

From “Assault on Malstorm Base”

I wish that humans would get over the entire skin thing.

Look, I didn't *kill* anybody for this skin. That's **gross**. The guy it belonged to was dead already when I found him -- and no, I didn't wait until he was dead, or helped him along. And I don't care what you've heard; I didn't *eat* him, either. Yes, I 'ate' his actual skin. That's different. I can't wear his skin unless I ingest it. This is just, what's the Ancient word? Right. *Biology*. This is all biology. He didn't need it anymore and I did. But that was about ten years or so ago, so it was starting to get a little ragged, and I needed to switch it out with some other skin. Which is why I was sitting in a half-mouldering Old Vegas bar that boasts that it's been in operation since before the fall of the USA. Judging from the taste of the peanuts, I half believed it.

The meet wasn't supposed to be for another fifteen minutes, but I check out a place before I settle down to wait in it. This one was pretty standard; cheap beer, cheaper seats, just enough light to keep a human from stepping into something. The air was good, because this dive was close to the university and wizards all smoke like

chimneys, and the beer wouldn't have been too awful if I had actually been drinking any. Can't drink or eat much in public, though. I'm a skin-stealer, not a tongue-stealer, and it's always a risk when I show too much of my mouth.

The wizard thought that she had snuck in, and I let her keep thinking that. All part of getting along in the world, right? Let her think that she had gotten one over on the snake-man, and maybe that would help me at some point later. So I made sure to start slightly when she dropped the glamour and sat down opposite me in one smooth motion.

"Mister Smith, I believe?" she said. "Nice suit." Which is true; it was.

I nodded back, "Professor Thackeray." It's weird, talking to humans -- or this case, elves. They can't smell what you're feeling, so you have to over-enunciate the words sometimes. It's tricky. "I trust that your day is going well." Wait, that should have been a question; oh, well, too late now.

She raised an eyebrow. "Reasonably well. Thanks for asking."

“You are welcome.” *Please, please, no more small talk*, I tried to project into her mind. Not that I can, but you never know.

Maybe I did; or maybe she just didn’t like talking to somebody from my species. She politely enough pushed over a small cloth bag; I looked into it, saw the key inside, and put it back on the table. From my own feet I brought up a genuine replica reproduction of an Old American briefcase, and slid it over the table. Thackeray looked at me before opening it; at my gesture she popped the latches and started looking at the scrolls found inside.

After a few moments, Thackeray looked up. “The contract said five scrolls. You’ve got seven in here.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “The sixth scroll appears to be an index of the first five, and the seventh is some sort of commentary on how the spells operate under real life conditions. They were clearly part of the grimoire that you contracted me to find.”

“No extra charge for them?”

“I would not object to a bonus, but the extra two scrolls are useless to me and I have no interest in a conflict with your

University. Simply keep this in mind the next time I contract with you and that will be sufficient.” And if the University of Old Vegas didn’t keep it in mind on their own, I absolutely would do it for them.

Thackeray smiled. “Won’t argue with that. Anyway, the key is spell-locked to a chest at the First Bank of Deseret in the Old Strip. It’s paid for indefinitely, so you can pick up your new, ah, *covering* at your convenience.” Thackeray surprised me slightly by standing up and actually offering her hand. “Pleasure doing business with you, Mister Smith.”

I stood as well. “And the same to you, Professor Thackeray. I hope those grimoires prove enlightening.”

“Or at least good for explaining how to counter Dominion scorched earth spells.”

“Of course.”

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When you wear sunglasses everywhere and everywhen you don’t need to worry if it’s too bright outside. And Old Old Vegas may not be pretty, but it’s always definitely

damned bright out. The desert wants this town back; you can hear the nature spirits still mutter about it and the ancient dam, down the road. Makes you wonder how anybody sensitive could hear himself think, but I wasn't staying. I had a hot date with a chest full of new, guaranteed ethically harvested, human skin, and then I could get back to underground spelunking for fun and hefty profit.

They let me get to the bank, at least. I'll give the Mormons that. The bastards grabbed me as smooth as silk, too: I was let into a private room, the chest was brought to me with no problems, and the security people came in just as I was digesting the new skin and dealing with the torpor. One sticky rune slapped on my wrist later, and it was all "He's fainted! Clear the way! Get him onto the carpet!" Then, after a couple of blocks, the carpet stopped being an ambulance and started being a paddy wagon, all the way up to the Fort.

I didn't even get a headache from the sticky rune, once I fully came to in the spare, but clean room. The room even had a fruit basket on the table -- and no knob on the door. Which was either good, or bad. Good, because if they cared about how I was feeling then they wanted

something from me. And bad, for the exact same reason. But if they were playing it civilized, then I would, too.

That didn't stop me from being pissed, though. All the lawbreaking I had committed here had been technicalities; I hadn't done anything **bad**. Humans might disagree about the skin-eating, but again: dammit, I didn't *kill* the original owner for it. If the University did, it was all on them.

My grumbling was interrupted by a knock on the door. **Mormons**. Of *course* there was a knock. I carefully squared myself up, took a deep breath, and said "Come in."

The guy who came in wore a Legion uniform, but his body language yelled 'spook.' His eyes were impressively open and friendly, too: as a long imitator of human expressions I was legitimately impressed. Even I wasn't entirely sure that it was faked.

The -- spy's? Secret policeman's? -- affectation of courtesy didn't extend to waiting to be invited to sit; he took the chair opposite the table from mine, straightened a folder or two, and waited, faint smile on his face and hands where I could see them. I shrugged, leaned back in my chair, and grabbed an apple.

The loud crunch seemed to almost reverberate across the room, and I suddenly regretted the gesture of mild defiance. I wasn't going to win a dominance fight with the duly appointed representative of a powerful theocracy, however polite and neighborly that theocracy tended to be. So I sighed, put down the apple, and extended my hand. "John Smith. What do you want with me?"

The man who would become my team leader smiled further and took my hand readily enough. "Ezekiel Oldbridge. We want to hire your field expertise, of course. Quietly."

"An ambulance out of a bank is quiet?"

"It can be. Once the person on it changes his face, of course."

Ah. "Where is the job?" Ezekiel flipped open the first folder. I looked down, and whistled. I don't, usually, but this skin was getting retired anyway. "Deseret is getting ambitious." I looked up. "Do you know how dangerous those things are? Even after a thousand years? **Especially** after a thousand years?"

“You recognize them, then.”

“Of course I recognize them! Everybody in my line of work recognizes them! Only a madman would want anything to with them.” And that’s when the breath caught in my throat. “Madmen, or the truly desperate.”

I sat down, heavily. “Are we really winning the War, then?”

Ezekiel nodded, although normally you would expect news that good to present a more joyful face. “We really are. The Alliance just took the rest of what was left of Dominion territory in the west. The front’s stabilized on the Missouri River itself. I’m telling you this because you’ve just joined up, right?” At my hasty -- and legally geasing nod -- he continued, “Two years, at this point. Maybe one. Then it’s over. We’ll finally have wiped the Universal Dominion off the face of the earth.”

Ezekiel tapped the folder. “Assuming that they don’t decide to try to do the same to us first. And these things are the only way they can hope to do that.”

I looked again at the name on the site. ‘Malstorm.’ A name that featured in some of the most lurid legends of my profession. Nobody knew anybody who had ever been

there; but everybody knew somebody who knew somebody who had been dragged there, and never came back. “I will go, of course. But only to destroy what is there. We will take nothing out of Malstorm Base. Not even a button for a souvenir.”

This brought back the smile from Ezekiel. “It is so nice to deal with people who don’t need things explained to them,” he murmured.

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Colonel Martha Schaffer, unlike Ezekiel, clearly *was* an officer of the Nauvoo Legion; and, judging by the mordant relish with which she opened up the maps, she was actually looking forward to traipsing north to meddle with tainted Ancient super-weapons. I would have shook my head, except that I had the same disease. There’s just something about mucking around with things that smart people leave alone.

The colonel looked sensible enough, otherwise. Her fingers served as a pointer as she noted details on the map. “Malstorm Base. Called by a slightly different name before the Discovery, of course. Bardic legend has it that it was where the Ancient Americans stored their I-C-B-Ms,

with great protections and wards against allowing such fell weapons to be lightly used. Or used at all.”

I raised my hand, politely. “Bardic legend?” I wasn’t sure how Schaffer would react to that, but she actually smiled.

“Yes! The descendants of the soldiers were still there when the Universal Dominion conquered the region. They fought well enough in the base’s defense that the Dominion gave them a chance to retreat; and for a wonder, they were allowed to trek south in peace. Their tribe eventually ended up settling in Old Vegas, in fact. There is an excellent set of murals in their tribal hangars describing the journey: photos of them are included in the appendix to the briefing materials.”

Ezekiel coughed, once. Schaffer nodded in response to the tacit reminder and moved on. “Yes. The Dominion occupied the base, renamed it, and used it during the Occupation as a punishment camp. Usually lethal, for the prisoners -- and sometimes for the guards. They delved deep, in those days, and placed whatever Ancient weapons they could find in the stygian depths.” Apparently Colonel Schaffer had a literary streak in her. Well, there were worse habits to have in one’s teammates.

“Do we know why they didn’t destroy the foul things?” That was from my old friend Professor Melissa Thackeray: I was utterly unsurprised to discover that she was in on this mission as our magical field advisor. No point to spreading around this particular knowledge, after all.

Schaffer shrugged. “The Dominion is easily arrogant enough to think that they could master these weapons, at some point. Or they were worried that the spirits that have accumulated around the I-C-B-Ms over the centuries might prove difficult, if suddenly deprived of their homes. Or they had some other inexplicable Dominion reason -- yes, Mr. Smith?”

I had raised my hand again. “There are mundane reasons, too. Icies -- I-C-B-Ms -- give off what the engineers call ‘radiation.’ Some radiation is bad right away, some of it is bad later, some of it will kill you on the spot. My, ah, *people* can see it sometimes. A little. Enough to know when to stay away. Which will hopefully help us when we are scouring Malstorm.”

Schaffer nodded pleasantly, made a note, and went back to her map. “Now, we didn’t take Malstorm itself until ‘49; the actual capture was done by Dwarvenwood troops, and when the ‘wood realized what was there it quietly sent

word to Deseret for help. We've been occupying it as part of a joint military operation for the last four years. By all accounts, it's been quiet there. I'll let him" -- she cocked her head at Ezekiel -- "explain why."

Ezekiel moved smoothly into the presentation. "We have *not* brought Malstorm to the attention of the Grand Alliance military. The place is a security man's nightmare: it's out in the middle of nowhere, and is filled with highly dangerous, demon-haunted cursed artifacts that are also poisonous. The fewer people who know about this place, the better.

"The problem is that even though the Grand Alliance doesn't know much about Malstorm, the Dominion remembers it. There have been credible reports that a few of their more radical mages are making their way west and hoping for a miracle. Or an atrocity. The Dominion's leadership knows that they're losing this war. Some of them are ready to burn down the world on their way to Hell."

Melissa Thackeray asked the question that I was about to. "Why aren't we already there with another full regiment, then?" Schaffer looked unhappy.

“We don’t have one. The Dominion’s at the breaking point; the Alliance has begged, borrowed, stolen, and in one case conjured every available organized fighting force on the continent. Which does not include the troops now at Malstorm Base; neither we nor the Dwarvenwood have let them get grabbed for the new offensive. We can send in a team of experts to direct the troops already there, and that will have to do.

Schaffer flipped open another folder. “Between us and the Dwarves, we’ve already got two hundred people on the base. That includes combat soldiers, engineers, a couple of healers, three mages for keeping an eye on the curses, and a sapper company. They’re none of them frontline Alliance strike teams, but from the reports they’re solid enough. They’ve had a couple of minor crises on the site, have handled them, have not needed anything extra. They should be able to support us in our various roles.”

Speaking of roles: I looked around. Ezekiel for skullduggery; Schaffer for killing people and breaking stuff; Professor Thackeray for general magic; me for digging, assessing, analyzing, and setting explosives -- “Where’s the cleric?”

The others at the briefing -- all Mormons, of course -- set their mouths. I debated taking off my glasses so that they could see me blink. Believe me, when somebody from my people does that, it means something. "We will have to have a cleric for this. We will need somebody who can do exorcisms, at the bare minimum. Faith healing would be a distinct advantage to also have, yes -- but these are literally demonically possessed weapons. They must be neutralized by someone with the spiritual authority to do that."

Ezekiel's tone was careful. "Our faith has a somewhat diffuse definition of clergy. Strictly speaking, I myself am a priest. I know the basic principles of exorcism, of course."

I looked at him. "Can you banish a demon in less than three seconds?" He opened his mouth. "Without using a firearm," I added.

Ezekiel stopped, and shook his head ruefully. "No," he admitted.

"Then we need the services of someone who can. Surely you have clergy who specialize in this."

“We do,” conceded Ezekiel. “But they tend to be a bit idiosyncratic. And, more importantly, *old*. There aren’t many that are useful, not a security risk, and physically capable of making the trip north.”

“Which suggests, then, that there are **some**?”

“Well, there is **one**. Roger Newell.”

“So what is the problem *there*?”

Ezekiel spread his hands. “He’s engaged to Arcadia Young. Who is one of the President’s daughters.”

“So he will not want to go?”

“Oh, he’d be eager to go,” interjected Schaffer. “Newell’s family was hardcore Resistance during the Occupation; one of his ancestors was the only child to survive the Dominion’s Slaughter of the Innocents, back in 2770. I’m sure that Newell would consider it a moral obligation to go. But his fiance will not be reasonable about this. At all.”

I stopped and thought. “Is there any way to convince this princess otherwise?” I noticed with some amusement that neither Ezekiel nor Schaffer protested the ‘princess’

moniker, although Thackerley looked faintly scandalized. But Ezekiel still shook his head.

“Sorry, no.”

I chuckled. “Then do not convince her. We just take this Newell priest along with us anyway. Somebody can approach him, convince him to join us, and then we go. He can make his apologies to her afterwards, when we are back and he is a hero. Princesses like heroes.”

Professor Thackerley shook her head. “The problem is, *Miss Young*” -- the emphasis directed at me, of course; and deservedly so, to be sure -- “is not cleared for this mission. If we walk in and take her fiance, she won’t take ‘Don’t worry about it’ for an answer, and then security goes to Hell.”

Both Schaffer and Ezekiel chuckled at that. “Who said anything about taking Roger?” asked Ezekiel. “If he ends up wanting to go, we’ll just **steal** him. Much less fuss and muss that way.” He thought for a moment. “Well, except for Roger. But Mr. Smith is right: princesses love heroes. She’ll get over it.”

“You hope,” muttered Schaffer.

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