paper prize.

{“Excellent!”}

It was for nothing more than rolling my Rs. It would be completely ridiculous to be proud at such a trivial achievement.

{“And how – ”} but then I couldn’t catch the rest of Dick’s rapid Portuguese. I stared at him. “How are you settling in?” he asked in English.

“Fine, I’ve been working on the research ideas.”

“The other staff say they haven’t seen much of you.” That made sense; I hadn’t spoken to anyone all week. I shrugged. “Well, let’s have it.”

I pushed a piece of paper across the desk. He read the words: “delay process?”

“It’s the strength of many potions that they take effect immediately, but for others it is a very great weakness, particularly in curative potions. Muggle medicine has vaccinations and preventative measures such as those malaria tablets, but we are limited to reacting to conditions after they occur, which is what makes diseases like dragonpox so deadly. By the time symptoms are evident, it may already be too late for treatment. If there were a way to administer the curative potion and have it remain dormant in the system until activated by a change in the body or the presence of an infection, it would be a significant advance.”

Chapter 17 of **THE NEW SKIN**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 40, No.7

MABON 2003

Note: any dialogue within brackets{} should be understood to be spoken in the Portuguese language.

“Yes it would, but how could that be done?”

“You know I have had some interest in timing elements in potions over the years.”

“You could say that,” he chuckled.

“As in my flying ointment, where I used the timing elements to regulate and delay the ending of the potion’s effect.”

“Or with Felix or Polyjuice, where you extended the effect.” I winced at his mention of those. I didn’t count them as triumphs.

“Yes, well, I believe I can use a similar process to delay onset of a potion’s effect. I would use the timing elements to extend the effects of a stasis, which would then have to be linked to a trigger, such as a change in the subject’s body. The trigger would end the stasis so the active curative part of the potion takes effect at the right moment.”

“Yes, yes!” He was excited at the idea. “In fact, a delay process like that would have a very wide application. With dragonpox alone, if there was widespread use, it could save hundreds of lives a year.”

“Exactly. If I can perfect a process, then it could be adapted to any number of different potions, as long as the specific ingredients don’t have a negative reaction. Even then, there may be avenues around that by means of ingredient substitutions.” His enthusiasm was infectious.

“Well, I think you are on to something here, very much so! On a practical level, do you have any first thoughts about how to put together a process and test it?”

“Yes. You know I’ve already isolated and tested the different properties of the timing elements of Felix. I will base the delay process off a combination of those elements. Attach the timing elements to a stasis, add a trigger to end it all and then the curative potion takes effect.”

“So it will have to be tested in conjunction with an existing curative potion.”

“Yes, and something as unpredictable and dangerous as dragonpox is out of the question. It has to be an absolutely predictable condition which is not life-threatening, so that there is little negative consequence to the subject if it fails during testing.”

“Something you’ve worked with before? I think I can guess.”

I shrugged. “Wolfsbane just makes the most sense. It should be

very easy to schedule and run tests, and I expect there would be a large number of willing subjects for the chance to get a potion they can take well in advance of the full moon and not worry about again."

"True, but we aren't certified for human testing. Now, don't look like that, it's not a problem! We simply contract out our human testing to the supervision of the University Hospital in Sao Paolo, and we also have an agreement with the University of Chicago if Sao Paolo is too busy. Not another thought about that end of things; I'll arrange it when we get there. Go back to the beginning. Ben is working on getting research assistants for you to start in two weeks. He's already received a few applications. I'd like you meet with him in a few days, say Wednesday? You can choose whoever seems most promising. Now, start an ingredient list for me while I get your contract set up."

We both spent the next few minutes scribbling on our respective papers. I listed all the ingredients of Wolfsbane, the timing elements, several different binders and stasis formulas. Dick was done first and pushed his papers across to me.

"Here we are, all in order. This is just the standard contract. Let's go over it. I left it at the standard time of one year with the option to renew. The base salary is 125,000 reais per year, which is about 65,000 dollars... oh hell, what's that in galleons? About 7,500 I think. Anyway, then there's 40% of any resulting patents, publications or awards, and there's a housing allowance if you want to live offsite. Otherwise you can keep the rooms you have and waive the allowance."

"Yes, the rooms will suit me." I didn't like the idea of being any closer to the noise and traffic of the rest of the city. The salary wasn't enormous, but I didn't need much. I could save most of it. "Explain the patent and publication clause."

"Well, while you are under contract to the lab, the lab has a claim to future earnings based on research conducted here. So, say that you patent the timing process, or write a paper on it, 60% of gross proceeds come to the lab, since those proceeds are directly dependent on work that the lab made possible. In short, the lab has a claim to all intellectual property developed here."

"Hmm, but in this case, the experiment I'm proposing is directly

based on my prior independent research. The lab can't claim any of the groundwork that makes this experimental direction possible."

"Now Cyril, it's a standard clause. You would find the same provision at any research position."

"Perhaps these other research positions do not expect the work to be based on independent research."

"Anyone in any position always brings prior experience and knowledge to the table. That's why people are hired."

"Still, I'm sure it's unusual for someone to come to a position with years of notes on prior experiments that lead directly into the current project. Thank you for my letters, by the way."

He sighed. "Well, as it is an unusual case perhaps we can adjust the terms. How about fifty-fifty?"

"I was thinking sixty-forty in my favor. Or I suppose I could find a different project that doesn't rely so heavily on my independent research. Though I wouldn't expect the results would be as groundbreaking or lucrative as this one."

"Now, now, you haven't had any results yet! All right, we'll go sixty-forty," he said, scribbling in the figures. "You *can't*, you just *can't* breathe a word of this to any of the other staff or they'll be at my throat, especially Professor Aruego."

"I'm very good at keeping my mouth shut." I initialed the changes and signed the contract.

"I expect you are." He paused. "On that topic, I have something I need to ask you." I didn't like the sound of that.

"It's not that I searched it out, but when I was back in Arkham, I ran across some news." He set a newspaper on the desk, top page down.

"It's not bad news, at least I don't think so, but I don't know if you want any news or not. If not, I won't bring it up again, but if you do want news I can pick up papers when I'm lecturing there. All we get down here are tabloids, I'm afraid."

I looked down at the paper. I was reminded unpleasantly of the day that Albus had presented me with my mother's note. It had sat there in the middle of his desk, the most terrible thing in the world. I never picked it up. At the time I rather thought that Albus

considered me a coward for not reading it, but it was perfectly clear to me that to pick up that note would be like handing her my consent, like agreeing with whatever excuse she might have offered. I believed he had saved it away from me somewhere and I was always a bit anxious I would run across it in some secret drawer in his office. I was relieved to be beyond that possibility now.

This was different, I told myself, it wasn't excuses, it was information. I couldn't cut myself off from information, no matter how much I might want to.

"There might be something I need to know. Yes, bring the news."

I turned the paper over to see the **NEW YORK PROGNOSTICATOR** headline: **BUSH CALLS FOR MISSILE SHIELD, DEFENSE COUNCIL INCREASES BORDER WARD FUNDING.** I looked up at Dick.

"Uh, International section, page 6, I think."

There it was: **BRITISH MINISTRY AWARDS ORDER OF MERLIN TO WAR HEROES, DEAD.** I sighed. Dick shoved off to get coffee as I read.

In an unusual ceremony, British Interim Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, awarded the nation's highest honor, the Order of Merlin first class, to the Order of the Phoenix members who died during the Battle of Hogwarts. The other casualties of the battle received the Order second class. A few who died before the battle, including Alastor Moody and former Minister Rufus Scrimgeour, also received the Order of Merlin. More controversially, the Minister also awarded the highest honor to Severus Snape and Regulus Black in a separate private ceremony. Ministry spokesman Chester Venables denied that this was to avoid protestors at the state funerals of the other recipients, but "simply because of the lack of a body in both of the latter cases." Further awards are expected for the living heroes of the war in after all the funerals are complete.

The article ended with a list of the medal recipients. A separate ceremony was just as well, I had no desire to share a ceremony with Moody. Of course it wasn't really me in any case. I put down the paper.

"Coffee?" Dick pushed a cup across to me. "Not bad news?"

"No, more like pointless news."

Dick returned my ingredient list to me. He had scrawled the word "greenhouse" next to a little over half of the entries.

"I know we grow quite a bit of this here, but you'll have to check with Professor Aruego about quantities. As for the rest, you'll have to do an inventory of the potions' stores. If you're free this afternoon, you may as well get a start. It would best if you get in any order you need as soon as possible. I'll send Grossman around to help with the inventory and ordering." I nodded and pushed back my chair.

"Now wait, I didn't mean this instant! Have your coffee. How are your rooms? Do you need anything?"

"No, everything is fine."

"And you found a grocery, everything you need? Have you had a chance to visit the city?"

"Not beyond the shopping. I've been working on this and my Portuguese."

"Well, good, but you know, you don't have to work 24/7. Some of the RAs and staff usually go out for a beer on Fridays."

"I'll keep it in mind."

He laughed at me. "All right, go back to work then. I can see you're itching. Just don't collapse of exhaustion on me."

I ate a sandwich in my flat as I went over the ingredient list again and added a few more items. If the RAs were to start in two weeks, I had little time to complete the abstract and get all the materials in order. I would also like to run a few preliminary trials on the timing elements before I turned the RAs loose on them. After all, I had no idea how competent they would be. I wanted to have a few promising angles mapped out.

With the Portuguese class until one every day, I could work in the lab from about two until ten pm. Then I would eat, a little Portuguese review, and six hours of sleep. Manageable.

I felt a little thrill of excitement when I pushed open the door to the lab. Quiet, empty, and mine. I hadn't been back since my tour with Dick. Now I held an ingredient list, an experimental proposal; it was real.

There was an stockbook in each storeroom. I had perfect peace for an hour and a half, exploring the stock, updating the stockbooks and checking ingredients off my list.

"Hello, anyone home?" I should have known. Peace could never

last, not for me. Grossman's curly head craned around the door. "You're doing inventory? Dick sent me around to help."

"Hmm."

"Well, what can I do? What's this?" He pointed at the pile and boxes and vials in the middle of the table.

"Expired stock."

"Yeah, I don't think anyone's been in since Fabricia Carvalho was lab head."

"What was her research project?" I had been wondering, since I couldn't see any pattern in how the stock had been depleted.

"Well... she was supposedly working on pain relief, but really she was selling off ingredients and buying drugs on the Dark Market with her profits. Had an affair with one of the RAs, tricked the others, stole a lot of rare plants from the greenhouses, then ran to Bolivia. We haven't heard anything since." Well, that explained Aruego's attitude to me.

"I see that I have quite the role to fill."

"Ha, even a marginally competent research project would be raising the bar." *Marginally competent?* Is that what he thought of me? I sneered.

"Complete the inventory in here, if you think you can manage it." I swept out to the other storeroom. I would check his work later and see if he was *marginally competent*.

I went through the cold, frozen and stasis stores. Stasis was in good condition, of course, but much of the cold and frozen ingredients were so old as to be unrecognizable.

I levitated the ruined stock over to the dry storeroom. The pile in the middle of the table had grown. Grossman was bent double with his head near the back of a lower shelf. He was also singing, an inane little tune. His singing was insufferable.

"Grossman!" I snapped. He jerked, knocking his head against the shelf with a thump.

"Uh, yeah?" He straightened up, rubbing the back of his head. He looked confused.

I waved my hand at the pile of expired stock.

"What does the lab do for disposal? Some of these may still be reactive."

"We feed the fish." Was this one of his stupid jokes?

"These are potions ingredients, not bloody table scraps."

"Doesn't matter. Those suckers eat everything. They're not, uh, natural piranhas. Some magical creatures researcher was messing around with unauthorized magical hybrids. Before my time. No one's found a way to kill them yet, so we just keep them contained. You saw the pool, right? Out by the greenhouses." That explained all the warning signs.

"There are pufferfish livers in here," I said, holding up the jar, "some of the most toxic substances –"

"Doesn't matter. It won't kill them. They're not exactly 'alive.' Dick already tried all the vines that the locals use as fish poisons. Nothing. It doesn't even slow them down. If the tetrodotoxin does kill them, well, good riddance. They're crimes against nature, after all."

"Not exactly alive?"

"I think Dick said they were fed unicorn meat."

"So they are undead piranhas living a cursed half-life?"

"You got it! As I said, crimes against nature. Useful crimes against nature, though." He scooped up an armful of the expired stock and levitated the rest. I followed him out to the pool. I might as well see how it was done.

Grossman showed me the locking charm on the gate around the pool. I noted with satisfaction that I could read most of the warning signs now: EXTREME DANGER, DO NOT TOUCH WATER OR APPROACH POOL, EVIL HUNGRY FISH WILL EAT YOU.

There was a yellow line painted on the cement flags around the pool at a half-meter distance from the lip. DANGER ZONE was written inside the circle.

"Come here, my pretties! Come and get fed, you little abominations!" There was a little fluttering movement under the water, but mostly I could see nothing but the reflected trees.

"You don't want to get too close," said Grossman in a more normal voice, pointing out the yellow line as if I were blind and stupid. "They do jump when they get really excited." He put on a pair of gloves, then tossed a handful of amanitas into the pool.

Excited was one word for it. Grey fish exploded from the water in a writhing mass to get at the fungus. Grossman fed the frenzy

with a bag of Solomon's seal. I didn't have any gloves with me, so I levitated a jar of dried Mugwump milk above the water and flipped it to dump out the contents. Some of the fish were jumping by then.

"Ah, good! You are feeding the little fishes! I so like to watch them," said a voice just beyond the fence. It made me jump a bit, I had been so absorbed by the frenzy that I hadn't heard Professor Funke's approach. She was holding a carafe and some mugs.

"Coffee?" She passed me a mug through the bars as Grossman unlocked the gate for her. "Now, what can I throw?" She joined us, gleefully tossing toxic substances to the fish. I stared at the frenzy, mesmerized. It was like watching someone try to shuffle a deck of cards in a bowl of chicken soup.

"These things live in the rivers here?"

"Oh, but the natural ones are not like this. One can easily go swimming, as long as one does not flop about like a hurt animal."

"Yes," Grossman agreed. "They very rarely get like this. Only sometimes in the dry season when the water level drops and they get stranded and crowded into little pools."

"Just like this pool," I said.

"Well, yes."

The piranhas enjoyed their meal of pufferfish without any ill effects, so we packed up the emptied boxes and vials. Since Professor Funke was so conveniently here, I might as well dive into the next step.

"Professor Funke, I've put together a list of ingredients needed for my research. Dick told me to consult with the Herbology department before placing any outside orders."

"Well, of course! Do you have your list? We can visit the greenhouses now. Let's see." Thankfully, Grossman shoved off back to

the lab building as Professor Funke led me to the greenhouses.

In some ways, herbologists are all the same: physically incapable of walking from one point to another in a greenhouse without stopping every few steps to point out an interesting specimen. Luckily, Professor Funke was actually interesting as we picked our way through the arid houses, which held a great variety of twisty, spiny, hairy and convoluted plant forms. The garden of 'living rocks' and the large Euphorbia collection were especially impressive.

Professor Funke took me through the sections of the temperate greenhouse that I hadn't visited before, then we stepped into the cold temperate house. I could see at once why Professor Funke found it a refuge. Outside, in the still, humid afternoon, the sun seemed determined to drill through my skull. The second we stepped into the cold house, our breaths condensed in white clouds and our steps crunched on the frosty ground. She let out a long "aah," as the cold air hit us.

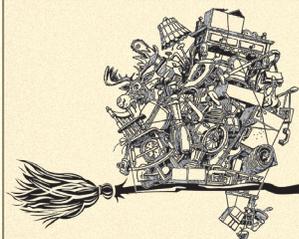
We each took a heavy coat from the rack by the door, then she led me down an alley of conifers dripping with oldman's beard and black lichen, past snowlilies, yellowing stalks of false hellebore, glistening icefruit trees, and out onto a scrap of tundra with a half-frozen pond in its center, surrounded by dried reeds.

"We are just entering our 'winter' now," she said. "We keep this house on a seasonal schedule since many of these plants require a dormant period." I crunched down to the edge of the pool. The water was dark and still under the ice.

"It is very beautiful, yes? Of course, the chungle is beautiful also, but sometimes it is nice to come where there is less." Her cheeks were pink in the cold air. It was rather peaceful here.

We looked over my list. We had managed to hit most of my ingredients in a somewhat inefficient way. There were only a few of the tropicals left.

It was like walking into a wall of hot water when we stepped out of the cold house. She took me down a dirt trail behind the greenhouses to the edge of the jungle. It was close to dusk now, the sky rosy and the bird and frog songs forming a dense wall of sound. I had thought I was used to the jungle noises by now, listening to them through my window



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as I was falling asleep, but it was much different to be surrounded by it.

When we stepped under the trees, it was almost claustrophobic, like being in a hot, crowded room where all the other inhabitants were invisible. There were constant flickering movements at the corners of my vision, crunching and rustling sounds above and around us. I couldn't relax, trying to keep track of everything around us. It didn't help that the mosquitoes seemed to search me out and that Professor Funke caught me several times just before I touched a stinging

leaf, a biting ant or a poisonous caterpillar.

We only went a kilometer or so into the forest before we found the plants on my list, and I already felt exhausted. And yet people lived their whole lives in that environment, and Dick had somehow managed to trek for years on research expeditions. How could anyone ever get used to it? It was a relief when we emerged back into the lab's clearing. Professor Funke was looking much less flustered than I felt. I brushed the last clinging mosquitoes away.

"I prefer the cold house," I said.

"It takes some practice to walk in the rainforest. This is a good place to practice. Even if one is lost, one comes across a road before very long." The birdsong was quieting now, as darkness settled in and greenish lights of fireflies blinked against the darkness of the trees. Bats were fluttering over the lawn, feasting on insects. I took my leave from Professor Funke and went back to the lab. The storeroom was surprisingly neat, the updated stock books in the middle of the table with a note from Grossman: *All done! See you tomorrow for ordering.*

Wonderful, something to look forward to. I retired to my flat. At this distance, the jungle noises sounded almost peaceful. Just an illusion, I knew now.

ANOTHER WORLD

The next two weeks went mostly according to plan. I had my Portuguese, then running trials in the lab all afternoon to determine which combinations of the timing elements had any potential, pouring over the Portuguese textbook

back in my flat, then food and sleep. My routine was broken by the annoyance of having to meet with Grossman twice. Once to do the ordering, then again to go over the research assistant applications.

I showed him my revised abstract with the ingredient list: 'to create a process by which a therapeutic potion may be administered in advance and remain dormant in the subject's body until triggered by an infection or onset of a metamorphosis. For the purposes of this experiment, we will be testing the hereafter named 'Delay Process' in connection with Wolfsbane potion.'

"Oh... that's ambitious," Grossman said. *What did he mean by that?*

"It's a perfectly legitimate aim!" I snapped. "You have no reason to question my goals."

"Question? No, no, I'm not saying it's impossible, it's just... impressive. I've never heard of anyone trying that." I had the suspicion that was not what he meant, but if I pressed him, he would probably simply lie to my face.

"The fact that it hasn't been tried is all the more reason to try it now, wouldn't you say, Mr. Grossman?"

"Uh, yeah, absolutely!" I would have to watch him, if he wasn't behind my work.

The meeting to screen RAs went more smoothly, perhaps because it was a more neutral topic, or perhaps he was now minding his speech around me. It was disheartening, however, that we didn't have many applicants to choose from.

Chapter 18 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 40, No.8

SAMHAIN 2003

"It's just such a last-minute call for applications; we usually give a month to gather materials and apply for the program. Not that these won't be good, but it's just a small pool, mostly locals," said Grossman.

He spread the applications out on my desk. They were almost entirely in Portuguese. I sighed. I would have to rely on his opinion to a great extent. I was more comfortable with Portuguese now, but my technical vocabulary was almost nonexistent. I would have to work on that.

We finally settled on three top candidates. Paola Hilberto and Guilherme Mata were both Brazilians in the graduate program with UFAM's magical division. The third was one of the very few applications in English: Jun Park, an exchange student from South Korea currently at university in Sao Paolo. The English was a little strange, however. According to the attached transcripts, Miss Hilberto had a couple of years of English behind her, but Mr. Mata had none at all. I really would have to rely on Grossman to translate, at least at first. I could not allow lab safety or my experiment to be compromised due to some misunderstanding.

I left my second meeting with Grossman more apprehensive than before. I would have to make an impression on three unknowns in just under a week. I couldn't use the standard speeches I had prepared in the past. The situation wasn't the same as controlling a batch of first-years or newt-levels. The RAs were supposedly, *hopefully*, at a much higher level. Unfortunately I would also be dependent on their performance for the results of the experiment.

The decision would be to speak in Portuguese, and perhaps not express myself perfectly, or to rely on Grossman's translation, which was an unknown to some extent. If I spoke entirely in English, I mused, they might well assume that I spoke no Portuguese, which would allow me to listen in on their conversations. It was an appealing idea. No, it was better if they knew that I could understand them, if only imperfectly. I didn't want everything to go through Grossman. The sooner I could do without him, the better.

I settled on a compromise; I would introduce myself and speak about the general aim in Portuguese, then have Grossman translate for me to go through the safety procedures, the rules of the lab,

and the specifics of the experiment, where my limited technical vocabulary would be a handicap.

I worked on my speech all week. If my Portuguese was laughable, it would entirely defeat my purpose; it had to be perfect. When Sunday night finally came, I knew it by heart.

If I knew it so well, why couldn't I simply put the matter out of my head and sleep? Instead I kept drifting in and out of dreams of someone battering down the door of my old potions classroom, none of the students listening when I shouted at them to get out.

When morning came I felt sick. I forced myself to eat some toast and tea. It was always like this, the first day of class, but once I made an impression, the worst would be over.

Still, I could hardly wait for Portuguese class to be done, I just wanted to get it all over with. Then class was finished, and I was back in my office behind the lab laying out my materials. All at once, time was moving too quickly. It was almost two pm.

I leaned against the wall near the door to the lab and listened. I had Grossman emphasize punctuality to the RAs in their acceptance letters. Apparently it had worked; I could hear them chatting in the next room.

I entered from the back, letting my office door swing shut behind me. Best not to think and just start on the script straight away.

"You were all chosen," I began as I came up to the front, {"because you show some interest and ability in potions. You will need much more than a *little* interest and ability to continue in this lab."} I was looking down on a rather underwhelming group. Grossman had been expecting to translate for me. I had told him he would need to. Now he was looking at me with considerable surprise. Good.

The other three faces were looking up more blankly. A young black man, that would be Guilherme Mata, with a small carefully-groomed moustache, was seated at an angle with his arm thrown over the back of his chair. A lighter-skinned woman with slightly protruding eyes, short curly hair pulled back by a headband, was spinning a pen between her fingers and chewing on something. Paola Hilberto. And finally, obviously, there was Jun Park, a young Asian

man. It was a struggle not to think of him as a boy, his face looked so young. He was leaning forward over his desk, a large smile plastered over his chubby face. None of them looked particularly intelligent.

{“What we will try here is something completely new in potions. It has not been done before and it is very important. It will take all of your mind and skill to do it. I will not let anyone hold us back. You must come on time, work hard and follow all the rules of the lab.”} I had been forced to simplify my speech a great deal based on my limited knowledge of the language. I wished I could make my point more strongly, but it would be much worse to choose the wrong word and come across as ridiculous. I hoped it had done its work.

{“Do you understand?”}

{“No problem!”} said Mata cheerfully. Miss Hilberto and Park smiled and nodded. Not so much of an impression then, damn.

“Grossman, translate!” He jumped up.

“The rules of the lab: first, no food or drink anywhere in the lab, *ever*. Even in a closed container. Food and drink must stay in the lounge next door. Every time you enter this lab you must immediately put on a lab coat,” I gestured to the cabinet by the door, “and you will wear gloves and protective gear before handling any ingredients.” Grossman was getting a little breathless. I paused for a second to let him catch up.

“Mr. Grossman and I are the only people allowed in the store-room. You will come to us for ingredients. You will *never* interfere with another person’s cauldron or ingredients while brewing. If your potion ever begins to undergo an unexpected or uncontrolled reaction, you will immediately cast a stasis, step away from the cauldron and call me. Is that clear?”

There was more nodding and a “no problem.”

I glared at them. “Then what are you waiting for? Bags away, lab coats on, *now!* Spit out that gum, Miss. Hilberto.”

They moved, Mata oozed out the door, Park bobbing along eagerly behind. I took the time to post the experiment abstract and protocol on the board.

I was just finishing as they regained their seats, now in their lab coats.

“Button that, Mr. Mata,” he said. He reluctantly did up his lab coat. Miss. Hilberto wasn’t chewing any longer. “Grossman, translate.” I indicated the board. He read off the abstract and protocol in Portuguese. Miss. Hilberto’s eyes were bugging out more when he finished. Mata was leaning forward intently. Park’s smiling expression was unchanged.

{“We are making a potion you can take in advance?”} It was simple enough that I could understand most of it without Grossman’s translation.

“That is what Mr. Grossman just explained, Mr. Mata. We will be using Wolfsbane for this experiment as it is most conducive to testing the delay process. We will be testing and developing three new potions components: a stasis to contain the active part of the potion, a timing element to extend the stasis, and a trigger to end the stasis and allow the active potion to take effect. Today, however, we will begin by standardizing our method of brewing the Wolfsbane potion. This brewing procedure must be exactly the same every time if we are to achieve any replicable results.” I looked them over as Grossman translated. Could I really rely on their brewing skills? Park’s blandly smiling face especially filled me with dismay.

“Park! Have you brewed Wolfsbane before?” I barked at him.

“Uh, brewed Wolfsbane?” he said, smiling and bobbing his head.

“Yes. *Have you brewed Wolfsbane?*” I said distinctly. How good was his English? Whatever his language skills, he had no lack of enthusiasm.

“Brewed Wolfsbane – yes, yes!”

“Very well. You will brew it now. We will observe and I will correct you. You will note that I have made some improvements to the standard formula, which is on the board. After that, you will all brew a batch. We must all have the exact same brewing method. We will not move on to the experiment until we have reached an acceptable standard for control. Is that clear?” There were nods and a “no problem” from Mata as Grossman’s translation caught up.

“The ingredients are on the third brewing bench. Begin!”

{“Senhor Ramson, where are the gloves?”} asked Paola.

{“*Doctor Ramson.*”} Even if I had given the title to myself, it was my title and I wanted it used. {“You will find them in the drawer

marked 'gloves.']} *Really*.

Everyone found their gloves and made their way over to the third bench. Mr. Park bobbed his head at me and smiled, selected a large bunch of Aconitum from the table and began to chop it.

I was ready to correct his technique, but instead I found myself watching fascinated as his knife flew through the plants at lightning speed.

"Put a merda!" said Paola.

Park wasn't smiling for a change, his face a smooth mask of concentration. I could have used his help on prep at the diner. The knife rattled up to within millimeters of his gloved knuckles and stopped. He swept away the stems, put the perfectly chopped Aconitum to the side, and began on the Backahasten mane.

I forced myself to find my voice. "Note that you must always chop with your fingers curled under," I said, pointing out his technique as he started on the twisting strands. "I will not give time off for missing digits." Miss Hilberto and Mata laughed as Grossman translated. They thought I was joking?

I could find little fault with Park's potion and none at all with his technique. When he reached the stage where it would have to brew for several hours, I had the other RAs start on theirs. To my surprise, Grossman also set up a brewing station and began as well.

"What are you doing?" I asked him in a low voice after I inspected the other stations.

"Since I'll be here translating, I may as well make myself useful. I took potions all the way through as an undergrad. Unless you'd rather have me sit on my ass?"

"Carry on," I said grudgingly.

"Sir, yes sir!" He clicked his heels and gave a mock salute.

I gripped the edge of the lab bench. *How dare he?* I leaned towards him. "Don't *ever* do that again. Do you understand me?"

"Y-yes," he stammered. He looked shocked. I pushed away from the bench and went over to the other brewing stations. I didn't want to draw any attention to Grossman's gesture and I didn't trust myself to speak calmly to him just then.

I ignored Grossman for the next hour and concentrated on the

RAs. Miss Hilberto was the slowest, but she worked carefully and methodically. Mata was slipshod at first, until I vanished his progress and made him start over. Then, I noticed with satisfaction, he took a great deal more care with his prep and timing. Park had prepped and finished a second batch before either of the others reached the resting stage. I merely glanced at Grossman's. It looked acceptable.

At one level there was little done on the course of the experiment that day, but I did have more information on my RAs brewing abilities so I could strategize who to assign to what branch of the testing. I closed the lab at seven, reasonably satisfied and ravenously hungry. Back in my flat, I poured over my Portuguese text as I ate. The sooner I could get Grossman out of the lab, the better.

The next day I skipped lunch and spent the hour before lab refining and posting the three main variant charts for the stasis. I had decided the night before to give Miss Hilberto the variant I considered most promising. She could work on that in her methodical way, while I gave the least-promising to Park. With his speed he could quickly find and eliminate all the dead ends and then move on to Mata's and Hilberto's variants for testing. Grossman... I supposed he could work on Hilberto's variant. I wanted to keep an eye on Mata myself and make sure the quality of his work didn't slip. And somehow I would have to find time to begin working on the trigger and timing processes.

"Yesterday we established our lab procedures and brewing standard," I began as soon as Mata slid into his chair, barely on time. "From now on, all the potions we prepare must meet that standard and be absolutely consistent, or our results will be useless. I have outlined the variants we will be testing to perfect the stasis and assigned you each one variant type. There are variant charts at each brewing station. You must complete notes of every result. Begin." They began.

I kept a close watch on Mata while working on my notes. He was still being careless with his prep and I had him re-chop several ingredients and restart his potion once. Park breezed through two branches of his chart as confirmed dead ends, and Hilberto and Grossman made acceptable progress. I felt almost cheery that night

as I closed up the lab. The dream of my childhood of becoming a researcher, making discoveries and advances, perhaps it hadn't slipped through my fingers after all, but had merely been delayed.

The next day I checked over Mata's prep carefully several times. It was a bit better than the day before; I only had to make him repeat two ingredients. When I went back to my notes on possible triggers, he muttered, {"Start over, with me, it's always start over!"}

Grossman laughed and called across the table, {"Just pay *attention*, Guilherme, or we'll throw some puff-adder in your pot when you're not looking. Then you'll really start over."}

Mata laughed, Miss. Hilberto laughed and punched Grossman in the shoulder. "Estupido!" I could only stare at him. What did he think he was playing at?

I stood up and leaned with both hands on the desk. "Did you think I wouldn't understand that?"

"What?" he asked, sounding genuinely puzzled.

"That you would throw puff-adder into – "

He interrupted me, "no, of course I wouldn't. I would never do that; it was just a joke!"

"Do you think that's a joke? To slip something into someone's cauldron?"

"No, I would never really do that... I'm sorry you misunderstood me. I wasn't being serious..."

"It's very serious!"

"Uh, yes, yes, you're right."

"You'll never suggest such a thing again!"

"No, I won't. It won't happen again. I'm sorry."

They went back to work in silence. I was still furious. How could he even threaten such a thing? But there was nothing I could do. I couldn't throw him out; I still needed him to translate. I was angry enough that I could hardly concentrate on my notes. It was a relief when seven finally arrived.

I went back to my flat, but I just couldn't stand the still air and wretched heat. I had to get out of there. I went to the cold greenhouse.

When my glasses cleared, I could see that winter was further

along since last week; there was a dusting of snow on the ground and frost flowers were blooming on the glass panes of the walls. I donned one of the coats by the door and followed the trail through the trees. The cool air and spare landscape in black, white and green were serenely quiet except for my steps crunching on the snow.

When I arrived at the pool, I saw that the ice almost covered it now, except for a dark hole of open water in the center. I tested the edge with my shoe; the ice cracked easily, it was still only a centimeter thick. I sat by the edge of the pond and skittered pebbles across the ice until they dropped into the open water with a 'plink.'

"You have had enough of the tropics?" I twisted around quickly. Professor Funke was walking down from the trees behind me.

"Enough of the heat, and my sodding RAs."

She laughed. "Yes, you are the Englishman who says what he thinks. Well, rain is coming soon. It helps with the heat for a pair of hours. Very unfortunate, it will not help with research assistants, unless you need them more soggy."

I snorted and skimmed another rock across the ice.

"Don't they work for you?"

"The work is... acceptable. I can't abide the *joking* in lab."

"Oh, well, there shouldn't be joking in a lab. That can be dangerous. If you ask Mr. Grossman to speak to them, surely they will stop?"

"Mr. Grossman is the worst of the lot!"

"Benji? You surprise me. He is usually very careful in lab. Beer?"

"What?"

She picked up a large stick lying at the edge of the pond and used it to break the ice with a sharp blow.

"Beer?" she asked again.

"Uh..."

She was pulling on a length of rope that disappeared under the ice. One long haul and she brought up a red plastic bucket filled with clanking bottles.

"Light or dark?"

"Dark." Well, why not? She handed me a dripping bottle. I wiped it off with my coat and popped the lid with Aperio Cervisia. It was

surprisingly good, much better than the piss I got in the States. Too damn cold though; I cast a small warming charm on the bottle.

Professor Funke laughed as she sat down with her own beer. Was she laughing at me? I decided to take no note of it. I took another drink. That was better. The label read XINGU. A pattern of tiny snakes formed a decorative border around the label. I traced one with my finger and smiled for a moment.

“Good, yes?”

“It’s named for the river?”

“Yes, a very beautiful place. Dick took the herbology section on a trip up the Kurizevo, and another on the Apaporis. He doesn’t go out for years at a time like he used to, but he still likes to visit his friends in the tribes. And there’s still so much to learn, of course. Very, ah, amazing to be in the rainforest so long. It is like being a thousand years ago, all at once. Another world.”

I looked out through the glass at the jungle trees beyond, pale behind the frost-covered glass. Wavering shapes of brightly-colored birds flew from tree to tree. Another world.

“If you want to see the rainforest, you just tell Dick and he’ll arrange it. He is always looking for an excuse.” As appealing as it sounded to be able to step out of this world into a new one, my one attempt to walk into the jungle so far had left me with not very keen on the idea of returning.

“The mosquitoes would devour me alive. Only my bare bones would be left.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There are many animals there who will eat your bones.”

“The jungle will grow over the spot until no trace remains of me, except for the giant carnivorous orchid which will devour unwary explorers.”

She laughed at that. “You like this end?”

“Better than dealing with sodding RAs. As bad as *students*.”

“You have taught? At Harbin?”

Shit. So much for keeping a consistent cover story. “No, a very long time ago.” Another world. “Well, Professor Funke, I think I

must take my leave.”

“No, after one has shared beer, it is permitted to use the du form and say the first name.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. It is the rule. *Uli*,” she said, sticking out her hand.

“Ah, yes... well, Uli.” I could tell I wouldn’t easily get used to that. It was like someone’s pet name for their post owl. It was almost as bad as *Benji*. I shook her hand. “Cyril,” I said. I didn’t see how I could avoid it after I had a free beer from her.

“Good evening, Cyril.”

I saw when I stepped into the wall of heat outside the greenhouse that the sky had turned a greenish-grey and the birds had gone very still. The rain hit me after only a few steps. I was soaked to the bone before I got to the door of the extension building. No, I didn’t think I needed a jungle expedition. There was more than enough rainforest for me right here.

START OVER

I dreamt of the black hole again that night. This time it was in the pond in the cold greenhouse: the dark hole of open water in the ice. The black water was bubbling up and lapping over the edges of the ice. Something was coming

up from the depths. The white skin of his head broke the surface of the pond and the ice cracked across. His eyes fixed on me and he smiled. I lay down in the snow next to the water. He knew what I had done and he was coming for me. There was nothing I could do.

I woke shivering, still seeing the image of him rising out of the darkness. It was clear what had happened. I had been too hot while sleeping and sweated, then threw off the covers and now I was too

Chapter 19 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 41, NO. 1

YULE 2004

cold. And hungry. I shuffled out to the kitchen to fix some toast. Then I would be able to sleep.

It was three in the morning and the brief downpour earlier seemed to have excited the inhabitants of the forest outside. The night animal calls drifting in through the kitchen window were louder than usual.

Despite my best efforts my thoughts kept drifting back to my next upcoming lab session. Any joking or carelessness simply couldn't be tolerated. It could compromise the experimental results or create a dangerous situation. Besides, I couldn't stand it. I would simply have to continue to put my foot down, more strongly if necessary. Stomach full and mind made up, I went back to bed.

Of course, thoughts at three in the morning don't always stand the light of day. The lab session began smoothly enough, except that Mata hadn't prepared his Omorphiadhendron correctly, so I told him to start over.

{“Why are you always looking at me and telling me to start over?”}

{“Because of *this*, Mr. Mata,”} I said holding up a leaf that he hadn't deveined before chopping. {“Start over.”}

{“You never watch the others.”}

{“No? Perhaps *you* should watch the others.”} I pulled him over to Grossman and Miss. Hilberto's bench and drew my finger through their correctly prepped Omorphiadhendron. {“Are you watching, Mr. Mata? Yes? Now start *over*.”}

He went back to his bench with bad grace.

The RAs continued working in a rather tense silence for perhaps an hour. I didn't note the time as I was finally making progress on my notes for the timing elements and the trigger. A presence in front of my desk finally caught my attention. I found Park standing awkwardly when I raised my head. He was smiling, as usual.

“What is it?”

“You want me to go on, yes? But I am out of *larrea tridentata*.”

After a trip to the storeroom and I brought it over to his bench. Heading back to my desk I saw Mata empty the contents of his

cauldron into the disposal cask and make a notation on his chart. *Finally* he was making some progress and eliminating some dead ends. I went over to check. *What was this?* His chart had no notes, just lines stricken through two of the variants.

{“Mr. Mata, where are the notes?”}

{“What? *Here*.”} He pointed at the chart in my hands.

{“I know this is the chart, where are the *notes*?”}

He looked at me, puzzled. Was that the wrong word? I changed tack.

{“What does this mean?”} I pointed at the crossed-out variants.

{“These two are nothing, they do not work.”}

{“And where are the notes on these two?”}

{“Notes?”}

“Grossman, translate.” He set down his knife and came over.

{“These two are dead-ends, yes? You have stricken them out, but you did not fill out the notes on the chart, here: duration, temperature, appearance, result...”}

{“These do not work at all, so there is no result. Poof, gone!”}

Even Grossman was shaking his head as he translated.

{“No, a dead-end is a result! We must have details on *how* it doesn't work or our results are not complete. You will have to run these again and take proper notes.”}

{“I will just fill in the notes now.”}

{“No! If you have not recorded the results at the time of the trial, the results are compromised! You have to start over.”}

{“Start over! Start over! But we know these don't work! You just want me to do the same thing again and again. It's always me! If you want notes on dead-ends, why didn't you tell me? You don't say a word and now you tell me I have to start over?”}

“Are you an idiot? There are spaces on the chart for every result to be recorded. It's self-evident that they must be filled in! {*Everyone!*”} I turned to the other lab benches and held the chart aloft. {“You are filling out every space on the notes, yes? Is there *anyone* here who thinks that taking notes means crossing things out?”} Park and Miss. Hilberto shook their heads reluctantly.

"It seems clear enough," I said, turning on Mata, "I don't know why you failed to understand or why you think you can get away with less work than the others."

When Grossman's translation caught up, Mata burst out, {"Less work! All I do is the same work over and over again!} *Punheteiro!*" Grossman didn't translate the last word. I resolved to look it up later.

{"I'm taking a break!"} He threw down his stirring rod and started for the lab door. Did he think he could just walk out whenever he pleased? I started after him. A couple of meters before the door he pulled out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. I made it to him in two long strides and grabbed the hand that held the lighter.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? You want to ruin your own potions, that's one thing – now you want to destroy all the ingredients? Destroy all their work? Destroy my work? *How dare you?* Get out of my sight, get *out!*" I wrenched the lighter out of his hand and threw it on the floor. "*Get out, now!*" He went.

I turned on the rest, who were staring at me mutely, *god*, just like dinner in the Great Hall behind enemy lines, any one of them happy to kill me given half a chance.

"Enough, enough! All of you, get out!"

"Dr. Ramson – " began Grossman.

"Not another word. We're done. *Get out, now, all of you!*"

Grossman put a stasis on the cauldrons and then followed the remaining RAs out of the room in silence. I wanted to pick up Mata's lighter and throw it after them. I gripped the edge of the desk until they were gone, then I hit the surface with my fists and sank down into the chair.

Silence. That's what I wanted, and I got it. My hands were still shaking. How dare he try to smoke in the lab? He would have contaminated all the ingredients, compromised all the potions in the room! Of course now the potions were probably compromised anyway, and the cut ingredients wouldn't last until tomorrow, damn it all.

Now I could do my work, in silence, without idiots around me,

without distractions. Only I couldn't even think about anything but all those eyes on me in the Great Hall, all full of hate, *I have to watch my back all the time*, and I couldn't get my hands to stop shaking.

I went back to my office at the back of the lab. All the cauldrons and ingredients could rot. I closed the door and locked it behind me. A smaller room was better; I didn't feel so exposed and I could see that nobody was watching me. I wanted a cup of tea, but I didn't want to go out to the lounge, particularly if the RAs had ended up there. I would have to stock some tea in my drawers. For now, water would have to do. I sipped it until my hands stopped shaking.

It could be a relief. No more RAs. Without RAs, I wouldn't need Grossman to translate and I could just work alone. It would take much longer, of course, but then I wouldn't need the Portuguese class anymore. I could spend all day brewing. All night, if I wanted. Alone. Then I could really get work done. I could do whatever I pleased. Why then did it feel like a defeat?

When I was able to face the larger room again, I returned to the lab to dispose of the potions and ruined ingredients. I salvaged what I could then packed the rest and went out to feed the fish.

Watching the roiling water was calming in a way, except that I kept wondering whether or not any bones would be left if someone fell in. I went back to the lab as quickly as I could.

I tried to work further on my research notes, but it was hopeless. I gave it all up as a bad job and went back to my flat to throw myself into my Portuguese. I had a few words to look up, in any case.

When I left Portuguese class the next day and walked back to the lab, I couldn't decide what I wanted more, for all the RAs to return to the lab that day or for no one to show up. Perhaps it was more which option I dreaded most.

As it happened, the point was moot. Dick found me in my office half an hour before lab was to begin. He knocked on the door frame and leaned in.

"Cyril? Ah, good, I was hoping to catch you. May I speak with

you for a few minutes?" I nodded and waved at the chair across my desk, cold dismay settling over me.

He sat and immediately began, "Ben told me there were some problems with one of the RAs yesterday. He's worried that the working environment in your lab is deteriorating and it may harm or slow your research."

"If I had known that he was required to report on my activities I would have come to you myself and saved him the trouble. I have done nothing wrong," I said stiffly.

"Oh, hell, Cyril! Do you always assume the worst? This isn't some disciplinary *thing*. If someone pulled out a lighter in the arid greenhouse, I would kick them out faster than you could say *Lophophora williamsii*! Ben didn't come to me to go behind your back or get you in trouble. He has some ideas about improving the RA's work in lab and he wants to present them to you in person. But, well... he told me that he thinks he has a special knack for offending you without meaning to. He asked me to be present to, ah, 'translate' for him should he put his foot in his mouth. Again.

"Also, I would like you to agree to cancel lab just for today so we can talk about this with no time pressure. Anyway, you've been working almost nonstop for the past few weeks. It's high time you had a half-day. Now what do you say?"

Having a little chat with Grossman about my shortcomings in lab was about as far down on my list of things I would enjoy on my half-day as I could get, just marginally above a picnic lunch with Sirius Black or a nice heart-to-heart with the Dark Lord. Still, if I were honest with myself, I had no desire to try to conduct lab today, with or without the RAs. If I didn't speak to Grossman now, he would only try to corner me later. Better to get it over with.

"Fine," I said.

"Good. Thank you, Cyril."

"I'll just put up a notice that lab is cancelled – "

"Oh, no need, I already told the RAs to take the day off." *Why did he even bother asking me?* I sighed.

"Fine," I said and followed him down the corridor.

"I understand that Grossman might be the kind of person who gets on your nerves, but please give him a chance. The reason I asked him to come down to Brazil and work for me is that he has a real gift for seeing how people work and bringing the best out of the RAs. He often has very useful ideas. You may want to shoot the messenger, but listen to the message first."

He opened the door to his office and ushered me in. Grossman was there already. *Wonderful*. He jumped up as we entered. Did he think this was court? I took the free chair in front of Dick's desk and stared at him. It didn't seem to put him off, though.

"Thanks for coming, Dr. Ramson. Look, first of all I want to apologize and explain."

Apologize? I kept staring at him.

"When I get nervous, or if I'm unsure, especially around new people, I joke around a bit. It's just to break the ice, to help everyone relax, to help myself relax. Over the years I've gotten into this habit whenever I'm in a situation where the atmosphere is a little tense, to tell a joke or two. It works for a lot of people. I should have seen right away that it doesn't work for you and cut it out right away, but it's such a habit now that I kept doing it.

"I never wanted to undercut you in lab, and I really, seriously, would *never* put something in someone else's cauldron. Never. That joke was definitely out of line. It's inappropriate and I'm sorry. I'm going to do my best not to make any jokes in lab again. If I ever forget, I hope I can count on you to remind me."

I smirked despite myself. "Oh, I'll remind you."

"Yeah, I'm sure you will. So... I also want to talk to you about what happened in lab yesterday. Guilherme made some mistakes, but then everything got a lot bigger than it needed to be and he made the really stupid mistake of pulling out the lighter in lab. I don't think he actually would have started smoking before he was out the door, but it was still a mistake. I talked to him afterwards; he knows that, and he does understand now about taking notes. He also knows about his mistakes in prep. All of these could have been minor issues up until the lighter. Part of what blew it out of propor-

tion is that Guilherme is getting very frustrated in lab.”

“If his frustration stems from his own errors, I fail to see what can be done about it, except that he cease making errors!”

“He is frustrated because he can’t get past the part of lab work that he is weakest at. He is not the best at prep, you may have noticed.”

I snorted.

“He is not very good at it, so if he wants to do it right, he has to do it slowly and carefully, but then he gets bored and impatient and he makes mistakes. When you tell him to start over, it only makes it worse because he is twice as bored the second time through.”

“So I should let his mistakes slide because prep is boring for him? I should indulge him at the expense of my research?”

“No, not at all! The prep has to be perfect if we’re going to be able to record results. That’s why I would suggest that Park handle most of the prep for him. Park can do it easily and the prep will be perfect. Then Guilherme can move on to brewing. He’s much better at that, probably because it’s more exciting; things are happening, he can see the results taking shape and he doesn’t get bored.”

“If I were to adopt this approach, it would be nothing more than rewarding Mata for his bad behavior! His weakness in prep would not improve and he would have no incentive to improve,” I answered, frustrated.

“But Guilherme’s personal improvement isn’t really the point. I could understand if this were a classroom setting and you have to be concerned with the development of every student. But this isn’t a matter of rewards and punishments; the main concern is accomplishing the research and what is the best way to do that. We know Guilherme is weakest at prep, and that is creating a problem for moving forward with the research. If you put him in a position to just start directly on the brewing, you can finally use his strengths, and it would be an immediate improvement in the working atmosphere of the lab. Your research would move forward much more quickly. He can work on his prep skills in his own time. A lot of the poorer schools here use cheap bulk ingredients that come already chopped, so he simply hasn’t had much practice at proper prep. I

really don’t think you need to worry about him working on his skills; he has quite a streak of pride and he does not like that he is being seen as the slowest one in lab. I’m sure he’ll be working on it. In the meantime, though, his weakness at prep shouldn’t be allowed to slow down the results in lab. If you are really concerned about his behavior yesterday, I would say find some other way to tell him: talk to him, dock his pay, something. But if you just keep making him repeat everything, it will only hurt the experiment. It’s not practical.”

The idea of not having to constantly watch over Mata’s prep was appealing; it would give me more time to work on the next steps, for one thing. He was right that it was a practical solution. Still, I didn’t want to concede the point to Grossman. It would only puff him up.

“I will consider it,” I said.

“I – ” he began, then paused. “Shit, this is the hard part. Dr. Ramson, it’s your lab. Well, it’s Dick’s lab, but you are the head of the potions section; you are in charge of it and you can run it however you want. Even if it seems to you like I’m just joking around or not respecting you, I am behind you and the research. I’m there to support you. That’s why when I see you... I can see that you’re starting to turn the RAs against you, and I don’t want that to happen.”

Turning them against me? Mata was the one who had snapped at me! I glared at Grossman.

“Look, if I make a stupid mistake in lab, I want you to correct me. Absolutely. Tell me my mistake was stupid, tell me to never do it again, tell me to start over. But don’t tell me that *I’m* stupid, because I’m not, and neither are your RAs. You were doing that yesterday. It’s a big part of what made something that should have been a minor problem end up with everyone leaving the lab.”

I took a breath. “I have never called you or any of the RAs stupid,” I said tightly. I wanted to say more, about how he was exhibiting his idiocy now, but I was conscious of Dick watching us both.

“No, but you asked him if he was an idiot and if he was trying to get away with less work, which was in effect calling him stupid and lazy.”

“If I recall correctly, he called me a punheteiro.” Dick had the bad form to laugh at that. I turned my glare on him.

"And he shouldn't have done that," said Grossman. "He was definitely out of line; I'm not defending the way he acted. I'm just – there was a point where things could have calmed down and gone back on track yesterday and that didn't happen. Look, you couldn't know, but he's from Bahia, and it's a common slur against the Bahians that they are stupid and lazy. So he's very sensitive to that. He took it personally. His taking it personally was part of the reason that things didn't calm down yesterday, but part of it was how you spoke to him. *Personally.*"

"If you think I'm going to let him or anyone get away with –"

"Wait, please! This is what I mean. He's not trying to 'get away with' anything. He wasn't against you. None of us are. We're all behind you. I can't tell you how excited we are about this research. This is the most fascinating research ever to come out of the potions section. Hell, it's the most interesting research in the whole lab in years. Sorry Dick."

"I'm revoking your herbology degree tomorrow," he said mildly.

"Paola's done a lot of work with magic theory – she's over the moon. The others are excited too. I admit it's hard for you to tell, since Guilherme has been so frustrated and Park, well, Park's excited about *breathing* so it doesn't show. They're on your side, but if you keep treating them like they're against you, you'll drive them away. It will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Look, it would just kill me to see you curse your own wand-hand like that, to doom your own research because of nothing more than some bad feelings and misunderstandings with your RAs."

Pulcifer's words came back to me: "...wreck everything you touch."

"I'm not asking you not to keep order in the lab. I'm asking you to just give us a little benefit of the doubt that we're not stupid, we're not working against you, we're *trying* –"

"You're *very* trying," I muttered. To my surprise, he laughed.

"Yes, I'm sure we are. But if I can work on not joking in lab, and if I can get Guilherme to work on his prep, and to not take correction personally, then maybe you could..." he lost his air of confidence.

Hell. They were waiting on me. "Work on not making personal remarks," I said grudgingly.

Grossman gave a breath of relief. "Thank you, yes, thank you."

Why was he thanking me? I hadn't actually agreed, but he seemed to take it as read that I would. Dick was taking it that way as well: "Wonderful, wonderful! I knew you two could come together!"

I wanted to stand up and protest that I had agreed to *nothing*, but how could I contradict Dick, my employer, and what on earth would I say? 'I refuse, and reserve the right to unreasonably abuse whoever I please'? No matter what I said, that's how they would see it. I clenched my jaw and reluctantly shook Grossman's proffered hand.

"Let's have a drink on it," Dick said, bringing out that awful cachaca and a couple of glasses. "To a fresh start." We drank. It was still awful stuff.

Grossman was all smiles now. "Thank you for hearing me out. I think you'll see things get a lot better in lab this way. Would you like me to talk to Park and Mata about Park covering prep?" It might have been all the talk or the alcohol, but I felt quite tired.

"Fine," I said, resigned. In for a knut, in for a galleon.

"All right, I'll be off then. Thanks again."

"Stay a minute, Cyril," said Dick as Grossman made his way out. "Another?"

"Uh, no."

"Ben didn't bring it up, but he was a bit concerned about how angry you got yesterday, and I have to say he got me a little worried too. Is everything all right?"

"Fine."

"Have you been sleeping?" His question caught me off guard.

"Yes, I sleep!" I snapped.

"A few weeks ago, you told me you were very tired. When I look at you now... you look more tired to me now. Have you been sleeping *well*?"

"Dick, I'm sleeping better now than I did... than I did."

"Yes, but is that sleeping well, or enough? How many hours are you getting?"

I looked at him.

"Cyril."

"Varies. Four or five."

"If I were getting four hours a night, I would be biting all the RAs' heads off."

"It's not lack of sleep that made me angry yesterday, it was Mata pulling out a fucking lighter in lab."

"Yes, but Ben told me that you threw the rest of them out also. *They* didn't have lighters."

"I just needed..." How could I explain it?

"Yes?"

"I couldn't stand them *watching* me a second more. I needed to be alone."

"Sure." He leaned back in his chair. "You know, when you need a break, you can step into your office, or go outside, take a walk, or even go back to your apartment. You're not chained to the lab bench. We save that fate for unruly RAs."

"I can't walk out on lab!"

"Certainly you can. Grossman can supervise if you need to step out; he's capable of handling any safety issues. Look, you've worked for a long time around anklebiters who've never held a stirring rod before, but your RAs have all had advanced potions training. You don't need to watch them every second. I'm worried you're going to damage your health if you don't, well, just relax a little. Take some breaks and get some sleep. If you can't sleep all night, we can push back the lab schedule so you can get a couple of hours after lunch. A lot of Brazilians take a very long lunch, so the RAs wouldn't mind. They'd probably like it."

"I don't know."

"Or something to help you sleep at night? Dreamless Sleep?"

I shook my head at that. It was ridiculous, I knew, but even after all these years there were simply too many associations with my mother. I still couldn't bring myself to take the stuff.

"Well, if you can think of anything that might help you, just tell me. Now, it has come to my attention that you haven't had a day off in all the weeks you've been here. You've hardly even stepped outside of

the University park, except to buy food. You are taking tomorrow off, and you are not going to be holing up in the lab working."

"Dick, I have plenty of work that I need –"

"No, it's already arranged; Grossman's taking the RAs out for a fishing trip on the river and you're going along. I want this to be a fresh start for you as well. It's ridiculous; you've been living in the armpit of the Amazon for weeks and you haven't seen the river. All you get is armpit and no Amazon! No wonder you're not sleeping!"

"You shouldn't try for benevolent tyrant, Dick, it doesn't suit you."

"Just go tomorrow, would you? Please?"

"Fine." Maybe I could feed Grossman to the piranhas.

THE MEETING OF THE WATERS

We met on the floating docks the next morning. It was early, far too early for me, but the docks were already crowded with fishermen and merchants unloading their goods. The lab's boat was the Klaus Kinsky IV, a ten-meter wooden fishing boat with a small hold and a peeling white cabin.

Grossman and the RAs were there of course, but, to my surprise, also Professor Funke and one of the herbology RAs, Gabriella Hoffman. They were chatting in German as Grossman and Mata hauled an ice chest onto the boat.

"You're coming?" I asked Professor Funke.

"Of course. Whenever there will be a boat ride, I am there."

Miss Hilberto and Park were carrying fishing poles on board, then the rest of us climbed up and we were off. Or rather, we were off after a quarter-hour of watching Grossman swearing and kicking at the engine. It was a touchy bit of equipment, since it had been a muggle vessel later converted to run on magic. Finally, we pulled

Chapter 20 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 41, No.2

IMBOLC 2004

away from the noisy docks, slowly threaded through a maze of other boats out onto the dark-brown water of the river.

{“Where do we fish?”} I asked Miss. Hilberto, who was organizing the fishing gear at the back of the boat.

{“Not here, no, first we have to cross to the Solimoes.”}

{“Isn’t this the Solimoes?”}

{“Oh, no, you see? Black water, so we are still on the Rio Negro. There are not so many fish on this side. The water is colder and sour here; the fish and mosquitoes like the other side better. We cross the meeting, and then go up the Solimoes to some islands, that’s where the good fishing is.”}

{“The meeting?”}

{“Eh, Benji, Dr. Ramson doesn’t know the meeting of the waters!”}

{“I know, that’s why we’re going there!”} Grossman called back from the cabin.

Miss. Hilberto turned to me to explain. {“The black water Rio Negro and the white water Solimoes meet, but they don’t mix. They flow side-by-side a long time before the Solimoes takes over. You’ll see; it’s like a line in the river, one side light and the other side dark.”}

{“I saw that on Dick’s map,”} I said, remembering.

{“It is better in person.”}

There was nothing to do for a while. Professor Funke and Miss. Hoffman had unshrunk some deckchairs, manhandled them open and used sticking charms to affix them to the deck. Park seemed to be getting a lesson from Grossman on steering, and Mata was hanging about near the back rail. I leaned on the side and tried to look into the dark water. Park seemed to have the steering well in hand, since Grossman came out to rummage in the cooler. It would have been quite peaceful if Mata hadn’t been set on bothering Paola.

{“Why are you messing with that? Aren’t you going to sunbathe?”}

{“Hmm, no.”}

{“No? Where’s your fio dental?”}

“Shiuuu!” she said, slamming the lid of the tackle box. Mata must have been deliberately provoking her, but I was at a loss to know how.

“Grossman, translate!” I said, “what is fio dental?”

“Dental floss.” Well, that explained nothing.

{“You don’t know dental floss?”} Mata butted in. {“No wonder you are always in a bad mood, no dental floss. You need dental floss!”}

{“There’s nothing wrong with my teeth, Mr. Mata!”}

{“Not your teeth, this is dental floss for your eyes!”}

{“What?”} Now Grossman was laughing. What the hell was he laughing at?

“Dental floss’ is what they call those teeny tiny bikinis,” he explained. Ah.

The previous evening, I had considered Grossman’s proposal about how to handle my RAs. I had come to the conclusion that the personal remarks had created a problem between us. However, it wasn’t the remarks in and of themselves, I decided, it was how the RAs were taking them. They simply hadn’t been trained properly, and didn’t understand how to take them. If I could train my snakes, I could train anyone.

“Grossman, translate!” I barked.

“I deeply regret that I must disappoint you, Mr. Mata. I am flattered by your request, but I refuse to wear a bikini.” Both Paola and Mata were laughing when Grossman’s translation caught up, Mata shaking his head in protest. I leaned on the rail with my arms crossed over my chest, my wand hidden behind my elbow. I went on.

“However, I am not a cruel man. I wouldn’t want to pine away for the view that I have denied you. That is why I’ve decided that Grossman will oblige – ”

“Wait – ” Grossman began, but I had already cast under my arm. He gave a yelp and ran for the cabin, but not before the women doubled over in laughter at his yellow bikini. Park shouted something in surprise from the cabin.

{“That’s pretty good,”} said Mata, {“but dental floss is much smaller.”}

There was another yell from Park. I decided I didn’t want to know what was happening in there.

{“Hey, here we are!”} said Paola.

It wasn’t so much of a ‘line in the river,’ as she had described, it was more as if someone had poured cream in their coffee and hadn’t stirred it. The border between the light and dark water was

swirling and shifting, but it was there, quite distinct. Park had stopped the engine, and we drifted along at the meeting of the waters. I leaned over the back rail and watched the border. It was very strange to be able to see into the water on the dark side, yet the light side was completely obscure.

The reflection of Grossman's head appeared next to mine on the surface of the water, then Mata's. I twisted to the side, but I wasn't quite quick enough. They hoisted me and I went over.

I landed in the dark side of the river. From under the surface, the water was less a dark brown, and more golden, shot through with streaks of sunlight fading into the darkness below. I could see the cloudy pale water of the Solimoes like a wall in front of me.

I surfaced just as a life ring landed in the water a few strokes away. Grossman and Mata were laughing. I could hear Professor Funke saying '— so childish!' but her tone was light. The shock of the cool water was wearing off, and now it felt actually pleasant after the relentless heat of the sun on deck. I could see that Grossman had returned his clothes to their original state. Pity.

"Grab on," said Grossman, "I'll pull you up." *The hell I would.*

I took a breath and dove, swimming into the Solimoes. Paola had said the Rio Negro side was colder, but I hadn't expected to feel the difference the second I crossed over into the cloudy light water. It was like stepping out of the shade into the light. It was also very disorienting; I could barely see my own hands in front of me. I had to guess which way to swim to come alongside the boat. I misjudged by a few feet and knocked into the hull as I came up.

Warm as it was, I didn't particularly like swimming in the light side of the river; I couldn't see what might be coming at me. I grabbed onto the metal ladder on the side of the boat and hoisted myself up next to the cabin. Park looked up from the boat's controls to where I stood dripping on the deck.

"Oh swimming! Yes, very nice!" He grinned and nodded happily.

I was shielded from the back of the boat by the side of the cabin. I squelched carefully up to the corner and looked around. For some reason, Park followed me, flattening himself against the cabin wall.

I hoped he wouldn't give me away. The rest were leaning on the back rail, looking over, Grossman calling "Dr. Ramson?" Perfect.

A quick Levicorpus and I had Grossman up. I let him dangle for a moment over the water to contemplate his fate before allowing him to plummet into the river with a satisfying splash.

Of course my satisfaction meant that Mata had plenty of warning. He didn't waste any time, unlike his work in lab, and seized Paola as a human shield. He maneuvered her by her shoulders to keep her between us. She crossed her arms and tried to look bored. It must have been difficult, as Mata kept jostling her around.

Miss. Hoffman and Professor Funke were laughing. "Oh no," said Hoffman, "we have a hostage crisis!" Paola said something I didn't quite catch, unfortunately. It probably would have been good to look up later.

{“You won't get me!”} called Mata over Paola's shoulder. Paola tried to swat his head but he ducked behind her back again.

“Babaca!” she said. I knew that one. What I didn't know was why Park was creeping towards Mata with exaggerated caution. He could only have been more ridiculous if he had held a finger to his lips and gone on tiptoe. I wanted to see what he was up to, so I fainted to the left. Mata turned with me, keeping Paola between us and his back to Park.

Grossman had managed to pull himself half-up on the back rail, and yelled, {“Guilherme, watch out!”} but it was too late. Park launched himself at Mata with a high-pitched yell and they both went over the side.

Everyone was laughing. I knew it was all a joke. No one had a wand drawn, except for me. I felt almost elated, in one way. We had won, but my heart was still pounding and I was gripping my wand so tightly that my hand ached. I forced myself to put it away and shake out my fingers. *Nothing is happening, you don't need it now.* I took a deep breath.

A few minutes later, everyone was back on board and dripping on the deck chairs. Park ran over to me and bounced excitedly from side to side in front of me, saying, “yes, yes!” with one hand held up, palm towards me. What the hell was he doing? Mata was carefully drying off his moustache and trying to get it to lie flat. Grossman was shaking his head like a dog, spraying Paola with water. *“Merda!”*

Hoffman pointed at Park, who was still waving his hand about

in front of me. "He wants a high-five."

"High-five! Yes!" He jumped even more excitedly back and forth. Oh god, if I didn't give him one, he would be jumping around me all day. I reluctantly tapped his palm. He immediately stopped jumping, thank god, and raised both fists above his head. "Champions!" He declared in triumph.

"We'll see," said Mata.

"Oh no," countered Grossman, {"no more throwing people in the river. They are the champions."}

"Pshh, as long as they don't get all the beer," said Mata with a shrug.

Park had bounced his way back to the cabin and we slowly turned and got underway again. Grossman had Park steer us up the Solimoes and into a meandering side channel whose banks were a mass of tangled vegetation broken by the occasional stilt-legged wooden house leaning out over the water. Where washouts exposed the crumbling clay of the banks, riots of bright macaws fed at the dirt. The tall trees overlooking the river were full of black vultures. Professor Funke pointed out some caiman sunning themselves in the shallows.

The air hung heavier as the sun rose towards noon and the stillness of the river was only broken by twanging bird calls in the forest. We anchored near the bank on the edge of a flotilla of water hyacinth and in the shade of an enormous overhanging tree. I felt lethargic, almost as if I could sleep on my feet leaning against the rail. Paola was preparing the fishing gear and Mata sidled over to bother her again.

"You know, I am an excellent fisherman."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes, I have a special gift with fish. Would you like to see?"

"Oh, a special gift? I'm sure you do."

Mata leaned out over the back and bellowed, {"here, pacu, pacu, pacu! Come to Papa Guilherme, pacu!"}

Professor Funke, who had been napping in one of the deck chairs, started up with a "*scheisse!*" The vultures in the tree above hunched up their wings and shuffled sideways along the branches away from the boat.

"Shut up, idiot, you're scaring the fish!" Paola slapped him on

the back in irritation.

"Oh no! I didn't mean to scare them! I'm sorry, I'll make it up." He leaned out over the water again and yelled, {"don't be scared little pacu, Guilherme is your friend, he would never eat you!"}

Paola punched him hard in the shoulder. {"Idiot!"}

"Ow! Shit, ok, ok." He was still smiling even as he rubbed his shoulder. Did he have his eye on Paola? I couldn't be sure, but it would explain why he kept bothering her and why he couldn't lose face in lab. I would have to watch them closely to see. Paola was casting some charm on the fishing line and Mata was watching her.

Uli leaned on the rail next to me. "Do you want to go on shore?" "Hmm?"

"They will be fishing for a while and it's so boring. I think for me, a little walk and maybe I can find some interesting plants, yes? You haven't seen much jungle yet."

"Very well." If I stayed on board, I would likely fall asleep, and with Grossman and Mata nearby I doubted that was safe.

Uli had Grossman set out the gangplank and used a spell to stretch it to shore. The vegetation formed a dense wall at the top of the bank, but once we struggled through that, it was more open in the interior. We ducked between thin trunks to the dim green older forest away from the river. Uli immediately became involved in examining a tangled mass of vines and epiphytes growing on one of the massive root buttresses. Every scrap of life here was simultaneously food for, and feeding on something else. Uli dislodged a colorful frog from the leaf well of a bromeliad.

A small movement near my foot caught my eye; a large spider was rearing up on half its legs, its four front legs stretched straight up in the air, swaying back and forth. Its legs were striped black and white. Its swaying movement reminded me absurdly of Park requesting a high-five.

"What's this?"

"Hmm? *Oh dear.*" I didn't like her tone at all. I took a step back.

"Keep going: they like to jump," she said.

"How far?" Back to the boat, perhaps?

"When it puts its legs down, that should do. It shouldn't bite if

you are not threatening it, but they are extremely poisonous. *Pho-
neutria fera*, the wandering spider. I wonder if Henrique has one?"

The spider finally lowered its legs. Without the stripes visible, it began to blend into the leaf litter on the forest floor. A small stunner, and she had the spider into a collecting jar.

We walked further in among the trees. We hadn't gone very far from the boat, but already the sounds of Paola and Mata were gone, replaced by the drone of insects and bird calls. Another world, Uli had said. She stopped and stood with her head tilted back, looking up into the trees.

She must have noticed me looking at her. "I cannot think as well if I don't have some time outside every day. Every other day, at least. If I am stuck at my desk for three days in a row, my thoughts just go in circles. I suppose that is why I'm a herbologist. One always has an excuse to go outside. It is very convenient." She looked at me. "Now you... you disappeared your first weeks here and no one saw you at all."

"I was busy." Had my thoughts been going in circles? "When I am working on a project, I think of nothing else."

"Very busy then. Well, I could not work like that, but then everyone says that potions masters are a bit strange."

A bit strange?

"A bit strange?"

"This is what everyone says."

Everyone?

"Yes, everyone. You've never heard this? Like all alchemists are cranks and seers are – how do you say it? Full of crap."

That may be true, but –

"Really, you have never heard this? Potions masters are supposed to be arrogant, to test their potions on people, and to be a bit strange. No one has said this to you?"

"Not to my face," I muttered.

"Well, well."

"And what are herbologists?"

"We are very nice, of course."

"Just nice? Not drug-addled tree-huggers, by any chance?"

"That's not nice?" she asked, laughing.

"I am not strange!"

"No? Not a bit?"

"No!"

"You are completely normal?"

"I – "

"Not unusual in any way?"

I drew myself up. "I am not *strange*, I am *above average*."

"Well, that is *very* interesting."

What did she mean by that? Some muffled yelling and whooping came from the direction of the boat.

"Ah, now they have caught something," she said.

"Or Paola has finally fed Mata to the caiman."

"Let's go and see."

Uli gathered the few samples and seeds she had collected and then we began to pick our way back to the boat. We had come in further than I thought; it took us almost twenty minutes before we burst through the wall of vegetation on the bank, brushing off stray twigs and mosquitoes as we stepped into the light.

The excitement was over when we climbed back on board. Grossman had caught a few peacock bass, but Paola had brought in the prize, a huge grey pacu that must have been about nine kilos. Guilherme was cleaning it, with Park craning over his shoulder, clearly itching to work on the fish himself.

"Well, your fish call appears to work," I told Mata. That provoked a long stream of angry Portuguese from Paola and a grin from Mata.

We grilled the fish on the boat, then ate it and drank beer and watched the white egrets mincing through the water hyacinth and the black vultures squabbling over the pile of scales and fish guts we left on the shore.

The pacu was excellent, though marred by Mata's smoking. I had to snap at him that he was welcome to destroy his own future in potions by ruining his sense of smell, but he wasn't to destroy everyone else's. He didn't stop, of course, but he did move downwind with a grin. The grin was some sort of progress, I supposed. I hoped the progress would hold in lab.

We headed back to the city as the shadows lengthened and the mosquitoes began to hover around us in clouds. We staggered back on shore in Manaus, then the RAs scattered when we reached UFAM Park. Stepping into the dim and cool interior of the extension building, I let a sigh of relief escape me. I still felt baked by the sun, and my head ached from the light off the water all day.

"Would you like a beer?" Uli asked as we ascended to the first floor.

"Hmm?" She caught me off guard.

"I want one, and you also, yes?" Well, I did rather, especially if she had more of the Xingu.

"Very well," I said.

"This way, then." She led me past my rooms to the last door on the floor. I realized I didn't know who lived in any of the other flats in the building. It was an oversight I would have to correct.

The layout of her flat was much the same as mine, though the dimensions of the room were a bit obscured by climbing vines and bristling ferns that covered every surface.

Uli opened the cold cupboard and brought out two bottles of the Xingu and two glasses.

"Who else lives on this floor?"

"Ah, yes, I have forgotten that you lock yourself in your room and lab and never see anyone. Professor da Silva is on the right side of the corridor, and downstairs are Dick and Benji. Of course, one doesn't see much of Dick either, he has rooms in Arkham during the week."

"And the rest?"

"Professor Aruego has a very nice house in the city. Dr. Zosimos has an apartment he shares with a girlfriend, but I'm not sure where it is. He keeps moving every time one of his ex-wives finds out the address. Yes, really!" she said, seeing my smirk. "Poor Valeria always has to lie to them when they call up the lab; either he is out or in the middle of some experiment. I think he is actually afraid that they will yell at him. Oh! Are you getting ideas? You look like you are getting ideas."

I raised my eyebrows and gave my most innocent smile. "Ideas?" I asked as if I had never heard the word before.

"Oh dear."

I decided to change the subject. "Where do the RAs live?"

"I think most of them have rooms in the UFAM residence halls, but I don't know. Some of them might live in the city. Have you seen the city?"

"No, it's a bit... busy." I couldn't explain my aversion to the noisy streets and crowds. I had thought that I would become used to being around groups of people again, but I still couldn't stand not being able to watch everyone.

"I'm not much of a big-city person myself, but there are some places in Manaus that are worth a visit."

"You're not a big-city person?"

"No, not really."

"I wasn't sure, with the way you put a jungle in your flat. Not enough outside for you?"

"You!"

She brought her hand up and paused. For a moment I thought she might be asking for a high-five, like Park, but instead she ran the back of her fingers across the scar on my neck. I caught at her wrist without thinking, but I didn't pull her hand away and I didn't let go.

RULES

I was swimming in the light side of the river, underwater. It was pleasantly warm, and I didn't seem bothered by my inability to breathe. I was bothered by my inability to see my way in front of me. Everything was cloudy, obscured; I couldn't tell where I was going. At once there was a wall of darkness in front of me; I broke out into the dark half of the river and I could see again. I could see... his body floating upright in the water in front of me, dead white. His eyes opened. I couldn't breathe.

Chapter 21 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSHAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 41, No.3
OSTARA 2004

I jerked awake with a gasp. I jerked again when I felt *someone* stir behind me before I remembered: Uli.

Shit. What the hell had I been thinking? I hadn't been thinking. Or rather, I had been thinking of only one thing. *Shit.* I was lucky I hadn't called out in my sleep and woken her. I couldn't count on my luck to hold. I eased out of bed carefully, felt around for my clothes, and picked my way to the bathroom. My head ached; dehydration in all probability. I dressed, then drank from the tap and tried to think.

I had been reckless, foolish. I had broken my own rules and let my guard down. It was an unconscionable risk. A risk of... a risk of what, exactly?

I *knew* that I had to keep my guard up, I *knew* that, but at the moment, I couldn't think *why*. And now that I had let my guard down with her, what would happen? I didn't know, and that was the real problem. I couldn't see my way forward.

Of course, I knew on one level that no one can really see their way entirely. Most people go through their whole lives without even the vaguest plan. I didn't know how they could stand it. In the past I always had to lay out my course, to try to see around every bend, down every forking path and be prepared for all consequences. Of course, that was when I had to live for the cause. Now that the cause was done, did that mean I didn't need to live at all, or did it mean I could live however I pleased? I didn't know.

If I knew anything, it was that I couldn't allow myself to say anything in my sleep. That was a present risk. I didn't know that I ever said anything intelligible in the grip of my nightmares, but I didn't know that I didn't. I had been lucky. I would have to be more careful.

I slipped out of Uli's flat and back to my own. It was three in the morning, of course, when my doubts always cornered me. It would be safer to sleep in my own room, alone.

I was fairly useless the next day. I hadn't been able to fall asleep again, after all. My plan of getting anywhere on my notes came to nothing, and the Portuguese text was completely incomprehensible. It all came of breaking my own rules. The rules were there for a reason, after all.

Uli tracked me down in the evening. There was a knock at my

door as I was washing up from dinner. When I opened the door she held up two bottles.

"Beer?" she asked.

I nodded her in. Well, it was good beer. She sat at the table and opened the bottles as I brought out glasses. She watched while I poured.

"So, why did you leave last night?"

In the pause while I thought of what to tell her, she went on, "Some people say I am too blunt, but I think it's better to have things settled at once. I won't just sit and wonder. If I think something, I will ask it. You weren't unhappy?"

The best course for evasion, I have always found, is to let a small part of the truth stand in for the whole.

"I often have dreams, and sometimes I can get rather loud. I was in the middle of one last night, and I only just managed to wake myself before I woke you. I thought it better to spend the rest of the night here."

"Oh, that's very simple," she said, breaking into a smile. "One just casts *Silencio* on oneself before falling asleep, like when there's a problem with snoring."

It was quite simple. It would cover any risk of my saying something in my sleep. That left the problem of saying something I shouldn't while awake. Of course, I had managed that before.

"Very well," I said. Was that all there was to it, then? No recriminations for walking out on her?

"You mean that? Very well?"

"Yes." I was a little surprised at myself, that it should be so simple, but why couldn't I have something simple for once? Perhaps it was reckless, but at that moment, sitting across from her, all I wanted was for it to be simple. Perhaps I did want to simply live, after all.

"Good," she said, smiling again.

It seemed good just then, simply good, and even later that night, extremely good. However, I was certainly feeling the side effects of my lack of sleep in lab on Monday.

The research was proceeding faster with Park covering Mata's prep. It was hard to tell how much we had progressed in the atmosphere of lab, but at least there were no incidents that interrupted the

work. I made some progress on my notes, but I was still sticking on the trigger. In some ways, it would have been easier if we had been developing the process in the context of Dragonpox. In that case, I would simply create a trigger that would react to the presence of the virus. A little bit of Frazier's first principle, quite easy to accomplish.

With lycanthropy it was more complicated, as the disease worked by mutating the body's own cells. I couldn't base the trigger off an alien presence in the body. It had to be based on a specific mutation of the native cells, yet not react to the cells' normal state. I couldn't really call any of my ideas very promising. By the end of the week I was ready to start snarling at the RAs again. By the way they were watching me in lab, I thought they knew it.

It came as a surprise when Paola of all people came up to my desk at the end of lab. I was scowling at my worthless notes, wondering whether I should bin them, feed them to the fish, or burn them, when she suddenly invited me to come along with the RAs for a drink. I stared at her blankly. Grossman must have thought I needed a translation, since he put his foot in at once to explain.

"A bunch of us go out every Friday for a drink at a bar just outside University Park. It's no big deal, most of the RAs come, and some of the staff. Dick, if he's around, Professor Funke, Professor da Silva..."

Did I see him giving Mata a look at Professor Funke's name?
What was he playing at?

"You're welcome to join us."

"Hmm."

He knew enough not to push, thankfully. It wasn't until I was going upstairs to my flat that the matter was decided. Uli was just coming down, and called out as if it were nothing, "ah, will you come along to the bar, Cyril?"

"Yes," I said as if it were nothing.

It was a short walk from the main entrance of the University to a bar called TRES FRONTEIRAS, apparently heavily used by UFAM students. It was dim inside, more crowded and noisier than I would have liked, but at least the RAs had a regular table on the first floor, away from the worst of it. I secured a seat near the corner, against

the wall. I could leave at any time, of course.

Pitchers of beer arrived, and fried snacks, and the RAs tumbled into chairs and bench seats. The budding alchemists were there, unfortunately, and two from the herbology section, Carraldo and Inez Dos Santos. The secretary, Valeria, I remembered, was there, as well as my own RAs. Dick bobbed up the stairs a few minutes after everyone else, calling across the table {"has anyone ordered food yet?"} When he saw me, he came over and clapped me on the shoulder and took the seat on the end of the table next to me, on the other side of me from Uli.

"Cyril, you came! I thought nothing was going to get you off campus. Excellent!"

The RAs were talking loudly, but I couldn't catch much of the Portuguese with everyone speaking at once. I was content for the moment to sip my drink and not pay attention. The problem of the trigger was turning slowly in my mind as Uli spoke across me to Dick on some herbology project.

It was Paola who broke my concentration. "Hmm?" I hadn't quite caught her question. She repeated herself in English.

"What are we working on next? After we have the stasis complete?"

The lab had made progress that week, eliminating several dead ends. One of Grossman's strains had potential, though it would probably be a month before we had a definitive conclusion on the best process.

"The trigger," I said shortly. One month to move from a complete standstill to the stage of having concrete possibilities for testing. The thought was daunting.

"That is what you're working on now?" And getting nowhere. I grimaced into my beer.

"It's a problem of... a problem of..." she had difficulty finding the word, and said something rapidly to Dick and Portuguese.

"Metamorphosis, my dear," he replied.

"Metamorphosis," she pronounced carefully.

"Yes," I said.

"Professor da Silva knows about metamorphosis," said Uli. "Dick, where is Henrique? Is he coming?"

"No, he went back to Interzone for the weekend; visiting friends, I believe."

I remembered the huge moths riding around on his back; of course he would know about metamorphosis. A natural and periodic alteration of form, an animal moving from one state to another. It was the key to developing a trigger, it had to be.

"Cyril? Cyril?" Uli nudged me. I must have been staring. Dick laughed. I turned to him.

"When is he returning?" I asked.

"Monday, I believe. Don't look like that – you can wait two days!"

It was actually two-and-a-half days, three nights. Damn, I could have spent all weekend working on the trigger if I could only talk to him now. I leaned back with an exasperated sigh. I didn't want to be patient when I could be making progress. Uli reached for my hand.

I saw it just in time and picked up my beer quickly. A chill was settling into me. Had anyone noticed? The RAs seemed preoccupied with their own conversations. I avoided looking at Uli. Did any of them know? That look between Grossman and Mata earlier in the evening... I wasn't sure.

"Cyril?"

I couldn't very well not look at her now. It was an impossible situation, and I had put myself squarely in it by ignoring my own rules.

"Hmm?" I said, as neutrally as I could.

"Everything all right?"

"I need to go back... get back to work." The need to get out of there was suddenly pressing. I was sitting there waiting to be exposed. I was being watched and *I had to get out*. I saw her exchange a worried look with Dick as I fished out a couple of bills to cover my drink and edged around the end of the table.

Dick rested a hand on my elbow as I went past him and asked in a low voice, "easy... are you all right?"

"Yes, I just... I need to go."

"Go on then. Let me know if you need anything."

I got out without a glance back. The first wave of relief came back on the forest paths of UFAM campus. The second came when I shut

the door of my flat behind me. There was no one watching me then.

I could only blame myself, unfortunately. I had broken all the rules that had served me so well over the years. Short-term, no attachments, no real names, absolutely no one with any connection to my professional life. Muggles only, if possible, and most of all, never let anyone see.

Uli couldn't know, of course, that it had to be secret or it could be used against me, against us both, actually, because... well I didn't know why. Dick didn't have any motive to use it, as far as I knew, but perhaps one of the others... Well, it didn't matter if I couldn't think of a reason at the moment. It was still revealing a vulnerability, and that could never be a good move.

There was a knock at my door, then Uli's voice: "Cyril?"

Hell, she must have left directly after me. If anyone at the bar was watching, it would be obvious. Dick couldn't have failed to notice. She knocked again. It would be even more obvious if I left her hanging about in the hall in front of my flat. I opened the door.

"Cyril –" she started.

"Come in." I closed the door behind her.

"Cyril, something is wrong. You left so quickly."

"I had to go." I didn't know what else to say. I walked back to the kitchen table.

"Did it make you angry that I tried to hold your hand? It's clear that you didn't want to."

"Not angry."

"You know, I don't know about where you worked before, but it's not against the rules here if we have something. Dick would never fire someone for such a thing."

I could meet her eyes after that. It was a hell of a better explanation than any I had. It didn't expose me as excessively paranoid, for one thing. "No?"

"Something bothers you very much about it. You're not ashamed of us having sex? Oh, am I blunt again?"

"No, I... don't go around showing..."

"You aren't like Dr. Zosimos, with angry ex-wives? Or... you aren't married, are you?"

She caught me off guard with that suggestion and I had to laugh. Of all the things I had been accused of in my life, being married had never been one of them. It would be a low blow if it wasn't so ridiculous.

"I take that as a 'no'. But I still want to know why I try to touch your hand and then you disappear."

It was hardly a rough interrogation, but I was constantly wrong-footed by such simple questions. It probably didn't help that I wasn't sure of the answers.

"I'm not used to... I don't like the idea of other people knowing."

"So you are ashamed of me?"

"No." Clearly she didn't know which direction my shame ran. I tried to start again, hoping I could find a clear line between what I could say and what I couldn't. "Where I worked before..."

"Dick said you did not have a good working environment in the past."

"What did he say, *exactly*?" I felt myself going on guard.

"I asked him why you never leave your lab or talk to the other staff. He said you had... a 'hostile work environment.'"

"Nothing else?"

"No, of course not."

It was a bit of a relief actually, for her to know that. It meant that there was an answer for her at last. A perfect answer – a small piece of the truth to stand in for the whole.

"Where I worked, something like that would have been used against me. I'm not used to anything else..." I trailed off. She was looking at me with concern.

"That's terrible."

"It's over."

"This sort of thing should not be allowed! *There must be a rule!*" She said seriously. I almost wanted to laugh. Her indignation was irresistible in a way. Oh certainly Death Eaters must not be allowed to backstab and infight, it is bad for morale and counterproductive



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to the cause. There ought to be a rule. I took her hand.

"So," she asked, holding my hand, "it is over, you don't mind now?"

I half wanted to drop her hand again. "It's over, but I'm not used to it being over yet. I'm not comfortable..."

"It makes you uncomfortable to show such things in public, yes?"

That was the crux of it, wasn't it? "Yes."

She sighed. "It's not what I want to do, to make you uncomfortable. I won't do that, but I will not lie or try to be secret either. That's just something I can't do."

"I won't ask you to lie about it, just –"

"I won't fondle you in public."

"Ah, 'fondle' might not be the right word."

"Well, I won't do that in public either."

Interesting wording aside, we seemed to have reached an acceptable compromise, something almost unheard-of in my life.

Later, when I was getting undressed, Uli ran her hand over the string of beads on my arm.

"What's this?"

"Something from an old friend." Well, several old friends. I had almost forgotten the beads, since the proximity charms had never activated.

"A girlfriend?" she asked with a sly smile.

"No."

"Really no?"

"Yes, really no."

"A dead friend," she said with a sudden acuity.

"Yes," I admitted. Dead friends, or dead friendships.

Our attention left the beads then, which was fine by me. Still I couldn't allow myself to forget them again. I had been letting the details slip, which was unacceptable. I had to keep everything under control.



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METAMORPHOSIS

I dreamt that night that I was flying through the dark sky, tiny clusters of lights among the winding rivers below me. One by one the lights were going out. Without their anchoring presence below me, I couldn't tell if I was flying, floating or falling.

I woke with a jolt, followed by a lesser jolt at finding Uli asleep next to me. I still wasn't used to that. We were in my bedroom this time: another rule broken.

As a child, I thought flying dreams were exclusive to witches and wizards, a precursor of the powers to come. It was Lily who told

Chapter 22 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 41, No.4
BELTANE 2004

me that muggles had flying dreams as well. At the time, I thought it a terrible judgment on them, that their brains would torment them with a desire for something they could never have. I couldn't imagine any productive purpose for a dream like that. Until, of course, I had my dream of Lily.

I always had that, even after her death, even after any vestige of romantic love for her had faded. It was a sort of judgment and a torment, but it had kept me alive and fighting for years. I had needed it.

If I hadn't had her, I would have had something else, I supposed. Whatever it was had to be unattainable so I could hold it out in front of myself for so many years without reaching it.

Now what did I have? Uli wasn't a dream. At least I didn't think a dream would snore like that. Could I really keep myself going now without one? I wasn't sure, but perhaps now that I didn't have an impossible cause, I wouldn't need an impossible dream to carry it out. I went back to sleep.

That weekend I spent mostly marking time until Professor da Silva's return. On Monday I remained in lab just long enough to set the RAs on their variants. I put Grossman in charge, against my better judgment, and left the lab.

Professor da Silva opened his door almost immediately at my knock, his eyes strangely magnified behind his glasses, focusing somewhere above my head before wandering down to my face.

"Good day, Dr. Ramson," he rumbled, "please." He stepped back from the door to let me in. He was wearing a red fez, perhaps a remnant from his trip to Interzone.

His office was dim, slatted blinds closed against the sun. I was conscious of whirring wings and clicking legs in the corners of the room. I didn't see any trace of his moth passengers this time, but an enormous centipede rippled away across the floor to run around the base of the wall like a living wainscoting.

I was about to start on the sentences in Portuguese that I had been practicing over the weekend, but Professor da Silva began first, with a hesitant "here, see. I will thank you."

He rested his hand on a shelf between two large terrariums and

a long-legged shape ran forward eagerly and rested on his palm. It was the wandering spider that Uli had collected in the rainforest. He held it in front of him on his flat palm, beaming down at it with pleasure. If any spider could beam back, it was surely this one. It rotated itself to face Professor da Silva and gently stroked his palm with its long forelegs. The professor returned his hand to the shelf and the spider backed away slowly into the shadows. Fine, they were obviously perfect for each other.

“Metamorphosis,” I began, “I am working on a trigger mechanism that requires...”, but Professor da Silva cut me off.

“Please, please! Here.” He gave an oddly formal bow, deep enough that the tassel of his fez swung forward over his face. His outstretched hand indicated the enormous beetle on his desk. A bright-green mantid chose that moment to land on his hand. He shook it off very gently and tapped his fingers on the desktop in front of the beetle. It looked like some sort of scarab. It lowered its abdomen to the desk with a solid thump and opened its carapace, revealing typewriter keys. *Well.*

I was a hunt and peck typist at the level of a nearsighted chicken, but if that was what it took... I had only struck the ‘M’ and the ‘e’ before the beetle raised its abdomen off the desk, wings fluttering. I took my hands off the keys quickly and the beetle resettled. *Fine.*

“Metamorphosis – ” I said. The keys began to work rapidly on their own, the clicking sounds running together into a purring whirr. A pearly sheet of paper began to emerge from the junction between thorax and abdomen.

Metamorphosis, I read:

Gods, inspire me to pour out my words in an endless tale of that process by which every living thing reaches immortality, to become one with the ever-changing nature of the universe, the essential spirit of the divine. Upon our death our flesh is torn by vultures, those intermediaries between heaven and earth, those messengers of the gods, and rises into the sky with them to soar across the world. Our bones are ground into the earth to grow into the plants which support all life. Just as we have filled our lungs with the same air as our ancestors, so will our last

breath, exhaled, be drawn into our descendants as they are born screaming into this world. Our spirit, said to fall in death, passes through the center of the earth to rise on the other side out into the infinity of space. Just as life feeds on life, so our souls feed on death. This is necessary...

“No!” I said sharply. “I don’t want a bloody essay, I need a translation!”

The beetle closed its carapace with a huffy snap and remained motionless. It appeared that I had offended the poor dear.

Professor da Silva tapped the desk again and said, “Kiki, por favor.” *Kiki?*

The beetle slowly reopened its wing case. The unfinished page came free from the carapace and dropped to the floor. A pair of large crab claws unfolded from beneath the desk and snatched it up, clacking. I could hear it being ripped to shreds somewhere out of sight. I drew my feet back.

I began again. “Metamorphosis,” I said, “gods, inspire me to pour forth my words and finish my bloody potion!” The words appeared on a fresh sheet of paper emerging from the beetle’s carapace, translated into Portuguese. *Finally!*

“I am working on a trigger mechanism to activate a potion when the subject begins a metamorphosis. Do you know of a substance or cell mechanism in one of your... charges that is activated at the moment of metamorphosis?”

Da Silva, reading the emerging paper as it uncurled, muttered, “ah, ah. Even better, I have one.”

“Have one?”

“I have a metamorphosis.”

A metamorphosis? What did that mean?

He opened a door at the far side of the office and stepped through what I took to be a bead curtain, but then unfortunately realized was a hanging sheet of webbing completely covered with tiny crawling caterpillars.

Taken on balance, I rather thought it best to move into the center of the room, away from desks, walls, shelves, and other possible hiding places.

Thankfully, Professor da Silva was not gone for long; he came

back through the rustling, quivering curtain bearing before him, well, a metamorphosis. It was the stasis ring I had seen Zosimos testing before. A small shape was held suspended in its field, constantly changing form from a crawling caterpillar to a fluttering white moth and back again. Zosimos must have tweaked something to make the aging effect run in a cycle.

"Here," he placed it in my hands. "It is your metamorphosis."

I carried it back to the lab with great care. I still had to find some method to link a trigger to the metamorphosis; it wasn't as if I could toss it, ring and all, into a cauldron.

As I came near the lab door, I could hear singing inside. It was Grossman, of course. I had a little trouble getting the lab door open with my hands full of the stasis ring. Eventually my elbow did the job and I edged halfway in.

"Grossman, shut up and get the bloody door!" That made him jump, I noted with satisfaction. He hurried around the lab bench to me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Um..."

"This is a lab, not a stage show. Not that you would have made it past the first audition if it was!"

"What is that?" He pointed at the ever-changing moth.

"Don't try to change the subject!"

Paola said something in Portuguese that I didn't know.

"Is that right: it's the whole life-cycle of a moth?" Grossman asked.

"Essentially correct, but..."

"Ooooh!" The RAs all clustered around the stasis ring on the lab bench. Paola was fiddling with the knob on the side of the ring that slowed the transformation to a crawl.

{ "Is this the metamorphosis for the trigger, like you said?" } she asked.

{ "Exactly." }

"Like you said?" asked Grossman, "I don't remember you talking about the trigger mechanism." Was that a touch of jealousy in his voice? I smirked.

"Perhaps you were too busy *singing*. {All right, back to work! And no *singing!*}"

For the next hour I practiced using the controls on the ring, which were quite delicate, and trying to think how I could use the metamorphosis to key the trigger. It came down to Frazier's first principle of Dark Magic: the part may affect the whole and the whole the part, First Corollary: a symbol may stand for an object, and an object for a symbol.

Clearly, I had my object to stand for my symbol. The problem was how to physically add it to the trigger. If I could halt the metamorphosis at several stages in the transformation, extract cells and distill them, perhaps that would be an adequate representation of the symbol. I looked up at the equipment table. Centrifuge, aerator, pulverizer, dryer...

"Grossman!" I snapped. He jumped. "Where is the distiller?"

"Uh..."

"What did you do with the distiller, Grossman?"

"I didn't..."

"Where is the distiller?"

"Dr. Zosimos took it."

"What? When?"

"While you were down the hall, uh, just now." The other RAs were nodding.

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"Well, it is lab equipment, and he's lab staff. I'm just head of RAs..."

"Grossman, when I leave you in charge, I expect you to defend this lab from all threats, internal and external!"

"Threats?"

"Anyone who has ever attempted a universal solvent is a threat." Paola gave a little gasp. Finally, *someone* who understood the seriousness of the situation. I went on.

"Can you really assure me that the distiller will make it back to this lab in working order?"

"Well - "

"Never mind."

"Where are you going?" Grossman said, heading to the door after me.

"To get it back."

As I strode back down the hall to the alchemy lab, my mind raced.

How had he timed it so I would be out of the room? It couldn't be mere coincidence, unless it was my old experiments with Felix at work again. He must have had some intelligence that I was in da Silva's office. That I was planning to go to da Silva was common knowledge to anyone who had gone to the bar on Friday, and some of his RAs had been there. He could also look down the hall from the door of the alchemy lab to da Silva's office, it could have been that simple. I didn't want to think that he had a confederate in my lab. The thought made my blood run cold, but I had to consider it. I would be a fool not to.

I had reached the alchemist's lair. I stood before the doors for a moment, put a polite smile on my face, and entered.

Last time, I remembered going straight into the lab through a narrow corridor between cabinets and devices, but now when I entered I appeared to be in a small square foyer surrounded by six chairs, each with some sort of addition of straps, tubes, glass and metal headpieces and measuring devices. They made my skin crawl. There were two doors, to the right and left. I decided to use the left-hand rule and quickly came to a series of lab benches covered with bubbling retorts and smoking crucibles. They were, however, all unattended. *Reckless fool.*

There was no exit that I could see, so I had to backtrack past the chairs, then down the right-hand corridor past a juddering machine stamping out small colorful cubes, past a series of cabinets in various stages of construction, and into an open space. It was furnished like a sitting-room, except for the chalk-circle wards and activated symbols inscribed on the rugs, and the distiller, *my* distiller in the middle of the coffee table between an oversized photo book on THE VINEYARDS OF ITALY and a stack of KITCHEN BEAUTIFUL magazines. Dr. Zosimos was running a feather-duster along the top of a frame of a painting of a country cottage covered with roses. Treehorn was fiddling with the distiller. *My* distiller.

"Ah, Dr. Ramson! So nice that you've dropped by. You do take an interest in the other labs after all."

"Dr. Zosimos."

"Myron, Myron, please. Yes, well, you are just in time for our little experiment."

"I don't want to –"

"Oh, not to worry, you're not interrupting! Not at all; Treehorn has it well in hand." The moon-faced boy was lifting a jar of bright-pink balls to the mouth of the distiller. Were those gumballs? I winced as they clattered down into the tank. I didn't want to think about what gum would do to the equipment.

"Now wait a minute –"

"Oh, no need to wait," he waved a hand at his RA. "Treehorn can proceed while I give you the rundown."

To my dismay, Treehorn had already activated the distiller, which was now making a noise like a troll chewing bones.

"A pure symbol, as you may know, has a great many applications through the first corollary to Frazier's first principle. Of course many such symbols are already in standard use, such as the blood of an enemy to stand for vengeance, but many more advanced concepts have never been manifested." He was bubbling with excitement. "Well, go on, what symbol am I manifesting? Have a stab at it!"

That wasn't what I particularly wanted to stab at, but there were activated circles on the floor and the distiller was already running. I couldn't safely disrupt the experiment.

I looked around at the Barcalounger, tasseled lampshades, the glass sculpture of a leaping dolphin...

"Mediocre aspirations?" I tried.

His face twisted in distaste. "No –"

"Bourgeois ennui?"

"No!"

"Hmm... superficial contentment?"

"Stability, man, *stability!* It should be obvious to someone of intelligence!"

Oh, was that so? "Pink gumballs?"

"A simple joy of childhood with a glue-like consistency –"

"In my distiller!"

"*Your* distiller? My boy, I'm afraid you're under a bit of misapprehension –"

"No, and I'm not your boy."

"Well," he went on as if I hadn't spoken, "the fact is that it's the lab's distiller, and as it wasn't in use –"

"I am *about* to use it in an *important* experiment and I require its immediate return."

"Hmm, hmm, hmm, about to?" He rocked from his heels up to his toes and back again with an infuriating little smile. "I'm afraid 'about to' means nothing. It is in use or it isn't. It *wasn't* in use in your lab. It *is* in use in mine."

"Ah yes, what a use. I'm so glad that *someone* has finally struck on distilling the essence of mediocrity. Oh I am sorry, *stability*." That twisted the smile off his face.

"I suppose you have some sort of grand use of a vast importance that I could never hope to achieve."

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I am working on something which could actually save lives."

"You cauldron-sniffers are all alike. You say you want to save lives, but really you just want to play god." Treehorn had settled into the Barcalounger with one of the magazines from the table.

"No matter how much I might want to play god, at least I would never be so moronic as to try to make a universal solvent!"

"Arrogant prick!"

"Bugging twat!"

"You think you can walk into my lab and tell me what equipment I can and can't use –"

"Just as much as you can walk into my lab and take equipment without permission –"

"I don't need permission to use lab equipment that is not in use!"

"In *my* lab you do. You, or anyone else, are not to touch anything in my lab without permission!"

"Oh, that's rich. It's not your lab and it's not your equipment! As much as you may want to pretend otherwise, you are an employee here like everyone else, and one with no seniority! I don't know what you're used to, but you can't waltz around like you're superior to the rest of us. You're not, you're nothing!"

"At least I'm not a *fucking idiot*."

I walked out on him. I had to walk out, as much as I hated to cede the field. It was pointless. I could shout at him all I pleased, but the fact remained that I couldn't break his activated circles and turn off the distiller in the middle of an experiment. He might be a dangerous fool, but I was not, and I couldn't make myself act like one, no matter how personally satisfying it might have been at that moment. No, I would have to be more cautious.

I admit, I had rather been looking forward to storming out and slamming the door, but even that small satisfaction was ruined by my running bodily into the cluster of my RAs stationed directly outside the lab.

"Grossman, what are you doing?"

"We're, uh, on break... so, no distiller?"

I gave a tight smile. "It's not needed at present."

"Oh."

"What does Valeria like?"

"What?"

SIMPLE

It took three weeks. I had to lay my groundwork, and more importantly, I had to be absolutely ready to put the distiller to use immediately once I had it. It wouldn't do to have Zosimos try to snatch it back again.

The RAs were narrowing the stasis variants down to two strains. I had quite a collection of caterpillars and stacks of theories on the trigger ready for the distiller once I got it. Grossman made noises about going to Dick with the problem, but I told him I would dip his feet in the piranha pool if he let a word slip. The hard work, the real hard work going forward was forcing myself to go out with the RAs on Friday.

Dick was as pleased as punch and chatted at me about the ridicu-

Chapter 23 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 41, No.5
LITHA 2004

lous errors he had found in student papers in Arkham. Uli laughed over me at Dick and her leg kept brushing against mine. Was she doing that on purpose? I was trying to watch the RAs at the other end of the table and it was very distracting.

Mata had asked Inez dos Santos to dance. That was interesting; I thought he had his eye on Paola. Paola was trying to read the covers of Treehorn's comics, but he wasn't taking much notice. Henrique had Grossman deep in conversation.

"The mandrake's wang is the most potent part of the plant..." Dick said.

"Oh no, you're not serious!" said Uli.

"I had a very hard time deciding what to write in the margin."

Uli's leg brushed against me again as she laughed. I put my hand on her knee under the table just to keep her leg still, but, well, that was interesting. I kept my hand there. She blushed. *Very interesting.*

"Though it may be the same size and shape as your 'wang', that is not what the root of the mandrake is called. Please use the proper terminology in your papers..."

"Oh no, you didn't!"

Uli put her hand on mine under the table. Very interesting. Shit, we were being obvious, weren't we? Except that the RAs weren't looking in our direction, and I was quite sure that Dick already knew. He had found me alone in the break room the previous week, asked casually how I was, and after a little throat clearing let it drop that the lab had no policies against staff relationships. "As long as everyone can work together professionally, I'm happy and I hope you are too." He ought to tell that to Zosimos.

Subtle, he was not. Still, it made a welcome change from Hogwarts where anyone caught carrying on would have hell to pay. Supposedly we had to set a 'good example' for the students or some such bollocks. It made for a lot of sneaking around and 'visiting my sick grandmother in St. Mungos.' Whenever Albus was called away on his Ministry business, Hooch would joke "who's hosting the staff orgy tonight?" I stayed well out of it. I preferred to keep my indiscretions entirely separate from the wizarding world.

At any rate, I didn't want to remove my hand at the moment. I could do what I liked, reckless or not. I leaned back, satisfied. I had beer and food and my hand on a knee. Simple. Not even all the loud talk and the strangers at the other tables could bother me that night.

Of course, nothing could remain simple, not for me. On Monday, I dropped in on the reception office with two large packages of the spicy nut mix that Grossman said Valeria liked. For years I had instructed my team captains to get to know the Hogwarts secretaries. It was the best way to be assured of the first choice of practice times and many other advantages. It always astounded me that none of the other Houses ever tried it. I suspected that most of the students outside of my own House never knew that the secretaries and administrative staff even existed, a very great fault. The secretaries were one of the best sources of information and influence in the school. In any organization, I suspected. I had a few secretaries in the Ministry that I knew quite well... all that was moot, now.

"Please don't imagine that I wish to cross any personal line, Miss. Morais. I have been employed in enough places to know where the work of the lab really rests. It is simply a 'thank you.' I'm sure the whole place would fall into ruin without you."

"Oh! This is the spicy kind!"

"Is that all right?"

"Oh yes, they are very good, thank you."

"Not at all, it's nothing compared to the work you do."

"Oh, it's nothing."

I made to leave the office, but she stopped me.

"I want to ask you, but I never see you. I need everyone to speak English to me, and you also."

"Of course." As I had been speaking English, I wasn't sure what she was getting at.

"You will?"

"Will what, exactly?"

"Come here to speak English sometimes. Tomorrow?"

"Hmm. Twelve-thirty." I didn't have much spare time, but I was planning to ask her for a favor soon. It was just as well to have her owe me one.

Of course I had to run into Uli as I left the office.

"Cyril," she said with a sideways look, "what was all that?"

Had she been listening in? "I agreed to help Valeria practice her English."

"Hmmm." Her face was set.

"Hmmm?"

"I didn't think you were one who does this kafe klatsch chitchat and so on."

"I don't."

"But for her you will?"

I sighed. It couldn't be simple, of course. I would have to bring her in and tell her part of it after all.

"I will for someone I need a favor of."

"A favor."

"In about a week, I'll need her to put a call through to Dr. Zosimos."

Her face relaxed into a grin when she got it, then her face became serious again. She took my elbow and said intently, "I need you to promise me –"

"I don't make –"

"I need you to promise me you will tell me when, because I *have* to hear that."

"Not a word, understand?"

She nodded eagerly. Ridiculous, it was already becoming complicated.

The next step came the following Friday. When we arrived at the bar with the RAs, there was a flurry of conversation between Grossman and the waitress. I couldn't catch most of it. I raised my eyebrows at Uli.

"Something about the big table upstairs being damaged or vandalized. She said it just happened and they haven't had a chance to replace it yet. They'll have to put us at some smaller tables."

It happened to suit my purpose admirably, since Treehorn opted for a table on his own to read his comics in peace. Once the others were deeply involved in their food and drink, I took the seat across from him. He didn't look up. I laid two of the comics I had bought on the table. He looked up then, first at them, then at me.

He didn't say anything, but I could tell he wanted to pick them up. I

pushed down the lip of the paper bag under my arm so he could see the titles of the other books I was carrying. I hoped I could rely on the recommendations Paola had given me. When I saw the look on his face I knew that Paola hadn't steered me wrong. I smiled; he was mine.

"I'll be done with these," I said, tapping the books in the bag, "when the distiller is ready for me. See to it, and inform me at once." I went back to Uli's table with the bag under my arm. After I was seated I looked back at his table. Treehorn and his new books were already gone.

Simple. I left early with Uli that night. On the way back to campus, she asked me abruptly, "very well, what's all of this?"

"This?"

"Come one, this funny business. First something with Valeria, and now something with Treehorn."

I was reluctant. It was simple enough in my head, but somehow I suspected it would not hold up so well in the open air. "It's nothing."

"It's *something*."

"It's nothing *important*." It wasn't really, but it was almost, almost like playing at the Hunt back when we were all students, before all the games turned deadly.

"You know, I thought you are someone who says what he thinks, but that is not quite right, is it? You say what you think about other people, but not about yourself."

I looked at her face. The game might not be deadly, but it was very serious to her. I sighed, I didn't want *serious*, I had enough of serious.

"Dr. Zosimos snatched my distiller from the lab just before I was going to use it. I'm going to get it back. I'm merely laying some groundwork."

To my relief, she snorted. "Dr. Zosimos can be very on-the-nerve, but you can just ask Dick to step in, you know. That is much simpler."

"No, I want to get it back myself."

"Oh, but this is childish."

I didn't have an answer to that, but I didn't need one. The serious look was gone.

It was the middle of the night and Nott was banging on my door. It must be a crisis, he would never dare otherwise. His face said as

much when I wrenched open the door.

“The common room – water, it’s full of water – ”

I was already running down the hall, *trying* to run down the hall, but I couldn’t seem to run fast enough. All at once, there I was stepping through the false wall of our common room into a wall of water.

She was the only thing I could see, floating upright, motionless. The white nightshirt that Dad always hated almost glowed in the black water. Her hair was floating across her face. I couldn’t see her. I had to get her out. I grabbed her under her arms and pulled and pulled. I couldn’t move her and I couldn’t breathe.

“Hey, stop, stop it.”

She wouldn’t come up.

“Wake up, Cyril, wake up!”

“What?” I said. Tried to say: I had no voice.

“Cyril, stop it.”

I stopped. I was breathing, after all, and there wasn’t any water if you didn’t count the sweat running down my back.

“My arms are supposed to be attached to my shoulders. I thought you liked them that way,” Uli said lightly. I was behind her, holding her under her arms. I loosened my grip, but kept holding on.

“You’ve still got the Silencio on,” she said. “Shit, you scared me for a second.”

I rested my forehead on her back.

“Was it a bad dream?”

I kept holding on.

“Cyril?”

When I didn’t answer she touched my hands lightly. “All right, it’s all right.”

Maybe she had seen my hands shaking, because she let me hold on and she didn’t ask me any more questions. It was one of the best things anyone had ever done for me. I held on.

We didn’t speak of it over breakfast, thank god. It was a quiet affair. Uli began on a sentence in a sort of hesitating way, once or twice, but she always had another subject when the words came. When she left, I felt a guilty relief. All ridiculous, it was just a stupid dream.

I held on until the next Friday. I had retired to my office to work on the trigger. I was at a tricky point in my calculations and every little noise that the RAs made in lab set me on edge. Finally, Grossman had put down his knife and said, “so, Dr. Ramson, do you want us to work on these variants or should we all just leave for a while? Because if you want us to work, there is going to be chopping.”

I glared at him and retired to my office. Not that I wanted to concede the point, but it was true that this way we could all do our work. In the peace of the office I was actually making progress, actually accomplishing something, when I heard the door open.

No knock? I thought I had trained my RAs better than that. I looked up with a sharp rebuke ready, but I swallowed it when I saw Treehorn standing there, no expression on his doughy face.

“Is it ready?”

He nodded.

“When I have it in hand you will receive the books.”

He oozed out. I put my pen in its place and straightened the notes on my desk. When I swept out through the lab I noted some suspicious whispers between the RAs. They could wonder.

I found Valeria in the reception room. She was more than ready to move forward with our plan. “I think it will be five minutes and I will have Mdm. Varos on the line.”

Valeria had informed me, when I approached her for my favor several days before, that the second former Mrs. Zosimos was a much better talker than the first former Mrs. Zosimos. Also, as her pique was more recent and more bitter, she could be guaranteed to keep Zosimos occupied for at least twenty minutes, if not longer. Valeria was actually quite excited about the project; I had some convincing to do before she agreed to wait for Treehorn’s word.

Five minutes. I hurried down the hall to Uli’s office as I promised. I rapped quickly on the door.

“Come!” she called.

I cracked the door. “Now,” I said.

“Now, what?”

“The call. Come now or don’t come at all.”

"Oh! The call!" She jumped up and smoothed down her shirt, then followed me out into the hall. I had some reservations about letting her in on the call, but I had realized that she could be quite useful as a second line of defense. We ducked into the lounge to wait for our cue.

For some reason, all my RAs were there, staring at us. I glared at them.

"What are you doing?"

"We're... making coffee?" Grossman offered. Mata raised an empty mug by way of proof.

"Why aren't you working?"

"We're on break."

"Get back to work!"

"Oh yes, just as soon as we've had our coffee."

I wanted to say more, but Uli was tugging at my sleeve. I peered around the door frame to catch sight of Valeria leading Zosimos into reception, saying, "he says he must speak to you before he orders the part..."

As soon as they were in Valeria's office, Uli and I followed. Uli stopped and leaned casually against the wall just outside of reception. I continued towards Alchemy, trying to keep my footsteps quiet. It was difficult, however, with all those echoes.

Echoes. I stopped abruptly, causing Park to run directly into me. I whirled; sure enough, my RAs were clumped just behind me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"We're on break," volunteered Grossman.

"Go have your break in the break room," I hissed.

"No, we thought we'd go for a stroll."

Goddamn it, I didn't have time for this. On the other hand, if the Death Eaters had taught me anything, it was that collusion was a very good guarantor of silence. I turned and started down the hall again.

"Get in my way and I'll hex you, understand?"

The little bloody pitter-patter of their feet picked up again behind me.

I flung open the doors of the Alchemy lab and found myself in a thoroughly nauseating room. It was a wide-open space, but the air was heavy with the scent of burnt sugar and chocolate. No wonder: there was a chocolate river winding its way through the middle of the room

between bright green hills whose grass strongly resembled dyed shredded coconut. Shrubs and flowers in unnatural colors dotted the hills. At one end of the room the river churned over a small waterfall with an awful glooping noise, and disappeared down a tunnel at the other end. A peppermint-striped boat bobbed on the chocolate river near the tunnel. I would be damned if I would take that thing.*

Instead, I led the RAs across the river on a path of sticky stepping-stones. {"Do you think all of this can be eaten?"} Paola wondered.

{"I wouldn't advise it, Miss. Hilberto. I wouldn't trust Zosimos with anything edible."}

We found a pink door half-hidden behind the rocks of the waterfall on the other side. It was none too soon for me; that room was making me quite ill.

After hurrying down a short hall we stepped into a small bare testing room. Beatriz Vilas Boaz and Frieda Borges were there. So much for a clandestine invasion. Beatriz was holding aloft an umbrella that seemed to be generating a violent thunderstorm beneath its ribs. Frieda was flying a miniature kite through the clouds below it. They both looked up and stared at us as we entered. Beatriz began to close the umbrella.

"Park," I snapped, "distract them!"

I'm not sure what he was trying to do, but it was quite distracting. It involved bellowing a song in Korean and a hopping, spinning dance. Well, he never lacked enthusiasm.

I ushered the rest quickly through the opposite door into, well, a sort of waiting room, pure white. A long oval table stood in the middle of all the whiteness, covered with a pile of fresh green grapes surrounding an abstract sculpture made out of some white, glistening, viscous material. I wasn't sure what it represented, but it looked rather obscene. A full-length mirror stood on the opposite end of the table. Treehorn sat in one of the white swivel chairs, head buried in a book about the Chrysler building.

* The variable nature of Zosimos' lab can be explained by his limited-range not-quite-infinite-improbability generator (pat. pend.). He's almost got it perfected; there are minor bugs he needs to work out.

I stood directly in front of his chair and held up the two books I promised him at eye level. His head slowly came up. "Where is it, Mr. Treehorn?"

{“Ah ha! Here is our sweet thing!”} Mata was holding up the edge of the white tablecloth to show the distiller hidden beneath. Treehorn took the books from my hand.

“Mr. Mata, Mr. Grossman, the distiller.”

They slid it free and carefully lifted it to the tabletop, brushing away grapes to make room.

“Right – ” I began.

{“It goes in reverse, it shows time in reverse!”} Paola was standing before the mirror on the other end of the room looking intently into its depths. {“It shows everything going backwards.”}

I looked over her shoulder into the mirror. Sure enough, I saw myself stepping backwards, Mata and Grossman returning the distiller under the table, all of us walking backwards out the door. *Of all the useless things...* Zosimos had probably been trying to make a glass that would show the future, knowing him.

{“Miss. Hilberto, enough. We are leaving. Mata, Grossman!”}

They hefted the distiller, I held the door and we went through.

In the testing room, Park had foolishly managed to get himself captured by the alchemists-in-training. Beatriz had shut his head up in the umbrella and Frieda was winding the kite string around his legs. He was still trying to sing, though muffled by the thunder.

“Park! Stop fooling around. We are leaving!”

Paola kept Beatriz and Frieda occupied with a few stinging hexes while Park struggled free, head dripping and glasses askew, but still smiling. Paola and I held off the alchemy RAs with a Protego as Mata and Grossman maneuvered the distiller through the door. A Colloportus behind us, and we were free of them.

We were slowed only momentarily by crossing the river with the bulky distiller. I could have instructed them to use a levitation charm, but it is generally not advisable to cast spells directly on delicate equipment. It was better to have the RAs carry it by hand.

Finally, we were out of the Alchemy lab and heading down the

corridor. It was Park who brought us up short just before turning the corner, waving his arms in the air. I could hear what had alarmed him: Uli's raised voice just around the corner.

“Ah, Dr. Zosimos, I was hoping you could take a look at something for me. It's just in my office – ”

Damn, he must have broken free from his call with the second former Mrs. Zosimos.

“Excuse me, Professor Funke, but I've already been away from the lab too long.”

“Really, it will just be a moment...” She was trying her best, but it sounded like a losing battle.

“Grossman, this way,” I hissed, knocking at Professor da Silva's office.

The moment he opened the door, he was almost bowled over by Park. The rest of us crowded in after him. Professor da Silva shut the door after us, but didn't seem at all put out by our abrupt entry. He gave a short bow and rumbled “Good day, Potions lab.”

He edged around us to the center of the room and pointed his wand straight up. I looked up, up into a cloud of swirling fireflies dancing in patterns in the air. The ceiling was lit by glowworms in complicated configurations, like writing in an unknown alphabet. As he dipped and turned his wand, the fireflies changed course, one way then another, crisscrossing in a dizzying whirl. I forced my eyes down.

Park, excited, had resumed his twirling dance. Without the singing this time, thankfully.

{“Hey,”} said Paola, {“I think he's going by.”} She was leaning with her ear against the door. I listened at the door for a moment to his steps moving down the corridor, then the click of the Alchemy Lab doors. I cracked open the door to see an empty corridor.

“Quickly now, back to the lab. Park, pay attention!”

We left da Silva to his dancing flies and hurried around the corner. Uli and Valeria were leaning against the wall near reception, laughing.

“Hurry, hurry!” said Uli. Did she think we were lazing about?

As we passed the break room, I said {“Miss. Hilberto, get a cup of coffee and bring it along.”}

{“But is against the rules to bring food or drink – ”}

“Don’t tell me the damn rules, get it now!”

The rest of us poured into the lab, Mata and Grossman setting the distiller back in place with a sigh of relief.

“Grossman, how do you get it started?”

“You can’t run it empty.”

I held out my hand to Paola, who obligingly handed me the cup of coffee. I poured it in, and Grossman turned on the burner.

“Break is over, everyone back to work, *now*.”

When Zosimos burst into the lab two minutes later, all the RAs were back at their work stations, I was making notes at my desk and the distiller was busy distilling.

“Ah, Dr. Zosimos. Good of you to drop by.”

“Distiller, where’s the distiller?”

“In its place, of course. It’s in use, I’m afraid.”

“In use?” He seemed a bit excited.

“Yes. Some divisions of this lab are quite busy with important experiments – ”

“In use for what?” he demanded.

“I’m distilling some coffee.”

“That has nothing to do with your experiment!”

“Certainly it does,” I said, trying to think of a connection.

“What? What exactly?”

“Surely it’s not difficult to understand? For someone of intelligence... well, it’s quite simple to see that the addition of caffeine to a potion can speed its absorption and effect on the body, therefore if the substance is distilled and then run through a reversal process...”

“You’ve just made that up!”

“The distiller is in use. You’ll have to wait your turn.”

“And when will that be?”

“When I am done with it!” I said, half-rising from my chair. He fumed at me silently, then left without another word.

The silence lasted a moment after the door slammed behind him, then Park raised his arms in the air.

“Champions!”

THE RETURN

The question was not whether I had been a fool, but rather if I had been too foolish to live.

I worked all weekend and the next week polishing my method of distilling the ingredients to compose my symbol. I had settled on using the mouthparts of the moth in three of its life stages. The mouth would hold additional symbolic significance to a lycanthrope. Paola was the best at actually controlling the stasis ring, so once I had removed the proboscis in the adult form, she was able to move the stasis backwards so I could remove the same parts from the earlier forms as well.

I placed the three simultaneous mouthparts, together with *aqua vitae* and *aqua regia*, into the distiller, and after twelve hours I had, well, something. After a week of improving and testing it, I knew I had something potent

The RAs’ had another river trip planned the next Saturday, but it had been called off due to some sort of vandalism to the lab’s boat. Apparently, the damage was superficial, but the trip had nevertheless been postponed for a week. I spent the morning going over orders for the lab with Grossman as we were running low on some ingredients, then I settled in to focus on the trigger.

Now that I had the distiller back in its rightful place, I wanted to start the RAs on variant trials for the trigger on Monday. Uli had promised to get me for dinner, so I looked up in anticipation when I heard the door swing closed.

It wasn’t Uli, it was the skin man looming in grey folds where it slumped against the door, its blind head turning from side to side. I hadn’t known that it was so tall; it reached the top of the doorframe.

No maximum range then, probably none at all if it followed me

Chapter 24 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSHAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 41, No.6

LUGHNASADH 2004

from Boston, I thought with a calm I knew wouldn't last. Soon it would have my scent. *My scent.*

With the last of my calm I picked up the jar of rosemary oil and flung it on the floor in front of the skin. It didn't break; I cast Reducto at it and the air filled with the herbal scent as the oil splattered. The skin's head began sharp convulsive jerking.

I went out through the cold storeroom and into the corridor at a run. I had to get them out, get everybody out. The alarm in the potions lab was right by the door, just behind where the skin was standing. There was no way I was going back. There must be another alarm, but where?

Grossman was coming out of the lounge room as I came around the corner, eyes widening as he saw me. "Get out, get everybody out!" I almost grabbed him by the arm before my brain caught up with me. Luckily, he was coming along on his own.

"What?"

"*Idiot*, just get Valeria and get out!"

He veered off towards the front doors and I headed on to Dick's office. Dick must have a way to clear the lab. He was trimming some dead leaves off his orchids when I barged in. He turned and looked at me, blinking, his glasses pushed up on his forehead.

"Dick, get everyone out of the lab!"

"Did you have an explosion? There are containment – "

"Now, Dick, *now!*"

He pushed his glasses back down onto his nose and cast at a small plaque on the wall. An awful tinny ringing started up. Dick took my shoulder and asked me calmly, "fire?"

"No, Dick – "

"What's going on? This is like Boston," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Dick, you have to get out too!" There were windows just behind him; he could go straight out, and then I could... *shit*, I had no ideas except to start running again.

"Not until you tell me what's wrong."

"Dick, you have to get out, now!"

"You better start talking then."

"It's a sending against me, a skin man."

His eyes widened at that. "A sending? How is it following you?"

"By scent, I think. Dick, get out and I'll lead it off."

"No, I don't think so. That's too dangerous. Give me your lab coat."

"Listen to me!"

"Shut up and give me your lab coat!"

His tone surprised me enough that I obeyed. He surprised me again when he stabbed me in the thick of my palm with his scissors and mopped at the blood with the coat. It was obvious what he was trying to do.

"No, Dick."

"Yes. You're going to take the cabinet to Arkham, now. *Shut up!*" he cut me off as I started to protest. "Your being here will just make it worse. It doesn't want me, we'll be fine."

He had the look on his face of the man who had traveled on foot from Manaus to Bogota, who had lived in the rainforest for years, who had fought off bouts of malaria through sheer force of will. I made one last attempt to sway him.

"Dick, everything I've touched, *everyone* I've touched – "

"Will be less of a target than your fresh blood." He took a protean note out of his pocket and gave it to me. "I'll write to you later. Now get out!"

I went.

I came through the cabinet to his Arkham office, quiet late-afternoon light still glowing through the blinds. I wiped my palms on my trousers. Dick was quite capable, of course, but I didn't like leaving him holding my bloody coat. Still, he was right that I would make it worse by being there. I had to trust that Dick would get everyone out. Would get Uli out.

I sat on one of the chairs, but immediately got up again. If the skin man had no range, that meant it would be back here eventually, eating chairs. Unless it ate me first. That was one solution, the only drawback being that for some reason I didn't want to die.

The other solution would be to destroy the skin, which I didn't think was possible. It wasn't like a bone sending that could be eliminated with one well-placed strike. Skins were much harder to make, and I had never heard of any way to destroy them before they found their target.

Even trapping or containment did nothing but slow them down.

I wasn't seeing any course in front of me but running again. If I got lucky, perhaps I would find a way to destroy it. If I got unlucky I would be eaten. Of course I couldn't simply live. I would never be permitted *simplicity*.

The protean note activated at about seven pm. I was back at my apparition point by the pond in the mountains. The leaves of the birches were just starting to turn. I was watching them lit up by the sunset when the card twitched in my pocket. Words were appearing across the note: *Skin mislead. Coming through. Need anything?*

I wrote back: *Bag under my bed. Room password: Leucanthus*. If I was going to start running again I would want my money and emergency supplies.

Ok, I'll be at the office in 15 min, came Dick's reply. I wasn't looking forward to this.

Dick, however, seemed cheerful and even a bit excited when he opened his office door to usher me inside.

"I thought I was going to have a boring day labeling seeds for Svalbard. Well, well!"

I looked away.

"Come on, have a seat. I have to tell you what happened."

"Dick –"

"You do want to know what happened, right? I took your coat out on the river. Dragged it here and there on the way, and in the boat's wake. I dumped it about fifty miles downstream. The skin was close enough that I saw it enter the water at Manaus, so it is following the trail, for now."

I didn't say anything.

"It must be pretty motivated to turn up in daylight like that. Aren't they more active at night?"

I gave him a grudging nod.

"Perhaps because it had you so close, yes? Did it have you this close in Boston?"

I leaned my forehead on my hand and grimaced.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought I had broken the trail and was out of range."

"Then it's a bit stronger than you thought. Well, any ideas?"

I stared at him.

"On how to get rid of it," he prompted. "It's more your specialty than mine."

"I can't keep running forever."

"That's not much of an idea."

"What do you want? I don't know!" I snapped.

"All right," he said calmly, "let's go back. How is it tracking you? You said by scent, so someone must have had something of yours to put it on your trail."

"Blood," I guessed. It would have taken a powerful trail to lead it the three-thousand some miles from Boston to Manaus. Blood would have been the best choice, and I had certainly left plenty of it behind.

"That makes it difficult. You can only disguise that by Polyjuice for a short period. What about whoever made the skin? Do you know who it was?"

"No. There are... several people who would have a grudge against me now."

"Hmm, if you could find out who it is and lead to their arrest –"

I was already shaking my head. I knew that much about skins: "once a skin has a target, it isn't controlled directly. The maker couldn't call it off any more than I could. They are said to be... inexorable."

"When did it start tracking you?"

I had been thinking about that myself. I saw the first signs, the damage to the island, at the beginning of July. "About ten weeks ago."

"Do you think someone has been tracking you from England? Could the skin have traveled that far in time? How long does it take to make one of those things?" He was pulling out a portkey chart and some scratch paper.

"I don't know exactly, but I think they have to be cured for a few days."

"So if someone got busy directly after your 'death' in England... when was that?"

"The second of May."

"So it took it about five weeks to cross the Atlantic, which is..."

roughly 3,000 miles," he read off his chart. "It's about the same from here to Manaus, but it took the skin twice as long to get there? That seems strange."

"I don't know how they travel."

"Well, in any case, could it really manage 3,000 miles in five weeks?"

"Hmm." It didn't seem likely, especially as skins were said to increase in speed over time, not slow down. It was a possibility, I supposed, that the skin had been made on this side of the Atlantic. That left the question of how its maker had picked up my trail.

Dick looked up from his figures. "I think you should stay here for a few days, maybe a week. I told everyone at the lab that there was a potentially toxic gas release, so everyone and everything had to be thoroughly Scourgified. Pretty good story, right? You should be proud of me."

I snorted.

"I took care of your quarters and belongings. There should be no traces to keep the skin around in Manaus. Once it reorients itself and starts heading back up here, well, maybe we'll have a new course of action."

I stared at him.

"If you're worried about your experiment, you can pass along instructions through me. The RAs still have plenty of variant testing to work on, yes?"

"Dick, don't be ridiculous, I can't go back! I'll have to keep moving from now on."

"What? Why would you think that? Obviously this is just temporary until we come up with some method of stopping the skin."

"No, it's too dangerous. It goes after whatever I've touched if I'm not available. The other staff would be vulnerable, as well as your lab equipment."

"I think we can work around that. It clearly passed up plenty of lab equipment in favor of, well, you. When you weren't available, it went for your bloody lab coat. A little bit of your blood and we can easily bait it away from equipment and people. Perhaps that would even be a way to trap it, if there's anything that can hold it."

"I doubt it," I muttered.

"Would you dispute that it's worth looking into? There are quite a

few resources here at Arkham. I can ask some of my colleagues, and there are a few other friends of mine if that doesn't pan out. Look, even if it takes a while to research, I think we can minimize the risk. I'll get you a portkey that you can carry with you. Before you come back we can bait a few areas near the lab with your blood and put an alert ward on them, and there's always my cabinet. All right?"

I thought it over. "It may work for now, but the skin has probably been getting faster as well. Faster and more accurate. It may not be long before I can't evade it at all."

"Why don't we see what we can discover before leaping to the very worst possible conclusion, all right?"

"In my experience –"

"Eh, eh eh!" He cut me off with a raised finger. "It seems to me that you've very neatly avoided the worst possible conclusion several times in the last year. Don't try to tell me you have bad luck!"

Lucky, me? Well, I wasn't dead. *Yet.*

"Look, I've got your bag. Let's get you set up at my apartment. It's just a couple of blocks from campus. I only use it when I have lectures in the middle of the week."

The flat was on Garrison Street, near enough that I could see the corner of the library building from the brick stoop. Dick didn't have a key to let us in; he used a few taps of his wand instead. He saw me watching.

"In this part of town near the University, we really are in an almost entirely magical community. It changes abruptly when you cross the river. The landlords and property owners on this side have a very strong preference for magical tenants. Completely illegal, of course, but the practice is entrenched, especially as the authorities won't enforce the law, and non-magical people aren't exactly in a position to complain. I'm sure they have no idea that they are being discriminated against."

That had always been one of the Dark Lord's talking points, that wizards could not live where they pleased, but of course, the opposite was also true. Somehow, back then I could clearly see the one, but the other was invisible to me.

When we reached the third floor, Dick showed me the spell for unlocking his flat. We entered through a small dim corridor to a combined dining and living room. The windowsill was crowded with plants and his shelves with books. No surprise there.

He opened a closet near the door and handed me a stack of linens, then set me up on his transfigured sofa. A brief tour introduced me to the bath, his bedroom (the home of more plants, books, and several elongated wooden masks), and the tiny kitchen off the dining area. There was also a fire escape which was past the building's anti-apparition wards. I ended up leaning against the doorway of the kitchen as Dick made sandwiches for us both.

"I'll be heading back to the lab tonight. I want to make sure we've got everything Scourgified and I have some donor appointments tomorrow. Write up any protocol you want the RAs to work on next week and I'll have Grossman take care of it."

"I left my notes on my desk in the lab, as long as the skin didn't eat them. I've got a few possible procedures on the trigger outlined for testing."

"I'll write to you by protean note if I can't find your outline. There we are!" He held up his dripping masterpieces. "Let's eat. Whiskey?" "Better than that awful cachaca."

We settled at his table with our sandwiches and glasses.

"I've already told the lab you were called away on urgent business—"

I nodded absently. My pickles kept trying to escape out the back end of my sandwich and now there was mustard on my fingers.

"— but what should I tell Uli?"

I almost lost my sandwich completely at that. I put it down carefully.

"Or I can arrange for her to come through the cabinet if you want to meet her here."

"No," I said automatically.

"Cyril, whatever you do is up to you. I don't want to get in the middle of this, but I won't lie to her."

"Urgent business isn't a lie."

He sighed. "It's not much of an explanation either."

It was an impossible situation, one which I had put myself into

squarely. One of a long line of impossible situations, really.

"I can't..." I trailed off.

"Can't what?" Dick pressed. "You've trusted me with your name for quite some time. Maybe that's just by necessity, but do you really think you have anything to fear from her?"

I just shook my head. How could I explain? My name wasn't simply a name. It had my whole past along with it. Even if she could accept it, I didn't think I could. Maybe now it wouldn't mean my death to say my name, but how could I ever be sure?

"Cyril, you know I'm behind you, but I won't lie to her."

"I'll... write her a note."

"Good."

After we finished eating he let me sit in silence and work on my note while he did the washing up. I tried to think of what I could say. Hardly anything. Uli had let me hold her without asking questions. I hoped I could rely on her goodwill again.

Uli —

I had to leave urgently. I would not have left if it wasn't necessary. I can't say any more. I will return as soon as I can.

— Cyril.

It probably wouldn't be enough for her, but anything more would be too much for me.

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Art by Mottsnave

ON TRACK

I woke very early from a dream in which I was earnestly giving the Dark Lord a detailed report meant for the Order. I only realized what I was saying as I saw the smile slowly spreading across his face.

I dragged myself into the lav and lit it with the strongest Lumos I could muster. There was no need to be quiet, as Dick had gone back to the lab until Tuesday. I splashed water over my face and told the mirror, “*he’s dead*,” several times. Maybe I could convince my reflection; it never seemed to work on myself.

It was still dark outside the window, but it would be useless to

Chapter 25 of **THE NEW SKIN** BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 41, No.7
MABON 2004

try to go back to sleep. I made tea and breakfast and tried to think.

Whoever had made the skin would have had to find a ‘donor,’ kill him, remove the skin without damaging it, set the spells on it, and finally use something of mine to set it on me. It was not a short or easy process. It was messy and risky. Whoever it was would need someplace where they could be certain they would be undisturbed. It was a large undertaking; they would have to be vindictive and absolutely certain of my survival after the battle.

For the vindictiveness at least, my beads held several good candidates. The fact that the beads hadn’t activated could mean that someone else had made the skin, or that my enemy was still in England. However, Dick was right; the timing did suggest that the skin had been made in the States.

If I could find where it had been made, perhaps I could find some trace left behind by its maker. I wasn’t sure how to do that; I had no trace from the skin man to make a directional charm: no hair, no blood.

I set down my mug. If the skin man really was keyed to my blood, to track me, then my blood would have been present at its making. If there was any trace of it left, then perhaps I could track it. The difficult part would be to ensure that the directional charm didn’t constantly point at me. Well, there were ways around that.

I had to raid Dick’s cupboards and office cabinets for supplies, but at last I had everything I needed. Rather than filling Dick’s flat with fumes, I decided to brew out at my sanctuary on the island. I apparated out at eight in the morning, before the first ferry. My room was as I had left it: half-ruined, empty. I reset the wards, then went to work.

It was a simple application of Frazier’s first principle of Dark Magic: *the part may affect the whole and the whole the part*. The ‘whole’ in this case was a few drops of my blood that I added to one end of my directional charm. The ‘part’ would be any other trace of my blood nearby. I completed the charm at about five in the evening, and hour after the last ferry had left. Looking at my work, I could almost hear Lucius’ voice sneering, “how very elegant.” It was an old popsicle stick I had found on the shingle, run through with a rusty nail.

“Shut it, Lucius, It’ll work.”

It worked perfectly. I activated the charm and it swung around to point steadfastly at me. Brilliant. That was the problem, of course. I was the nearest source of my blood.

I took the charm out to the shore and dug through my bag for my emergency potions supply. There they were, my last four vials of Polyjuice and the hairs I had picked up from the salon, months ago now. Only four vials, four hours. I would have to work fast if there was any trace to be found. I couldn't spare the month to brew any more.

I prepped the first vial and downed it. I was that blond teen again. Well, it didn't matter, I would have to move under a disillusionment anyway for greatest speed. I picked up my bag and the directional charm, which was swinging very slowly. I thought I might not be getting a hit at all until it finally settled in a wavering arc between west and southwest. A very faint signal.

I apparated to my point behind the ticket booth on the wharf in Boston Harbor. Could the signal be getting stronger? My popsicle stick had narrowed its arc, swinging side to side by perhaps thirty degrees. If it had narrowed so much in the course of only a few miles, I must be close, maybe within the city itself. I didn't want to think of the implications of that. Whoever had tracked me had got quite close.

I started running, past the wharfs and into the city streets, but I realized I would be too slow. Disillusioned, I had to constantly dodge and duck around traffic and pedestrians. I couldn't keep it up.

I stopped in a sheltered spot between a news kiosk and a fire hydrant, took my broom out of my bag and unshrunk it. I rose on it very slowly, then headed out at a height of about forty feet. I greatly disliked flying in cities. Too many wires, poles, people and buildings. Still, I had to move; I knew I would run out of time otherwise.

I flew slowly, zigzagging between the buildings with one eye ahead and one eye on my popsicle stick. The arc was still narrowing. I worried that it was leading me to my old house, that I had left some trace that the skin hadn't eliminated, but while I was flying over the Commons, its bearing changed suddenly to due south. That couldn't be my house. I landed in a clear spot of lawn near the south edge of the Commons and began to walk.

For the first few blocks the signal became clearer with every step, until at once I lost it completely, my popsicle stick spinning aimlessly. I stopped dead, and was immediately jostled by a pedestrian. I stepped out of the way quickly, and luckily she didn't seem to notice.

I looked down at my charm. It was pointing directly at the spot I had just vacated. I stepped back into place and it swung wildly again, until I chanced to tilt it and it swung firmly to point straight down.

It was somewhere directly below me. I looked around. What could be below me? I was near the outside edge of the sidewalk in front of a plaster-fronted apartment building. Perhaps there was some basement room that extended below the sidewalk.

Someone was approaching the door, so I shadowed her footsteps and slipped in after under my disillusionment. She took the lift up, and I scouted around the lobby until I found the stairs to the basement.

There were storage rooms, a laundry room, supplies and cartons, but all along my charm pointed steadfastly to the outside wall. I could even pinpoint the exact spot, but it didn't do me any good; there was no sign of a door or any way to continue. There must be some other way in.

I was running out of time on my vial of Polyjuice. I lost my disillusionment when it ran out and the change took me. I stayed in the laundry room until I felt my body settle into its familiar shape and I could recast my disillusionment.

Back out on the street I looked around for another possibility, but nothing looked likely; no underground carpark, no subway entrance – but I had passed a T stop recently. Where was it?

I began retracing my steps towards the Commons. A few blocks away I found it: the Boylston Street Station on the Green Line.

I hurried down the steps, clinging to the wall to avoid the press of commuters. I jumped the turnstile and headed into the station proper. I would need my directional charm again, soon. I stepped into the bathroom. I had to catch myself and remember to use the women's. I locked myself in a stall and took my second vial of Polyjuice.

My disillusionment fell away again as I took on my teen girl form. It was just as well. It would be very hard to board a crowded train under a disillusionment.

Back out on the platform, I took out my directional charm, feeling a bit ridiculous. Not too ridiculous, as I was overshadowed by the extremely drunk man loudly giving his opinion on dog leash laws to a frightened couple and anyone else in range and the busker who apparently thought that playing the trumpet badly should inspire people to give him money. The blond in ill-fitting clothes following a popsicle stick was a minor distraction at best.

My charm was now pointing determinedly south. A metallic breeze was blowing through the station, followed by a loud rush and blue flashes in the tunnel to the north. A southbound train was pulling in. Well, what else? I got on.

There were no seats. I managed to get myself a spot at one of the poles in the general press. I hung on with one hand and held the charm with the other, still pointing directly south.

There was a lurch that made everyone stagger and we began to move towards my goal. The train did not keep heading south, however. A few minutes after we left the station the tracks curved sharply to the right, and the train, of course, followed, screeching and throwing up sparks.

All the standees staggered again as we went around. I was trying to watch my charm... but what the hell was someone's hand doing on my arse? I spun around, but no one was touching or even looking at me. I gave my very best glare at everyone to cover all the possibilities. When I looked back at my charm it was pointing southeast and wavering as we traveled away.

Damn, I was clearly not on the right track. I must have missed something. I got off at the next station, Arlington, and had to wait for the next train back to Boylston. I could feel my time slipping away, but there was nothing else I could do. I couldn't exactly disillusion myself or apparate off a crowded platform.

The northbound train was much less crowded, and I was able to get a seat by the window on the right. This time I could watch closely, and as we rounded the curve and my charm swung from southeast to south, I saw a dark-shadowed area to the right of our tunnel. Was that it? It was the best possibility I had.

I got off at Boylston, hurried up to the bathroom, and recast my disillusionment. Back down on the platform, I got as close as I could to the southbound tunnel and looked into its depths. I had maybe twenty minutes left on the Polyjuice. I would have to try to get as far as I could now. There were red and white warning signs on the opposite side of the tracks: DANGER ELECTRIFIED THIRD RAIL. There was a gruesome little picture of a lightning-bolt menacing a stick figure. I didn't want to end up like him, so I'd have to stick close to the near side of the tunnel. Trains, there was also the problem of trains. The next southbound train was just pulling in. If I entered the tunnel as soon as it pulled out, that would give me the most time. When it rumbled away, trailing dust and sparks, I jumped down and started after it.

The tunnel was lit irregularly by caged bulbs hanging along the sides that cast a yellow glow. After the first ten or so, there were only blue bulbs, submerging the tunnel in a dim watery twilight. As I hurried along the tracks, I noticed that there were narrow alcoves every ten meters or so, perhaps so train workers could take refuge in the tunnel. I started keeping track of each one as I passed it.

It was slower going than I liked, trying to step carefully over the ties and rails without tripping. An abandoned work boot was half-wedged under a rail. I didn't like to think about that. The charm was still pointing south. A faint breeze was blowing on the back of my neck. I could smell metal. *Shit*. I scrambled back to the nearest alcove, half-stumbling over the ties.

I made it just as the lights of the train were glinting off the tunnel walls. It swept past an instant later, impossibly loud, a blur of light and sparks and with a wind that sucked all the air from my body. When it had gone, I grabbed my knees and just breathed. I knew I should follow after it as quickly as I could, but my legs felt a bit wonky.

When I went on, I started counting the paces between alcoves. I made it past four alcoves and was a little over halfway to the fifth when the breeze picked up again. I started to run. Where the hell was the bloody alcove? It wasn't where it was supposed to be. *Shit-shitshitshit*. I could see my shadow cast sharply in front of me and

the sudden glare. *The wharf*, I thought, and turned –

When I landed in my apparition spot I let myself slowly slide down the back of the ticket building until I was sitting. I rested my head on my knees. That was it! Damn muggles and their damn trains. Like hell I was going back down there while the trains were running.

I was roused from my shock a few minutes later by the Polyjuice wearing off. The disillusionment fell away too, of course. Well, let it go, I didn't need it at the moment. The trains wouldn't stop running until after midnight. I decided to get food.

The food helped my attitude considerably. I realized I hadn't eaten since my early breakfast at five in the morning. I took my time with it, paid my bill and walked slowly back to the Commons. I sat on a bench under a disillusionment as the city quieted. Just before midnight I went back down to the Boylston Street station and waited for the last train to come rumbling through, the last staggering passengers to leave the platform. Finally the metal shutters were rolled down, closing the station for the night.

No more trains now, I told myself. Not until five in the morning. Perfectly safe, as long as I didn't touch the third rail. I took a breath and jumped down into the tunnel. Shortly after the point where I had my last near encounter with the trains, the tunnel began to widen. The weak blue bulbs didn't nearly fill the darkness. I cast a *Lumos*.

The tunnel was splitting. On the right side the tracks descended and curved away. On the left, a rusted set of tracks rose on a gentle incline and disappeared behind a padlocked chain-link fence into a completely black tunnel. *Well*. I took my third vial of Polyjuice and brought out my charm again. It pointed straight down the darkened tunnel.

I cut the padlock with a spell and repaired it once I stepped through. No need to advertise my presence.

No wonder it had been abandoned. It was a much smaller tunnel, shaped like an egg on end. Those trains that had tried to run me down would never fit in here. The tracks, when there were tracks at all, were rusted and bent. There was a small ledge running down the left side and both walls were crowded with alcoves. The arches came every meter, but were much smaller than the ones in the large tunnel. If you

were working here when a train came along, you wouldn't have to run for an opening, but it would be much trickier to fit in it entirely. Every step I took echoed and bounced off the rounded walls.

I passed a crushed can, a baseball cap, a twisted socket wrench, a glove, a crisp wrapper. Eventually, the tunnel opened again, another tunnel joining mine on the left; there were two identical egg-shaped dark openings in front of me. Even standing directly between the two tunnels, I couldn't see any difference in where the charm was pointing.

Except... when I had been using the charm above ground, I had been on the right side of Tremont Street and just to the left of that apartment building. It had to be the right-hand tunnel. Above ground, the three-block walk from Boylston Street station was nothing, but in the darkness it stretched out forever.

Finally my charm began to swing slightly to the right and I came up along a low metal door set into the right wall of the tunnel. I cast both *Hominem* and *Specialis Revelio*, but there was nothing. If anyone had done their work here, they had abandoned the place. I ducked into the room.

It was a small square room, the far wall covered with pipes and metal fuseboxes. The main feature of the room as a two and a half meter diameter burned and blackened circle dead center on the floor. My charm was pointing into the far corner.

I carefully edged around the burnt area to the forest of pipes on the wall. Scrabbling on my hands and knees in the corner, my charm finally led me to my target. It was a cork vial stopper stained with my blood. Whoever had made the skin had a whole vial of my blood. Had they collected it from the shack? I had left enough there, after all. I pocketed the cork.

Unfortunately, whoever it was had cleaned up after themselves with fire. I turned back to the burned circle. The chalk or salt marks that must have contained the fire were gone now, but they had clearly done their job. The ground inside the circle wasn't entirely even; there were blobs of blackened melted glass. The remains of the vial? I strengthened my *Lumos* and started to examine the ground inch by inch.

My Polyjuice ran out while I was still working. I hardly noticed except that I no longer had to tuck blond hair behind my ears to

keep it out of my face. When I was done, I had a small pile of detritus outside the circle.

Three blobs of melted glass, some metal that might have been a belt buckle, two smaller bits of metal, a puddle of rubber, and several bits of burned plastic. Rubbish. I sorted through the bits and pieces. The only bit was remotely encouraging was the smallest piece of metal. It had more of a gleam than the other metal and there was a chip of something white stuck to it. The tiny chip was quite hard, white gradating to yellowish, like a piece of bone. Or tooth.

At once I realized what it was: a filling and a bit of tooth. The liquid metal might have protected the tooth fragment from the fire. I was probably holding the last of the skin man's body.

REVERSE

It felt strange to be skipping classes, but my Portuguese would simply have to suffer for the next week. Would I have excused any of my own students from class if they were being tracked by a Sending? I decided that I would excuse them from class to avoid disruptions, but I would assign them make-up work outside of class. Dick did have several herbology texts and a few novels in Portuguese in his flat; they would have to do to keep my Portuguese in shape.

I spent the evening trying to keep my attention on one book after another. Not a great success; my mind kept revolving back to my problem with the skin. I was getting nowhere. I simply didn't know enough to help myself.

To remedy that, on Monday I spent all day in the Miskatonic University library reading everything I could find on Skin Sendings. It was long overdue. It was also mainly an exercise in frustration.

Chapter 26 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 41, No.8
SAMHAIN 2004

Most works on the subject focused on Bone Sendings, which were far easier to make, or Inferi, which were much more common and more flexible, since they could be made to follow orders. For the first five hours, the main result of my research was the astounding conclusion that Skin Sendings were a great pain in the arse and thus hardly ever used.

I finally found one tantalizing scrap of information. It was in an irritatingly pedantic tome: **RUNIC AND FOLLOWING CURSES** by James M. Rhodes.

'Though Dr. Karswell, that scholar of overblown repute, has asserted with certainty that nothing may turn a Sending from its target, his conclusions are, as usual, as shallow as a rain puddle. A Sending made of the skin may be of flexible usage. Should its author find a more pressing aim than he at first dreamt, a new HARE may be substituted and the former reprieved, to the great sorrow of the latter. This may only be accomplished ere the swift HUNTSMAN has hit its mark. Therefore, the AUTHOR must act quickly if such a substitution is intended.'

I wished the honorable Mr. Rhodes had a portrait handy so I could shout at it. If it was possible to extract anything from all his stuffy prose, it was that the target of a skin could be changed, but only before the first target was taken. Fine, and how could that be done? I would have been happy to wade through more of Rhodes' awful verbiage if he would give even a hint, but there was nothing. If I could believe him, it gave me a scrap of hope that I could turn the skin away, but could I trust him? None of the other authors had mentioned anything of the kind. It seemed a distinct possibility that Rhodes had invented the detail just to prove the hated Karswell incorrect.

The other books gave me nothing. According to them, traps, enclosures, and even Impenetrable Boxes would only slow but not stop a skin. All the authors agreed that a skin's Intent had an almost unparalleled magical force behind it, powered by the great sacrifice required for its making. The life of the skin's donor far outweighed the amount of power used to create any magical trap or shield. That Intent was powerful enough to outlive any attempt to physically destroy a skin and imbue every particle of the skin with the strength

to continue its mission, no matter what form it was in. There was no way to destroy a skin until after its target has been reached.

I was not in a cheerful mood when I arrived back at Dick's flat. I tried to focus on Portuguese for a few hours, though it was hard to apply myself if my days were numbered. Of course, I had never had the luxury of *unnumbered* days, but at least, before, I had a cause to keep me going. Now, what was the point?

Dick arrived with a take-out dinner in a paper sack and a much more optimistic outlook. I filled him in on my searches as he laid out the food.

"Well, I leave you alone for two days and you find out where the skin was made and quite a lot about it. You should have everything wrapped up in about a week."

I glared at him. "All I found were dead ends."

"You have to see it another way round. Look, it's just like variant trials; you have to weed out the dead ends before you can find the variant that works."

"*If* there is one."

"Besides, you found the site where the skin was made and a trace of the original body, yes? That's not necessarily a dead end. Give it a little time. Now, I've sent word to a friend who knows about things like these. I'm sure it will be several days before I hear back. I'll also speak to some of my colleagues here at the University. If that author you found hinted at something, well, then the knowledge must be out there."

"Unless he was mistaken or inventing it."

He looked at me. "Possible, yes, but it's also possible that he's not."

"I haven't survived this long by relying on false hopes."

"I'm sure you haven't, but you haven't survived this long by giving up, either. Speaking of which – " He pulled out a small jewelry box.

"You're not going to propose, are you?"

"Not unless you have a very handsome dowry. It's a Portkey. Open departure to Chicago. Have you ever been there?"

I shook my head.

"Good. It'll do in a pinch. I have some friends there who could

put you up for a few days if it ever comes to that. I put their names and addresses in the lid. Keep it on you."

A quick glance under the lid showed me a bottle cap emblazoned with the word MOXIE nestled in the velvet of the box. I pocketed the box. Dick stacked the empty plates and carried them out to the kitchen. His voice drifted back out. "Ah, this is going to be my one word on the subject and then I won't mention it again. Judging by Uli's face when she read your note, you might want to write her another one. That's it, not another word."

I grimaced to myself. I had known, of course, that the note wasn't quite enough, but what else could I say? There was nothing else I *could* say.

The rest of the week passed as an exercise in frustration. Dick returned to his flat in the evenings with his own reports of dead ends. One colleague at the university theorized that if a transfer of targets were possible, it would have to be accomplished by removing and replacing whatever material keyed the skin to its original target. She had no idea, however, specifically how this could be accomplished with an active skin trying to attack.

On Thursday, Dick was to head back to the lab for the weekend. I was not. "Stay here for now. I'll lay out some bait and see if the skin is still hanging around Manaus or it's headed back here towards you. Even if we can't hold it off forever that way, at least we can try to keep it off track," Dick said.

"Bait?"

"Yes. Ah, do you have anything you can spare?"

We settled on a few pairs of my dirty socks with a drop of blood on each. The skin really would be the only thing that would want to touch those.

"Hopefully, I should have word back from my friend, the expert. I'll send you a note over the weekend. Anything else you need?"

"Make sure my RAs have been working and not mucking around."

"All right, I'll have a shout at them for you. Chin up!" Then he was gone.

Friday night was very bad. I was running up stairs, desperate to get Dick's office. I was going to be too late again, I knew it. When I burst in, Dick was sitting at his desk. "*Severus, please...*"

I woke sweating. I couldn't close my eyes again or try to sleep any longer. Eventually I found myself out on the fire escape. I had to get out.

I apparated back to Boylston station. The tunnel gaped in front of me. I stepped into the darkness. Usually, the second time down any path feels faster. But then I felt like time had slowed, stopped, and began to run backwards. I finally stood outside the metal door, wondering what beast was waiting for me inside.

The beasts were all in the past, of course, except that the past was following me now. I stood in the room for a long time, staring at the blackened circle on the floor.

Dick's message appeared early Saturday afternoon. I had finally dozed off on his couch, trying to read one of his Portuguese novels. When the protean note twitched in my pocket, I woke groggily.

'Dirty socks still in place, all clear.'

Fine. I went back to sleep for a few more hours before I packed my bag returned to the vanishing cabinet. I was going to be up late again. I had an idea, though it would probably be another dead end.

Dick was in his office when I came through. I felt a moment of dread when he opened his mouth, but thankfully he did not say my old name.

"Ah, welcome back. How was your weekend? Any new leads?"

"Hmm."

"Hmm yes or hmm no?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"All right, all right, I won't pry."

"Any word from your friend?" I said, to change the subject.

"Nothing conclusive..."

I couldn't help chuckling. Evidently we both had a spare wand up our sleeves. "I'm back for the moment, but I'll need another day before I'm truly back in the lab."

"Fine, just let me know if you won't be in lab on Monday. I've left

Grossman's notes from the week on your desk."

I took care to avoid being seen by anyone on my way back to my rooms, then shut myself away. I spent the rest of the evening looking over Grossman's notes and napping again. A little after midnight, I picked up my bag, warded my door and crept down the hall.

All was quiet in the lounge room downstairs. *Perfect.* I was about to push open the door when a voice made me spin around. "Oh, I didn't know you were back!"

"Grossman!"

He was stretched out on the couch reading, invisible from the stairs. Damn him, I couldn't be seen!

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

"Uh, reading?"

"Incorrect! You are coming with me. Not a word." Collusion, one of the best guarantors of silence.

Remarkably, he refrained from any inanities as I led him through the lab corridors. Was it possible that he was learning? It seemed highly unlikely. When we reached the Alchemy lab doors, he whispered, "we've still got the distiller, you know."

"Do you want a bloody medal?"

"No, I just meant -"

"Shut it, Grossman. Not a word, understand?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but caught himself in time and nodded instead.

The doors were only held by a simple locking charm. I tripped it easily and swung the doors open. We stepped through into darkness. I cast Lumos.

We were standing in a bloody hall of mirrors. Zosimos must have some sort of prescience that he used to thwart me. "Curse him," I muttered.

"What?" asked Grossman.

"We're looking for the mirror that Paola saw. The one that runs backwards."

"Well, better get started."

"You take the other side."

We moved slowly down the hall. A few of the mirrors were simple reflective surfaces, but most had been altered in some way. One showed a true, rather than a mirror image, another the back of my own head, another, strangely, myself as a woman. One made me start and hurry along as the images of my parents and grandparents appeared in the glass. There was a view onto a winter crossroads at night, one onto the bottom of the sea, a third with stars wheeling through the sky. I thought I had it once, before I realized it was showing me my own time running backwards as I grew younger and younger. It was somehow worse than the one where my hair went grey and my face crumpled into a web of wrinkles. One showed everything in negative: light was dark and dark was light. It reminded me uncomfortably of that other place I saw when I was lying on the floor of the shack. I began to feel short of breath. I moved on.

I was staring, hypnotized, into a glass which showed my flesh peel away and dissolve, leaving my bare skull behind, when I heard a noise from Grossman across the room.

"I think I've got it!"

I tore myself away from my own decay and hurried over. He had it; I could see us in the glass walking backwards from glass to glass and out the doors.

I had Grossman carry the base; I took the top and we carefully maneuvered the glass out of the Alchemy lab and down the hall. I had to hiss at him and jerk at the mirror as he almost went right past Dick's office and on to the Potions lab.

"Oh, sorry, I thought –"

"Never mind, Grossman," I said as I edged Dick's door open, "I'll take it from here, you are dismissed."

"But –"

Dick poked his head around the doorjamb. "That's right, Benji, we'll take it from here. Thanks."

I clutched at the mirror, barely keeping from dropping it. "*Shit!*"

"Come on in, Cyril. Here, I'll get that." Grossman sloped off as Dick took his end of the mirror and brought it in his office.

"Don't pop out like that!"

"Sorry. I knew you were up to something so I decided to work late."

We set the mirror down in his office. Dick was peering at it.

"That's Myron's Retrograde Glass, isn't it? Oh, very clever!"

I smirked.

"Are we going to set it up now?"

I stopped smirking. "*We?*"

"Well, Cyril, I'm afraid lab equipment can't be used off site except under the supervision of the lab director."

"You just made that up!"

"Well, that *is* one of the perks of being lab director; you get to make up the rules. Now come on, I want to see that room and it wouldn't hurt for you to have help lugging that mirror."

"Fine." He was standing between me and the vanishing cabinet at any rate. Dick went through first with the mirror and I followed. We had an awkward journey from Dick's office to beyond the campus anti-apparition wards. Once we could apparate, I brought Dick to the tunnel just outside the metal door in a side-along, then returned with the mirror.

We bundled it through the door together, then set it up in the far corner where we could get the best view of the whole room. It started working immediately, showing our entrance, then the room plunging into blackness.

"Is there any way to speed it up? Otherwise we'll have to be here for a few months."

Dick began fiddling with a knob on the side of the frame. "Yes, here we are! Now it's working."

"Oh really? How can you tell?" The mirror remained quite black.

"I can – look!" There was a flash of light. Dick twisted the knob sharply and the image slowed to show a blond teen on her hands and knees picking across the floor under a Lumos, my previous visit to the room. I had to admit, I looked pretty good.

Dick turned the knob and sped the image again. Out of an eternity of darkness a dim glimmer appeared. "There!"

Dick slowed the image again. There were embers in the center of the

blackened circle. A dark figure entered the room backwards, carrying something. An enormous billow of smoke descended from the ceiling and the room was suddenly awash in blinding flames. The room was burning and I could barely see a blackened figure in the center of the circle.

Oh god, Vince burned and I couldn't get him out, he burned.

I closed my eyes, gripped my knees and tried to force the image away.

"Hey, all right?" Dick asked.

"Yes, just... *bright.*" Hell, what was wrong with me? This was information I needed; I had to look.

I looked. The flames were at their height. I focused my attention away from the body to the figure near the door, the fire lighting his face. It was Avery.

As I watched, he put up his wand and the fire flowed back to it in a bright line. He looked so much older. Somehow in my mind he had gone back to how he was as a student. That Avery was long gone now.

He stepped into the circle and knelt next to the thing I was trying not to look at: a flayed corpse, muscles and sinews exposed. Avery unrolled the bundle under his arm; the skin, of course. It had been much pinker then.

He lifted the flopping head and brought the mouth close to his. The books had described that, the last step before curing. He unsealed the eyelids, then an empty glass vial by his leg leapt up into his hand. As he held it in front of the skin's nostrils, a dark thick liquid rose out of its nostrils and back into the vial. That would be my blood, of course. Both Dick and I jumped as we saw the image of the vial stopper roll from almost under our feet, across the floor, and fly back into place in the neck of the vial.

Avery put the vial in his pocket and brought out a small knife and a needle. With strange movements, he unsewed a small scrap of something white from underneath the skin's tongue. I couldn't properly see what it was.

I wished I couldn't properly see what came next. Avery turned the skin inside-out through its mouth, dragged the glistening greasy thing over to the flayed corpse, and with awful jerking movements, began to put it back on the body from the soles of the feet up.



Art by Mottsnave

When he came to the groin, Dick pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

We sped up the image. It must have taken many hours, since the skin had to be removed in one piece without splitting. Avery did cast some stretching charms during the process, but he mostly worked by hand. The stretching would explain the skin's current height.

Dick slowed the image as Avery neared the face and head. There was something not quite right about the face. I knew what it was when he finally reached the mouth. He had broken the bones of the face to keep the jaw attached to the skin. The process ended with Avery reaching deep inside the corpse's mouth to make a cut in the throat. He dressed the corpse. It looked *familiar* somehow, but I couldn't quite place it. The head had been completely shaved, including the eyebrows, and very recently, judging by the contrasting paleness of the skin. Had Avery done that, and if so, why?

Shit, *Polyjuice*. That would explain why my alert bead had never activated. I wouldn't be able to use it to track him, either, if he was using Barty's trick. So where had I seen the corpse before? I got as close as I could to the glass without blocking the image.

It was a young man in his mid-twenties, white, probably had fair hair, judging by his coloring. Average build; no help there. His features were a bit distorted, swollen, and his eyes were bulging. He had probably been smothered. Everything I had read on skins agreed; the donor had to be killed without magic and without damaging the skin. Smothering or drowning were the usual methods.

After the body was dressed, Avery uncast the circle, hefted the corpse under its arms, and shoved it ahead of him out of the room, which was plunged into darkness. Another feeling of familiarity assailed me. What was it? Ah yes, I had been dragged like that by Avery myself once. At His return, when I had arrived late, too late as usual. When the meeting had finally adjourned to the abandoned building at the edge of the cemetery, I was still in no shape to walk, so Avery carried me. I fought the urge to grip my knees again.

We sped the image and found three other arrivals of Avery, looking thinner and more bedraggled each time. At the earliest occasion, he

had slept in the room for several days in a row, but in all of that, there were no other appearances of the man who had been made into the skin and nothing that could possibly tell me where to find him now.

"So he didn't cure it here," said Dick.

"According to the informative Mr. Rhodes, it has to be buried for three days. I assume he chose someplace without a concrete floor."

We wound back further and further, but there was nothing but utter darkness for at least a year. Dick finally turned from the mirror and looked back at the blackened circle on the floor.

"God, I need a drink." There was disgust on his face.

"*You* insisted on coming." Some venom had crept into my voice. What the hell did he think he was going to see? He had been spared the killing itself, which must have taken place elsewhere. What did it matter what happened to a corpse? It wasn't as if the owner felt anything. It was nothing, a bit of rubbish. The Dark Lord had pits full, the rubbish pits... rubbish or raw ingredients. It didn't matter, none of it mattered.

"Yes, I did, and I don't regret it, but I do want a drink. You too? Let's get this mirror back."

We sat in his office in Arkham and drank.

"The man; did you recognize him?"

I gave a short nod.

"Who is he?"

"A friend."

"A *friend*?" Dick looked more shocked than he had while watching the mirror. He'd probably never had a friend turn into an enemy before. Well, he wasn't exactly the sort to make enemies at all.

I snorted. As if there were anything left to salvage from that friendship. "He's hardly a friend now, Dick. Besides, it doesn't matter who made the skin. It doesn't help. I still don't know any way to destroy it or stop it long enough to change its target."

"Well, I heard from my friend, and he thinks he can help."

"Yes?"

"Yes, but we have to go to him."

"And where is he?"

"In the rainforest."

VOYAGE

Now, now," said Dick.
"I don't like it in there, Dick."
"You're just not used to the rainforest."

"Everything in there wants to eat me!"

"The trees don't want to eat you," he said with a smile.

"They would gladly use my bones as fertilizer, and you know it."

"They're not planning to kill you for them, though. It's much more like waiting for some old relative to die so you can come into your inheritance."

"Well, I plan to write them out of the will, the ungrateful brats."

"Would it help if I promise to have you buried at sea where the trees can't get you? Besides, the more immediate threat is the *skin* that wants to eat you. This way you'll be staying on the move while the skin is working its way back to Boston, and also getting the help of an expert."

"Oh yes, just who is this expert of yours?"

"He's a friend I've known for years. His name is Tepora."

I regarded him suspiciously. "Tepora?"

"He's an Oi healer. He's very knowledgeable and he's agreed to help."
"Oi?"

"They live near the Rio Vaupes. It will probably take about a week to get there."

"A week? Can't you simply apparate?"

"Apparition's not so simple in the rainforest. Rivers change courses, new growth, fires and flooding can alter the land so much in a short period of time that it's very difficult to keep accurate apparition points fixed in your head. Broom travel is actually quite dangerous over the rainforest, and landing can be almost impos-

Chapter 27 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 42, NO.1

JULY 2005

sible in the closed-canopy forests. The best way to travel is still by boat and foot. Still, we can shorten the trip greatly by apparating to the town of Boa Vista before heading up the Vaupes."

"And when we get there, how is this Tepora going to help? What would he know about skin sendings?"

"He knows quite a lot about hunting and being hunted, revenge and stopping revenge. I explained the situation and he said he thought he could help, but he needs to see you in person."

I glared at Dick. *This* was my great hope of stopping the skin man? "Wrote him a letter, did you?"

"Actually, that's one thing macaws have over post owls. They can take verbal messages." He sighed. "I understand you're skeptical. Tepora isn't part of the magical practice that created the skin, but that might very well be a strength in this case. Apparently no one who *is* part of that practice knows of any weakness in them. In any case, it's best to arm ourselves with all possibilities rather than dismissing something out of hand." I couldn't easily disagree with that.

"Now, why don't you take the rest of this week to get your RAs set up on the next step of your potion. If you keep spending the night in Arkham, maybe we can keep the skin heading north, for now. I'll make the arrangements, put together the equipment and we can leave at the end of the week."

"What will you tell the lab?"

"Simply that it's the best opportunity for you to see the rainforest. There's only about a month and a half left of the dry season; it gets very hard to travel once the rains set in. Since you have your research set up, now's your one chance to have a little expedition." It sounded quite reasonable, actually.

Being back in the lab wasn't so simple, however. I was skipping my Portuguese class. It felt very strange; it was the first time I had ever dropped a class. Still it would have been rather ridiculous to be back for only five days before leaving again, so I might as well save the mornings to continue the research.

As I had the morning free, I went straight after breakfast to talk to Uli. I needed to speak to her straight away. It would have to be

straight away or not at all, I knew that much. She wasn't in her flat when I knocked. It was a relief; I still didn't know what I would say to her. She was, however, in her office.

"Come," she called at my knock. When she saw me in the doorway, there was surprise first, a flash of something else, then her face settled into annoyance. She put her pen down with a sharp click.

"I'm working. I'm not sure this is the best time."

"Do you want me to come back later?"

"Yes, but even more I want to hear what you have to say."

I took the chair in front of her desk. "There's not very much I can say." She frowned. I took a breath. "I'm sorry I had to leave without notice. I'm sorry I had to stay away and... I'm very sorry I can't say any more about it."

"God damn it! But what can I do with that? Nothing!" She put her hand in front of her eyes. "I don't know what to say." When she took her hand away I was startled by the emotion in her eyes. "Cyril, I really don't. I need to think about this, please."

Was that all, she wasn't going to throw me out? There was nothing else for me to say, but, absurdly, I didn't want to leave it there. Did I *want* to tell her? It was impossible.

"Please," she repeated, "I have to think about it. I will come talk to you later."

Later? I swallowed. I had an awful urge to shout insults at her until she would just end it now, but I couldn't. Still clinging to idiot hope, more fool I. I left.

I was too old to be such a fool. I should have ended it myself. Instead I went back to the lab and tried to focus on the notes Grossman had left for me. They did nothing to improve my mood. They had made some progress eliminating dead ends, true, but now I was far behind. I wasn't sure how I would possibly set up enough variants for them to work on while I was gone. And what if this was it; if I didn't come back from this trip? Then the project would never be finished. I would leave a legacy of nothing but death and wreckage behind me.

When I entered the lab after lunch, Grossman jumped up with

a "welcome back!" as if he wasn't already perfectly aware of my return. I regarded the RAs carefully as they set up their stations and went to work. I could see they were being wary around me. Was that because they had a week without my supervision? *Or possibly, just possibly, idiot, because you are standing there watching them like a hawk.* I shook my head, and settled behind my desk to work on next week's protocol.

When they finally left, I went back to my office and sat at my desk where I could stare out at the dark trees. I might be behind, but I couldn't focus any longer. I felt claustrophobic.

I left the lab and went out to the cold greenhouse. Snow had fallen, transforming the spiky reeds and grasses into soft white mounds. Tree limbs were bent under the weight. I walked down to the pond, which was only visible as a flat sunken expanse of snow. I tested the ice with my foot, but drew back at the creaking groan. Still not safe to cross.

Uli found me half an hour later, sitting at the edge of the pond.

"You're not too cold?" she asked.

"No."

She scuffed her foot through the snow and looked at the black ice below.

"I don't like this, that there is something going on and you can't tell me. It's not particularly fair. If you can't... well, what can I say? I don't even know if I should be worried."

True enough. I didn't say anything.

"I am going to ask you a few questions. I have been thinking all afternoon: what is the *least* I need to know if I am going to continue with you?" She appeared to steel herself for a moment.

"First, are you married or do you have someone else somewhere?"

"No." I was relieved to get one I could answer so easily.

"Does this thing you left for have anything to do with me or have any effect on us?"

"No."

"Is this over and done with, or are you going to keep disappearing?"

"No, I think it's done." It had to be done soon, one way or another.

I was beginning to wish I had come up with some story or excuse in my note to her. Why hadn't I? She would have been happier, in all probability, and then I would have been happier. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to, which was very unlike me.

Uli sat down in the snow next to me.

"I don't like this. You don't make it easy on me, you know."

"I'm sorry." I was surprised how easily it came; that was probably the easiest thing I had said to her all day, and the most honest.

"My research will be ending here next summer. Whatever we have, I just want to enjoy it. I want to enjoy *you*, I just want it to be simple."

I felt myself relaxing at her words. She noticed and gave me a half-hearted smile.

"I don't want to be worried and wondering and not knowing what is happening. If it would be like that, I would rather have nothing. Do you see?"

"Yes, I want it to be simple too."

We looked out on the snow-covered pond for a while in the stillness.

"I think I want to try this," she said. "For now. Maybe it doesn't work, but we can try."

I nodded. We sat closer and looked at the winter.

"Dick's taking me up the Rio Vaupes at the end of the week. He says that it's the last chance before of the rains –"

"God damn Dick! Tsch! What if I come too?"

It seemed incredible how quickly everything organized and made ready for an expedition, but as Grossman said, the lab already had all the equipment on hand and permits in place. Dick liked to travel light, so there would only be a small group going. Grossman explained all this after lab on Tuesday and immediately before he informed me that he would be coming along as well.

It made sense, I supposed. Both Uli and Grossman had their own research, Uli into the contraceptive and reproductive herbo-logical preparations of the native populations, and Grossman into the differences between the plants used for hunting poisons and curative preparations. The expedition was a good opportunity for

both of them to further their research.

Still, I couldn't help feeling a bit dismayed. I *had* to keep everything separate: my past, my research, and my personal life simply could *not* intermingle. And so now they were all set to go on a rainforest expedition together. Wonderful.

On Thursday evening, Dick met with me in his flat in Arkham, where I was still occupying his couch. He was going over lists of what I would need for the trip, though most of the time he spent criticizing my shoes. When he finally wore me down to taking the trainers instead of the boots, and we were sitting and drinking at his table, he pulled out a newspaper. "I found this when I was getting coffee this morning."

FUGITIVE DEATH EATER CAPTURED.

It was the NEW YORK PROGNOSTICATOR, dated Monday, September 14th.

On Saturday, September 12th in the small Welsh town of Dolwyddelan, British Aurors apprehended Benedict Crabbe, who had eluded authorities since May. Muggle neighbors noted suspicious activity at a supposedly abandoned cottage and made a complaint to the police. DMLE agents, which have been closely monitoring all muggle reports of suspicious activity and possible spell lights, intercepted the call and arrived before the muggle authorities. Benedict Crabbe, a marked Death Eater and member of Voldemort's inner circle, was in poor physical condition and surrendered without a struggle. The British Ministry of Magic has not released details of Crabbe's flight from the Battle of Hogwarts this spring. A trial is expected within the month.

Crabbe was one of the very few marked Death Eaters still at large. As yet unaccounted for are Joseph Avery and Augustus Rookwood. Lower-level Snatchers and collaborators Terrence Bridswell, Wendell Carlisle, Garth Faraday, Martha Jenks, Morgana Jones, and Anselm Keefer are also still at large. Anyone with information is urged to contact the Ministry of Magic or use their anonymous reporting parchment.

Photos of Benny Crabbe and the rest accompanied the article. Benny looked shockingly thin. He usually carried an extra ten kilos, but that was long gone now. He stared out with dead eyes, obediently turning his head to the side and front. Had he heard that

Vince was dead? He must have done.

"Are you going to report the one we saw?" Dick asked hesitantly.

"No."

"No? They have an anonymous..."

I was shaking my head. I had never given any one of us to the Ministry, and I wasn't about to start now. "Dick, I don't even know where he is now. It would be useless."

"Well, you know best. We'll leave Saturday very early. You'll be ready?"

I was always ready. I had to be, didn't I?

I left detailed instructions on the variants for the RAs to pursue, not that much work would get done with both myself and Grossman gone. It would be a bloody miracle if the lab was still standing at our return.

Saturday at dawn we met just outside the apparition wards, shrunken gear stowed in packs, hats on, malaria pills swallowed.

Dick had given me a little speech the night before about how most of the inhabitants of the rainforest viewed humans as a walking smorgasbord, so all equipment, clothes and our persons had to be Scourgified twice a day and checked thoroughly for parasites. He had also brought out a sheaf of photos of the more dangerous animals and plants so I could recognize them. We had spent a good two hours looking at caimans, bushmasters, fer-de-lances, Africanized bees, wandering spiders, and many more. I dreamt that night about electric eels that somehow had got the ability to swim in air and were floating at ankle height around my flat. When I woke before dawn, I wondered how bad it would be to let the skin find me. I had a good run, didn't I? Yet there I was, out behind the greenhouses, Dick checking my pack, first-aid kit and hammock.

We apparated to the town of Boa Vista, Dick taking me in a side-along. Boa Vista was a very generous name for the view of a haphazard collection of tin-roofed shacks and stilt-legged thatched houses on the muddy banks of the river. I turned, fixing the spot in my mind. It would be our rendezvous point in case of trouble, our last clear apparition point in the rainforest. I had asked Dick why we couldn't

simply apparate directly into the Oi or one of the other Indian villages. He patted my shoulder and said it would be a very good way to get shot, and it was terribly rude, besides. So, from Boa Vista we had to trek.

Dick had supposedly already arranged for a boat, but for some reason we had to sit at a table in the shade of one of the shacks, drinking gallons of coffee as young boys were sent running in all directions to find it. It had to be that particular boat, it was the one that Dick had arranged to be fitted with a spell-driven motor years ago.

"Isn't that a violation of the Statute?" I asked when the locals had gone off.

Dick laughed. "No one cares about the Statute out here. Half the locals are from tribes designated as 'integrated Statute-exempt societies' anyway. Ministry officials never set foot in the rainforest. They just don't care."

While we waited, Dick bought some eggs and dried fish off the stooped old woman who was serving us coffee. She brought them out a few minutes later all wrapped up in one stinking newspaper bundle. Perfect, fishy eggs.

Finally the boat pattered up to the rickety dock with a flock of boys running along the shore behind it. The fishermen who had 'borrowed' it had to unload their catch, then we had to load our own gear on board, and extract the giggling boys who were trying to stow away in the hold. Uli set them one-by-one on the dock and shook her finger at each one, which sent them into paroxysms of laughter. Finally we cast off and pulled away from the dock lined with boys shaking their fingers at us in farewell.

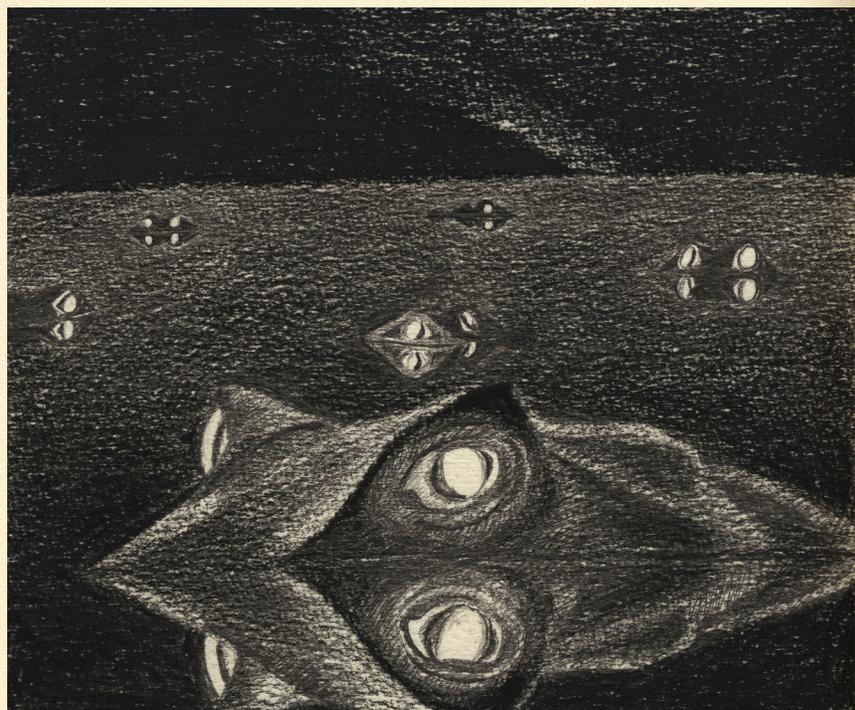
We were off.



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Art by Mottsnave

UPRIVER

We traveled up the river by boat for three days, setting out early in the mornings when the riot of birds woke us, pulling up occasionally to stretch our legs or examine some unusual tree Dick spotted from the river, then continuing on until dark. The emerging sandbanks and logs in the river didn't allow us to travel by night. As we ventured into the maze of channels we saw more animals and fewer and fewer human traces. Elegant formations of jabiru storks and egrets flew high overhead, and marauding flocks of parrots and toucans swung on lower

Chapter 28 of **THE NEW SKIN**
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Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 42, NO.2
IMBOLC 2005

branches. Piercing cries of howler monkeys rang out for miles every dawn and dusk. Phalanxes of turtles dove from logs into the river as we passed, and Grossman once had to work very quickly with the boathook to keep a swimming bushmaster from boarding.

We ate our fishy eggs, rice, fried potatoes and baked beans, a bag of fruit Uli had brought from Manaus, jars of sauerkraut, and fish, plenty of fish. Little red-bellied piranhas, full of bones, peacock bass, and one enormous catfish that fought with Dick for half an hour before we got it on deck. One day we could catch nothing at all, as we were being followed by an opportunistic pair of river dolphins who poached everything off our lines.

We slept on the deck on straw mats, Uli's next to mine, though we had agreed on 'no fondling,' as she called it, due to our close quarters. Also due to close quarters, I made sure to cast *Silencio* on myself every night. With good reason; the second night I dreamt of having to give Potter an Occlumency lesson, but at the moment I cast *Legilimens*, his eyes changed and the Dark Lord looked through him. He reversed the spell on me and I *knew* that he knew everything. I woke with a silent gasp and tried to wipe the sweat from my face with my shirt.

I needed water. I cast *Lumos* to find the bottle and immediately froze as glowing red eyes appeared in the darkness beyond the boat's rail. One set disappeared with a tiny splash and the other two sets rocked gently. I strengthened the *Lumos*. Caimans in the river, floating motionless with just their snouts and reflective eyes above water. Wonderful. A second one sunk out of sight as I leaned on the rail. One left. I drank my water and stared at it as it stared at me. "Can't get me now," I muttered behind my *Silencio*. I went back to sleep.

On the beginning of the third day we turned up a clearer and narrower channel of the Vaupes. We began to have to look out for rocks as well as sandbanks, even at one tricky spot Grossman and myself at the prow pushing off from the surrounding boulders with boathooks as Uli steered and Dick bellowed directions. Just before dusk, we reached the end of the river route: A series of steep rapids and falls where the river descended twenty meters over a quarter mile, ending

in a wide swirling splash pool. There was no way to bring the boat up that. We anchored downstream in a calm part of the channel and secured the boat to wait for our return, sealing bags of rice and potatoes and the remaining cans of beans in an impenetrable box and masking the boat with Notice-me-nots and disillusionment charms. We ate catfish and watched bats swooping over the water as the light faded. Only three days; somehow it felt like weeks.

Time slowed further when we entered the forest the next day. In part it was the lack of any landmark; after passing the rapids on the riverbank, we turned away into the trees, and every direction looked much the same. In part it was that it was physically hard going as we had to work our way through heavy growth and sometimes cut our way with slicing charms, but mostly it was that I was traveling with goddamn herbologists. They simply had to stop every ten meters or so to examine some fascinating specimen collect it, and argue over the subspecies.

To make it worse, I was definitely the preferred blood source among the four of us for any insect around. Somehow I always had a cloud of motuca flies and mosquitoes hovering around me. When we had stopped so Uli and Dick could argue over the bark of yet another indistinguishable vine, I finally snapped, "no wonder it took you eight years to walk to Colombia if you stopped every ten paces!"

Dick laughed. "Now, now, we're herbologists. You have to expect us to herbologize. Just relax; we'll get there."

"Easy for you to relax, since you have me as your personal insect attractant."

"Must be your sweet disposition," muttered Grossman.

"I heard that, and I know where you sleep."

"Hey, there's an easy way to get rid of those motucas you know." Grossman showed me his technique of holding a hand over my head as bait while walking, then when a motuca landed, bringing it down smoothly to slap it with the other hand. "You can get rid of all of them like that, since they always take a second after landing to bite."

After that, I amused myself by pacing and massacring flies every time the rest stopped to look at some specimen. It worked well except for the

time I became too absorbed in my task and stepped in a fire-ant nest.

Every night I had the most parasites to remove, cream to apply to kill the *bichu geographicum* crawling under my skin, jiggers to dig out from my feet and under my toenails. Everything seemed to have a special affinity to me; perhaps I spent too much time in Professor da Silva's office. I discovered a *dematobis hominis* on the back of my neck when I removed my shirt at the end of the day to Scourgify it. It was a large tender lump just below my hairline, and what was worse was that I could feel something *moving* inside.

I immediately began to sweat, nightmare images of a head growing on the back of my head springing to mind. "Dick?" I said, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. I was only partly successful, based on how quickly he appeared at my side.

"What's wrong?"

"Something's moving in there, Dick, get it out!"

"Ah, *dermatobia hominis*! Don't worry, they're very easy to take care of."

"Well, take care of it, get it out!"

"There's no rush - "

"Yes there is, it's growing!"

"It's just a fly, Cyril, it doesn't grow very large. The worst it could do if it hatches is that sometimes the spot gets infected."

"It won't hatch because you'll get rid of it now!"

"Well, soon. We'll have to kill it first, then we can pull it out clean."

"You can't pull it out now? Why not?"

"They have, well, spikes to hold on with... "

"Dick!"

He had the bad grace to laugh. "Calm down, it's very easy." He was Scourgifying the spot, then I felt a slight pressure. "There you are."

"What did you do?"

"Just covered it with some spello tape. It will stick to the tape as it tries to get to its breathing hole and suffocate. The tape comes off in a day or too and the larvae comes with it. *Easy*." Easy for him to say, he didn't have some *creature* growing in him.

At night we strung our hammocks from the trees and slept around a fire, the flickering light making the surrounding jungle

seem even more claustrophobic. The night noises we had on the boat, of fish jumping in the river and droning frogs were replaced by the mournful call-and-response of some far-off tinamous and strange rustlings that seemed far too close.

The next day we crossed streams frequently, and I got quite tired of constantly casting Tergeo on my shoes. I finally gave up and squished with each step. On the fourth day after leaving the boat, we turned and followed a stream uphill to a series of swampy ponds in a wide caldera. The frogs that night were overwhelmingly loud. I couldn't sleep for a long time. Once when I shifted in my hammock again, I heard Uli whisper, "Awake?"

I sighed and nodded. She stretched out her arm from under her mosquito net and gave my hammock a little push. It swung gently. I tried to imagine I wasn't trapped in a thousand ways, that I was floating free. Free, at least for the moment. I fell asleep with the slow swaying.

The next morning, we repacked our gear with the gifts for the Oi on top. We would be approaching the village that day. Dick pulled me aside after breakfast (the last of the hard-boiled eggs, coffee and malaria pills).

"There shouldn't be any problem with the Oi. They're my friends, I lived with them for a couple of years. They've met Ben and Uli on earlier trips, but you are a stranger to them and they approach all strangers with a fair amount of caution. It's a necessity of life out here. The only thing you need to do to show that you're not a threat is be relaxed and open. Easy."

Easy for Dick, perhaps. "Easy?"

"Yes," he said firmly, "*easy*. You can stick by me. Now let's go. There's still some walking first."

Our route that day led us uphill again. First gradually, then up a short steep rise. When we reached the level top, the forest was quiet, more quiet than it was at midday. "Let's stop a moment, shall we?" said Dick.

That was all the warning we had. Two figures rushed at us from the trees. Dick held on to my elbow. "Remember to relax," he said. The figures turned at the last minute and veered into the trees again. All was silent. Dick began walking again.

"What was that for?"

"Just to see who we are and if we'd run or try to attack. They'll tell the rest we're on our way."

Grossman and Uli were relaxed enough. Had this happened on their earlier trips?

The second visit came as we were crossing a log over a soggy bit of trail. It was a good spot; we were quite vulnerable trying to balance on the slippery surface. At once I noticed a group of silent figures behind us watching. I could see black-haired heads when I craned my head around to look back over Uli's shoulder. Dick called out a few words in another language, then said to us, "it's all right, keep coming across and keep your hands out of your pockets."

We came across, and were herded from then on by half-seen figures, never very close. They finally closed the distance as we came through some garden plots and out into the village. I had a brief glimpse of long narrow houses with high-peaked thatched roofs around a packed-ground plaza before the crowd closed around us, blocking my view.

It wouldn't be entirely fair to say that the Oi were naked; after all, they wore at least two pieces of string around their waists, several necklaces and cotton armbands. Their skin was absolutely flawless. How did they manage that? I was covered with mosquito, ant and motuca bites, a rash all up my left arm from that caterpillar I had brushed against, and innumerable little cuts from leaves and thorns. I felt ridiculously sweaty and unkempt in comparison to them. I could feel their eyes on me.

Dick was holding onto one of the men's arms and talking to him. He laughed and answered. The press around us was loosening as another group of men walked up. There wasn't much difference in their clothing, if you could call it that, but one man in the new group came up with a swagger as if he owned the place. Everyone got quiet again as he addressed Dick.

They went back and forth for a few minutes, but most of the eyes were still on me, watching. Some of the men had short-range weapons in their hands, machetes and clubs. There were two rifles. I watched them. The important man gave a speech, a boring speech, judging by the impatient shuffling that began on the edges of the crowd.

All at once the crowd broke apart with noisy talking and shouting. What had changed? The important man was still saying something to Dick, but it no longer seemed to hold any import. Women and children had appeared from somewhere. Grossman had somehow lost his shirt to a group of boys who were patting his chest hair and laughing. Uli had been seized around the waist by an older woman who easily lifted her off the ground, saying "Uli-Uli! Uli-Uli!" The same man who was talking to Dick before was now alternately clapping him on the upper arms and catching his hands and laughing. There was still a group of armed men watching me. The important man was watching me as well. He said something to Dick. Dick pulled at my elbow. "Cyril, relax, unfold your arms. There."

He addressed the important man; I caught my name, but nothing else, of course. I unfolded my arms.

"Cyril, this is Canutsipem. He's the head of the Oi."

He stood very close to me. I felt it was probably bad form to step back.

"Everything's fine," Dick said, "the women and children are here. Just relax."

I could do this, after all, it should be no problem for me. How many times had I been examined, watched, read? No matter how many times, no one ever saw what was in my head. It was simple, I just needed to be how I was at every meeting, at every dinner at the manor, at every speech in the Great Hall. I started to collect myself. They could look at me all they pleased; there was nothing to see.

Dick took me by my shoulders and turned me to face him. He got close to my face and spoke seriously. "Cyril, stop it, whatever you're doing. They don't like it; you're putting their backs up. There is nothing you need to do right now but relax. Please just relax."

"What do you mean?" I was in control, and there was nothing to see.

"They are not threatening you. Stop acting like it."

Shit, he told me to relax, and then he told me to let my guard down. How the hell was I supposed to relax if I didn't have my guard up? It was ridiculous.

"Whatever you're thinking of, change it. Try... thinking of someplace safe, with friends. Because that's where you are."

Did he think I had friends I could let my guard down around? Better to think of someplace without people at all, someplace safe. My quarters down below everything else, when everyone was away for the hols and I had the whole place to myself. Alone and safe.

Dick must have been satisfied with my face, since he stepped back again. Canutsipem stepped into the breach, much closer than before. He looked my face over carefully. Quickly he reached out and placed two fingers exactly over the marks left by Nagini's fangs. Dick's arm right behind me kept me from stepping back. Canutsipem pulled his hand back and looked at the distance between his fingers. He said something to Dick. "He says: that snake was about 12 feet long."

"Yes," I said warily.

"He wants to know if it was a bushmaster."

"No it was... It was another kind."

Canutsipem considered this after Dick translated, and spoke again.

"He says it was smart of you to survive that." I nodded. He kept speaking as Dick translated: "but it would have been much smarter not to be bitten in the first place."

"Fine," I said through my teeth.

The head of the Oi burst out laughing when Dick gave him my answer. He reached for my shirt buttons. Dick's voice in my ear repeating, "relax, Cyril," kept me from drawing back. He undid my shirt, several hands tugged at my sleeves. I knew I was going to lose my shirt, but equally I knew that I couldn't resist. I scowled. Canutsipem laughed again, joined by some of the others. Were they going to strip me completely? God, this was altogether too much like school. Well, I supposed it was a bit different, since the attackers were unclothed themselves. In some ways, I reflected, it was the opposite: they were making me stand out less, not more. That thought made the process a little easier. They stripped me to the waist. That seemed to satisfy them, thankfully.

They examined me, touching the beads around my arm, Canutsipem's eyes on the scar running across my midriff. He spoke to Dick again: "he says you must be very lucky because he doesn't think you are very smart."

I narrowed my eyes. "Others have thought that. They regretted it."

I'm not sure how Dick translated that, but whatever he said, it made Canutsipem laugh again.

"Now would be the time for gifts," said Dick. I opened my pack. Dick had loaded my pack with the largest share of gifts at the last camp. I had complained about it at the time, but now I could see the reasoning behind it. I had to pay my way much dearer than the others who were already known to them. So I brought out the gifts and Dick unshrunk them: packets of fishhooks, new machete blades, bags of salt.

Canutsipem didn't seem very impressed with the gifts, accepting them without comment, except for eating a small handful of the salt straight from the bag with great enjoyment.

The serious occasion appeared to be over as quickly as it had started. Dick was being peppered with questions and I heard my name once or twice. Unexpectedly, I felt a hand on my elbow and someone asked me in Portuguese, {"See-ril? What does Cyril mean?"}

It was one of the Oi men, a little taller than I, with a slightly crooked nose.

{"Mean?"} I forced myself not to draw back from his touch. Where had my shirt gone?

{"What does *Cyri!* mean?"} He pronounced each word slowly, as if I were a bit dense. I had to wrack my memory for my schoolboy Greek, buried somewhere under my Portuguese and Latin. And what was 'ruler' in Portuguese, anyway?

I settled on {"king"} as the closest equivalent. The Oi man nodded, considering.

"Savuru," he said. Was that his name? I was about to ask when Dick turned back to me.

"Cyril, this is my good friend Tepora," he said, introducing me to the man who had been holding his hands earlier and to whom Dick had given his packages. He wasn't much older than I, I thought, though it was hard for me to tell any of their ages with their very clear skin and very black hair. His armbands had tufts of black and white feathers worked in. Like Canutsipem, he was intent on examining me closely. I held still again.

"I've been telling him that you've been my friend for many years. He wants to look you over." That last part was unnecessary. His fingers were running over the scar on my neck. He moved around behind me while Dick said, "You're doing fine."

Sod him, I was beginning to feel like a skittish horse being sold at a fair. If anyone tried to check my teeth they would bloody well lose a finger.

Tepora found the bit of spello tape on the back of my neck that covered the *dermatobia hominis* breathing hole. Tepora laughed and said something to Dick, who passed it on to me: "he says that they do exactly the same thing, except that they use a piece of fat and some latex sap instead of tape."

"How interesting," I ground out.

"We'll go to his family house. The larvae should be ready to come out and he wants to look at something on Ben as well. We'll be staying with his family, so we can set up our hammocks there."

Tepora led us across the hard-packed earth of the plaza to one of the thatched houses. There was a low entrance to one side of the carved beam that held up the held up the peak of the house. It was carved and painted in white, black and red chevrons. Tepora had Grossman and I sit in the shade in front of the house as he and Dick disappeared inside.

There was still a small crowd lingering around us. I finally caught sight of Uli again. She was at the center of a crowd of her own dominated by one older woman who held onto her possessively and stroked her hair. I noticed that she had lost her shirt also, very interesting. Grossman laughed. I glared at him; he had been watching me.

Tepora started on me when he emerged. There was a brief pressure on the back of my neck and then he peeled up the tape. He helpfully showed me the fat half-inch spiky worm dangling from it. Wonderful. There was a brief painful pressure on the wound and the application of something that stung. "What's that?" I asked Dick.

"It's a resin called 'sangre de drago.' It's sort of an antiseptic."

"Sort of?"

Tepora applied something sticky to the rash on my arm and told me sternly through Dick not to touch any caterpillars.

"If I had seen it, I wouldn't have touched it."

"Didn't you see the anthill too? You can't count on being lucky here, you have to pay attention," he said.

I scowled. It was true that I hadn't been paying attention when I stepped on that anthill, but that caterpillar had been on the underside of a leaf and completely invisible.

Tepora moved on to Grossman next and a parasite that had infected his left elbow. He examined the irritated lump, then leaned in and made a short whistling sound through his teeth. At the noise, the maggot half-emerged from the wound. Tepora had a wood needle through it almost faster than I could see. He pulled it free and showed it to Grossman. It was even more impressive than my larvae. "Euurgh!" said Grossman. The boys who were watching the operation fell about laughing.

"Evi evi!" they shouted.

"Again, again," Dick translated.

"Euurgh!" said Grossman, obligingly. The boys had him repeating the noise every few minutes.

We hung our hammocks between some support poles on one side of Tepora's house. The interior was dim and smelled of wood smoke, but was surprisingly airy, aided by openings on both ends and regularly-spaced chinks in the wall.

"And Uli?" I asked Dick.

"Oh, I'm afraid she'll be claimed by Amaru. She basically adopted Uli on her last trip here. She'll sleep in her family's house." I supposed Amaru must be the older woman who had been hanging on to Uli all afternoon.

We spent the afternoon just sitting in front of Tepora's house. Dick was engaged in a long conversation with Tepora over the bundles he had brought, which were now unwrapped to reveal many plant and seed samples. Tepora went over each item in detail with Dick, rubbing them with his fingers, sniffing and sometimes tasting them. Dick was questioning him closely.

Some of the other men stayed around Grossman and me. Two who spoke Portuguese, Alapa and Savuru, asked us about our trip and the fish we had caught. Canutsipem and his entourage appeared

again after a while and started asking questions through Alapa and Savuru. Most of the questions were directed at me: where I was from, how I knew Dick, how lucky I was. They started calling me 'hori-katu,' which apparently meant 'lucky.' I didn't think it was exactly a compliment. Well, it certainly wasn't the worst nickname I'd ever had, and it was still better than Grossman's, which had apparently just been changed from something that meant 'curly' to 'euurgh.'

Canutsipem said something which got a big laugh, translated by Alapa: {"we've heard of England. You have a woman in charge."} Ah, the queen.

"Well, she's not really in charge. It's just so... her family can pretend to be important. Other people are the real rulers."

"Many people? You have a council like the Arumbayas, not a real ruler," he said dismissively.

"You're getting off easy," said Grossman. "I had to explain the American electoral college last year. It didn't go over well."

"This is a bad idea," said Canutsipem through Savuru, {"if there are disagreements then nothing gets done, and no one is responsible for everything."}

"Well, sometimes it's a good thing to have many minds working on a problem. And what if you get a chief who goes bad?" asked Grossman. Would Canutsipem take that as a slight? But he simply thought it over and shook his head.

"You Americans and English make it too complicated. When there's a bad chief everyone knows it and he's killed before he can do much damage. Simple." Ah yes, very simple.

Grossman asked the questions then, about someone's broken leg, reportedly healed, and some babies, who were healthy. My attention wandered. Two of the older boys were standing near the side of Tepora's house, making short buzzing noises at each other, then taking small jumps back. There was *something* about the noises, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. It was beginning to settle into evening; swallows were dipping and swooping across the plaza under tall pink clouds. Grossman and the others were still talking. The boys were gone, but the buzzing noises were still there. I felt

a cold rush down my spine unrelated by my lack of a shirt. That buzzing was a spell, I *knew* it.

I got up and turned quickly. What was that spell for? We were surrounded.

"Dr. Ramson?" said Grossman. I held up a hand. I could hear it somewhere nearby. Two of the men were now standing too.

"Cyril, why don't you have a seat?" said Dick calmly.

"Dick, what's going on?"

"Nothing, everyone's just talking."

"No, there's a spell somewhere."

Dick pulled me back down. "The kids are just playing; it's nothing to worry about."

"What are they doing?"

"They have many, uh, *sung* spells. I'll explain later."

Canutspem was watching me carefully again, but then he said something that got a laugh and the momentary tension was gone. {"Lucky doesn't believe he's lucky,"} came the translation.

"I was just told to *pay attention*," I retorted. This time I got a laugh as well. The conversation picked up again around me. Women and children had joined the outskirts of the group and added to the laughing and talking. I could see Uli leaning against Amaru, their heads together as they spoke.

Just as the light was going, two of the men got up and then arranged themselves on the ground, sitting with their legs stretched out in front of them, but angled to the side so they could sit closely face-to-face. They held onto each other's upper arms and began to sing, belting out a song that fell off in an almost mournful way at the end of each line. Other men joined in at the ends of the lines with a dissonant buzzing harmony. The buzzing reminded me of the noises the boys were making earlier.

"Ah," said Dick, leaning across to me, "they love to sing. I was wondering when someone would start up. It's the story of the twins, the sun and the moon."

Dick translated, aided by Savuru who interjected in Portuguese now and then. It wasn't a very *nice* story. A man who promised his daughter

as wife to the jaguar didn't want to give her up, and made several new daughters out of wood to give him instead. The song went into exhaustive detail about the woods and plants used to make all the parts of their bodies. It lost me, though Dick was very enthusiastic about that part.

At any rate, the wood daughters didn't last long, they all began to die off one by one on the way to the jaguar, some killed by animals, some by fingernails turned into biting flies, and several by one of the girls who realized that they were all made out of wood as substitutes and decided to get rid of them. Finally she was the only one left, but she didn't have much a better fate. She married the jaguar and gave birth to twins, but was killed by the jaguar's mother and hidden in the roof thatch of his house. After the twins found and questioned their mother's corpse, they killed their grandmother jaguar, and tricked their father into eating her. When he realized what they had done, he tried to kill them with an enormous snake that he sent to wrap around the house and trap them. The twins escaped by climbing up the smoke from the smokehole and into the sky to become the sun and the moon. The song was over, leaving me feeling a bit stunned.

"Just what is the moral of that story?" I asked Dick.

He laughed. "It's not exactly an easy life out here, you know. Survival is one of their highest virtues." I supposed that I should feel at home.

The gathering was beginning to break up. We moved into Tepora's house as the mosquitoes began to descend; they mostly kept out of the smoky interior. Tepora's wife, Ierem, had brought out some sort of flat bread or pancake, which Grossman identified as manioc bejus. It had to be the blandest thing I had ever eaten. Thankfully, there was also roasted fish and yams along with it.

The population of the house had grown since we had strung our hammocks that afternoon. Aside from Tepora and Ierem, there were their children: their sons Tupa and Xipo, about eight and ten, and a two-year-old daughter Mawa, who was still nursing. Tepora's assistant or apprentice was a boy of about twelve, Xumu, who lived with them as well. Then there was Ierem's sister Bukhuna, along with her husband Natakoya, their four younger children, and her husband's mother Xurikaya. There was also Natakoya's brother Nixi

and his foster-son Raci. Apparently there was yet another brother and two more boys who were out on a hunting trip for a few days. It was quite a crowd. Even with all my head-of-house experience, I doubted I would be able to keep all the names straight.

The women and children finally had their chance to examine us closely, and they took advantage of it. When the poking and prodding were finally over and I could let my shoulders down, there were gourd bowls passed around, with some drink Dick called *chica*. It had a slight banana taste. It also had a bit of a kick to it.

Tepora sat next to me and said something very earnestly. Of course I couldn't understand a word. Dick explained: "I asked Tepora to explain about the Oi and why so many have magic."*

Tepora went on, Dick translating. "It happened when Aravatua was the head of the Oi. They lived on a lower branch of the river then, below the rapids. I think Tepora and I have narrowed the date to about 1880, from what he can tell me about the chiefs up until now. There were only a very few Oi who had magic at that time, maybe fifteen adults and less than ten children. They had an alliance with the

Ruapu, and would meet once a year for wrestling matches and songs. One of the Oi killed a Ruapu wrestler by accident, but some of the Ruapu thought it had been a trick. When the Oi were on their way home, they were attacked, though no one was killed. Later they sent payment to the Ruapu for the wrestler who was killed."

Tepora spoke on for several minutes before Dick translated again: "Then, the Oi were visited by a group of Kubenia who were friends of the Ruapu. They said they were just traveling out of the floodplains, but the Oi saw that there were no women or children with them. They decided

it was safer to kill all the Kubenia." When Dick caught up again, Tepora went on.

"They invited the Kubenia to bathe in the river, and while they were there, the Oi women cut halfway through all their bowstrings. When they came back to the village, the men attacked the Kubenia, who ran for their bows. Of course, the strings snapped and the Oi killed them all.

"Some time later, some Oi were out fishing and they saw some strangers on the other side of the river. The strangers were calling to them and inviting them on shore. The Oi went straight back to the village and everyone was very upset. Part of the Oi decided to go to their winter quarters early and left straight away, the rest decided to stay. One old man who had magic stayed up in the middle of the plaza, singing to protect the village. Everyone could hear all sorts of animal calls all around the village, and finally they started calling the old man's name. They called his name until he stopped singing and then there was a stranger standing just beyond the trees, holding something out to him. The old man went to take it and the stranger clubbed him to death. Then the village was overrun. The ones who had magic and could make themselves and their children invisible made it to the boats and escaped upstream. They made a camp and stayed hidden by singing for three days. When there was no more smoke rising from the village they went back, but everyone was dead, even the women. They thought the strangers would have taken the women along, but they killed them all.

"The Oi who were left joined the ones who were in the winter quarters, and then they all moved again, above the rapids. For many years they cut off all contact with any other people and kept their villages unseen by singing. He says that was a very hard time for the Oi, but it was also very fortunate for them. When the rubber barons came and massacred and enslaved the other tribes, the Oi were already living unseen and weren't touched by the killing. The Oi credit their magic for much of how they survived the rubber boom. They are still very careful about contact with outsiders, but now they are allied with the Arumbayas, the Pomberos, and the Tatu-Karaia. That's why there are so many wizards among the Oi," Dick finished for Tepora.

* The Oi are based on a legendary tribe in the folklore of the Trumai Indians. They are only described as carrying clubs, and singing in chorus. Though some of their stories and practices are based on other tribal folklore from the region, they are not meant to resemble any actual group.

Some of my sources for the details in this and the next chapter are XINGU, THE INDIANS, THEIR MYTHS, by Orlando and Claudio Vilas Boas, ONE RIVER, by Wade Davis, SOUTH AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY, by John Bierhorst, WIZARD OF THE UPPER AMAZON, by Bruce Lamb and Manuel Cordova, and WALKING THE JUNGLE, by John Coningham.

I was a bit surprised that Tepora would admit the Oi's parts in their bloody history, but Dick's words came back to me: "Survival is one of their highest virtues." Good thing for them that it was.

"Sung magic, then?" I asked.

Tepora explained, "by singing, by drawing and by plants. Just like there is singing with and without magic, there are preparations of plants with and without magic. Everyone in the Oi does the same things, but some use magic, like my teacher and my apprentice, and some use other methods, like myself."

When the words sank in, I felt my stomach drop. Tepora was a muggle, this person on whom Dick pinned all my hopes to escape the skin, couldn't even...

"Dick – "

"We won't talk about that now. No business on the first day," said Dick.

"What?" Grossman asked.

I had almost forgotten he was listening. Dick was talking to Tepora again. Grossman didn't push it. I watched the fire.

FRIENDS

I didn't sleep much that night. It felt strange to be in such an open space with so many other people, not visible to me. I could hear soft voices in some other corner of the house, the creak of hammock-ropes against the house poles, the far-off calls of the night birds outside. The open cavernous plan of the house let sounds and breezes drift around me. I stared up into the dark rafters, far above. Nothing was really still. Every time I drifted off some tiny noise or movement would bring me awake again. And then the Oi rose early, very early. Ierem was cooking beijus at the fire before it was light, the rest of the family slowly gathering around her

Chapter 29 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 42, No.3
OSTARA 2005

as the food came off the fire.

Grossman was the last up, but finally it was impossible for him to pretend to be asleep any longer with four of the children climbing into the hammock and poking at him. He reared up with a monster's roar that sent all of them scurrying and shrieking with delight. We drank manioc mixed with water and ate manioc pancakes with everyone crowded around the fire. Just as the birdsong was reaching its height, we could hear voices adding to the noise outside. Everyone sauntered out, Grossman yawning hugely. Canutsipem was on one side of the plaza, speaking in a droning chant, while the rest of the Oi sat in front of their doorways or under their house eaves.

"Ah, nothing like a lecture in the morning, right?" said Grossman.

"Lecture?"

"Canutsipem likes to make sure everyone is on track for the day. Mostly he reminds the women not to be lazy. Good thing too; the women take care of the manioc. If they ever decided to be lazy the village would go hungry."

To their credit, the women didn't seem to be paying much attention to the speech. They nursed some children, poured gourds of water over others to wash them, husked corn, spun cotton and talked among themselves.

Canutsipem seemed satisfied with the half-attention he got, and ducked back into his house as the sun was lighting the clouds a brilliant pink.

"Coming?" asked Grossman. "Everyone goes to wash first thing." I nodded, it was rather sticky.

Tepora's brother-in-law, sister and the children went along. Dick and Tepora had disappeared somewhere, according to Grossman, they would probably be out collecting plants all day. We were following a narrow track through the Oi's garden plots, riotous collections of vegetables, cotton and arrow grass. Some women were already work there. They watched us as we passed.

"They didn't trust me a bit the first time I visited, you know. I made the mistake of playing with the kids too much. Since I'm a wizard, they thought I might curse them out of envy. Dick finally

got them to calm down. I think he told them that I'm a bit simple..."

"Not really?"

"Stop it! What I'm trying to say is that it just takes some time for them to accept you when you're new."

"And Uli?"

"It's different for Uli. She's a woman. She's not seen as a potential threat. Her problem is that she's not allowed to hear some of the songs or try some of the plant preparations. It's a segregated society in many ways. It's sort of a trade. She can't take part in certain things, but in other ways she's immediately brought in, much closer than Dick or I will ever be. She really is considered family to Amaru, who's been lobbying hard to have her live here permanently."

Would she want that? I wondered.

The trail widened as a couple other tracks joined it, then ran down a red clay bank to a stream about five meters across, the mist still rising off it in lazy waves. About fifteen of the Oi were ahead of us, washing, the men upstream, the women in the shallows with the children.

"Well, here we are," said Grossman, stripping on the bank.

God. Well, everyone else was stripped, so there was really no point delaying or refusing. I would only stand out more, the longer I stood clothed on the bank. I got in the water as quickly as possible.

While we were slapping the water on, one of the men began to speak to Grossman very earnestly. Grossman was repeating a few words back to him, his face a mask of concentration. The man finally broke into a grin, confident that he was understood.

"He wants us to go fishing with him."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure." The man had waded back to the bank and was gesturing to us. "*Now*, I guess."

We made our way back out to the bank and dressed while the man introduced himself as Avatsiu, and three boys who were about 12 or 13 joined us. I had expected that we would go back to the village for fishing gear, but instead Avatsiu just picked up a machete and a coil of twine. Were we to catch the fish with our hands? Or perhaps we could dunk Grossman's feet in the water and collect

any piranhas who attached themselves.

The boys crashed along the trail in front of us, imitating birdcalls and animal grunts to each other's laughter. Avatsiu continued to talk to Grossman, despite the fact that he could only understand part of the conversation. "I think there's going to be singing tonight, that's why we're catching a lot of fish," he finally explained.

"Singing?"

"It's their favorite thing. Everyone eats and drinks and they sing chorus songs. It's fun!" Ah, *fun*.

Our path cut away from the main stream along a quiet side-channel. A cloud of small white moths fluttered up from the grassy verge as we stepped out on the sunny bank. The boys squatted, waiting, as Avatsiu stepped over to the trees and began cutting down a length of vine.

"Ah, he's going to use *serjania piscetorum!* You have to see this!"

"Of course I'm going to see it, I'm right here." *Idiot.* My tone couldn't deflate his mood; Grossman was far too excited by the nondescript vine that Avatsiu was now crushing against a rock with the flat of the machete blade. Milky sap oozed out. Avatsiu would drag the crushed end of the vine through the water to spread the sap, then crush a few more inches. When he reached the end of his section of vine, he tossed the spent piece in the water. Then, nothing. We sat and waited for the sap to take effect.

The boys were making a game of bothering each other. One (Siu, Grossman said), used a long stem of grass to try to poke Mavat and Viti without being caught. Mavat retaliated with small pebbles he flicked off his palm. Viti was doing something. He bit off a bit of fingernail and spit it into his palm. He leaned over, ignoring the pebble that bounced off his shoulder, and made a strange short buzzing noise. A large motuca fly flew looping off his palm and bit Mavat on his ankle. He swatted it down and shot another pebble at Viti.

Had he really done that, *made* a motuca fly? That buzzing noise held something, I was sure of it. What was the word those kids used on Grossman? Ah, yes, "evi evi." *Again.*

"Evi evi," I said. The boys stared at me. "Evi evi," I said, again.

Viti leaned forward on hands and knees and held an intense discussion with the other two, in whispers, as if I could understand a word they said.

Grossman hadn't been paying attention. "What's going on?" I ignored him.

The boys leaned back out of their circle and turned to me. "Evi evi," I said.

Viti replied something. "Uh, I think he's asking what you want," said Grossman.

"I want him to show me how he did that."

"Did what?" I didn't answer.

"I can say: teach me."

"So, say it."

He said it, "Mm voche," and I repeated the words to Viti. The boys had another whispered conference. They leaned apart again but didn't address me, simply waiting. I repeated "mm voche" again.

Viti leaned forward, touched the frame of my glasses and gave them a small tug. He drew his hand back quickly, as if the glasses might burn him. He wanted my glasses? I wasn't sure why he was so curious; Dick had been coming here for years and he wore glasses. The Oi must be accustomed to the sight. Well, seeing glasses is one thing, but having a pair of your own is something else. My glasses were fairly useless; they didn't change my vision and it wasn't as if I needed a disguise out here, but I didn't want to just give them up without a fight. I suspected the Oi might be bargainers. Yet another reason I should feel at home.

I took off the glasses and held them up. Viti nodded. I ran my finger along one earpiece just up to the side of the lens, then stopped and pointed at him. "Toff!" he said.

"That's a big no," said Grossman, unnecessarily.

Viti wasn't hesitant to reach out to the glasses now: he ran his finger from one earpiece across both lenses and all the way along the second earpiece. He wanted the whole thing, of course. It was my turn to say, "toff," then I traced out one earpiece and half a lens. Viti shook his head firmly. I indicated how fine and handsome my

glasses were and how they could reflect the light into Mavat's eyes. Viti used his hands to show what a big ferocious fly he could make.

"Oh, just give him the glasses," said Grossman.

"*Quiet*, you. I'm doing *business*."

Viti and I inched our way along the glasses and finally settled on one earpiece and two lenses. I snapped off the other earpiece and tucked it in my pocket before giving Viti the rest of the glasses. Viti's face was immediately transported with delight as he popped the glasses on his nose. His friends fell about laughing. He pushed the glasses up on her forehead, holding them with one hand to compensate for the missing earpiece. He pretended to examine a blade of grass minutely, holding it close to his eyes and rubbing it between his fingers, saying "hmm, hmmm." It was a pretty good impression of Dick. Grossman had a good laugh at that.

"Aren't you glad you managed to hold on to your precious earpiece?" he said to me.

I snorted. "Obviously you aren't a ..." I caught myself in time "A bargainer. You don't know how to play the game."

"Whoever gets the earpiece wins?"

"It's not an earpiece, it's a bargaining chip. Whoever thinks they have the best deal wins."

"He looks pretty happy."

"Just imagine how happy I'll be when I know how to set a motuca fly on you."

Viti was about to begin his demonstration to me, but we were interrupted by a noise from the channel. Fish were bobbing to the surface belly-up until the surface was crowded by their still bodies. The 'fishing' from then on was as easy as picking berries. We waded out and had our pick. Sua threaded them onto lengths of twine through their gills. When we were done, we were all loaded with long strings of fish.

There were still a great number of fish floating in the channel, but according to Grossman, the drug would wear off, slowly, and they would swim away on their own soon, as long as the egrets and fish eagles didn't get them first.

By the time we reached the village, my shirt and trousers were soaked with fishy water, for the first time I envied the Oi's lack of dress. All they had to do was take another dip in the stream and the fish smell would be gone. The strings of fish were passed off to the other members of Avatsiu's house for cleaning. As soon as we were unloaded, Viti pulled me away to sit in the shade under the house eaves.

We worked on making flies all afternoon. The key, apparently, was the noise, and Viti's technique of teaching me was to repeat it over and over and laugh at my attempts to imitate him. It was a sort of buzzing low noise with a bit of 'shh' in it, forced out between clenched teeth.

For the first hour or so I concentrated on making the right noise. It was similar to casting a spell by wand, I supposed; one had to have the spell word absolutely correct. Yet even when I had the sound perfect to my ear, Viti was still shaking his head at me. He had me try it once with a bit of bitten-off fingernail, but the nail sat inert on my palm as I made the noise over it. Viti sighed and brushed the nail off my palm. He squatted silently for a few minutes and started again.

He mimed the process again, spitting a bit of nail in his palm, making the noise over it. Then he stopped and did it again, making no noise at all, just making a face, closing his eyes and wincing in concentration. He pointed at his head a few times to drive the point home.

Well, I was missing something, clearly, some key thought or trick of concentration. Closing his eyes and wincing, that made me think of a student's first attempt at a non-verbal spell, but this spell did have a word. Only it wasn't quite a word, was it?

Perhaps that was the problem, I was thinking of using this sound like a spell word without a wand movement. Perhaps it was more like a non-verbal spell, but since the Oi didn't use wands, the physical act of making the sound stood in for the wand and hand movement. That meant I had to concentrate on *something* non-verbally while producing the sound. I tried it again, just the sound alone, and then with a push towards the idea of a fly. Viti broke into a broad smile and he clapped me on my upper arms. I winced. Well, that was it, apparently. I tried it with a scrap of nail. The nail gave

a small jerk and lay still. I had it, but I didn't quite have it.

I practiced with Viti for two more hours until I had a fly. It wasn't much of a fly. It managed to buzz in one drunken circle and then fall twitching into the dust, which made Viti roll onto his back laughing. Still, it was a fly and I had the method now. I only needed more practice. And more fingernails. If I could only get my nails to grow back perhaps I could torment Grossman with motuca flies on the way back to the boat.

Uli came around the end of the house with a string of peppers.

"You're making friends already?" She tied one end of the string into the thatch under the eaves.

"Purely a business relationship," I said.

"Ah yes, that's clear." Viti was still laughing and clapping me on the arms. Uli said a few words to Viti, who nodded smiling. "Yes, purely business."

"You speak it?"

"Only a little. I do know the word for 'friend,' though." She ducked back into the house.

The village was getting busy as the heat of the day fell away. For some reason, Viti followed me around for the rest of the afternoon, joined by Sua. They spoke together, occasionally addressing me, though I couldn't understand them. I found it a bit unnerving. They kept smiling at me. I tried to tell them to go away in Portuguese, but they understood me no better than I understood them.

They followed me back to Tepora's house. Dick and Tepora were back and sitting by one of the small cookfires that were always burning in the house, peeling lumpy seedpods. I sat against one of the house posts watching them, glad to be in the dim interior. Viti and Sua struck up a laughing conversation with Dick, Viti showing off his new glasses.

Dick smiled at me. "You're making friends already."

I sighed. Why did everyone think that?

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BIRDSONG

The village began to gather outside around three main cooking fires. The smell of roasting fish pulled the last stragglers out of the longhouses and onto the plaza. I stuck to Dick in the crowd. Someone was giving a high-pitched call that fell away in a chuckling sound. A few boys were wrestling in the dust by the houses and small children were running, weaving through the people. The movements were as dizzying as the bats swooping overhead.

There didn't seem to be any particular order to the feast; whole fish and manioc bejus came out in a steady stream, almost too hot to touch. Following Dick's lead I sat in the large circle of men Grossman came by a few minutes later and joined us, just as I was getting the hang of picking apart the fish without burning my fingers.

Gourds came by next, with something like the chicha we had the previous night. Dick called it caxiri. How many mouths had been on that gourd? I winced, but Dick whispered, "go on," sharply into my ear. I supposed I couldn't refuse without some sort of unforgivable rudeness. I drank. The caxiri was stronger than the chicha we had before, much stronger. I was glad I already had some food in me. There were chunks of roast meat that Dick said was tapir. It wasn't bad, though a bit greasy, then the gourds came round again.

Another high-pitched call came up from one of the circles of women, followed by laughter. I couldn't see what caused it, but a minute later Viti and Sua came running up. They tried to squeeze in next to me in the circle, but the men nearby pushed them back towards the outer rows.

Dick was talking to Grossman about the seedpods he had been working on, and there was Oi conversation all around, it all washed over me. Dick asked me something that I didn't quite catch.

Chapter 30 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSHAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 42, No.4

BELTANE 2005

"Hmm?" He didn't repeat it, but just patted me on the shoulder. Somehow I didn't mind. The gourds came around again. It was getting too dark to see the bats against the sky, except when they swooped in range of the firelight. Two of the men on the other side of the circle

It was different from the night before when just the two had sung, alternating back and forth, and the rest just joining in on a few words at the ends of the lines. Now, when they reached the end of the first line, the whole circle joined in to sing the whole line again. Dick apparently knew the song. Well, he had lived with the Oi for more than a year. The song had a simple harmony that gave it a sort of mournful dissonance. As it ended, Dick leaned over to explain: "that's a song about someone who went mad while gathering honey and cut his leg down to a point to use as a weapon."

"Uh –" As an explanation, it left much to be desired. He started to say something more, but another song had already started up, led by a different voice. Grossman was being coached by the men next to him on the chorus.

"There was a canoe that was actually alive and went out every night in the form of a snake to bring back fish for the village," Dick said of the next song.

"How considerate."

Food and caxiri came around between songs, which rose and fell like waves. Dick kept leaning over to explain... about the spirits of the dead who went to war against the birds... about a network of rivers running beneath all the rivers of the world...about snakes rising up from the rivers below and becoming people when they reached the surface. I couldn't make much sense of any of it.

Despite the several doses of strong caxiri, I began to feel a slowly building apprehension as I realized that the singing was traveling around the circle towards us. Surely not? But then it reached Grossman, who didn't pause, and began to bellow out, "*in a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine...*"

Dick leaned over to me with a laugh. "They don't like most of Ben's songs, but they love that one because it has the death of a gold-miner."

"Dick... no."

"Look, it's an exchange. They've been giving us songs all evening. It's a gift. It's expected to give something in return."

"I don't, I can't –"

"It doesn't have to be sung well, as long as there's a chorus to join in on. Here, have another drink." I drank.

"I'll give them an extra song so you have some more time. I'll help you out with the chorus. They'll want to learn it themselves and get the translation anyway."

I wanted to protest more, but the whole group was just finishing, "*til I kissed her little sister and forgot my Clementine.*"

Dick gave me the gourd again with a pat on my shoulder, and began to sing, strangely, about a man stuck on the tube under Boston.

I tried to think of a song with a chorus. I took another drink. It wasn't a particularly good memory, for all the cheerful atmosphere. I was always the one to go down to the pub to try to bring dad home. He was always happy there, until I turned up. Sometimes I would just hide by the door and watch instead of going up to him. It filled me with a kind of hunger to see it all; warm lights, friends shoulder to shoulder, bellowing out songs over their pints. It was like another world to me. I knew that I would never be a part of it, by the look dad gave whenever he spotted me. Before he saw me, though, he was happier than I'd ever seen him. Happier than he ever was with us. Without us, he was happy. I hated him for it, then.

They were just finishing. Dick leaned over to me. "Do you have one?" "Not yet."

He said something in Oi to the men next to us. One of them called out, "MARY ELLEN CARTER." I took another drink as Dick began on his next song with a chorus that the Oi belted out with particular relish.

I couldn't even say if I hated him now. If that had been the one place in the world where he could find some measure of happiness, how could I grudge him his few hours there? Why shouldn't he enjoy it? Was that what he had done when he left us, gone off to find the only happiness possible for him? I wondered if he had been any better at running away than I was.

The last chorus died away. In the brief silence I could hear voices raised from the women's circle: "*bald gras' ich am Neckar, bald gras'*

ich am Rhein, bald hab ich ein Schätzle, bald bin ich allein..." Even Uli had been pulled into the singing.

"Have you got one?" Dick asked quietly.

"They *have* to do the chorus."

"Well, that is the idea. They'll pick it up."

I took one more drink, then began as loudly as I could, "*where has' tha been since I saw thee?*" Silence.

I glared at Dick. "You come in there: 'I saw thee!'"

"Ah."

He got it the second time through. "*Where has' tha been since I saw thee?*"

"I saw thee!"

"*On Ilkla moor baht'at...*"

I got Dick repeating the lines properly by the time we got to "*tha's been out courtin' Mary Jane,*" but it wasn't until "*tha's ban to catch thy death of cold,*" that the Oi were joining in. Then it all had to come to a halt as Canutsipem asked Dick to translate. Dick looked at me.

"Well?"

"Well what?" It wasn't exactly a subtle song.

"Ah, what's 'bah'tat?'"

"Without a hat."

"Oh."

Dick and Canutsipem went back and forth a bit. At the end of it, Dick turned to me. "He says that a man broke taboo by going to a sacred mountain without a proper headdress and having sex with this 'Mary Jane,' so the gods of the mountain caused him to get sick and die."

I considered. It was as good an explanation as any. "Yes, that's it exactly."

Canutsipem looked very pleased and demanded that the song continue.

We went through, "*then us'll have to bury thee,*" "*then worms shall come and et thee oop,*" and "*then ducks shall come and et oop worms,*" though there was some protest that ducks eat water plants and not worms at all. I put that to rest by declaring that we had special ducks in England.

"*Then us'll come and et oop ducks,*" and "*then us'll all have etten thee,*" were received with great satisfaction by the Oi. Canutsipem

remarked that he always knew that whites were secretly cannibals, even though they tried to pretend otherwise. They were slightly disappointed at the last verse of, *“that’s where we get us own back.”* Canutsipem said it was redundant.

It might have been lucky to hit on a song that the Oi liked, but it did carry the disadvantage that it all had to be repeated twice so they could learn it. When they were finally satisfied and moved on to the next song in the circle, Dick tapped me on the shoulder and said, “congratulations, you have a hit. They get very excited about new songs.”

Men came and went out of the circle, but the singing went on without a break. They were clearly intending to go all night. I staggered to my feet, the full impact of the caxiri hitting me as I rose. I needed a piss. I wound away from the fire, past the houses and past the first trees to the latrine trench. Back out on the plaza, I leaned against a housebeam to get my balance and watched the fire from a distance.

From outside the circle, I watched the figures sitting shoulder to shoulder in the warm light. It was like another world. The women’s voices blended in with the men’s, making a different song. I watched from afar.

Dick was somehow at my elbow. “Cyril, Tepora wants to talk to you.” “Hmm? I don’t speak Oi.”

Dick looked amused. “That’s why I’ll be there to translate. He wants to talk to you about your problem with the skin.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.” Dick steered me through the longhouses. All of them looked the same to me now, so I wasn’t sure which doorway we ducked into. Inside, he led me through the forest of support poles in the darkness to a very small fire. It was flickering with an oily underwater light. Tepora was crouched next to it, bristling with feathers. When I got closer I saw that they were part of an elaborate headdress and neckpiece. His pupils took up almost his whole eye, turning them into wide black holes. His apprentice, Xumu, I remembered, was standing motionless a few feet behind Tepora.

“He thinks he can cure you, but he needs to know more about who got you sick,” Dick said quietly.

“Sick? I’m not sick.”

“Someone has sent a curse against you. To the Oi, that *is* the very definition of sickness. Don’t worry, I’ll be right here.” As if I were worried about *that*.

There was a small gourd half-buried in the soil next to the fire with a dark liquid inside. Tepora was coaxing the fire up with a feather fan. I didn’t like the look of that liquid.

“Dick, am I going to drink that?”

“Yes.”

Tepora handed me the gourd and said something. “He says, ‘it’s sweet,’” Dick translated. It didn’t smell sweet. It moved like oil. I looked at Dick. “It’s better to try to imagine it sweet than, well, how it is.”

I breathed through my mouth and downed it as fast as I could. It was unimaginably bitter. I remembered from one of my first herbology textbooks: *“the bitter sense of taste is often the body’s first warning sign of a toxic substance.”*

Tepora produced another gourd of caxiri. I didn’t particularly want any more, but I would have drunk anything at that point just to take the taste out of my mouth. The fire between us was small, but I found that I was sweating.

“You might want to start heading outside now,” said Dick. First he wanted me to come in, and now he wanted me to leave again? A moment later, I knew what he meant, urgently. I just made it out the door before I lost all the contents of my stomach. I dry-heaved on shaking arms several times before I leaned back against the wall, panting. For a moment I was cold sober; every sound and shape around me was clear and distinct. The smells of vomit, fire, fish and jungle were all sharply individual; the sounds of Dick’s breathing and footsteps as he stepped out of the house were shockingly loud.

“Better?” He cleaned up the vomit with a Scourgify.

“What happens now?” My own voice rang strangely in my head. It sounded like someone else’s voice.

“We go back inside and Tepora will take a look at you.”

“Not that,” I said as he helped me to my feet. “What happens with that *stuff* I took?”

Dick shrugged. “I just see some pretty colors.”

We ducked back inside. "You've taken it?"

"Oh yes, several times. I wouldn't be much of a herbologist if I never tried the herbs."

My hands and feet were all pins and needles by the time we got back to the fire, so I was glad for Dick's help to keep me from staggering into the house poles. Tepora had me lie on my back next to the fire, just as I felt a flush of heat travel from my chest out to my extremities, followed by a drenching of sweat. Tepora moved out of my direct sight. His shadow thrown up against the rafters was like some kind of fantastic bird, the moving feathers casting long fingers of darkness across the roof. There were moving lights at the edges of my vision, pale green and blue, but when I turned my head they rushed away. I couldn't get a clear look at them.

Dick and Tepora had their heads together, strange two-bodied animal joined at the neck, the one half, Dick, rooted to the ground and growing like a tree, the other, Tepora, shifting and rustling, a colorful bird trying to take flight. They came apart in a slow elastic pull, the words dripping out of their mouths in bright burning drops.

Tepora was singing a pattern of light that hung in a tracery at the edge of the roof. Dick leaned over me and let his hands run into the ground to join the underground river.

"Tepora says he's seen spirits like the skin that's following you. He can give you something to put it to sleep." *Sleep, sleep sounded wonderful.* "If you really want to get rid of it, though, he needs to know about who sent it to you, so tell him as soon as you see him."

"See him?" I managed. The light that Tepora had cast on the roof broke into tiny worms and fireflies and began to whirl in a complicated pattern. All the strands were drawing in on each other above my head until they came together in a small hole of bright light, like a coin. I wanted to reach up for it, but my hands felt cool and distant, like they had also fallen into the underground river, far away. The only twitched.

Someone was coming, upside-down and backwards. The singing outside had quickened to a driving chant. He danced backwards across the rafters, jerkily, parts of him falling away and joining up

again. He smiled at me. I know, Severus, he mouthed silently. The Dark Lord took his last dance step into the white hole and sank up and away, like smoke. Gone.

Bellatrix came next, spinning in a black fury, sucked up into the white hole like a whirlpool. Rodolphus was close behind, trying to reach her but not quite touching her before he was whisked away.

I didn't want to see Vincent, but there he was, doing his 'Crabbe dance of victory' backwards across the rafters, lit up like a candle. I turned away from his light. Tepora asked something, and Dick translated: "is that the one?"

"No he's... he's just a boy."

They all came. Lucius limped and staggered, held up by Draco who half-carried him. Greg ran to catch up to his friend. Albus was there, dancing in ecstasy, as I had seen him in my dream. Rookwood put on one face after another as he stalked to the hole. Benny crawled, growing older with every step.

With Avery came a warm rush of air and the scent of a late summer afternoon, mown hay and cows. A heavy door creaked somewhere in the distance. *Strange*, I thought vaguely. "Get out of the way," snapped an irritated voice behind me. I tried to step to the side before I remembered that I was lying on the ground. He must be underground, I thought. "That's him." Had Tepora heard me? He was more than half-bird now and the rustling of his feathers was louder than the fire as he bobbed and swayed on his knees. His apprentice was twining up the house post like a vine.

My friends were still crossing the ceiling. Wilkes was battling some invisible enemy. Rosier was floating peacefully along, like a boat on a stream. The Carrows swung each other round and round, Greyback nipping at their heels.

I had been dreading her, of course, above all others, consumed by the thought that she would look down and recognize me, but when she appeared, bright as the sparks drifting up from the fire, she was marching purposefully towards the light without a glance back. She was dragging James by the hair. I laughed until I could hardly breathe.

"Hey, all right?" Dick's worried face swung into view.

"I always knew who wore the trousers," I said when I caught my breath. Dick patted my shoulder. Peter was following them, scrambling on all fours. "Do try to keep up, Gerald!" He didn't seem to hear me.

My elation didn't last. Moody came stumping along, rolling his eye across the ceiling ahead of him. Quirrell jerked and spun, trying to catch someone following him, his face a mask of terror. They all kept coming, so many of them, too many. How could they all fit through that hole? The wavering blue light around the edges of my vision welled up, a river that would swallow us all. The house posts were crowded with figures, a swarm of crawling, staggering, dancing spirits. I didn't want to look at them all, but their faces glinted down like stars, like glowing insects. His face drifted past, the Auror, flat on his back and as petrified as I was now.

Some feeling was finally returning to my hands, so I covered my face. Tendrils of light still managed to seep between my fingers, but at least I couldn't see the faces any longer. Slowly, very slowly, the waves of blue light ebbed away. Dick and Tepora pulled me up by my shoulders and had me sit against one of the house posts. It was dawn. I could see the grey light between chinks in the walls. There was still singing outside, a gently falling tune almost overwhelmed by the birdsong. Tepora handed me a gourd. "It's just manioc drink," Dick reassured me.

Dick and Tepora spoke quietly while I sipped the manioc. At length Dick came back and knelt by me. "Tepora says he can stop the skin, but it will be easier if you have something from the skin that he can use. He has a preparation that puts dead things to sleep. It's very strong, but it's stronger if he can direct it specifically at the dead thing in question"

"I've got the tooth in my bag."

"Good. Can you get it?" He gestured across the house. I realized I was in Tepora's family house after all; I could see my hammock and bag through the house posts. I brought back the tooth, a bit unsteadily. Tepora turned it over and over in his hand.

"Now Cyril, he's also going to want some payment." Tepora looked up and ran his finger along the beads on my arm. My heart sank. He said something, and Dick translated: "he says you've done something, and these beads are 'alive.'"

"They tell me if any of my enemies are near. They're no good to him; they are keyed specifically to my enemies. Dick, I need them."

Dick and Tepora spoke together for a few minutes. "He wants to have the beads to examine them and see how to make his own."

"I'll show him how to make them. I'll give him the beads of the dead."

"He says he'll have you show him how to make the beads, but he wants the live beads too." Tepora drove a much harder bargain than Viti.

"Dick, I *need* the bead from the man who made the skin. Tell him that." Tepora finally nodded, and we sealed the bargain with caxiri. Tepora gave me a new cotton thread, on which I strung my Avery bead. He took the rest and wrapped them around his upper arm.

"He's going to start working for you now. He says he'll see you later today. Tepora swept out, followed by Xumu. I leaned back against the post.

"Dick, this is my last good shot, do you understand?" Any other solution I could think of would just slow the skin and perhaps lead to greater risk later if I let my guard down.

"Listen, I've known him and worked with him for years. There is no one who knows more about magical plants and their uses. The Oi are very sophisticated in their herbological preparations. If he says he knows something that can put the dead to sleep, I trust him."

"Would you trust him with your life?"

"Yes, I would," he said seriously. I didn't mention that it was *my* life we were risking.

Some of Tepora's family drifted in while we were talking and now there were bejjus cooking over the fire. I wasn't sure how I felt about the idea of food, but once I got one down and some more manioc drink, I did feel much less wobbly.

The morning wash at the river was a rather subdued affair, though some of the younger Oi had passed from the stage of tiredness to a laughing giddiness. After I washed, I put my clothes back on and walked a few paces up the bank to a sheltered spot above the water. The morning mist was burning off quickly, and I could just see some grey shapes, maybe monkeys, descending a tree on

the other side of the river. Most of the other Oi had gone off now, to the garden plots or back to the village, but Viti came up to me and spoke very seriously. Didn't he know that I couldn't understand a word? I noticed that he had added a cotton thread to the glasses so he could wear them around his neck like a necklace. He left, but returned a few minutes later leading Uli by the hand.

"Good morning." Her voice was hoarse. I supposed she had been singing all night. "You've got Viti worried. He thinks you're sick."

"Sick?"

"He thinks you're acting a little off. You're being very quiet." She spoke to Viti. "I told him you're just tired. He says white people are stupid. If you're tired you should go to sleep."

"Later," I said. Uli sat next to me on the bank. Viti squatted by the water and shot glances back up at us.

"Did they make you sing last night?"

"Oh god."

She laughed. "I told Amaru that the Oi are just like my people. Drinking and singing all night. It's an Oi Oktoberfest."

I snorted.

"Amaru is showing me some of her plants and preparations today, so I've got to go. Don't sit here too long or you'll have a whole crowd of Oi worried about you." *Worried*, why should they be worried about me? They barely even knew me. After Uli left, though, Viti kept throwing what really looked like worried glances in my direction until I decided I might as well go back to bed. Or rather, to hammock.

Tepora woke me sometime that afternoon, and led me over to the same small fire he had used last night. Dick was there, sorting out a pile of plant parts. He had already melted down a few of my beads, I noticed with a grimace, and laid out the extracted components.

By the way of Dick's lengthy translations, he had me walk him and Xumu through the process of their making. It seemed ridiculous; as far as I knew, most of the ingredients didn't grow in the Amazon, but that didn't seem to bother Tepora. He had Dick describe the plants in minute depth along with all their properties and nodded thoughtfully. "He'll think of substitutes," Dick explained.

We finished as evening fell. Tepora's family was crowding in, the excitement of the previous night falling into a happy tiredness as they chatted over the fire. Tepora pressed a small bag into my hand. It was made of some kind of soft skin, all sewed shut. There was one small hard lump inside along with something light and rustling. I thought of fluttering bird wings and a broken concertina.

Tepora was speaking; Dick translated: "he says when a dead thing eats it, it will go to sleep." There it was, my last hope.

"Canutsipem told me this morning that the rains will start in two days. We'll have to leave tomorrow."

Strangely, I felt a little shock of loss at the idea, like the clock that was counting down the last seconds of my life had stood still while I was here, and would start running again once I left.

We ate roast yams and tinamou, the little birds whose mournful calls we heard every night at sunset.

The next morning as we packed our gear, Tepora proudly demonstrated the bead he had made from Dick's hair, which was shaking and humming from proximity with its target. He must have been up all night making it and finding the proper ingredient substitutions. He said something to Dick, who translated, "now I won't lose you." It was a very different use from my beads.

We were seen off with a long speech from Canutsipem. No one bothered to translate for me, so I suspected it was boring. I was surprised to see that both Uli and Amaru were crying as they pulled apart and we started on our way.

"Oh god, it's worse than last time. Let's go quick," she said and hurried down the trail. I had to stride to catch up.

"All right?"

"You don't often get taken in like that, you know? I remind her of a dead daughter. The only thing I can say why she can't adopt me is that I have my own mother... Shit. I don't want to live here and leave everything behind, but she really is the most open, honestly loving person I've ever met, and I don't know when I'll see her again."

There wasn't anything I could say to that.

"You can come back, you know," Dick said.

"Yes, it's a bit harder when I'm working in Heidelberg, though, and I'll be there before the next dry season."

We had left the open clearing of the village and its gardens behind us, but not all of the Oi were gone. Bird calls bounced from one side of the trail to the other. Dick saw me peering into the trees. "We'll have an escort for a few miles to come." I only saw one once, as we left Oi territory. I looked back to see a figure watching us from a fallen log, a pair of glasses glinting from his neck.

THE JOKE

Just as Canutsipem predicted, the rains caught us on the second day from the Oi village. The forest had fallen into an eerie green silence, then there was a dull roar as the deluge hit the canopy far above us. It reached and soaked us a few minutes later. The Impervio I had cast on my clothes was virtually useless as rivulets ran down the back of my neck under my collar and into every crevice. I was rather glad I had left my glasses with Viti.

We built a palm leaf shelter over our hammocks that night and cast Impervios on it, but I still went to sleep soaking and woke soaking the next morning. We could probably have forced a fire with incendio, but the prospect of the billows of smoke from the wet wood wasn't appealing, so we set off without breakfast by mutual agreement.

We were slowed by the increasing muddiness of the trail. I lost a trainer more than once until I resorted to sticking charms to keep them on my feet. We didn't reach the river until two hours after nightfall, picking our way carefully by Lumos, mobbed by enormous moths. I heard the rapids long before we reached the river, thinking at first that it was another deluge on its way.

The river was almost a meter higher than when we left it, and our

Chapter 31 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:

TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 42, No.5

LITHA 2005

boat strained against the lines. We packed ourselves into the hold and spent a frenzied two hours sorting, drying and repacking the plant samples that Dick and the others had collected. Finally, we collapsed around the tiny folding table and ate potatoes, sauerkraut and baked beans. It was at once delicious after the day-long fast, and shockingly salty after the Oi's unseasoned food. We strung our hammocks wherever we could in the shelter of the hold and slept.

With the current up and the sandbars submerged, the trip downriver was much faster than the way in. When we staggered back to the lab, still not completely dried out, I thought Dick would be excited or triumphant by our trip and all his collected plant samples. Instead, he was as withdrawn as I'd ever seen him, giving sharp one-word replies and quickly disappearing into his office.

"He doesn't like leaving the rainforest," Grossman said as he saw me looking after Dick's closing office door.

The next day, Dick was back to his usual self, busy pouring over the samples he had collected. I stopped by his office after dinner, as he requested, to discuss Tepora's bag. Dick had evidently been thinking it over, because he already had a plan to propose to me.

"Have you done any laundry from our trip? We need your dirty socks."
"Again, Dick?"

"Yes, hear me out. We'll bait them with a couple drops of blood and put alert wards on the lot of them. We'll put the bag in the closest sock, with the most blood. We'll lead it in and let it take the bait."

I nodded slowly. It was a decent plan. The possible flaw was that skin sendings become more accurate over time and it wasn't clear how accurate my skin was yet. Would it pass up the dried blood on my socks close at hand for the real fresh target of myself slightly further away?

Dick and I paced around the lab at the edge of the forest in the rain, with a bag of my dirty socks and a quarter cup of my blood that Dick had kindly extracted. We set them out in concentric circles under alert wards and Impervios. Once the last sock was placed, well soaked in my blood and with Tepora's rustling bag inside, Dick clapped me on the shoulder.

“There, we’ve covered the major possibilities now, haven’t we? To be on the safe side, keep that Portkey with you. If any of the alert wards go off, you can just use it. In fact, that would be best all around. With you out of the way, the skin will have a greater incentive to console itself with your socks.”

I held up the jewelry box. I had been carrying it with me even before our trip to the Oi. We slogged our way back to the lab building, shining like a beacon in the night.

It wasn’t that I doubted Dick’s plan. It was as good as any I could have conceived. It was my dream that night. An enormous dark bird was trapped in a small pink room, turning and scratching at the floor. It tried again and again to open its wings, but they thumped uselessly against the walls and ceiling. The room was growing smaller and more distant with every wingbeat even as the bird grew larger. I woke in blackness, the rustling of its wings echoing in my head.

I made my way back out to the lab grounds. The forest was still a wall of dark, ringing with night-animal noises. I took down the wards over the last sock-trap, worked Tepora’s bag loose, and reset the wards. If the bag was my last chance and last hope, I wanted it to be with me and under my control. Reassured, I went back to bed.

The next morning, after a brief shopping trip to replenish my supply of socks and get myself a rain jacket, I spent poring over the notes left by the RAs. I spread the charts over the whole floor of my flat. We had already determined the top candidates for the stasis. Now there was also a working trigger and two rough potential trigger variants. I could see one reason they were less effective than the top trigger: the RAs had prepared the mooncalf jelly raw rather than soaking it in lye in advance. That would increase its potency and also allow the brewing time to be reduced slightly, which would increase the efficacy of the kappa water in turn. I made notes on the adjustments for the RAs. That would keep them occupied for a few days.

Meanwhile, I would have a battle ahead of me: eliminate or avoid any adverse reactions between the elements of the stasis, trigger, timing and Wolfsbane. The stasis contained several elements that were categorized as strongly cold, wet and phlegmatic. Wolfsbane itself, of

course, was decidedly hot, dry and choleric. I would have to find some way to mollify those two aspects to work together rather than in opposition, or else there’d be a hell of a reaction. It would not be easy. Perhaps I could trick them into some friendly competition, or unite them against a common enemy. Well, I would have to work on it.

In lab, I had Paola and Mata begin work on adjusting the trigger variants while Park and Grossman made me several batches of the Wolfsbane and the stasis to work with. Paola and Mata were very pleased to learn my trick with the mooncalf jelly. I didn’t usually make a practice of revealing my tricks like that, but it would have been impossible to progress otherwise. It was only a matter of time before it leaked to Park and Grossman as well. I sighed and started in on manipulating the stasis and the Wolfsbane.

By the end of the week I had settled on the addition of Hrimthur hair as a melancholic element to draw the ire of the phlegmatic elements of the stasis and the choleric elements of the Wolfsbane. After they reacted with the Hrimthur hair, I would simply decant out the precipitant and continue with the rest of the potion. The trick would be to introduce the three elements at the same time and keep them all in precise balance so one could not dominate the other after the reaction with the hair. It would mean carefully adjusting the formulas of both the stasis and the Wolfsbane.

I set the RAs loose on the addition of the Hrimthur hair for the next weeks while I drowned in a sea of charts as I tried to pull the whole potion together into some sort of rational process. Paola was thrilled by my method of bringing the choleric and phlegmatic elements together. She hung around my desk at each break and at the end of lab with a thousand questions about the theory behind it. I was sorely tempted to send her and her questions to Zosimos, but I did want all of her appendages intact. I would need all hands on deck to put the potion together. If it ever *would* come together; some days I couldn’t see it at all.

It was the work of another three weeks to put the whole process together, and then another week and a half to bring it from a cumbersome and inelegant process to a tight 28-hour brewing cycle.

I used the name J. Williams? Never in England, I was sure of it. Then at once I could picture myself writing it on a clipboard, lined paper, a cheap pen... it was the sign-in sheet for the Pensieve in the Boston Public Library. The sandy-haired clerk was saying, "I'll take that," picking up the clipboard, leading me to the Pensieve room. The sandy-haired clerk, who, if I pictured him with his head and eyebrows shaved, the bones of his face broken, was the same as the corpse that Avery had taken into the Tube tunnel.

I ran my hand over the skin's face flattening its features. It was almost impossible to tell without the structure of bone beneath and with all the stretching and distortion of the skin, but it could be the same as the clerk. It must be the same.

Dick found me on my hands and knees next to the skin, smoothing out its features. He froze for a moment at the sight, then got down next to me.

"Are you all right?"

I just nodded.

"I could barely understand Guilherme. He said you gave it something."

"Tepora's bag, yes. It worked."

"Good."

I started to stand up, but an instant sharp pain bloomed behind my eyes. I sat back on the floor against the lab bench. Had I really been breathing that hard?

Dick hadn't noticed. He was still bent over the skin, saying, "unbelievable, unbelievable."

I rested my head on my knees and closed my eyes. If I hadn't remembered the word for pocket, it would have been over... if I hadn't pushed my left hand in before my head, my arms would have been pinned to my sides and it would have been too late for the bag to do any good. I tried not to picture any of that.

"Hey, hey," Dick had a hand on my shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I just... just a minute." He brought me a cup of water from the sink.

"We could feed it to the piranhas," he said after a few minutes.

"I don't think that's a good idea. If the bag is keeping it dormant, it could become active again once it's eaten. I could have hundreds of undead piranhas after me. No, I don't think so."

"You could say the same about any way of destroying it, really. It might deactivate the bag. Let's get it back to my office and we can decide what to do with it." He folded it like an overcoat and tucked it under his arm. I was glad he was carrying it.

When we reached Dick's office, Mata was pacing in the conference room. He saw us and took two steps forward. When he saw what Dick was carrying, he took two steps back.

{“Guilherme, thank you for calling me so quickly, but there really was no need for concern. I'm afraid we all got taken in by a rather nasty practical joke.”}

{“But that thing – ”}

“Completely harmless, just an animated construct, though it does look very convincing. You did the right thing to bring me. Let's have a drink.” Dick deposited the skin in his office and brought out the awful cachaca again and glasses.

Mata looked at me. {“A joke?”} He did not look convinced. I didn't blame him; it was unconvincing. The fact that I had been carrying the specific substance to defuse the skin put the lie to Dick's explanation. Whether he believed it or not was less important than if he would play along.

{“Yes,”} I said. Mata pushed back from the table.

Dick put a hand on his arm. {“Wait, please. Have a drink and I'll explain.”}

He was looking at Dick a little angrily. He wasn't going to play along; I would have to step in.

{“I have an enemy. From where I worked before. It is very important that he does not know that his *joke* did not succeed. You can't speak a word of this to anyone. I will need you to promise.”} He stared at me, then dropped his eyes and nodded.

We made it a simple Good Faith agreement. Not as secure as an Unbreakable, of course, but with the language barrier it would have been very inadvisable to attempt an Unbreakable. Dick ran through

the words in Portuguese twice to make sure I had them correctly. Mata took another drink, then took the Good Faith with me. He left without another word, shaking his head. I wondered if there was any way I could repair his trust.

Dick and I returned to his office, where the skin was waiting on his couch. I looked at it while Dick poured another drink.

"Do you need to remove the parts that key it to you?"

"Already done."

"Well, then it could be harmless."

"*Could* be. Unless someone decides to use it against another target."

"There is that."

We drank in silence. The cachaca was beginning to grow on me.

"What happened, exactly?"

"It was in the lab cabinet. Mata got Tepora's bag out of my pocket. I just managed to get it in in time."

Dick sighed. "No wonder he wasn't taking my joke explanation. He saved your life?"

I had to agree, unfortunately. Another debt.

"We could send it to Svalbard."

"What?"

"The world seed bank. It's very fortified: buried in a mountain under a glacier. I know the director. We send in seed samples three of four times a year. I could send the skin along next time. He would be sure to pack it away someplace safe. How long did you say it would last: 120 years? He could lock it away somewhere it wouldn't be disturbed for that long."

"I'll think about it. Maybe there's some way to destroy it entirely."

"I thought you said there's no way to destroy it before it reaches its target."

"I'll look again. If I can't find something, send it to Svalbard."

Dick packed it into a bag and closed it in his office safe, password *Lophophoria*. It would have to do, for now.

"Speaking of sending things in... those vials looked finished. Are we ready to send them for testing?"

"We've got a variant I think will work for a single repetition. I still

need to work out a way for a single dose to last through several repetitions."

"Now don't get ahead of yourself. If you have what you believe is an actual working variant, even for a single repetition, let me submit it for human trials. That's quite the leap forward. It will support a paper on its own."

"A paper? It's not complete!"

"If it's effective for a single repetition, it's absolutely complete and ready for publication. You can work on improvements and repeating elements while we prepare for publication."

"Publication."

"Yes. I don't know if you've noticed, but I've got a research lab to run. If we have something publishable, we publish. All right? Here." He poured me another drink. "I know you want everything to be perfect before you let it out of your grip, but if it works for one repetition, it *is* perfect for what it does. One triumph at a time. You can work on your next step while it's being tested."

"Fine," I conceded.

"Good. I'll send it for testing. Let's have a drink on it."

Later, I was leaning against my door trying to get it open, stubborn thing, when Uli appeared at my elbow. Where had she come from?

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

Why was she whispering? Oh yes, it was late.

"Done with the first stage of the potion. Dick's sending it for testing."

The door finally came open and I lurched inside. Uli put her arms around my shoulders. "So you're done, really?"

"Just the first stage, maybe."

She brought her mouth close to my ear. "Congratulations."

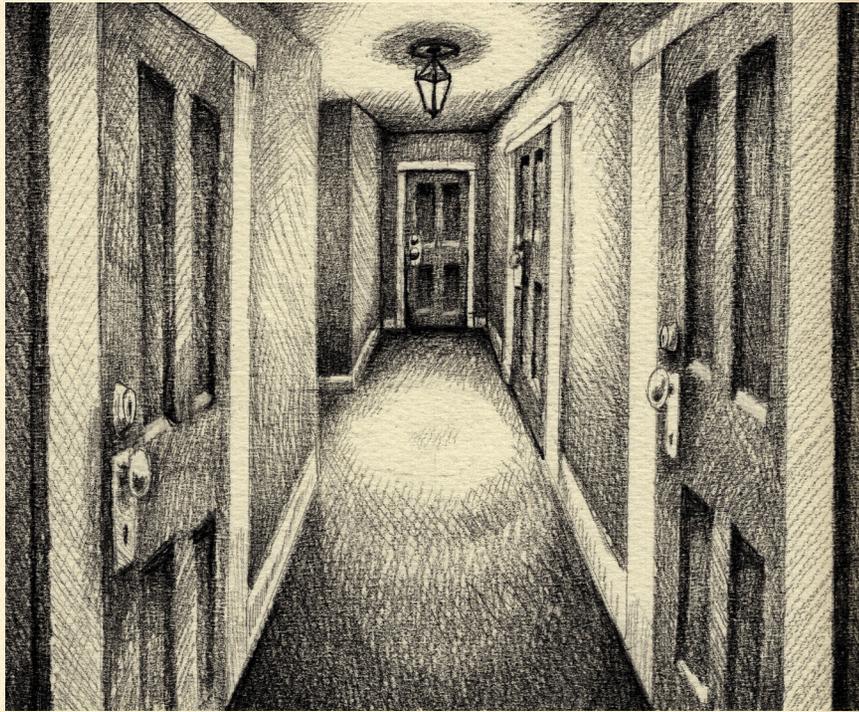
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Art by Mottsnave

THE HUNT

I still had to find away to make the potion repeat. I still had to find a way to make sure the skin would not repeat.

The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Avery would have kept some way of tracking the skin's movements. He certainly had the raw materials in the form of hair. It would be quite simple for him to make a tracking charm. If he saw that the skin was no longer moving and decided to check on it, well, he would find me nearby. I couldn't risk it. I couldn't leave him alone. God damn him, if he had left *me* alone, we could have both

Chapter 32 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 42, No.6
LUGHNASADH 2005

THE NEW SKIN

been free. Now he was forcing my hand.

Very early on Friday morning I entered Dick's office. He had arrived back from Arkham late on Thursday and I knew he wouldn't be up for a few hours. I took the charmed bag out of the back of the safe and checked its contents. The dead features stared up at me. Still asleep, for now.

I took the cabinet through to Arkham, then apparated to my sanctuary out on the island to wait for business hours. I would have to be careful. I only had one vial of Polyjuice left. I would need to be sure of my target before I used it.

I cast a glamour on myself for the time being. It was superficial and wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny, but all I really needed was for Avery not to notice me from a distance.

I left the skin in the warded room on what was left of the collapsed sofa, then apparated to the library. The library was quiet on a Friday morning. I went past the woman on the front desk quickly and ducked into the stacks. I found a row close to the entrance of the reference room where I could slip a few of the larger tomes free to have a clear view through to the reference desk. It was staffed by a middle-aged woman who was taping up the spine of a grimoire with a disapproving frown. No sandy-haired man. I hoped this wasn't his day off. I roved up to the balcony to see if I could find him. I'd hardly got up when I saw him walking back to the reference desk below. The woman staffing it gave him a nod and walked off herself. Good, maybe I could catch him alone. Best to be quick.

I tucked myself behind one of the stacks and downed my Polyjuice. I had one hour. The clothes had to change; a couple of spells and everything got tight and short. I had years of watching Slytherin girls playing dumb to try to get extra help or assignment extensions this way. All I had to do was follow the script.

Avery was still alone on the desk when I got downstairs. Perfect. I rested my new chest on the counter and said, "uh, hi." His eyes didn't reach mine. *Perfect.*

"Can I help you?" Idiot, his accent was showing. He was slipping.

I opened my eyes wide. "I can't get the stupid scrying bowls to

THE NEW SKIN

333

work for me. They *never* work for me, but *you* could show me how to work them." I played with a lock of my blond hair and bit my lip.

"Oh, I'll show you."

He had no problem leaving the desk unattended, good. He led me back to the ranks of scrying bowls.

"You're not in school?"

Since when did Avery care about that? And did he really think teen girls went around cutting school just so they could visit the library? I couldn't have the wrong person; I had clearly seen him with the corpse of the man who was standing in front of me.

"It's for a stupid school project. I have to catch up," I said with a sigh.

"Now, what do you want to search for?" he asked, picking up one of the parchment slips next to the scrying bowl.

"We have to look up the battle of... something." I rolled my eyes up. "I don't know, this is *hard*."

He gave a little smirk at the last word, the lech. I pushed my shoulders back and inhaled. Yes, he was still looking.

"Wizard or muggle battle? Around here?"

"I think so. Wizard battle I guess."

"Battle of Braintree?"

"That's it! You're so good at this!" He'd always had a knack at finding books in the restricted section. I studied him while he demonstrated the use of the scrying bowls. He seemed at ease with his new life, guard down.

"...and when your references come up you lay another slip on top, and they stick, see?" He peeled up the second parchment and handed me my list of references. It wasn't quite enough.

"That's so easy! You explain things really well." Was I laying it on too thick? Apparently not. He was eating it up.

"I'm supposed to come back tomorrow with my study group. Can I ask for you to help us?"

The lure of a whole group of adoring schoolgirls was too much for him, of course. "Sure. I'm Charles."

"Charles..." I said slowly. I looked up at him and pushed the card of references back along the counter. He smirked at me as picked

it up. "Write it," I said, holding his gaze. Would he, just for that? When he pushed the card back at me it bore the name 'Charles' and a number. I put in my pocket with a smile that he probably took the wrong way. I backed slowly away from the counter for a few paces before I turned into the stacks. I could hear him behind me. A few rows down I saw the other reference desk librarian and turned to edge past her. I heard Avery's steps pause for an instant at the entrance of the row and then move on. He couldn't follow me past her. I backtracked through the stacks and made my exit to the muggle section of the library as quickly as I could, back past the stuck horse-cart and the cursing artist.

I waited out the Polyjuice locked in a stall in the women's restroom on the second floor, scrambling to get my clothes transfigured back in time. I ducked out as quickly as I could, luckily not spotted by any women patrons.

I bought myself a travel sewing kit and a large carton of salt at the STOP & SHOP and then apparated back out to the island. I didn't really know if this would work, but I had to try.

I spent the rest of the morning laying my wards with a large circle of salt on the floor. By the time my RAs would be arriving in lab to work on the variants I had left for them, I was carefully dissolving the small bead the contained Avery's hair. Blood would have been much better, but any method of getting some would have put him on high alert. The hair would have to do.

When the alert bead was gone, when the hair was free and everything prepared, it was late afternoon. I was tired and hungry, but I kept going, I wanted this over and done with.

I laid the skin flat in my circle and went to work carefully sewing the slip with "Charles 542-0210" under its tongue and the hair in its nose.

I would need something to track the skin myself. I had to be sure, more sure that Avery had been with me. The skin didn't have any blood left, and Avery had already taken all the hair for his own purposes. I cut off a sliver of fingernail.

Well, one thing left; I had to remove Tepora's bag. Simple enough, of course, except that if my transfer of target had failed, the skin

would be on me in an instant.

I found the small lump of the bag in a fold of the skin on its right side. Carefully, I worked it up out of the throat, into the mouth, then it was in my hand. When I had it, I lunged away from the skin as far as I could and prepared to apparate. The skin, however, only barely started to move, gathering fold on fold and pushing itself upwards, wavering like a snake trying to climb a wall. At last it stood upright, twisting slowly from side to side.

Well, if it still wanted me as its target, it was certainly being coy about it. The twisting movement slowed and stopped with it facing roughly southwest.

It began to move. I opened the door for it; I didn't particularly want to watch it squeeze under. It clung close to the jamb and edged its way around, but when it reached the small chamber at the top of the steps it stopped again, slumped against the wall. A bright patch of sunlight still fell in the entrance. It was acting like a newly-made skin again: moving slowly, avoiding bright light, taking its time to pinpoint its target. Would it take weeks to reach Avery as it had with me? Well, at least I had time to make my tracking charm.

The shingle provided me with a clear plastic bottle and my wand provided me with fresh water. I wanted a tracker that was less noticeable than my popsicle-stick-and-nail contraption. A piece of fingernail floating in solution should be effective. I would fit right in with all the Yanks who couldn't go anywhere without a bottle of water, as if they might suddenly drop dead of thirst in the middle of Boston.

I wouldn't have noticed the skin if I hadn't been testing my finished tracking charm at that moment. I followed the movement of the sliver of nail with my gaze and saw the skin's grey form in the fading light, wavering like a column of smoke as it came down the shingle. When it reached the larger rocks near the water line it collapsed to the ground and surged forward with a rippling movement, quite fast. I hurried down the shore just in time to see it disappear into the waves. It was hunting now, and it was fast, very fast. I didn't want to think about how narrow my own escape had been. I disillusioned myself, unshrunk my broom, and followed.

It was only just past five o'clock and getting dark. I landed behind the ticket booth on the wharf and watched the scrap of fingernail slowly track from east to west in my plastic bottle. Finally it hung up at the side of the bottle pointing due south. The skin must be out of the harbor now. I flew slowly, keeping a careful eye on wires and streetlights as well as my tracker.

Its aim was a bit... shaky at first. Of course it wouldn't be able to fix on Avery directly while he was still under the Polyjuice, it would have to stick to older traces of him for now. He couldn't keep up the Polyjuice forever; he would have to sleep sometimes, and it would be wise for him to take other breaks from the potion to avoid the mental and physical side-effects of long-term use.

The skin came ashore south of the city and took its time visiting some shipping yards, a block of storage units, and a public pool (closed for the season) where it devoured a few towels. Unwillingly, an image of Avery came to me, splashing into the lake in our fourth year, taking bets as to whether he would be able to dive down to the common room window. I shoved the image out of my mind.

After a few hours we wound north to Boylston Street, where it disappeared abruptly down a storm drain. It was headed to the room, no doubt. When I apparated below, I found it crouched in the blackened circle, touching the floor and slowly turning in place. Could it tell it had been made here? Probably not; it wasn't as if it had a *mind*.

I sat in the corner and watched it scabbling on the floor. "Nothing left." It couldn't understand, of course. I wished I had brought some food with me. I was working on the repeating element in my mind when I noticed that the skin had stopped moving. It was standing, frozen, in the center of the circle. I pushed myself up and gripped my wand. It couldn't possibly change targets back on its own, could it?

It hung there, motionless, for several long minutes, then rippled down to the floor, beneath the door, and was gone. I followed.

It was already hard to see it at the limits of my Lumos, just a flicker of grey movement in the darkness of the train tunnel. Its movement was completely different than it had been before; it was purposeful, swift, gone.

I followed more slowly for a time, but soon I was at the barrier

at the entrance to the disused tunnel and beyond it I could hear the roar of a train passing. I couldn't go out there, not for another couple of hours anyway. I would have to follow it above-ground.

I apparated to my spot behind the hedge on the commons and checked the tracking charm. The skin was moving steadily south and west. I unshrunk my broom and followed.

The winter wind was biting now. My hands ached despite the warming charms and I could barely keep my grip on the tracker. I resorted to keeping it in my pocket and checking it every ten minutes. It was perhaps inevitable that I would overshoot my target. I rose, backtracked and circled the point: it was a block of flats, brick, set in quiet back streets.

I landed on the roof and stood with my back to the raised metal stairwell, breathing on my hands. I could see the problem with my tracker: It could give me direction, but not altitude. The chip of fingernail was pointing resolutely at the southeast corner of the building, but there was no way to know how far below me it was. I would have to check every floor.

A *Specialis Revelio* told me it was a muggle building. A *Hominem Revelio* told me the stairwell was empty. I opened the door with an *Alohamora* and descended. The stairwell let me out in a cream-colored hallway with a scuffed blue carpet. It felt stifling hot after the cold outside. Somewhere behind closed doors a television played with a distorted underwater sound and a hallway radiator was hissing. Everything else was still. The carpet muffled my steps.

The tracking charm led me around two corners to flat 707 in the southeast corner of the building, but when I cast *Specialis Revelio*, there was nothing. That couldn't be right; he would have some sort of wards. I hurried back to the stairwell and descended. I felt like I was slowly diving underwater.

Each floor was close and still, the air almost as humid as Manaus.

It was number 407; I could feel the wards on the back of my fingers as I brushed close to the handle. I cast *Specialis Revelio*. Sure enough, a bright tracery of wards appeared across the door and threshold, quite strong.

I was examining the pattern when they went out, snuffed out

like a candle. I cracked the lock and entered.

There was a pale orange light filtering in from the city through the window, but otherwise the flat was dark and still. I cast *Hominem* and *Specialis Revelio* again. No one and nothing. Everything snuffed out.

My tracking charm was pointing right. I cast a low *Lumos* and edged around an armchair and table to a door on the right side of the room. I cast *Hominem* and *Specialis Revelio* again. Nothing. What did I expect? I was always too late. The black crack under the door yawned at me like an abyss.

I pushed open the door to see what I already knew. The struggle must have been brief; the sheets and blankets were ripped off the bed, but the rest of the room was untouched. The skin lay where it had ended, halfway between the bed and the door. It was distended, bulging at strange angles. It was already beginning to decay, weakening into slime. The Dark Magic that preserved and animated it was gone now. All I could see of Avery was his bare foot half out of its mouth.

I went back out to the living room and sat on the couch. It was over. I would have to dispose of it, but I didn't want to go back and look at that foot, not just yet.

I began circling the living room instead, strengthening my *Lumos*. Someone had made a home here, Avery or the man he had killed. There was a wireless, a spell-run disk player, a bookcase full of volumes weighted towards local history. There was a print showing a flight to Harzburg, another of a witch making a table dance, and a few plants.

A small writing desk held some bills and correspondence and some framed photos. A woman was holding two children by the shoulders who were proudly displaying an obviously homemade sign: "MERRY XMAS UNCLE CHARLIE."

There was a life here, or the remains of one, that Avery had been trying to take for his own. Would he really have been able to keep it up? Keep Polyjuicing himself every day, correspond with his new family, keep all the friends? How long would it have gone on if he hadn't tried to destroy me?

Well, 'Uncle Charlie' was gone now. I couldn't leave anything to be traced. I Scourgified everything I had touched, returned to the

bedroom, took hold of Avery's bare foot, and apparated.

The room in the disused tunnel was as I had left it. I dragged the skin onto the charred area, and recast the circle, setting strong wards. I even used the same boundaries of the circle that Avery had set.

When I was done, I hesitated. Part of me wanted to split the skin, to look at his face again. No, there wouldn't be any point to it. He wasn't the Avery who had been my friend. *He* was long gone, years gone now. He had changed himself long ago. I cast Fiendfyre.

I had to leave the room while it was burning; it was sucking all the air out of the room. I stood with my back to the wall of the corridor and closed my eyes against the image of the body twisting in the fire. I waited, listening to the flames devouring the body.

When I stepped back in and forced the flames out with the countercurse, there was nothing left but blackened floor and blackened ceiling, as before. I Evanescoed the traces of the circle, closed the door, and apparated away.

I didn't want to go back to the lab that night, to see anyone have to talk to them. I couldn't manage Uli that night, frankly. The thought of being touched made me a bit ill.

Where else? I settled on Dick's flat in Arkham. He would be in Manaus now; he wouldn't mind. I apparated to Arkham, and the cold walk from the apparition point to his flat brought my hunger back. I raided his kitchen for sandwich makings. After I ate, I needed to drink, I found. I poured myself a very large whiskey and sat at his table and worked at it steadily.

It had been my fourth year at Hogwarts, my fourth year at the Hunt. Avery had approached me again about teaming up to take our targets and watch each other's backs so we couldn't be picked off. It had worked well the year before. It wasn't too much of a danger to repeat the alliance, since repeats were uncommon and not expected. Avery didn't know, however, that I had drawn his name as my target. It was a one-in-fifteen chance, after all, not such a great fluke. It served him right, I told myself, he should have considered and planned for that possibility, he should have examined more closely the forged target slip I had shown him with Petria Greenaway's name.

It was almost too easy. Avery had been poised in ambush, just a few minutes from taking his target, when I marked him from behind. He didn't even realize at first that he was out of the game; I had to tap him on the shoulder where the white spot of the mark still glowed and give the standard salute: "*ave atque vale*." His target, Walden, as it happened, watched in amusement.

Avery had sworn a bit, "bloody hell, Sev, you couldn't let me take old Walden first?" But finally he shook my hand and laughed, "well played, well played." The House didn't like a poor sport at the Hunt. Still, he hadn't asked me to watch his back again.

I supposed that I was after all a traitor from the first, a betrayal to all of my friends, one after another, a wrecker of everything I touched.

I hit the table. Well, what the hell did it matter to him if I was? With the Dark Lord dead, it didn't touch him. He could have walked away, lived his stolen life in peace for as long as he could stand the Polyjuice. Yet the minute he saw me he had to step back in the game. He couldn't leave it alone.

Perhaps that was the flaw, that essence that marked us as snakes forever. We couldn't step away from the game even after all our games turned deadly. We had to play to the very end even if it destroyed us.

"*Ave atque vale*,"* I whispered into my whiskey. I poured the dregs down the sink.

* *Ave atque vale*:
Hail and farewell.

RESULTS

There was a tapping at the door.

"What?" I muttered. My head ached and it felt early. Couldn't I go back to sleep? There was that bloody tapping again. I turned over and blinked. Dick was standing in the entryway of his flat, knocking lightly on the inside of his door. Oh yes, I was in his flat,

Chapter 33 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 42, NO.7
MABON 2005

taking up his couch. Again.

"Good, uh, afternoon, Cyril."

Afternoon?

"Don't people usually knock on the outside of doors?"

"It wasn't until I was inside that I saw there was a reason to knock," he said, amused. "I *was* looking for you, though."

I put my head back and groaned. When I opened my eyes again, I could see he had gone in the kitchen and was puttering about. I slipped into the lav and washed my face. He had coffee on the table when I came out.

"Better?"

"Better," I said after I had some.

"I was a bit worried. You were just gone, and with you, no news does not mean good news."

I drank my coffee.

"When I saw that the skin was gone, I got really worried."

"I said I would destroy it if I could."

"I thought you said it couldn't be destroyed until it reached its target."

"I found a way to destroy it."

"You did?"

"That's enough, Dick."

"I just –"

"That's enough!"

He looked shocked at my cold tone. He stood without another word and returned to the kitchen. I finished my coffee.

He returned a few minutes later and leaned on the back of his chair. "One question: is it over?"

"Yes."

"Good." He sat across from me. "*Good.*" He sounded more certain the second time he said it. "Well, will you be coming back to the lab today?"

"Yes."

"The other reason I was looking for you is that I have the results from the first human trials from Sao Paolo, and I want –"

"The results are back?" I stood up. "Where are they?"

"In Manaus, of course. I'll show you when we get back. Now, do you want some breakfast?"

"No, I want results, now."

"Well, let's go then."

I saw the envelope on his desk as soon as I stepped out of the Vanishing Cabinet. I had it open and the charts spread across his desk before Dick stepped out.

The sample size was quite limited: the study included twenty-five subjects (Group A) taking my variant one week prior to the full moon, twenty-five (Group B) taking traditional Wolfsbane one hour prior to moonrise, twenty-five (Group C) taking traditional Wolfsbane one week prior to the full moon, and twenty-five (Group D) taking nothing.

Groups A and B were able to follow all the commands given through the walls of their cages while fully transformed. They all put the striped ball on the shelf, the polka-dot ball in the box; they managed to stick to the canned food and not eat the live goat. The members of Groups C and D on the other hand, ate the striped ball, the polka-dot ball, the canned food, the goat, the can, the shelf, the box, and spent the rest of the night chewing on the bars.

There were side effects, but they appeared to be minor: muscle aches and mild to medium nausea (and two cases of severe nausea) just after ingestion and then again just before transformation. That must be the trigger taking effect.

Dick kept trying to read over my shoulder until I threw the first five pages on the desk to distract him. When I reached the end I switched with him and went back to the beginning. "Good, good!" he kept saying. When he reached the end he jumped up and brought out the cachaca again. I hardly noticed the taste this time.

"Damn it, Dick, the sample size is too small! It's not a significant result!"

"Nonsense, it's just a preliminary trial, and it's an absolute success! Minimal side-effects!"

"Only twenty-five subjects taking my variant." I stood up and paced across the room.

"Sit down. Chicago will start testing soon. The permit process takes longer up there, but the sample size will be much larger."

"We'll have to brew more..."

"No, they'll brew their own from your formula. You know they

have to be able to replicate it independently.”

“Dick, what if they get it wrong?” I half-stood again.

“Sit down! Drink that. You do know this is good news, right? If they get it wrong, you’ll go there and show them how it’s done. Do you want to visit the facility?”

The question surprised me. “I’m not sure.” Did any of my former students work in Chicago?

“Well, if you do, I can arrange it. Now, you should start writing up your abstract and protocol for publication. We’ll leave the results and conclusions until we have a larger sample size from Chicago and Rio, of course.”

“Publication? Dick, I still haven’t added the repeating element yet!”

“Cyril, we’ve been through this. This is a result that deserves publication in and of itself. Especially with *this* coming back from Sao Paolo.” He tapped the papers on the desk. “You can work on the repeating element while testing continues. We need to get the patents in place now for the potion as-is. I’ll have the papers for you to sign tomorrow. All right?”

“The project is not complete.”

“The first part is complete. Well, assuming Chicago can replicate your results. Look, you’re new to the research world. In research, if you don’t publish, you don’t get press. If you don’t get press, you don’t get donors and grants, and without them, you don’t get the money to conduct your research. If there’s anything publishable, we *have* to publish.”

“Fine,” I said shortly. “I’ll have the repeating element added by the time the testing is done.”

Dick laughed and shook his head at me. “I’ll look forward to it.”

I spent the rest of the weekend in the lab, only stepping out once to sign the patent applications with Dick, and returning to my flat late at night. I had a deadline now, a little over a month to develop my repeating element. I was far behind and I didn’t know what I would assign the RAs to work on on Monday. At least the work kept me too busy to think, to see the last of the skin going up in flames.

I didn’t see anyone else, either. I kept the TRIAL IN PROGRESS sign on the lab door. There was a knock at my flat once, but I didn’t answer. I couldn’t afford any distractions.

My best lead was the possibility of using a reverse to reset the potion. Of course, the reverse could not be a spell; it had to be some physical element. There were a few possible ingredients used in youth and beauty potions to temporarily reverse aging effects. If I could link them somehow to the potion rather than to the body, perhaps I could return it to its stasis stage.

By Monday, I only had the roughest of formulas. Monday was not very productive. I had intended to spend only a few minutes announcing the results of the first human trials, but I had only just begun saying that the packet from Sao Paolo had arrived when there was a general rush on my desk.

Park got there first, but Grossman pulled rank and removed the papers from his upraised hands. He stood and read with a smile growing across his face.

{“Benji, I *will* kick you,”} said Paola.

{“All right, all right!”} He read the results aloud in Portuguese. Eventually, Paola and Park clasped hand and jumped up and down. Mata shook his head in wonder, {“It works, it really works!”}

{“Save it, Mr. Mata, all of you. The sample size is too small to be of significance. We will not know anything definitive until results are returned from Chicago.”}

“Bullshit,” said Grossman immediately. “There’s no way we could get 100% success rate like this without the formula being good. Even if Chicago doesn’t return 100% like this one, we’ve got something big.”

“That’s enough, Grossman. We have a deadline now. I will not publish without at least a prospective repeating element added. I want a working prototype with the repeat by the time the human trials in Chicago are done.”

I set them to work on the possibility I had developed over the weekend. Once they were busy at prep, I couldn’t help picking up the results and rereading them. *100% success rate.*

{“Would you look at that? He’s *smiling*,”} said Grossman. Mata whistled.

{“Shut up, Grossman! Get back to work, all of you!”} They just laughed. Shit, they were used to me now. I’d have to work harder.

I began on that when the RAs had their break. As usual, Mata took his coffee out to the covered porch of the lounge room where he could smoke. I had gone out through my office windows and around the side of the building. I managed to pluck the cigarette from his mouth with a directed wind without being seen. However, when he brought out the pack for another and I *accioed* them all at once, he could hardly avoid noticing. He ran over to where I was destroying them with *aguamenti*.

{“What the hell?”}

{“No smoking, Mr. Mata.”}

{“I’m on break, I’m outside. It’s none of your business!”}

{“I wish that were true. Unfortunately there is now a debt between us. You *do* understand a life debt, do you not?”}

He stared at me, speechless.

{“It’s quite clear. The way things are between us now, I *cannot* stand by while your life is at risk. There are definite consequences if I don’t try to save you.”} An ignored life debt would result in crushing remorse, depression, and a very nasty and long-lasting case of the flu. I had experienced it once and I had absolutely no desire to experience it again. Besides, I couldn’t afford the time away from my research.

{“Save me? I don’t need saving!”}

{“Since you continually put your life, your health, and your potential potions career at risk, clearly you do.”}

{“*Piss off!*”}

{“No, I will not piss off. I’ll make this clear. If I ever see you risking your life by smoking, I’ll stop you. I don’t have a choice. If you want to smoke, you’ll have to piss off where I can’t find you. And I *will* find you.”}

He didn’t try to argue. He huffed a breath out and strode angrily back to the break room. He’d definitely think twice before saving someone’s life again.

There was a knock on my door that night as I was washing up from dinner. I opened it this time. It was Uli, bottles of beer in hand. “I heard you have something to celebrate.”

We drank beer and sat at my kitchen table as she read the results. The papers were beginning to show some wear from all the han-

dling. I smoothed the pages as she finished them.

“Are you going to frame that?” She poked me with her elbow.

“No, you were *crumpling* them.”

“Hey, I’m kidding you.”

“I know that.”

“Do you? That’s very good news.” I wasn’t sure if she meant the results or the kidding. “You *could* frame them if you want.”

“The sample size is too small. We won’t really know until the trials in Chicago are done.”

She sighed. “I think you should live in the rainforest.”

“Why? Do you want me to be sucked dry by mosquitoes?”

“No, because you relaxed there. Maybe only for five minutes, but I saw you.”

I shrugged. I honestly didn’t know what had allowed me to relax then. I had been surrounded by strangers, bitten and itchy, and the skin was still after me. Yet Uli was right; I had relaxed then. Perhaps it was the feeling of being beyond everything, in another world. How could I recreate that?

I gave a short laugh. “I’m not going to live in the rainforest.

She shot me a sly look. “You could just pretend.”

We went to her flat, to her little jungle, and pretended.

I was walking with him again. He was slightly ahead of me; I had to keep up. Sunlight through the trees cast bars of light and shadow on the trail. It was beautiful, in a way, but it was hard going, very steep. He was bringing me to the top of something, where we would be able to see out. We would be able to see everything.

“Severus, I have always felt a certain kinship with you. We are very alike, you and I.”

I knew I ought to feel disgusted, horrified, but he was his young self again, full of charm and power. He was everything I wanted to be, after all, it was a great compliment.

“Oh, no...” I tried to turn the compliment aside.

He laughed, but not nastily for once. A real and warm laugh. “Yes. That is why I regard you as such a good friend. I know I can

trust you to be honest with me. A *real friend*... a *real* friend is not someone who just tries to always please or say agreeable things. A real friend can be truly honest. He will speak his mind. He will try to correct you if he sees you turning the wrong way. Everyone needs a friend like that, Severus. That's why I value you so highly."

I could see the top of the hill through the trees, a thin spire of grey rock. Were we going to climb that? "I can't..." I said.

Uli was up before me the next morning. That was unusual. I found her brooding over a cup of coffee at the kitchen table. Coffee, good. I sat across from her. She gave me a wan smile.

"You were having a nightmare last night, I think."

"Did I wake you?"

"I was already awake."

"Oh?"

"I suppose it's stupid, but I couldn't help thinking about you disappearing on Friday. I had to come to you to hear the results. Everyone else heard it first."

There was a waiting silence. I felt blindsided. "You didn't say anything yesterday."

"I was... pretending. I'm sorry. I am always the blunt one. I was thinking that maybe you never say anything to me because I'm always the blunt one and I say things first, so I was pretending not to be. I thought, maybe I'm just too quick. I'm always going to you and bringing things up. Maybe you want to talk, but I always beat you to it and you don't like that. So I tried. I decided, I'll just wait and be patient and *not-blunt*. This is a mistake for me. I can't keep it up." She sighed. "I'm always standing just on the edge of something with you. I think we're close, I think we're friends, but there's this *something* in between us, like a hole, I don't know what it is. It's whatever you don't want to talk about. I'm always thinking, this time he'll say it, this time he'll tell me, but you don't. You never say it."

She fell silent again. I could see another hole in front of me. She was waiting for me to tell her, but it was impossible. Impossible and pointless. I could see that she was about to end it if I didn't tell

her, but if I did tell her, she would be sure to end it anyway. Then it would be over and she would know. No, it was impossible. There wasn't any one thing I could say without the whole disgusting mess coming out, like all my memories pouring out at once.

"Whatever this thing is, it's growing between us. I don't even think it matters what it is; it's the *not talking* that matters," she said in an almost pleading voice. I was sickeningly reminded of my own pleas to Lily to just *talk* to me.

"I don't know what to do, if you think you can't trust me. You trust me or you don't! I'm thinking one day that we are close, we are really friends, but friends *trust* each other. A friend can tell a friend anything."

I could feel my face going stony. It was ridiculous; it was only a dream, after all, but at that moment I had not the slightest desire to say another word to her or to see her face again. I took my mug over to the sink and washed it out. My back was so stiff it ached.

"Cyril, please look at me."

I didn't.

"Cyril, I'm *sorry*..."

I closed the door behind me and went back to my flat. I had work to do.

It was just as well, I told myself. I needed to remove every distraction if I wanted to progress on the repeating element.

I took a shower at my flat, leaning my head against the tiles and letting the hot water do its best to take the knots out of my back. Not a complete success.

Afterwards, I went straight down to the lab and started working on my ideas for the repeat. I was almost disappointed when the RAs arrived in the afternoon and disturbed my silence. They must have developed the sixth sense my Slytherins always had about when not to bother me, because not a word was spoken until they were leaving at the end of the day. Grossman nattered at me for a few minutes, something about Dick and donors, then left me in peace.

I worked as long as I could, then went back to my flat, ate and slept. I started over the next day, pushing ahead with another variant. The RAs came in at some point, all except Grossman. Where

the hell had he got to? Well, to hell with him, I didn't need him to translate any more. I hardly needed to speak to the RAs anyway. Just as well, since I thought my variant was almost cooperating with me. There seemed to be the beginning of a reverse reaction, I just needed to find a way to sustain it.

I began again. I would try adding the Kappa water more slowly and keep the temperature low. I began the addition of the Kappa water in a thin stream, stirring constantly.

The lab door clicked close and I could hear Grossman speaking to someone. Did he think he could waltz in late? But what did I care? All I was concerned with was this reaction.

{“May I introduce the head of our Potions program?”}

What was he going on about? Shit, the slow addition wasn't working. I could see the elements separating. With the temperature lower, the reaction didn't have enough energy to start properly. All I was getting was a curdle. I threw down my stirring rod and stepped away from the bench. I backed almost straight into Grossman and a man with shiny hair in a shiny suit, one hand extended towards me. What the hell was this?

“Who the hell are you?” I snapped.

Grossman paled and said to the ridiculous man, {“just a moment, let me—”}

Oh, didn't he understand English? Well, I could fix that. I switched to Portuguese. {“What the hell do you think you're doing here? You are interrupting *important* work and you are not wearing the safety gear that is required of *everyone* — ”}

Grossman tried to take my elbow. “Wait, he's — ”

I shook him off. {“I don't care who he is! — Of *everyone* who steps into this lab!”}

The shiny-haired man drew his hand back with a sharp movement. I rather thought that he wanted to slap me. He was welcome to try.

“Get this idiot out of my sight!” I snapped at Grossman.

{“Maybe we should start brewing a calming draught,”} Mata muttered to Paola. Did he think I couldn't hear him?

{“*I don't need a fucking calming draught!*”} It came out much louder than I intended, almost a roar.

Grossman was leading the idiot hurriedly out the door. The others were holding themselves very still. Mata had a peculiar expression on his face. I realized he was trying not to laugh.

{“Get out! All of you!”}

They went.

Peace and quiet. Damn me, it was what I always wanted, but as soon as I got it, I couldn't stand it. I cleaned up the stations, closed down the storeroom, then went through to my office. I made a cup of tea and stared at my variant charts. Useless, it was all bloody useless.

Dick arrived, as expected, a few hours later, knocking at my office door and saying tentatively, “Cyril?”

“Yes, Dick.” He sat across from me.

“Don't you have lectures in Arkham?”

“Well, I just thought I'd drop by and see how you're doing at scar-ing away our donors.” His donor, of course it was. Grossman had warned me the day before.

“Bloody hell,” I muttered.

“Are you all right?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, of course. You've got Grossman worried about you again. And so am I.”

I didn't say anything.

“It's not the donor I'm worried about.”

“My variant just went to hell, Dick, that's all. He came in at exactly the wrong time.”

“You're all right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, how do you like your bad news: little by little or all at once?”

“All at once,” I said immediately. If he was going to fire me, I just wanted it over with.

He didn't say a word, he just brought out a newspaper; the NEW YORK PROGNOSTICATOR again. I was beginning to actively dislike all newspapers.

“The *Living* section, page ten, I think. Upcoming books.”

Ah. *Skeeter announces new tell-all expose: SEVERUS SNAPE: SAINT OR SINNER.*

"That *minging* slag."

"You might be able to head her off if you were to come forward..."

"No!"

"All right," he put his hands up. "I'm not pushing you."

I shoved the paper away and leaned my forehead on my palm. "It's been a bloody awful week, Dick."

He leaned forward with his elbows on my desk. "I don't like the idea of you losing your temper like that. I don't think it's good for you. Remember you can just walk out when you need to. Make it easy on yourself. As for the donor, screw the donor. I would give twelve donors for one good researcher."

"Well... eleven to go, then."

Dick laughed. "Does that mean I have to start keeping track?"

He summoned a piece of paper from my rubbish and smoothed it out on the desk. He wrote my name at the top and put a single tick mark beneath.

"In all seriousness, Cyril, I have to inform you that if your research brings in any new donors, that will count against your total score."

"Oh, damn."

"Now it's only fair for you to see what you're up against."

He wrote 'Pfr. Aruego,' and gave her one tick, 'Dr. Zosimos,' and gave him three. "Universal Solvent, you know."

"Oh, yes, I know."

Finally, he wrote his own name and gave himself four ticks. "There *may* have been a dinner party once with several donors present, and I *may* have gone on and on about the superior quality of Colombian over Brazilian cocaine. I'm still not sure what offended them more; the talk of illegal drugs or wounded national pride. It was definitely wounded national pride the time I told a donor that I wouldn't visit the Manaus Opera House because it was built with the blood of the Indians.

"As you can see, you'll really have to buckle down now if you want to catch up with the rest of us. But Cyril, I have complete confidence in your ability to piss people off."

"Well of course, Dick. I was taught by the very best."

THAW

The next two months proceeded with very little in the way of solid leads on the repeating element.

The most positive development so far had been the easing of the chilly distance between Mata and myself ever since the incidents of

the skin and the smoking. Not that it mattered to me, but it did improve the working atmosphere in lab. It seemed that my little shouting spree at the donor had strangely endeared me to Mata. My only guess was that he found it somehow satisfying that he was not my only target.

The rainy season was well underway and drenching storms rolled over the city virtually every day. I had to cast drying charms on the walls and curtains of my flat to keep the mildew blooms under control. When I could stand the hot and damp no more I would spend time in the arid greenhouses pouring over my notes.

I avoided Uli. She had knocked on my door once (I didn't answer), and tried to speak to me in the lounge, but was thankfully interrupted by Henrique coming in for coffee while I made my escape. I stopped going for drinks on Fridays, though Grossman and Paola persisted in mentioning it.

My little game ended one day in the cold greenhouse. The humidity had been clogging my brain all morning, so I made my escape to the welcome sharp cool air of the greenhouse. Winter was beginning to ease there. I could smell the thawing mud. Skunk cabbage shoots were pushing up through the frost, and the ice on the pond was beginning to break up. The ground was too wet to actually sit, so I walked around the edge of the pond, cracking the thin plates of ice with my boots.

"Hello," Uli said. She had come halfway down from the woods. "Is it all right, or am I chasing you away?" she asked, stepping down to the pond.

I didn't like the implication that I was running away. "All right,"

Chapter 34 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE
VOLUME 42, No.8
SAMHAIN 2005

I said guardedly.

“Are you angry?”

I had to think about that. I crunched some ice. “Not with you.”

“I’m sorry, you know. That it didn’t work.”

I didn’t say anything to that.

“If you want to stay away from me, I understand, but you know you don’t have to stay away on my account. I’m not angry. It doesn’t hurt so much. It only twists the knife a little bit.”

“Only a little?”

“It’s not so sharp, the kind you use for butter. What do you call it?”

“A butter-knife?”

“Yes, a butter-knife.”

Part of me wanted to be offended that I amounted to a butter-knife after all that, but it was a relief in a way. It wasn’t something monumental after all, no referendum on my qualities as a friend or on my ability to wreck everything I touched, just a fling that had come and gone; a butter-knife.

“Good,” I said, meaning it.

“Beer?” She was hauling on the rope at the pond’s edge. The red bucket bobbed to the surface and she extracted two dripping bottles. I warmed mine.

“Maybe it’s better, yes? To have everything a little simpler. And this way you don’t have to say anything.”

So I didn’t say anything. We drank our beers in silence in the silent greenhouse.

It was the last quiet I had for some time. Carnival arrived in Manaus with heat, crowds, fireworks and the blaring music from the stadium leaking across the city. Dick tried to drag me out to see it, but one look at the press of people trying to squeeze into the stadium and I headed straight back to the lab.

Dick advised me to cancel lab for the week. I resisted the idea. It seemed ridiculous to stop work because of some sort of dance competition. I had to concede his point when my bloodshot and bleary-eyed RAs staggered into lab late on Monday. Was there any possibility of productive work on a repeating element? There was a rather greater

chance of exploding cauldrons and botched note-taking, I determined. I had a small shout at them. It didn’t take much, as I could see how they were wincing at any loud noise. I told them all to piss off for two days to give the alcohol a chance to leave their systems.

When they returned later in the week, looking considerably more sober, testing finally proceeded. Unfortunately, none of my repeating elements showed much promise. One of Paola’s versions almost returned to the stasis stage, but not quite. I felt some other approach was needed, but I couldn’t quite see it, somehow.

There was still no prospect of a working repeat when the results came back from Chicago a month and a half later. The sample size was much larger, with a hundred subjects in each testing category. The thought of that many werewolves in one place made my skin crawl a bit. They must have scoured the country to get so many. Or did they pay the subjects to take part?

The results were no longer 100% positive. Four subjects who took my variant had an allergic reaction of an itching rash around the corners of their mouth and the potion proved only slightly effective. Privately, I thought it sounded like a reaction to the *euphorbia helioscopia*. It might be possible to find a substitution with further testing.

One subject failed without any allergic symptoms, but she also had a history of being resistant to unaltered Wolfsbane. Pity she wasn’t in the control group. Two subjects had a partial response, being able to follow some directions of the testers, but not others. Of those, however, subject A34 confessed that he had heard and understood, but chose to ignore the instructions “‘cause fresh goat is my favorite!” *Well.*

Testing was set to continue for the next three months, varying the lead times of the dose to see how far in advance it would be effective.

I wanted to wait for the rest of the results, but Dick pushed and finally wore me down to writing up the experiment ‘as-is,’ with notes about the continuing testing. I didn’t particularly like or understand his rush to publish, but I had to admit he was much more well-versed in the world of research than I. I had a draft for Dick to look over after a week. I also wrote references for the RAs, easy enough; I had churned out plenty of those over the years as Head of House. Their

terms would end in May, so I might as well be ahead on the references.

Dick met with me in his office to go over our article revisions. We pored over the result charts and double-checked the entries. Dick wanted me to expand the conclusions section to contain broader implications for my delay process beyond Wolfsbane into its potential for use against diseases such as dragonpox. I knew the potential was there. The danger of fast-moving diseases such as dragonpox was that by the time symptoms became apparent, it was often too late for the curative potion to do much good. If my delay process could be added to that potion so that it could be taken years in advance of any outbreak, it could save many lives. Still, including the possibility in my article seemed pointless. We hadn't developed the delay in the context of dragonpox or anything else, and the human testing would be very difficult in any case. I was resistant to mentioning it at all before we had a chance to work on it.

"Dick, isn't that simply giving a leg up to our competitors?"

"Yes, but at this point, we *want* to give them a leg up."

"Oh, do we?"

He smiled. "As much as I want Stoltz Reaserch Labs to get all the glory in the world, well, we are tiny. I would love for us to be the ones to break the cure for dragonpox, but I have to admit that it won't be us. It will be one of the really big government or commercial labs, like Heidelberg, or Harbin, or Bishop. They have enormous Potions departments, all the permits in place for extensive human trials. They never have to wait for ingredient shipments or grants; they are staffed, stocked and ready to go. No matter how inspired we are, they will beat us by a country mile. They are much better than we are at taking a prototype potion to the stage of commercial or clinical distribution. Therefore, we *want* them to. The sooner we publish and the more importance we place on the implications of your delay process, the sooner the big labs will come knocking down our door to license the development of the Wolfsbane and your delay process itself. The more of a leg up we can give them in developing it, the sooner your potion will be doing real good for patients, and not to put too fine a point on it, the sooner you and the lab will have a good and steady income

from the licensing. *We* won't be the ones to cure dragonpox, but once *anyone* uses your process in the cure, *you*, my dear, will be set for life."

I grimaced. "It feels like giving up."

"It's not, it's certainly not. It's playing to our strengths. Your strength: coming up with an absolutely groundbreaking new process. Their strength: testing and development. Let them be the ones bogged down in months and years of human testing, eliminating allergens and side effects. You can let the license fees roll in and think of brilliant ideas."

I snorted. It would be quite a while before I saw a sickle of license fees, if the trouble I had in getting anywhere on the repeat process was any indication.

"Now I want to talk to you about your references." I was surprised to see his grim look. "I can't let those pass this office."

"What?"

His look softened. "I realize it's not intentional, but you can't do this to them. Not after all the work they've done for you."

"Dick, what are you talking about?"

"Your terrible references. You'll sink any chance they have of a good job or a research position." He pushed the papers over to me.

"Don't be ridiculous. I've been nothing less than honest –"

"Listen, *listen*." He picked up Mata's reference and read, "...while Mr. Mata's skills at ingredient preparation are inconsistent, he is an adequate brewer who may be of some help in any lab setting. He exhibits some impatience to progress in a project... Cyril, you'll bury him!"

"Dick, I do not insult him or downgrade his abilities in any way. I refuse to write some sort of meaningless 'puff piece' that's of no use to a potential employer or the applicant. I won't falsify a recommendation!"

He held up a hand. "I'm not asking you to. Look, in the normal course of things, if this reference crossed my desk from someone looking for a job at the lab, I'd throw it straight out. *Adequate*. When I see the word *adequate*, to me it reads as barely competent. Is that what you mean by adequate?"

"No, that's not the meaning of the word!"

"What does it mean to you?"

Wasn't it obvious? "His brewing is competent and acceptable."

"At what level, exactly?"

"At the level I assume he is applying for, a research or professional level."

Dick scribbled over my reference and read it back to me: "Mr. Mata brews at a professional level and would be an asset to any lab."

"Wait!"

"Is it a lie?"

"No, but –"

"No buts! If it's not a lie, we'll keep it. Now about those 'inconsistent' prep skills, has he improved since the beginning of the experiment?"

"Yes, Park is no longer handling his prep. I believe he's been practicing on his own."

"Do you ever have to reject his prep anymore?"

"No..."

Dick was already writing. I tried to crane over the page but he cupped his hands over the words to block me. I leant back and folded my arms. Finally he lifted the page and began to read.

"In the course of his internship, Mr. Mata has exhibited marked improvement in his skills and great initiative. His preparation of ingredients is flawless –"

"Flawless?"

"Yes, when someone's prep never has to be corrected or redone, I would call that flawless." He continued, "his preparation of ingredients is flawless and he brews at a professional level. He is highly motivated and eager to progress on experiments. He would be an asset to any lab."

God, it was so sugary and sweet it made my teeth ache. He looked at me. I was glaring. *"Puffery."*

"No, not at all. It's just a translation."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes. It's the same praise that you were giving, but set into positive rather than negative terms."

"Dick, this is exactly what I was talking about. When everyone sets their praise into the most positive terms possible, it all becomes meaningless."

"Cyril, it's simply the style. You have to comply to some degree if you don't want the RAs to be judged unfairly."

"I've been writing references for my students for over fifteen years

and I have never had to comply. They have found good positions on the back of my words."

"Ah, well, that was under your old name."

"What of it?"

"Do you think, *maybe*, your reputation preceded you?"*

I glared at him again. "What reputation would that be, *exactly?*"

He chuckled. "Well, if the potential employer knew you or had been one of your students, they would probably know how hard it is to reach your level of 'adequate,' for example."

"Or to translate, everyone knows what a fucking bastard I am."

He laughed. "If you want to put it like that, fine, but no one knows that Dr. Cyril Ramson is a bastard too, so that sort of recommendation would be a real obstacle. Let's do it my way."

I sighed. "It's still puffery!"

He considered. "Maybe, but it also might be a bit suspicious if Dr. Cyril Ramson wrote references exactly like, well, *you* did. Do you think anyone would make the connection?"

"Let's do it your way."

"Good. Thank you, Cyril."

The revised the article just made the deadline for the March edition of POTIONS MONTHLY. The RAs were elated when it came out, rendering yet another lab day useless. I admit it was gratifying to see it all in print, and much more pleasant than another round of failed repeating variants. My sweeping generalizations and predictions in the conclusion did make me squirm a bit. Well, I supposed that was the comfort of using a pseudonym; it could all be on Dr. Ramson's head.

Uli made the mistake of stopping in to congratulate me that night. To be fair, it was equally my mistake for accepting her congratulations. We both knew it was idiotic; some doomed attempt to capture what had already come and gone. We could barely meet each other's eyes over breakfast.

Uli leaned her head on her hands over her coffee cup. "God, what were

* The first couple of graduating classes under Snape before his reputation began preceding him, quietly 'lost' their references from him, forged their own, or got Sprout to write some instead. Slytherins are nothing if not resourceful.

we thinking?”

Unfortunately, I didn't have the answer to that one.

“Let's not be idiots anymore, all right?” she said.

“Good luck with that.”

She punched me in the arm before she left.

TOO LATE

The news came a couple of months later. They had been months of frustration when it came to my repeating element. We had been eliminating one dead end after another, which would have been some sort of progress as long as there had been anything which wasn't a dead end. There simply wasn't.

A week of slowly building irritation was capped when I stepped from my office into the lab to find it empty. Where was everyone? Didn't they know we had work to do? The lab tables were untouched; there was no equipment out. I was heading for the hall door to go hunt the RAs down when Park came bursting in and nearly ran me over.

“Ah! Dr. Ramson, they want you in the lounge room, yes!”

He burst out again ahead of me. What he was excited about? Well, it was Park. Perhaps the question should be what wasn't he excited about?

I followed him to the lounge. All my tardy RAs were there, along with Grossman, Uli, Valeria, Professor Aruego and the Herbology RAs, and, unfortunately, Dr. Zosimos and his assistants.

Paola was trying to pour champagne and spilling it. Park and Mata were shoving each other and laughing, and there was a general confused clamor.

“Here he is, here he is!” said Grossman, trying to grab me by the arm. I pulled away testily. “The man of the hour, the 1999 Paracelsus Prize in Potions!”*

Chapter 35 of **THE NEW SKIN**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

Original publication:

TALL TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 43, No.1

YULE 2006

“What?” I said. It was far too noisy in there.

“1999 Paracelsus – ” he began, then waved at Paola, {“another glass over here!”}

Someone shoved a glass of champagne into my hand.

“What?” I said.

Someone put a letter in my other hand. There was the seal showing the Basel arms and below the inscription: “In recognition of their outstanding contribution to the field of Potions, Cyril Ramson DMA and the Stoltz Research Lab are awarded the – ”

“What?” I said.

Dr. Zosimos had somehow oozed up without my noticing. He was holding out a hand. “Well, whatever may have happened, I'm just honored that my distiller may have contributed a little something to the achievement. Congratulations!”

“Your distiller?” I didn't move to shake his hand. My hands were full in any case. In any case it was all impossible. I turned back to Grossman, who was drinking champagne at a good clip.

“What is this?” I demanded, giving the paper a shake.

“The Paracelsus,” he said, too loudly.

I shook my head at him. “Grossman, you have to apply or be nominated.”

“Sure. Dick applied.”

Did he now? “Where's Dick?”

“In his office. He's getting something, a bottle of something.”

“The cachaca?”

“Something better than that, I hope! It's the Paracelsus!”

“The *what?*”

Grossman laughed. “You'll have to do better than that for the acceptance speech.”

I somehow lost hold of my glass. I couldn't do much else but watch it fall.

“Hey,” said Grossman. I wanted to sit

* Paracelsus was actually Phillippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus Von Hohenheim, a physician, astrologer, and alchemist, among several other fields. He lived during the late 1400 — early 1500s. He was responsible for several groundbreaking developments in medicine, including the invention of laudanum.

As every potioner knows, he famously said “*Poison is in everything, and no thing is without poison. The dosage makes it either a poison or a remedy.*”

down, but I remembered just in time that I didn't have a chair. I managed to straighten up again.

"Hey," said Grossman. I had spilled champagne all over the floor and the glass was broken. I should repair it. I had my wand out, but I couldn't quite think of the spell. Dick was at my elbow, saying, "let's go back to my office, Cyril."

He steered me around and out the door. "You can put your wand away now."

He took me through his conference room and into the couch in his office. He gave me a little push on my shoulder. I sat.

"All right, Cyril?"

I held the paper out to him. "What is this?"

He smiled. "It's the Paracelsus Prize in potions. Do you want to hear the award letter?" He picked up another piece of paper from his desk and read: "Dear Dr. Stoltz, we have reviewed your application to the Paracelsus committee in the field of Potions on behalf of the Stoltz Research Lab and Dr. Cyril Ramson. Having verified your results through independent testing, and in recognition of this outstanding development in the field of Potions, we are pleased to inform you that Dr. Cyril Ramson and the Stoltz Research Lab have been awarded the 1999 Paracelsus Prize in Potions. Dr. Cyril Ramson and a representative of the Stoltz Research Lab are invited to attend the award ceremony in Basel on June 30th, 1999..." He trailed off. I was gripping the arm of the couch.

"I'm sorry. It was stupid of me to surprise you like this. I thought a *good* surprise... well, it was stupid. I should have told you about the application, but I didn't want to wind you up and I didn't want to disappoint you if it didn't come through. All stupid."

I wasn't angry at him, so I probably should have acknowledged the apology, but I could only hang on to the arm of the couch.

"All right, Cyril?"

"It's too late." I knew I was breathing too hard. I tried to slow down.

There was a hesitant tap at the door. Dick stepped half-out and held the door blocking me. I could hear Grossman on the other side. "Is, uh, everything ok?"

"Fine, just a bit of a shock." Dick was asking him something in a low voice.

"... don't think so, maybe just a sip? He dropped it..."

Dick rumbled something in reply, then shut the door. He picked up the certificate, which I had dropped, and pulled up a chair opposite me.

"Cyril, what's wrong?"

I kept gripping the arm of the couch.

"You said 'it's too late.' What's too late?"

Too late, two hours late. I had to hang on, or I would start slipping backwards. I couldn't go back there. I caught a whiff of cold air, wet grass, mud and blood. None of that was here now. I was sitting in an office, talking to Dick. I pulled myself back to the present with an effort. Dick was holding the award letter on his knee. He was waiting for an answer. The Paracelsus. It wasn't possible.

"I used to daydream about it. I'd even write the acceptance speech out in my head."

Dick laughed. "I think everyone in the research fields does that. There's nothing wrong with that. It's good to have a dream to aim for."

"I'd plan what I'd spend the award money on. I'd buy a house somewhere out in the country. I'd get her out of the End. I'd save her."

"Who's her?"

"Mum."

He was silent for a moment. "She was mentioned in one of the newspaper articles about you last year. How old were you?"

"Eighteen."

"Sometimes there's nothing anyone can do, especially not a child. You can't really think that you could have stopped it. When someone is determined... It doesn't rest on you. You know that, right? Even if you could have won the Paracelsus at eighteen. I remember your letters from back then. You were very bright, but I don't think you were quite up to winning the Paracelsus."

I snorted. "What does it matter? I'm always too late. I couldn't save her; I couldn't save any of them."

"Who, Cyril? Come on."

I hung on to the couch arm, breathing too hard.

"Here, just to calm your breathing. It's a half-dose." He was trying to hand me something: calming draught.

"I don't need a fucking calming draught," I said.

He laughed. "Come on or you'll hyperventilate, and that doesn't feel good." He put the vial in my hand. I took it.

"I couldn't sodding..."

"Take it easy."

After the potion, my chest didn't feel so tight, that was true.

"I couldn't get anyone out!"

"You tried –"

"I'm always too late! I didn't see how bad it was at first and I turned too slowly, *idiot*. It was already sealed, everything was set in motion, they were already as good as dead before I went for help. Doomed, and *I* was the one who doomed them, Dick!"

"Yes?"

"If I hadn't..." but I couldn't easily go on from there. If I hadn't doomed them, would the Dark Lord be thriving today without any flaw to bring him down? Even if I let that go, my failures were more extensive, they went much deeper.

"The kids, Dick, my own students. I couldn't get them out. I just had to watch them be lost, one by one. I couldn't even talk to them!"

"Cyril, people have to go their own way, you can't hold on to them –"

"Dick, I couldn't even *try* to stop them, and he burned himself, Dick, he burned himself to death!"

"Oh god, one of your students? Oh god."

He came back to the couch with the other half-dose of calming draught. I didn't take it.

"I'm sorry as hell, Cyril, that's just awful. I lost a student to a boating accident once. That was bad enough. Your student – I can't even imagine." He sat in silence opposite me while I failed to get myself back under control. The half-dose of calming draught didn't really help with that; I couldn't keep my face how I wanted it.

"Is this the first time you've done this? Since it happened?"

Fallen apart, I supposed he meant. I could only manage a nod.

"Well, it's probably about time. Just take it."

I took the other half-dose. I rested my face in my hands as it took effect and I lost all control over my expression. "It's all just shit, it doesn't matter," I mumbled through my hands.

"Clearly it doesn't matter to you at all."

He brought me some water after a while.

"You can't control people, Cyril, not really. As much as I want to shape students, or guide them, or influence them, it really has to come from their end. You say what you have to say, do everything you can do, and then you have to just stand back and let them go. That's all you can do."

"Dick, I could have done more. If I could have been honest with them, I might have got them out –"

"Could you have done that, though? Told them the truth?"

"I don't know, maybe not."

"All right, then you did what you could. Now you just have to let it go."

"How the hell do I do that?"

"Ah, you never let anything go, do you?"

I laughed, it was all so hopeless. "God, I can't even sodding control *myself*!"

"It's all right –"

"No, it's *not*, if things are out of my control it's dangerous, it's very dangerous!"

"Cyril, things *are* out of your control. You can't control everything, it's not possible."

"I have to try –"

"You're just setting yourself up for, well, for *this*. Just let it go. Just *try* to let it go."

"Dick –"

"Are you in danger here? Right now? Well?"

"Not that I *know* of."

He smiled. "Isn't that as good as it gets? This might be your best chance ever to let everything be out of your control. I suggest you take advantage of it."

I didn't like his suggestion, but the truth was as much as I wanted to fight it, I didn't have much choice; I was falling apart. When

Dick stepped out, to, as he put it, “let the RAs know how overjoyed you are and tell them to go on celebrating without us,” the release of being alone made me weep helplessly. I wasn’t sure exactly what I was weeping for. All of them who were lost, my former friends, myself, or the pile of shit that was the past twenty years.

When Dick came back about a half-hour later, he gave me a pat on the back and said, “good, good,” as if he had been just waiting and hoping for me to have a good sob. Even my mortification couldn’t make me stop.

“Here.” He poured me a glass of champagne from a half-full bottle he had brought in with him. “I had to fight this away from Zosimos; we may as well put it to use.”

Several glasses later, Dick had transfigured the couch flat. The alcohol on top of the calming draught was hitting me hard. I didn’t resist the suggestion and stretched out on the couch. He was sitting at his desk, reading over the award letter and smiling to himself when I fell asleep.

I woke the next morning with a bit of a head. Not too bad, just enough to make me groan and reach for the water on the side table. Dick must have left that for me.

I felt better once I washed my face in the lav. The letters from Basel were still on his desk. I returned the couch to its original shape, then sat with the letter and the certificate. I read them several times. It was true, it was really true.

Dick was making coffee in the conference room when I emerged. I got a large cup and sat with the papers in front of me.

“Had a chance to look those over?”

Were we ignoring last night? *Good.* “Yes.”

“It looks like it hasn’t quite sunk in. Well, this won’t help at all. This is the acceptance form we need to return.”

He showed me another paper with the award money listed. It was a lot. I blinked at it. Fifteen thousand galleons. After the lab’s cut it would be nine thousand. I could live on that for years.

“What did I say before? Once the licensing comes in, you’ll be set for life.” *Dear lord.*

“In terms of the lab’s cut, I’d say it’s the equivalent of about fifteen private donors. I’m very sorry to inform you that this will count against your total score.” He had pulled out his tally of who had driven off donors. He was scratching out my single check mark and replacing it with a ‘-14.’ “I’m afraid this puts you very far behind.”

I covered my face with my hands and laughed. Completely impossible.

“Don’t worry,” Dick went on, “Brazil will take its cut too. You can meet with my accountant if you’d like.” I nodded vaguely, staring at the award letter. Would there be greater scrutiny on my IDs and papers now? How could I manage it?

“Now, it’s still over a month off, but you might start thinking about your acceptance speech.”

“No, Dick, it’s not possible.”

“But surely – ”

“Absolutely not. There’s already been one attempt on my life. I won’t subject myself to possible recognition.”

Dick sighed. “Have you thought about a temporary disguise? I just think it would be a great shame for you to miss this opportunity after all the work you’ve put in. The Paracelsus Prize dinner doesn’t come along every day.”

“No, I can’t. You go and accept for the lab. Take Grossman. Leave me out of it.”

“I won’t push, but don’t decide this minute. Just think it over.”

I shook my head at him. My mind was made up.

“Let’s meet again in a few days. We can talk about accounts and so on. Just let it sink in for a bit, yes?”

We agreed on an appointment for the following week, though I was sure my mind wouldn’t change.



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Art by Mottsnave

DEPARTURE

We met before the week was out. Dick came to me in my office after lab on Friday. There was a polite tap on my door and he leaned in. “Do you have a few minutes?” He took the seat opposite my desk.

“I mentioned to Ben that he might have the chance to attend the Paracelsus award ceremony. He was excited about the possibility.” I tried not to imagine that.

“We had several things to discuss, but perhaps most importantly, he told me that he knows about you.”

That I wouldn’t attend the ceremony? I hadn’t discussed that with everyone but Dick, though Grossman might have guessed from my reaction to his mention of ‘acceptance speeches.’

I must have looked blank. He went on, “he knows who you are.”

“What?” I heard myself say. I wasn’t sure where my stomach was located at the moment. Had he been investigating me? Checking on my shoddy references? Listening in on my conversations with Dick?

Dick read my look. “He wasn’t trying to find out, but when Canutsipem was talking to you about your scar being snakebite, he just realized it. Look, back when your, uh, death came out in the papers, I was shocked. Ben saw me very upset, and I told him that I knew you and that we had corresponded for years. When you showed up a few months later he might have had a vague suspicion, but with the snakebite? Well.”

Damn it all. I couldn’t even be angry at Dick. He had thought me dead at the time, so why shouldn’t he tell Grossman about me? I couldn’t be angry at Grossman, more was the pity. No, I could only be angry with myself. I was the one who reached out to someone who knew my past and my name. Of course the secret wouldn’t

Chapter 36 of **THE NEW SKIN**
by Mottsnave

Original publication:
TALLER TALES MAGAZINE

VOLUME 43, No.2

IMBOLC 2006

hold. I had been a fool to think it could. I must have been going off the rails to write to Dick. Still, as idiotic as it was, where would I be now if I hadn't? On the run, or more likely, in the belly of the skin. Even if the letter had been ill-advised, I had needed to get out.

"He doesn't want to compromise you or make you feel at risk in any way. He says he's willing to enter a Good Faith or a vow if you want."

I should have jumped at the offer, I supposed, but somehow the thought of entering into another vow left me feeling exhausted and a bit ill. I shook my head.

"He won't say your name. I know you two don't always get along, which is why he asked me to, uh, translate for him again, but you can trust him. I've known him for years. He respects you a great deal and he wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

He was probably right. I couldn't imagine Grossman vengefully exposing me.

"I can't stay, Dick. I have to get out." I hadn't planned the words, but once they were out, I knew I was right. It wasn't just Grossman. If my article in POTIONS MONTHLY had been nothing more than that, an obscure article in a research journal, that would have been acceptable. But the Paracelsus Prize was news. Aberforth knew the name Cyril Ramson; if he heard of the award and my name together with Stoltz Research Labs, he would have my location. I had to get out.

Dick sighed. "I can't exactly say that I'm surprised. I am sorry though. I'd ask you to think it over if I didn't know you better than that." He sat in silence for a moment. I wondered if he was thinking of some consequence for my breaking the year-contract.

"You know, when I was younger, I used to spend years out there," he waved vaguely at the jungle beyond the lab grounds. "The hardest part always was coming back. One of my donors would usually want to throw me some awful dinner party as soon as I stepped out of the trees." He laughed. "I think they assumed I must be starved for company. Anyway, it was always torture. Sitting still in some elegant dining room, trying to keep track of all the conversations bouncing off the walls, smiling polite people all around. And their questions! 'What was it like, Dr. Stoltz?' 'How wonderful that you

can teach the Indians!' 'Aren't you glad to be back to civilization?' I never knew what to say. I'd escape as soon as I could and find some pocket of forest to explore, or lock myself away somewhere alone and label samples for weeks on end until I could finally bear to be around other people. Sometimes it just took a week, sometimes it took almost a month.

"You've been in your own kind of jungle for years, Cyril. Not as nice and peaceful as mine. Whatever you need to do now, to bring yourself back, I think you should do it. Even if it means not being around other people for a while. What will you do?"

"I don't know, Dick."

"Do you want my contacts in Chicago? Or you could use my apartment in Arkham if you like; I'm not there very often."

"I think I need to find my own place." I remembered looking at my map when I was on the run from the skin and seeing the vastness of the country in front of me. I had to be able to find a safe place somewhere.

"Well, do you want to keep working on the repeat process?"

I stared at him. "I *can't* stay here, I – "

"So? I don't see why you can't work on it remotely. If you want to break your contract, we'll have to talk about it, but I don't see any reason we couldn't bend it a bit, if we both agree on the changes. You can go on leave until you're settled, and then work remotely. Come up with proposals and variants, and we'll do the testing here.

I nodded slowly.

"I *want* you to keep working for me Cyril. What I *don't* want..." He sighed again. "I don't want you to disappear. I'm going to ask you to stay in contact with me. You don't have to tell me where you are, but it's always a bad sign when you cut off contact. I don't want you to do that again. I need to hear from you sometimes. Just to know you're alive."

I didn't want to look at him.

"Will you do that? I don't want to go through another year like last year. Please, Cyril."

"All right."

He smiled. "Letters. We *will* have our letters again." He held out his hand and we shook on it.

There was paperwork, piles of it. There was the receipt of the Paracelsus prize, setting up an account and filling out impossible tax forms in Portuguese, and adjusting my contract with Dick. It all left me with a headache and little brainpower left to work on the repeating element, but it hardly mattered. I was fairly convinced that I was on the wrong track and I would have to rethink my whole approach. Perhaps a break would be good after all, until I could think of a new direction.

My decision was reinforced by the interview requests that began to trickle in to the lab from various research journals. I had Dick turn them down on my behalf, but I knew reporters. It was only a matter of time before someone decided to turn up unannounced and try their luck. I stepped up my plans to leave.

I made my announcement in lab the next afternoon. {"This avenue of approach on a repeating element is a dead-end. Beginning at the end of next week, I will be taking a leave to examine other possibilities."} There was silence.

{"You're leaving?"}

{"That is what I just said, Miss Hilberto."}

Even Park seemed unexcited, for once. Grossman had a guilty look. Good.

{"You couldn't work on it here?"} he asked.

{"No. Don't look so worried. You'll all have your recommendations before the end of the program."}

That ended discussion, or so I thought, until Dick found me a day later and told me that the RAs were planning a 'surprise' going away party.

"I thought it would be better not to be a real surprise. Not after last time."

"Dick, I don't want it."

"It's not *my* plan. If you really don't want it, you'll have to tell them."

Somehow, though, when they all filed into lab the next day sharing secret smiles amongst themselves, I couldn't. Well, it would have been betraying Dick's confidence, for one thing. I lasted out three days. Finally I couldn't stand their looks anymore and snapped: "whatever you're going to do, just do it!"

"Uh.... What do you mean?" said Grossman, doing a terrible job of trying to look innocent. I just glared at him.

The next day, they sprung their 'surprise.' I allowed myself to be dragged into the lounge room during break. There was a paper BEST WISHES banner, a spread of food and drink that looked fairly decent, and a thankfully small group of people. Aside from my own RAs, there was Dick, Henrique and Uli. I wondered if Dick had a hand in limiting the guest list.

"Uh, surprise?" said Grossman.

"Quite."

He laughed and poured me a glass of champagne. Maybe I could manage to hold on to this one. The others already had their glasses.

"On behalf of your RAs," began Grossman officially, "we're very sorry that your experiment didn't achieve anything of importance. Nevertheless, we think this is offset by the relaxed and friendly working environment – "

"Shut up, Grossman."

"– so what we're trying to say is: you should have some food and drinks and open some presents." *Presents?*

Glasses were clinked all around and a mercifully small pile of wrapped parcels appeared. I would just have to get it over with.

The first was a joint gift of two books from Paola and Mata, a new edition of Frazier's *THEORY OF MAGIC*, revised and expanded by Campbell, and the controversial new work by Gently, *HOLISTIC MAGIC THEORY*, that attempted to link quantum string theory to the working of magic.

{"Have you read this?"} asked Paola.

{"No, I haven't had a chance."} I had been a bit preoccupied last year when it was released. I did remember hearing reports of the Academie de Belfort burning it in protest. I didn't know if it had any merit, but it would probably be entertaining at the very least.

I was stopped from flipping over the cover to take a look by Mata pressing a very small parcel on me. {"It's nothing,"} He said. It really wasn't; it was an empty cigarette packet. {"Done, poof, gone."}

There was nothing to say to that but {"thank you."}

Park's gift was next, a flat wooden box stamped with the word

PULLMAN. It wasn't possible... but there they were, five Pullman knives. There was a Subtle, an Allegorical, an Ambiguous, a Double-Entendre, and an Explicit. They were the very best. Shit, it must have cost him a fortune.

I had to thank him, but he beat me to it, bobbing his head with a huge grin on his face; "thank you, yes, thank you!"

"Damn it," said Grossman, "mine's crap compared to that."

"I would expect nothing else, Grossman."

His soft parcel revealed a black shirt. I lifted it up. It was stamped NORTH COAST BREWING COMPANY OLD RASPUTIN RUSSIAN IMPERIAL STOUT. In the center of the shirt was a reproduction of the famous muggle photo of the mad monk himself in the middle of casting legilimency. Shit.

"There's something on the back..."

I turned the shirt around to read NEVER SAY DIE in large letters. I was going to have to kill him.

Fortunately for Grossman, a clanging erupted from the lab grounds.

"The sock wards!" said Dick.

"The what?" asked Grossman.

Dick and I looked at each other. The skin was gone, so what could be disturbing our sock traps?

"I'll go take a look," said Dick, "you stay here."

"No," I said.

He sighed and we both went out the side door to the lab grounds. The rest trooped after us. We saw the intruder as we hurried around the back of the lab building. It was a diminutive man dressed in khakis with innumerable pockets and wearing a pith helmet. His face was dominated by a long red nose and flowing white moustaches. He was waving one of my socks at the rustling undergrowth.

"Ezra?" called Dick.

"What?" I said.

"That's Professor Wormburg, the old head of the magical creatures division, he's been out on an expedition," said Grossman. "He's got a... he's got... it's..."

I looked back to see what could have finally shut up Grossman. A head the size of a wheelbarrow had emerged from the trees, followed by a long sinuous body. Its eyes were like polished marble. Huge tusks curved out of its mouth like obsidian sacrificial knives. Its scales looked like gold and turquoise one second, then became as misty and changeable as a rainbow. A crest of emerald feathers rose on its head, sending up sparks of electricity. As it swam through the air, it made a noise like a five-hundred pan-pipe orchestra battling a rabid llama.

Professor Wormburg tossed it my sock, which it snapped out of the air and swallowed in one.

"Dick, I appear to have run out of snacks. Do you have any tasty tidbits handy?" called the professor.

"*Anguista pinnata*," muttered Dick. The feathered serpent of the Amazon, of course, he found it after all. It flew in a spiral, a figure-eight, and a complicated pattern of a circular calendar foretelling the end of the world.

"I believe he's still a bit peckish," called the professor.

It was mesmerizing. I forced my eyes away. Henrique was spinning with delight, his wandering spider swaying on top of his fez. The RAs were looking at the serpent in wonder. {"He's beautiful,"} said Paola.

"Dick?" said the professor.

"Ah, there's a spread in the lounge," began Dick, finally getting hold of himself.

It was too late. The serpent had decided to find his own food. His feathers puffed and settled, releasing clouds of mist that rose into the trees. He reared up out of his spiraling dance and launched an elegant swooping dive.

"No, you don't want to eat that!" yelled Grossman. The serpent ignored him, as should any intelligent beast. Its head hit the piranha pool in a plume of water, and there was a brief final crunching.

The serpent pulled itself into a contented coil over the empty pool. It made a noise like a mariachi band falling down the steps of Chichen Itza. It opened its mouth and a cascade of sparks emerged,

followed by a cloud of mist smelling of ozone, chocolate, cinnamon, and ghost peppers. {"Spicy!"} said Mata. It settled its head with a purring rumble.

"But, but..." stammered Grossman, "the piranhas, they'll eat him from the inside!"

"Oh, no," said Henrique calmly. "He will not be harmed. He is a god."*

The serpent seemed to agree by lazily waving its plumed tail and summoning a small raincloud to pour water over itself, the grounds, and us, of course.

We pressed around the wrecked fence of the former piranha pool. {"So beautiful,"} said Paola. She couldn't resist touching a scale through the mesh, even though she got a sharp shock in return.

"You said you have some snacks?" said Wormburg. "If you don't mind, I think I should gather them now for when he wakes up."

We all sloshed back to the lounge. Wormburg claimed all the sausages and cold cuts for his charge, while we ate the cheese and fruit that was left. All the attention was on Wormburg now, which was a relief. Dick was asking about his partner on the expedition, Mr. Flanders.

"Oh, we ran into his Lost City of the Crystal Skull. Yes, very interesting place. It had the most fascinating poison frogs. Well, Mr. Flanders was going to go on with me, but then he discovered a doorway to another plane of consciousness in the Temple of the Moon."

"He took it, and didn't come out again?"

"Oh, not to worry. He popped his head back out to go on without him, that the plane of consciousness would let him back out at Berkeley."

Grossman snorted. "Of course it would."

"Well, I ran into that beauty three months later and started to bring it back, but my supplies finally ran out when we reached the Rio Negro. Just made it back in time to bring him in."

I wasn't sure that 'bring him in' was the best description. If anything, the serpent was deigning to grace us with his presence. At least until the snacks ran out.

Wormburg was ready to go back out with his sausages, and the rest crowded after him. Uli pulled me aside from the rush.

* The feathered serpent who appears in this chapter is not the great Quetzalcoatl himself, of course, but a distant cousin.

"I have nothing for you but my best wishes. So! I give you good luck and the best of everything." She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and followed the others out. Well, very interesting. I followed after.

In the short time we had been gone, the raincloud had dumped enough water to create a small lake between the lab building and the greenhouses. The serpent was awake and, well, playing. It romped in the water, plunging in and out in graceful arcs, shooting up suddenly to snap at passing birds, and dragging its tail to send up plumes of spray.

Across the lake, some shapes were emerging from the arid house: Professor Aruego and the herbology RAs. Professor Aruego was swinging her cane in the air and the RAs were waving across at us. On our side of the lake, Valeria and the alchemy section had appeared from somewhere. Treehorn helped himself to a sausage.

"Hey hands off!" said Wormburg. It didn't seem to matter; the serpent wasn't interested, no matter how much Wormburg waved his sausages in the air. Finally he gave up and we turned it into a picnic on the wet grass, eating the sausages and drinking champagne while we watched the serpent frolic. Park clapped and cheered at every leap, soon joined by the other RAs.

When the setting sun turned the raincloud pink, the serpent began to circle in the water, faster and faster, spiraling towards the center of the pool. When it reached the center, with nowhere else to go, it started up, whirling like a tornado, silvery and sparkling, the water following in a huge waterspout. The cloud above it was whirling too, growing enormously tall and lit crimson by the sun. The serpent disappeared into the cloud with a flash of heat lightning and the sound of crashing brass gongs and a gamelan orchestra going up in flames, followed by a happy purring rumble.

We sat in stunned silence as the cloud broke apart in shreds to show nothing but empty sky and glorious sunset. What had been a lake in front of us was now a muddy waste. The herbology RAs were picking their way across to join us on the lab side.

{"Just look at our test plots!"} said Professor Aruego angrily.

{"We'll replant, Bruna, that's all,"} said Dick. Wormburg was still looking up at the sky, lost. Dick addressed him: "so, we'll be seeing

a groundbreaking monograph in a few months?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" he said, coming back to the present.

The RAs were chatting excitedly and casting drying charms on each other as we trickled back into the lounge. I was subdued. I couldn't quite imagine another day here going through the motions, not after that.

Dick and Professor Wormburg disappeared into his office. I went back to my flat, well, Wormburg's flat really, and packed. A couple of hours later, everything shrunken and stowed in my bag, I knocked on Dick's office door.

When he opened it, breath smelling of cachaca, I could hardly recognize the place. Crates, boxes and muddy bags covered the floor. Photos of the feathered serpent and myriad other fantastic creatures were spread across the desk and stuck haphazardly to the walls. Professor Wormburg was there, carefully separating the pages of a sodden field journal, his pink scalp shining under Dick's desk lamp.

"Cyril, come in! Ezra is just getting sorted out."

"I see."

"Drink?"

"No, thank you. The flat is cleared."

"What? Have a seat." He moved a crate of plaster-cast animal tracks to the floor so I had a place to sit.

"Professor Wormburg's flat is cleared," I said again.

Professor Wormburg noted me for the first time. "Oh, now, I didn't mean to shove you out!"

Dick chimed in: "Cyril, don't be ridiculous. Ezra will be staying here. He's taking the couch until he can make other arrangements. That flat is yours."

"No, it's time for me to go. Come on, Dick, you couldn't top that send-off."

He sighed. "Why don't you use my flat in Arkham for a few days until you know where you're headed?"

"Dick..."

"All right. I don't like to think of you heading out with no place to go, that's all."

Professor Wormburg butted in. "You don't have a place to stay? I

can't push you out on the streets!"

"Ezra, if he won't listen to me –"

"He won't?" I wished they wouldn't talk about me as if I weren't there. "Then he can take my tent, at least." He addressed me, finally: "listen, it's already packed, it's in *fairly* good condition, weather-proof. No, I insist." He pushed a shrink-sack bundle into my hand. "It's self-pitching. You'll see; goes up in a snap." Dear lord, was I really going to be camping after all?

"Yes, Ezra, good idea. Take it, Cyril." I took it. It wouldn't hurt to have it, just as a backup. I didn't know where I was going, after all; I only knew that I had to get out.

"Dick –"

"You're going, fine, I can see that." He came around the desk and grabbed my hand.

"I'm serious about that promise, Cyril. Letters, I *will* have your letters."

"You'll have them." We shook on it. Dick hung on to my hand a moment longer.

"Best of everything. Take care of yourself, and whenever you're ready, you know you have a position here." I nodded and he gave my hand a final shake.

The vanishing cabinet loomed in front of me. I stepped in and closed myself into the darkness.

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*Story and illustrations were written and drawn by
Mottsnave. Cover illo by Mottsnave.*

*Typesetting, advertising graphics, and publication
design were done by Red Hen in Adobe InDesign,
Adobe Illustrator, and Adobe Photoshop. Cover scene
was built in the DAZ studio and Adobe Photoshop.*

*Advertising graphics resources are from varying
sources, primarily LiquidLibrary, formerly Dynamic
Graphics, now a property of Getty Images.*

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