

Homefront 1: Burning Bridges

November 5, 2005 (Boston) Accents were present where appropriate, God help us all.

It had been two weeks since the massive time/space shift Gretchen inflicted had ceased, and in that time the city had suffered a variety of aftereffects. The more mystically attuned citizens had been aware of what happened to a greater degree than most, leading to an uptick in business for local psychologists. There was the addition of the Revolution's rather impressive new headquarters, a giant high-tech castle that had simply appeared from the wreckage of the old one. The theme villain infestation hadn't gotten any worse, but nor had it improved; people were coming to accept their presence as part of the city's character, and Roy McCoy was certainly easier to live with than stray ogres.

The public had not been told that two members of the Revolution—who must have saved everyone in New England—were still missing. They did know that Phoenix Talon was back in Japan, because they were reading his comic book (the ninjas were a lot better in the book than in real life). Holly Shapiro in particular wanted to know where they were and why they weren't taking care of local problems like they were supposed to.

Out in Chicago, Dr. von Blood, former villain who had very publicly turned to good as the result of a fortunate accident with a mind-control ray, had some rented space outside the city, large enough to maintain his impressive laboratory. November meant cold weather and a few lazy snowflakes drifting downwards. He had been having a hard time finding staff since his conversion to the side of good. His sole minion, a young student named Irwin Piatrowski, came into the lab amid the buzzing of the tesla coils.

"Dr. von Blood? There's someone at the door to see you."

"An enemy come to challenge us?"

"I don't think so, he has a card...." He handed it over. Larry Oliver of K. Robeson Enterprises, with an address in Allston, Massachusetts? The only one he knew by that name was an old theme villain, the Muse.

"Show him in, Irwin."

Irwin left and came back with an older man who moved with the energy of a young one. "Cornelius, how are you?" Larry extended a hand, smiling. "Larry Oliver."

"Good afternoon."

"It's been some time," he acknowledged, and got right to the point. "I've heard through the grapevine and of course seen some of the speeches that you've given on television, that you've... shifted from one side of the legal spectrum to the other?"

"Yes, that whole New Years Eve brain reversal thing."

"Still comfortable with that?"

"Migraines from time to time, but nothing a bottle of Excedrin won't fix. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"In a curious set of circumstances, I find myself on the same side of the law," Larry explained. "A rather nice young gentleman up in Boston, who is currently heading up their superhero team. They've been going through some challenges lately, as you might be aware, but earlier in the year he approached myself, Sphinx, a few other of the old veterans, and asked us to start investigating things that people didn't want found out. It's a sideline for those of us who are retired, and I've found that I rather enjoy it."

"What sorts of things?"

"Criminal enterprises, the existence of the World Crime League, I keep trying to determine whether the abominable snowman really exists..."

"Terrifying secrets that underlie reality?"

"More conspiracies that the world would rather not have unraveled."

"I see," he nodded.

"We try and avoid anything that leads to tentacular horror."

"Always good advice."

"But," he went on, "you may have been aware of the force field surrounding New England a couple of weeks ago...."

"Yes, I read about that in *Popular Science*."

"They were, we, all of us, were involved, the Revolution specifically, and I'm afraid that in the aftermath, a couple of members of the Revolution have vanished. We haven't held a funeral for them of course, because there are no bodies," he added. "We know what that means."

"They'll be back. They always come back."

"But, I wanted to extend to you an opportunity. My employer is looking to fill out the ranks of the Revolution with people he thinks have the necessary skills and abilities to see things through."

"Ah, I see!" he said, pleased. "So you're asking for my assistance? Von Blood is at your service."

"Simple as that?"

"Simple as that." Indeed, he had more than once offered his talents to the Justice Defenders, who seemed unaccountably reluctant to accept him.

"I had several more pages of script to run through, but if we're going to cut the scene here..." he gave a bow.

"Ask, and I answer. Of course there may be practical details to iron out."

"You'll be working directly for the Massachusetts as well as for the federal government. So there are going to be some background checks and details, but your recent activities will probably vouch for you rather well."

"I hope so. Would there be the opportunity to continue my research?"

"Entirely. In fact, they have a new, unexplored headquarters full of technology that is barely understood, with a significant amount of empty space in it."

"Splendid! Well, this is a perfect opportunity."

"I have to say that when we started looking at people who might fit the bill, your name was one of the first to come up."

"Well, that's very flattering. I come fairly late in the alphabet," he added.

"Mr. Silver has a rather enthusiastic mindset, and viewpoint that very much believes in the possibility of redemption for those of us who operated on alternate sides of the law. Something I feel the boy is... very much... you have to meet him to properly understand," he decided.

"I look forward to our meeting," Cornelius assured him.

"He has an enthusiasm. But when could you arrange to head out to Boston?" he asked brightly.

"Very nearly a moment's notice."

Larry clapped his hands once, clearly pleased. "Begin packing immediately."

"Irwin! Disassemble the tesla coils!"

"Here's the address," Larry handed him a sheet of letterhead. "I'm afraid I have a plane flight back, and you have a truck to navigate across the country, but I'm grateful for your rapid acceptance. I think it shows the correct spirit in these circumstances."

"I endeavor to do the correct thing," Cornelius replied modestly.

Larry walked away and once outdoors, pulled out a small device and spoke into it. "Target one, acquired."

Over the course of the afternoon various high-tech gizmos were taken apart and packed into a rented truck. A

mob of central European farmers came by with pitchforks and torches, just for old time's sake. He waved at them.

"Nice knowing you!" one shouted back.

* * *

Ashwam Tabor was at a nightclub. He spent most of his free evenings at clubs. Much as he liked going to HBS, he did find himself resenting the demands the program made on its students. So far, tonight, he was striking out, an all-too-common experience, but he was nothing if not determined. The driving beat of the music made the mirrors on the walls shake, and conversation was only possible at very close range.

"Are you not loving Depeche Mode?" he asked the nearest woman, who obviously didn't hear him.

At 11:30, almost time for him to leave and go study, something amazing happened: an attractive woman came over to him.

"Hey, baby! How are you doing?"

She leaned in close. "I'm doing great, and yourself?"

"I'm fantastic!" And slightly drunk.

"You're not from the States, are you?"

"No, I am from proud mother India!"

"So you're actually an Indian, Indian?"

"Yes, the place with the elephants. Want to see my trunk?" He attempted a roguish smile.

She actually smiled back, leaning even closer, with a slightly predatory gleam in her eye. "I don't know if we need to whip the trunk out just yet, but can you trample around the dance floor a little?"

"I can do better than that, baby. Let's go!" He suspected she was looking for someone to go home with, and since she was obviously not Indian and also very attractive, with mid-cut brunette hair and very physically fit, he saw no reason to be suspicious. To hell with studying. He gloried in the uncommon position of having other men glaring, wondering why this woman was gluing herself to *him*.

"So, do you... have your own place?"

"Yes, I do."

"They're gonna be closing down in a little bit... we can pick this up somewhere else?"

"Yes, why don't we go find a taxi..." That wasn't hard, and the ride to his Cambridge apartment passed quickly. They climbed the stairs to the third floor, pausing every now and again. Keys out, door open. She pushed him inside, slammed the door shut and locked it.

"It's just you here, right?"

"Yeah... baby..." This seemed strange suddenly.

"Do you want to see something *really* interesting?" She moved to take off her dress, but rather than skirt she seemed to be grabbing hold of her *skin*, which pulled off entirely. What was revealed was sort of the same size, but he couldn't imagine how she'd hid the wolf snout under the mask....

She tossed the skin aside, growled, and sprang. There was a spiritual as well as physical wrenching sensation as her paws slammed his shoulders down to the floor, her teeth descending to remove both his throat and his soul.

The growl became a startled yelp as the young man expanded massively and grew a trunk and tusks. He tossed his head and she scrambled backwards to avoid his tusks, fell onto the couch, which flipped over, concealing her. He scrambled to his feet and shoved the couch up against the wall, which gave way beneath the enormous force, leaving the couch in the hallway outside.

Something heavy landed on his back, tearing at him with claws and teeth. The elephant skin is too tough for her to inflict any serious damage. He reached back in an awkward overhand blow, but she avoided it, and the

supernatural wrenching sensation came again. The apartment was a shambles from all of the swinging around.

He topped over backwards, attempting to crush her under his great weight. There was a very unpleasant noise, a lack of motion, and the building manager was going to have fits about the carpet...

Ashwam had one of those phones with the really big buttons. He also had the Indian Consulate on speed dial.

"Excuse me, I don't understand, you have a what?" the consulate staffer said.

"There is a werewolf, here in my apartment, it tried to kill me."

"We'll be sending a detail over right away. How did the werewolf get into your apartment?"

"It's a long story." They had warned him about bringing strange women home, but what was he supposed to do? She'd looked American, and he only had to worry about people from back home.

"Would you like us to contact the local authorities?"

"Yes."

In moments, there was a knock on his door. He checked the peephole and saw an older gentleman he had never seen before. Something about him didn't seem quite human, perhaps the manelike hair.

"Mr. Tabor?"

He remained silent, which was difficult as an elephant, but he wasn't about to trust a stranger just now.

Whoever it was moved around to the hole in the wall and pushed the couch out of the way, peering through the hole. "Mr. Tabor, are you in there?"

Ashwam hung back. "Come on if you think you're tough enough!"

"I'm sorry, I seem to have stumbled into something...."

"Are you with her?" He pointed at the corpse. "I made short work of her and I'll make short work of you!"

"Hm, bargest," he identified the body and looked up at Ashwam seriously. "It is your ability to make short work of her that has called you to our attention."

"You're not making much sense here," Ashwam noted.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I go by the *nom de guerre* the Sphinx, and I am an employee of K. Robeson Enterprises, which is run by Scott Silver, who is a member of the Revolution."

"Is this a private or a public corporate?"

"K. Robeson Enterprises is private. The Revolution is of course a government-funded superteam. I'm sure you're familiar with them," he said gravely. "They've saved the world a couple of times."

"Actually, I don't think I am, but go on." He usually stuck to the business section.

"They're located in the city. They're looking for members. You have certain unique capabilities. My employer thought that it might be in everyone's best interest if an offer were extended to you." If Sphinx had his doubts about that, he didn't display them.

"How much money? Would this be an executive position?"

"I can guarantee you that you would be in the top decision-making team. May I come in?"

"You will be pleased to be waiting out in the hall for a few minutes. I am expecting someone."

"The security detail from the Indian Consulate?"

"How did you know that?"

"It's my job to know these things. Everyone has their own..."

"Wiretap?"

"...Parts to play in the organization." He smiled. "I don't need a wiretap, sir. I merely have... experience. I'll give you some time to think about this. Here's our card."

Ashwam gingerly accepted it with his trunk.

"If you'll excuse me."

"Yes, yes, good evening."

Sphinx stepped back with perfect timing; the door to the primary stair opened, revealing the security people and police, one one-hundredth of a second after the other door had closed behind him.

"Mr. Tabor, are you all right?" the policeman called.

"Yes, yes, be coming in, please!" He told them the story, embarrassing though it was.

"We've been trying to figure out what was happening to these guys for a while," the man noted. "I understand from files we got from the Revolution that there were a bunch of things that might still be in the city, some sort of werewolf-vampire cross."

"What is this Revolution thing again?"

The man stared at him. "They're the official Massachusetts superteam. You know, they just saved the city?"

"Oh, I see. I am not reading the papers."

A shrug. "Well in any case... yes. It's a good thing for you that you're an elephant, 'cause otherwise I don't think this would have gone well for you." Boston cops were really hard to phase by this point.

It was dawn by the time it was all done, and he had a group project due that day. *The rest of my team is going to kill me*, he thought dismally, though at least the consulate had been able to get him a place to sleep, and a severe tongue-lashing. *You are not wanting me to get any at all, are you?*

"Target two contacted," Sphinx reported from the shadows. "I'm fairly certain, now that he realizes his vulnerability, he'll be more interested in accepting the offer."

* * *

Amy was at the library looking for information for a paper she needed to write. She liked the BU library, browsing gently through the stacks, listening to the distant hum of traffic and the rustling presence of the other students... her ghostly tutor making acid comments about the fact that *her* book didn't seem to be in this library, and the ghostly raven sitting on her head, who made rude comments about the people.

Guys, I have to do homework. Could you leave me alone just once? There's more important things you could be doing, you know.

The ghosts of Angela Miller, aka Horus the Gray Mage, and her familiar Jasper the raven, disappeared with a *hrmph*. The lights dimmed and came back up.

"Are we talking to ourselves in the stacks again?" There was a woman walking towards her, young, so probably a student but with a proprietary air, so probably one working here. Very beautiful.

"Um, I guess I was. Sorry," Amy murmured.

"Oh, that's all right. The whole 'being quiet in the library rule' is more enforced in the breach," she smiled. "Is there anything I can help you find?"

"Well, let's see here." She consulted her syllabus. "I'm looking for..."

"Love, sex, a young man, marriage...? What are you looking for?" she asked softly.

More than a little taken aback, Amy replied, "Um, a book on the invention of the printing press. Right now. Um. Who are you?"

"Oh, I work here. Come with me." She picked up a book. It had "Amy Reynolds" written on the spine.

Horus...?, Amy asked silently, getting creeped out, but there was no sign of the ghostly mage now.

"Ah, aisle four. Around that corner, over to the left, just past spiritual contentment."

"Thank you."

"You'll find your history."

"Oh. Great." She backed away and went to see what was there. *This kind of thing never happened back in Akron.*

The other woman let her go for a while and then followed her, looking at the shelves. Amy could hear her muttering, "Banks, Banks... I wonder what happened to her..."

Amy turned the corner and saw no one. The lights were oddly dim, more light candlelight than fluorescent. "It's not closing time is it?"

"Oh no, deary," said a cheerful middle-aged woman. "I'm not an expert on these things but I don't think you're too close to it yet. You were looking for history?"

"Uh, yes. I... don't recall seeing you here before. Are you new?"

"Oh, we only work on strange shifts in these parts," she smiled.

Oh, I bet you do. "Um, yeah, she said four aisles down and...?"

"Right over here. Printing presses?" She ran a finger along the shelf. "Impressing soldiers, pressing wine, psychological pressure... ah, printing presses."

"This is not the Dewey system," Amy noted. "Thank you very much."

"We scoff at Dewey."

"U-huh. Thank you very much," she repeated. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. You can stop saying thank you," she added kindly. "It's okay. Just make sure you properly check it out."

"Oh, of course."

"And I wouldn't mention Dewey to her," the woman whispered. "She doesn't have much truck with that new-fangled nonsense."

"Okay. I won't." She went to where she hoped she would find the front desk, having some idea of what else she was going to find there. *Nice time to kite off, Horus.*

"Oh, it's you," the crone greeted her, a bit sharp-toned.

"Hello," she smiled. "Just one tonight."

"Are you sure this is really what you want?"

She thought about the other stuff the first one had mentioned, and nodded firmly. "Yes. I have to write a paper. For Monday."

"Very well." She stamped it and handed it over.

"Thank you very much."

"However." She leaned forward and with surprising speed grabbed Amy's arm, her voice a stern whisper. "When you see them, let them know—they *haven't brought the map back!* Do you understand?"

She nodded tremulously. "Okay."

"Let him know, what I told him before still holds: flayed, salt. Right?!"

"Right." She nodded some more.

"Good."

"Okay."

"You seem like a very nice girl, have a nice life," the crone said, releasing her with a pat.

Amy took her book and walked with determined calm away from the desk.

"Oh, dearie?"

"Yes?" She retraced her steps.

"You'll need the address and phone number." The woman handed over a piece of paper. "They won't be expecting you, but I think it'll work."

As she approached the door the lights flickered again and normality resumed. *Okay. There's a Twilight zone in the library. I'm going to be a sorceress, I can handle this. Manifestations of the triple goddess... no problem. That's just peachy. Horus, are you around?*

What?

Were you hanging around for what just happened?

No.

Oh. Okay. I'll... I'll tell you about it later, I'm going home. She went back to her room, only later remembering the paper. It was a Revolution business card, with a phone number written on the back, along with "2:00 pm. Tomorrow. Waterfront." Since Amy did read the paper (all of them, quite avidly), she knew something about the team. The news hadn't said much about them lately.... Interesting.

There was no chance of not going; one does not screw around with the Crone, and besides, she was intrigued, so she cut class in the afternoon and went down to see what was there.

* * *

Dr. von Blood's cross-country journey was uneventful. Irwin did most of the driving, of course; that's what minions are for. After far too long they finished passing Pennsylvania, then New York, and finally Massachusetts.

"Stopping at these tollways... it's a pity there is not some way this could be done electronically," he mused.

"You're sure you're going to be able to arrange for me to get in at MIT?"

"It would be child's play," the doctor assured him. "Once they hear you're working for me, I'm sure it would be merely a matter of trivial formalities to sign you up."

Irwin accepted this stoically.

"Besides, your college undergrad years are vastly overrated."

"Don't I need those in order to get my graduate years?"

"Self-study is often much more important," he was assured. "Why, they laughed at me, back at the university. They said I was mad! Ha! I showed them, I killed most of them! Which I guess didn't really prove my point, did it?" he added thoughtfully.

"No... but I'm sure you feel bad about it now... sir?"

"Yes, in retrospect I suppose so. It does mean that the alumni office doesn't keep pestering me. Everyone I know who finished their course of education says that's a perennial problem."

Traffic in Boston with a large truck was the usual nightmare, and it wasn't long before von Blood felt a migraine coming on.

* * *

The morning had seen a loud argument at the Indian Consulate, about how Ashwam needed to be more careful, and how they couldn't protect him against werewolves, for pity's sake, and when asked who could, perhaps superheroes.

"What superheroes are there around here?"

"The Revolution!"

He called the number on the card.

* * *

The waterfront—specifically, the docks used to go back and forth to Revolution Island—were unusually quiet. There was a large rental truck pulling up, though. Amy asked Horus to go look around.

"I see no headquarters here," von Blood complained. "Unless it's underground?"

"I think it's there, sir," Irwin pointed across the bay, and up.

"Ah." They contemplated the castle.

"Excuse me, sir?" Amy wandered over. "I'm supposed to be meeting someone here. Are you him?"

"Are you here to meet von Blood?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "There wasn't a name."

"Or were you here to see the Revolution?" He said this rather doubtfully, looking at a young woman in the slovenly garb common to college students.

She considered that. "I suppose I could be...."

"Well, if you are in need of assistance, von Blood can be of help!"

"And Irwin," his minion added.

"And my assistant, Irwin."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. von Blood and, um, Irwin."

"Anything you need, miss?" Irwin asked eagerly.

"I received a card under mysterious circumstances, so I'm just going to see what turns up here, I suppose."

A car with diplomatic plates drove up. There was an argument going on inside it.

"I have to tell you again, sir, we have serious concerns about this."

"Well, you were saying that you cannot help me, I must do something!"

"And yet, these are people who put their lives in danger, every day!"

"It won't be that bad, I'm sure. You're overreacting. Don't put me in your bag. That is your bag, it is not mine."

"These are obviously the people you are supposed to be meeting."

"I hope so," Ashwam said, his eyes lighting on Amy.

"I do not recognize them as members of the team, but surely Mr. Silver will be here soon."

"Yes, yes... I'll call you later." He strode over to the girl. "Hello...." Irwin looked affronted.

"Hi," Amy said.

"Are you who we're supposed to be meeting?" Irwin asked.

"I don't think so," Ashwam said without looking at him. "But I might be who *you're* supposed to be meeting," he said to her. "Are you also looking for the Revolution people?"

"Apparently," she shrugged helplessly. "I didn't know I was...."

"Well, I was," von Blood said. "I have been invited here. Obviously if one of you can arrange transportation to that headquarters there, we can get started."

"Excuse me, pardon me, I hate to do this—I am, alas coming into the scene late," Muse said, striding up to the group. "Our employer was supposed to be here to meet you, but I'm afraid certain things have come up requiring his attention."

"Called together by a mysterious employer who cannot be here..." von Blood mused.

* Namely, the Hartford school system servers exploded the previous night, forcing Tom's presence at work.

"Yes, I know, classic, isn't it? You must be Mr. Tabor," he turned to Ashwam. "I am Larry Oliver."

"Very pleased, yes."

"And... miss?" He turned a querying look on Amy. "I'm afraid that we have not been properly introduced. Larry Oliver, I am an associate of the Revolution and a member of K. Robeson Enterprises."

"Amy Reynolds. Pleased to meet you." This man might be old enough to be her grandfather, but he was also the personification of charm.

"Our transportation over to the island will be here momentarily," he told the others, before turning back to Amy. "Is there something we can help you with?"

"Um. I suppose so. I was told to come here."

"You were standing on the stage as if you belonged." He took the card she handed him, looked at her sharply. "Who gave you this?"

"An old woman in the library, which wasn't really quite the library."

"How old?" he asked slowly.

"I'd say crone-like would be appropriate."

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" He stepped away and pulled out the smallest mobile phone any of them had ever seen. "Felix? It's Muse. She has a card... from one of the women in the library. Could you double-check the file on that? Uhuh. Hm. Of course!" He turned back to her with a smile. "If you have some time, we would love to be able to discuss this more with you on the island."

"Sure," she chirped, astonished and thrilled. Hardly anyone outside the team had ever seen the old base, let alone the new one that had appeared when the world changed back to normal (by virtue of magical talent more aware than most of what was really going on, Amy had spent her days keeping her head as low as possible and ignoring Horus's suicidal plans to oppose the witch-queen's rule).

A hovercraft slid across the waves toward the dock, large enough to accommodate the truck.

"Any difficulties getting here from Chicago?" Larry asked the two farthest travelers.

"The traffic in Scranton was something you would not believe."

"And yourself, Mr. Tabor? Did you sleep well last evening?"

"I did not get much sleep. I had to be up early for school today."

"I do have to apologize again for Mr. Silver not being able to be present. It seems as if in the magical transference, some mystical daemonic wolf aspects managed to embed themselves in the ant eggs that were buried in the city after last summer. There is now a lupine ant infestation throughout the smaller parts of the sewers."

"Interesting," von Blood allowed, while Ashwam had his doubts and Amy considered what kind of headline that would take.

"These things happen, of course. Fortunately for everyone's clothing, the passageways that the ants are infesting are generally no wider than three feet. Mr. Silver is able to negotiate those circumstances, the rest of us are not. He's assured me over the phone several times that they really aren't that dangerous, merely capable of gnawing through steel and breathing fire."

"That sounds very dangerous to me," Ashwam remarked.

"Not to Mr. Silver, sir," Larry smiled.

"He's not a very astute man, then, is he?"

Larry stared at him for a moment. "There's a difference between something seeming dangerous and being dangerous. To him, these things are not dangerous."

"I would say it was the latter."

Amy kicked him on the ankle.

"Maybe this is an American thing. In India we are much more down to earth."

"But if they're smaller than three feet... for something to be truly fearsome it must be capable of looming over the skyline," von Blood asserted. "Then you've got real giant ants."

"But it breaths fire!" Ashwam pointed out.

Irwin tugged on his master's jacket sleeve. "Like that?"

If not quite looming over the skyline, the serpent rising out of the water behind them was a good ten feet around and thirty feet above them. Wings unfurled, casting an enormous shadow over the hovercraft.

"Well, there's something you don't see every day," Larry remarked.

"Would you say that was not being dangerous?!" Ashwam demanded.

"Oh no, that's dangerous."

"I would hope so."

Obviously a crossbreed, Horus murmured in Amy's ear. Someone crossed a northern-clime dragon with a daemonic entity.

"Get behind me, I will protect you!" Ashwam told Amy.

"Irwin, why don't you take the young lady into the truck," Larry suggested.

The young lady ignored Irwin's hand on her arm. "I'm trying to do something!" She stared in wonder at the dragon for a moment, muttered a quick luck charm, and gripped her onyx necklace focus; she'd never done this outside Horus' tutoring sessions yet. *Creatures of night...* "Form of... crocodiles." She summoned a swarm of shadow-alligators to the water. They swarmed around the dragon but were kicked away by the back legs. "It worked!"

"I have to say, miss, that you're not the character I thought you were," Larry noted. " But perhaps I shouldn't have been too surprised." He drew a sword cane.

"I am very impressed," Ashwam said. "We should talk about this—over drinks, dinner maybe."

Trying to hang onto her concentration, she replied, "Uh, I'm not twenty-one yet!"

"I know places where that's not a problem."

"You're in the wrong scene, young man," Muse rebuked. "Give it a few minutes, curtain change, see what you can do then!" He took up an *en garde* before Amy, who was much impressed by this gallantry.

Horus appeared, visible only to Amy. *I'm trying to make mental contact with it... whoops, no mind. It can probably be confused by an illusion. Give me a moment.*

"Let us see how this thing stands up to the power of science!" Von Blood drew his energy pistol and fired. There was a piercing screech as the pistol rent the very atoms apart, and a bellow from the dragon. "Ah good, our weapons affect it." A shimmer of protective energy appeared around him as he activated his personal force field device.

Ashwam transformed, sending the boat lurching to one side, then the other as he took a few running steps and leaped off the hovercraft, landing just short of the dragon. Irwin had run to the truck to find more weapons and now held on for dear life.

"Mind the crocodiles!" Amy warned.

The dragon reared back, inhaled, and unleashed a cloud of frost. The water around the boat froze solid. Muse wrapped his coat around himself and Irwin's teeth chattered.

"Hands... frozen... to door!"

Amy reformed her shadows as a great raptor, which dove at the dragon's head, tearing long gashes in its scales.

Screams echoed across the water, a tour boat coming back from a late-season whale watch entering the area, and Arnold "Action!" Chang from WAMT was already on the scene in the helicopter.

Von Blood fired again. The dragon appeared to be laughing at him. He considered changing weapons.

Amy's eagle dove again. Ashwam thrashed through the water, grabbed hold of a leg and was thrown off. The dragon's head slashed down and grabbed him in midair, shook him like a terrier with a rat, then chomped down hard.

Amy screamed. Irwin made a remark about the team not lasting long.

She's worried about me! Yay! Ashwam thought, not hurt all that much.

Remind me to tell you about the last time I met one of these, Horus said, and created an illusion of a second boat full of elephant people in an attempt to distract the dragon.

"What looked like it was going to be another scene of devastation," Arnold said into his mic, "as the giant dragon that has been hindering shipping in this area for some time made another appearance, but it looks as if the dragon has bitten off more than it can chew this time! Who are these mysterious superbeings? Ooh, that looks like it had to hurt that one."

Von Blood hesitated. "Irwin, toss me the dislocator gun!" He did so hate using that thing, but surely these were dire circumstances. Irwin struggled with the door for a moment, rummaged for the gun, and threw it; the doctor caught it with barely a glance. The gun was suitably elaborate and alarming looking even to the uninitiated eye, and when he fired it a chunk of the dragon... disappeared.

The eagle dove again. Horus recommended keeping its motion in line with the illusory boat.

"I must say, sir, that's a very impressive looking weapon," Larry noted.

"The elephant-man seems to be in some danger," Arnold commented for the viewers at home.

From the uncomfortable position of being chewed on, Ashwam gritted his teeth and swung a mighty fist into the thing's mouth, knocking out a couple of teeth.

Dr. von Blood changed settings and fired again, sending a bit of the creature's midsection into nothingness. Blood rained down on the ice, and the dragon began to collapse backward into the water, still thrashing.

Horus dismissed the ship's illusion and said, *It might still live through this.*

Well, what would you suggest doing? I could have my crocs gnaw on it for while....

It might be more important just to be able to find it later, see if we can't track it. A moment later, I've placed a tracer on it. We should be able to locate it again later if need be.

Okay, good. Aloud, "Wow!" She looked around. "This happens to you all the time?"

"Well, not that particular thing, miss, but something similar," Larry acknowledged.

"Wow. I wish I had my camera."

"Um, I have a feeling that there's more to you than you originally let on. Which I have to let you know I appreciate and admire," he added.

"Thank you. I guess I was supposed to be here."

"I hope you don't mind this level of activity?" he asked von Blood.

"No, no. Are those sorts of things common around here?"

"Over the last few weeks, yes. Fallout from magical residue of a war against a daemonic wolf-god."

"Ah. That makes sense."

"I've been told that as long as the eight-armed serpentine daemon didn't get free during everything* we should be perfectly fine. But what are the odds of that?"

* Which, of course, it did.

Von Blood pondered. "Have you considered mining the harbor?"

Amy went to see if Irwin was okay. "Are you all right?"

He was huffing on his frozen hands, and smiled at her. "Oh, yeah. There was a time the national farmer's guild tried to burn down our headquarters just on general principle, so this is really not worse than that, just colder."

"You get valuable experience this way," his employer approved.

"Yeah, I now know how to recalibrate a dislocator gun."

"You'll probably need that. So how long have you been working for this guy?" she asked.

"Just since the start of the semester."

"Oh... So you're in school, too?"

"Yeah, hoping to transfer over to MIT."

"Good luck."

"He assured me it would be a simple matter of some paperwork," he added, a bit uncertain about that.

"Well apparently you could disintegrate the admissions guys. That would save some time."

"We don't like to use the d-word," he murmured with a glance at the white-coated formerly evil scientist..

"Sorry," she whispered. "I'm new at this."

"There are some issues. He gets migraines."

"I'm sure the hovercraft will thaw itself out fairly soon," Larry assured them all, and turned toward their elephantine companion. "And you, young man? How are you feeling?"

"It is not a problem," Ashwam assured him.

"It was chewing on you!" Amy said, astonished.

"I can endure much more than this," he smirked. "You are pretty good yourself."

She blushed. "Not so much, I don't think, but thank you."

"Don't be foolish, you were incredible," Irwin said earnestly.

"We shall have to do some sparring some time, hm?" Ashwam persisted. "Don't you think?"

"You seem to know quite a bit about this potential superhero thing," Irwin said from her other side. "You said you know the college area, we could discuss that some time, over dinner or something?"

"I believe I already suggested that," Ashwam growled.

"The three of us could go," Irwin riposted.

"That sounds like a great idea," Amy agreed. "Let's do that."

Von Blood watched this byplay with some amusement. Irwin was a young man, and who knew? Exposure to her might cause him to develop superhuman abilities. "It is well-documented, after all, that people who enter romantic relationships with superhuman beings either acquire such abilities themselves or, sadly, suffer early deaths," he noted to Larry, who nodded.

"Interestingly enough, we have an example of that right on our own team. Or at least we did, before she was disintegrated, but at the same time as her paramour, so I have complete faith that they'll be back."

"You said yourself, the bodies were never found."

Amy, who had not heard the first part of that exchange, pricked up her ears. "Is that what happened? They got disintegrated?"

"We're not entirely clear on the precise details," Larry replied, "because it happened in a world entirely unlike

our own."

"Oh, right."

"I do not care what world you are being in, if you are disintegrated you are dead," Ashwam said firmly. "That is how these things work."

"I will defer to your obvious expertise in these matters," Larry said graciously.

"I am just being realistic! I mean, you can believe whatever you want, but..."

Somewhere, Horus was laughing, though not without a bitter edge. After all, her spirit had been trapped in a ruby since the 1930s after her murder by the Coven. "My mentor would like a word with you one of these days," Amy told the sometimes-elephant.

"I should be glad to talk to him, give him my phone number."

Starting to put it together, she looked around at the group. "So... this is the new Revolution here? Because of the old ones getting... well, whatever?"

Larry gave her a thoughtful look and took her aside a bit. "I have to ask you something. Judging from your age and your general disposition, as well as the comments I have overheard, I am inferring that you are a student at one of this city's many fine universities."

"Mm-hm."

"What are you studying?"

"Journalism."

"Your honesty is appreciated," he smiled.

"You're welcome, I guess. What difference does it make?"

He sighed somewhat. "The questions that you're asking, and the general tone in which you are asking them, implies that you are the sort of person who attempting to put together a story for publication. I've run into this sort before. Is this your intent?"

"Of course not," she replied, surprised. "I haven't gotten your permission."

He smiled, more warmly this time. "I think we'll get along just fine."

"Don't get me wrong," she added quickly, "this is absolutely fascinating, and if you guys want me to, I'd totally love to, but... I don't necessarily want the whole city knowing everything about me, either."

"Perhaps you could wear a different hairstyle," von Blood suggested. "Some other way of concealing your identity, perhaps a revealing outfit."

"Disguising yourself as a man?" Larry added.

She shook her head firmly. "That just leads to weirdness."

"It's classic, very Shakespearean."

"And Freudian, and a few other things." Fortunately Horus didn't seem to be around at the moment.

"How could you ask her to cover up her beauty?" Ashwam asked, shocked.

"Revealing outfit," von Blood repeated. "Distract the villains."

"That, I am thinking, is the better course of action," the Indian approved.

"I have a lot of experience with young women in revealing outfits," the Muse reminded them sternly, "and believe me, I have to say that dressing them up like men is a far better choice."

"That is your own lifestyle choice perhaps," von Blood waved a hand. "Let the young lady decide."

"A costume, huh? I suppose I can come up with something. My adviser knows a little bit about these things."

"Your adviser in college knows about costumes?" Larry regarded her with new surprise. "Are you minoring in

drama by any chance? Looking for an opportunity to tread the boards?"

"Um, actually—you might know Horus," she realized. "You were around back then, huh?"

"Hor—Horus?" He paused. "Your adviser?"

"Tutor."

"Mentor?"

"Yeah."

"One might even go far as to say, spirit guide?"

"I'm not sure how she'd react to that--"

"She?! Oh, bloody hell!" Seeing Larry Oliver openly astonished is an event worth marking in one's diary.

"Perhaps you have a point," von Blood conceded.

"I am not understanding," Ashwam complained.

"There are many things in life that are not meant to be understood," Larry declaimed. "It seems that this young lady and I have a history with which I am not entirely familiar, but if you are in contact with Horus, please let him, or her, know that I am particularly sorry about the MacBeth Incident."

"I'll pass that on."

The hovercraft was moving again.

"I am not acquainted with the practice of superheroes," Ashwam asked, returning to human form. "Does one have to wear a costume?"

"In my experience, I've noticed that people who can turn into large, distinctive-looking creatures don't bother with costumes," von Blood told him. He himself always wore his lab coat, rubber gloves, and high-top basketball shoes. "Aside from perhaps a belt or loin-cloth type arrangement."

"Some sort of identifying marker," Larry added, "so that if one were to run into, in your case, a different humanoid elephant, one would be able to readily distinguish you."

"I see, I see."

Larry's little phone rang, and he excused himself for a moment.

"It is seeming a strange thing," Ashwam commented, shaking his head.

"It depends entirely on whether you have a secret identity to keep," Larry added, returning.

"Yes, of course," von Blood nodded. "When your identity is publicly known, there is no point in wearing a mask."

"In your case, as long as Mr. Chang didn't catch your transformation on camera, and I don't believe that he was there...." He waved to the helicopter, "Yes, you can go now."

Amy waved too, enthusiastically. She liked Arnold.

"You realize that getting yourself caught on film is not the best way to maintain a secret identity, young lady?" Larry said patiently.

She looked abashed. "Oh. Just a little caught up in the moment."

"Mr. Oliver, her presence here could easily be explained if she were to file a news story about this event," von Blood noted.

"I have to admit there is a certain attraction to having a journalist work for us rather than against us...."

"Oh. Her." Amy grimaced.

"Oh, you're familiar with Ms. Shapiro then?" Larry asked.

"For class I have to keep track of all the news and stuff around town, so I've been studying her style, it's very interesting."

"I have this distinct fear that over the next decade it will become the predominant form of journalism in the United States."

"Her fact-checking isn't always what it should be."

"All this would be made easier if there was some sort of national information network to allow rapid dissemination...." the doctor noted.

"We've tried that," Larry reminded him. "The federal government cracks down, if you link together too many computer systems they form an artificial intelligence and inevitably attempt to take over the world."

"That would be a problem with the business plan," Ashwam allowed. "But still, what kind of capital outlay do you think would be necessary...?"

"Proper security precautions obviously need to be taken," von Blood remarked. "You merely need to make sure that there are magical elephant creatures, or something, standing by."

"Or make sure that the first thing the creator tells it is not to kill anyone? I understand that that one works relatively well. And here we are on the island," Larry said. "Referred to these days on most charts as Revolution Island, not surprising that. I believe it had a number designation prior to, so you can consider this to be a significant step up in its credit. There's the headquarters. Unfortunately I was just informed a few minutes ago by Sphinx that we are still sans leader, Mr. Silver is still underground."

"What is the origin of this amazing structure?" Cornelius asked.

"From what I've been told, it used to belong to some giants. I'm not too clear on all of the details," he admitted, "but it was the headquarters for some of the entities in the fantastical universe that recently occupied Boston."

"Got left behind after the transition?"

"It was at ground zero for it. They had used the flying fortress to ram the Prudential building, which was the focus of the witch-queen's power. When her power was broken, it was close enough to it to remain extant; however in the same way that everyone from the contemporary time period had translated into a fantastical format, the fantastical format translated through to the here and now. I understand that the bound chaos daemons that served as the power source for this entity have been replaced by some sort of quantum fusion drive. If you want to take a look at that..."

"I would happily take a look at that."

"It is a very impressive castle," Ashwam said. "Of course, in India we have bigger ones. You know, Indian civilization has produced many monumental structures. Of course many of them are in Pakistan now. But it's a good castle, very nice."

"At the end, I wouldn't worry too much about the costume," Larry told Amy. "There's someone affiliated with the team who's developed a great affinity for such projects. Who knows, fifteen years from now a trend you started could dominate the world. You'd be surprised how much people begin to admire and in some ways nearly worship those of superhuman ability."

"Really?" Ashwam's interest was clearly piqued.

"Oh, it's been known to happen." He could almost see the wheels turning in the young man's head.

The interior of the base was indeed scaled for giants; the ceilings were all eighteen feet high. There wasn't very much in the place, though; it didn't have much of a lived-in feel. They were met by the Sphinx.

"Most of the rooms that we have here are as yet unoccupied," Larry told them.

"Can I ask an important question?" Ashwam piped up. "What are the defenses of the castle? If someone tried to attack it, what would happen? Is it just our powers, is there something else?"

"There are defensive screens and systems in place, and we are upgrading them," he was told. "Mr. Silver's been very busy over the past couple of weeks, making sure the the headquarters is as defended as he would

like it to be."

"That is good, because there are people who are trying to kill me," he explained.

"Oh." Pause. "May I ask an impertinent question...?"

"It is being like this. For centuries, my family has had the so-called avatar of Ganesh in our family. So this is why I am changing into the elephant, although the elephant is obviously not Ganesh, because it has two intact tusks."

"Of course."

"But anyway. So they were supposed to be being gods, and such nonsense," as if it was the most boring thing possible, "and I think it is nonsense, and I do not want to be their god. The thing is that if they kill me, the power will go to somebody else, and maybe they can convince that person that he is god. So people are trying to kill me, so that someone else can be their god. So that is why I joined the team."

"That makes sense," the doctor nodded.

"I guess so," Amy agreed dubiously.

"Also, I am understanding that the pay is not too bad."

"Were you aware of that?" Larry asked the others, who shrugged.

Horus, is that guy really a god?

How should I know?

"So it is being that people come trying to kill us, they have bombs, guns."

"Do you have to worry about people with supernatural or superhuman abilities trying to kill you?" von Blood asked pragmatically.

"I do not think so, we have few of these people in India. There is Juggernaut, you have probably heard of him. Some others, but not many. I am sure that nothing out of the ordinary will come here and attack us."

"Well, since the ordinary apparently includes giant frost-breathing daemon-dragons...." Amy shrugged.

"No, that would be unusual," he said firmly.

"My concern was mostly whether one should be trying to protect the place against a huge, devastatingly powerful single opponent, or armies of black-clad assassins," von Blood explained.

"The latter, I should think."

"Mr. Silver has definite strategies in making the place ninja-proof," Larry said.

"Heavy window screens?"

"No, what he had in mind primarily was setting up force fields directly behind the glass windows, so that the ninjas would jump in, thinking that they'd merely be shattering windows they had already weakened, and then rebound off the force field like birds that didn't see the plate glass."

"That's mean!" Amy said.

"I like his way of thinking," von Blood approved. "Screens and fly paper. They can be swatted later on." He looked around the hall. "The place is set up for communication then? Is there what one might call an operations room, or command center?"

"We're on our way right now." They passed through a gigantic doorway. "Felix, how are things coming?"

This gentleman was also known to von Blood by reputation, and to Ashwam because he had visited the previous night.

"It is good to see you again sir, I apologize for my attitude last night."

"Don't bother; it's perfectly natural that you should be cautious, having already been attacked once. Were the police able to clean up your apartment?"

"To an extent, but it seems that I will be moving in here now, I think. Then we can all beat up the werewolves!" he beamed.

"I'm not sure werewolves will be the problem...."

There was a bank of computer screens on one wall—Scott was slowly adding one system at a time, hoping to find out what the critical mass was.

"Wow!" Amy exclaimed. Irwin, who had mostly been unimpressed so far, echoed her.

This is the problem, this is what India needs! Ashwam thought, all but salivating.

Noting the difficulties inherent in relying on hovercraft for transport, especially with dragons and so forth, von Blood inquired, "Does anyone have any suggestions on where to put a teleporter terminal in town? Does this organization have an office in town? Could something be rented?"

There was the K. Robeson office, and the secondary base in the Blobcave. And the team had money now, which unfortunately for Ashwam was not available for investment. A phone call was placed to Scott, who noted that the blobcave was already home to the team jet, so it would be easy enough to add a pneumatic elevator that could lift people and things to the Copley Place area. Only problem being that this might open the cave to attack, should anyone gain control of the doctor's teleportation devices....After consulting the map, as well as Felix and Larry's knowledge of prior cases, they settled on the parking garage underneath Boston Common.

In the course of this discussion Ashwam voiced the opinion that was not possible to control someone else's mind. "I have never heard of such a thing."

"You're from India!" Amy protested.

"Well, you can gain someone's devotion through religious or political means, but to control someone else? I do not think it could be done. No, no."

"It's possible to engage in electro-chemical reprogramming of the brain," von Blood said.

"Perhaps, perhaps."

"It happened here in Boston, even," Amy informed Ashwam. Though that had been before she moved there. "Don't you read the papers?"

"This is how I had my own... enlightening. I and my erstwhile partner in crime were attempting to reverse the mentalities of all the revelers gathered in Times Square, to produce an army of minions. But sadly we were foiled by those kids and their *verdammmt* schnauzer. But it all turned out well in the end."

"That must have been a very interesting experience for you," Amy noted.

"It was, well, you might say life-changing, yes."

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to interview you...."

"Certainly, certainly, I'm very forthcoming about this," he beamed.

"So, I am needing a new apartment very badly," Ashwam said. "When can we move in?"

There was some paperwork to do, most of it already taken care of, and von Blood had been regarded as something of a security risk....

"Narrow-minded fools."

"They used to think the same thing about us, but eventually we showed them all," Larry assured him. "Which means that we're just going to have to ask you to fill out some things, miss. Given that someone out there felt that it was important that you be present...."

She took the papers hesitantly. "Are you sure this is okay? I mean, I guess you were looking for them, but..."

"Mr. Silver was clear on three things he felt the team needed, at least until the rest of the team can be recovered from whatever circumstances they've stumbled into. He felt that the team in its last incarnation lacked sufficient physical strength, with the absence of Miss McKay. Hence the contact to Ashwam. He felt the team lacked mobility, and would benefit from a greater degree of technical expertise. Dr. von Blood is one of the

world's leading experts on teleportation theory."

"I am a master of displacement," he admitted, displeased by the "one of."

"The third thing that he has been looking for, for some time, is someone with magical or supernatural ability. Given our recent events, to wit the parallel fantasy universe, as well as other actions that have occurred, it's an area in which the team has had a weakness for some time. Unfortunately, after the Daemonwar, mystical heroes are not exactly thick on the ground. The ones that do exist are very difficult to contact, or already tied up in long-term contract with other teams."

"I see... well, I'd be happy to help."

"Once we do a cursory background check..."

"Done already," Felix announced.

"I haven't done much in my life," she admitted.

"It did look a little sparse, but not sparse in the way that makes it look like someone is trying to set up a better than normal plan. Just the right degree of sparseness, which means that whoever set up your artificial background did an incredible job. Or you're telling the truth," he added. It was quite impossible to tell when Felix was joking.

"The latter," she hastened to affirm.

"Oh. Good."

"I live in the dorm at BU."

Larry nodded. "If you're going to continue a secret identity, it might be best if you continue to do that. It's also important that we develop a form of cover story for you. Some reasonable... distraction....." They looked at one another with the same thought in mind. "Would it be possible to speak to your adviser? If the Revolution were to go to your professors, and ask that a particular student...?"

"I think they would eat that up," she grinned.

"An internship, as it were."

"I mean, wow!"

"Press liaison," von Blood supplied.

Larry nodded thoughtfully. "We are after all tied in with the rest of the state government."

"Oh, well, then perhaps you could simply excuse it as patronage. Do you have any relatives who are party loyalists?" He was from Chicago, after all.

Amy shrugged. "Akron is pretty tame. I can talk to Dr. Jenks."

"I think that would be an excellent idea."

"We do have one other problem," Felix noted. "Over the last two weeks, there's been a series of disappearances on one of the T lines heading across the Charles. It seems to be increasing in a predictable sequence, one person the first night, one person the second night, two people the third...."

"The Fibonacci series?" von Blood inquired, brows furrowed.

"Always the same car, always the same train, always the same time?" Amy asked.

"Same route, same time. Busy enough timeframe that people might not necessarily notice that someone's vanished."

"So someone boards the train, then does not get off when it arrives, and no one sees them disappear?" von Blood said.

"The problem is that last night, twenty-one people vanished."

"Well, we should be calling the police," Ashwam said. "They shall have to investigate. What?" when everyone including Irwin stared at him.

"I don't know if the police would really know what to do," Amy suggested.

"One assumes that they have already been contacted, and that is why they have asked us to look into this," von Blood explained.

"But, what can we do?"

"I don't know that the police are aware of this yet," Felix said.

"That people are just disappearing?" Seemed unlikely to her.

"Boston police are also notoriously ineffective," Cornelius sniffed.

"Ah, compared to Indian police, they are very very good. But I do not see any supervillains here, so what would we do? Who is there to be beating up?"

"You have to investigate, and find out who is doing it, and then beat them up," the scientist told him.

"Oh."

"There's a very simple method of investigation in this case," Felix said.

"We all ride the train," Amy said promptly.

"You have a knack for this, don't you?"

"I would also suggest that no one else ride that particular train," von Blood noted.

"I do not like the train, usually I take taxis," Ashwam said uneasily.

"Well, it would be a special train, we would be the only ones on it."

"Would it smell better than the other trains?"

"Presumably."

"If some action isn't taken, thirty-four people will disappear tonight," Felix interjected somberly.

"The trend-line might plateau, you know..." Ashwam said.

"Not if it's the... what did you call it?" Amy said.

"The Fibonacci sequence."

"Then it's not going to go back down."

"At some point one would reach the limit of the number of people who are on the train..." Which was true, but not much help. "Obviously, riding the train is an important thing to do. Why the Fibonacci series?"

"If it's a supervillain, they might just like that," Amy shrugged.

"Are there any mathematically inclined supervillains in this area?"

"India has given the world many of its greatest mathematicians."

"We're still not entirely sure what Fox and Hedgehog do, although they do seem to be very timing-oriented," Larry said thoughtfully.

"Hm. I never heard about them disappearing people, though, don't they usually rob places?" Amy asked.

"Yes."

"Have there been any ransom demands, sudden upsurge in the availability of organs for transplant on the market?"

"No, we've been specifically tracking that. Scott would throw a fit if he thought it was more Resurrectionist activity."

"It is a naturally occurring sequence as well," Felix pointed out. "Snail shells."

Amy consulted with Horus, who wasn't able to shed any light on the situation, or at least not any light that

Amy was able to understand. While the rest of them put their heads together she called her adviser to explain that she had been present for this totally awesome event at the harbor, absolutely the coolest thing ever, and the team wanted her to do an internship. It took some fast talking about how good the school would look, assurances that she would avoid any and all forms of danger, and stress on the fact that there was absolutely, positively, definitely no need to get permission from her parents, who (she was quite sure) already thought she was a Satanist.

The afternoon was spent by some of them in moving and/or unpacking, and by others in preparing as best they could for the evening's affair, which in Amy's case meant finding a costume and a name. In honor of her mentor, she decided on Isis. The costume turned out to be no problem once she was introduced to the person Larry had mentioned.

"Well, hello! You're Amy Reynolds, right? My name is Molly."

"Hello, Molly. Nice to meet you. Do you work with these guys?"

"Oh, I'm just old friends with them. But I had just recently taken Needle under my wing as far as her costuming problems...."

"I heard about the change, looked good. I'm kind of a minimalist dresser myself some times, but I think for a costume I'm going to need something a little different."

"Do you mean minimalist in the sense of--"

Thinking of where Ashwam would probably take that sentence, she finished it with a firm, "No."

"--Style?"

Oh. "Well, I just go to school, so, y'know, jeans and t-shirts usually work okay."

"Well, we'll have to do something about that, too, dear," Molly Irish smiled. "Come along!"

"I was thinking something with an Egyptian theme."

"I think we should be able to do that quite easily. Come, let's shop!"

Molly being Molly, this didn't just mean a costume, but a new school wardrobe. "You are going to be representing your university, the Revolution as an organization, and most importantly young lady, you will be representing yourself!"

"I hadn't thought of it that way...."

"At your age, few people do. But it's important that you make the impression. Once you get people to believe what you want them to believe about you, everything in the world is easier."

"You know, you're not the first person who's said that to me." Horus was a firm believer in the need to have an image, and the less that image looked like the real you, the better.... She did have to forestall Molly's attempts to get her more than one costume; while one was rushing to the scene of a crime was no time to be trying to figure out what to wear. She got a skirt and a couple of midriff-baring tops, picked up a black wig to cover her hair (she'd been trying to get it to look just like Aimee Mann's), a serpent headdress, and a small mask. Onyx gems were easy enough to sprinkle through the cobra-motif jewelry; her spells seemed to work a lot better when she had the stone around.

Meanwhile, the MBTA was contacted (by Scott, in between ant encounters) and closed part of the Green line for the necessary timespan. The disappearances happened at midnight, so most of the missing were students, who might easily go for days before anyone realized they were gone. One train was laid on that would run non-stop. Dr. von Blood would drive. Irwin would not be coming along.

The three of them boarded the train at North Station. Irwin passed von Blood his array of pistols and his kit. The newly-christened Isis asked Horus to stick around and keep her eyes open. Pachydermian, as he would henceforth be known, transformed as soon as he boarded.

"Boy, this feels really weird," Amy muttered, tugging at her mask.

You get used to it, Horus told her. It's almost like it merges with your skin.

"Oh, great."

It's the midriff-baring that should be making you feel weird. In my day....

"It's 1987."

The almost empty train pulled out. It was drizzling lightly outside, the sort of dark night where you wonder if the stars will ever come back....

Amy checked in with Horus.

Something's about to happen.

She relayed this.

"I should have brought a Geiger counter," von Blood muttered.

The interior lights flickered and dropped to the level of candlelight, and something from outside leaped in through the front of the car. Nothing shattered, it just jumped through—huge, about the size of Pachydermian, arms dangling low, shoulders humped over with a large head in front, the hair oddly mossy. It landed, shaking the entire car.

"Pay the toll!" it shouted.

"We are on official business and we do not have to be paying the toll," Pachy said.

Von Blood hit the brakes. The monster didn't seem to be affected by the change in acceleration.

"You will have to be coming with us to the police--"

It jumped farther down the car, claws gouging into the metal floor. "One two three four five," it counted rapidly to thirty-four, leaped toward Pachy. "Thirty-one missing! Pay the toll!" it screamed in his face.

Isis muttered a defensive spell and grabbed her focus. "Creatures of night..." She conjured a lion from the shadows this time, and sent it leaping onto the thing's back with a growl.

The shoulders and head spun around as if on gimbals to look at the lion. "You don't count! You don't count!"

Dr. von Blood turned, drawing an energy pistol. "Your mathematical obsession is nothing compared to the power of applied science!" He fired into its side, leaving a long rend in its flesh. The thing did not, however, appear to be impaired by this wound.

In fact, the wound began closing immediately.

"How come nobody noticed this thing before?" he wondered.

"I don't think we're where we were," Amy said. "Horus, do you know where we are? You know all this dimensional shit..."

In a pocket dimension of some sort. This thing's probably generating it, was collecting whoever it needed to.

It ripped into Pachy with its claws, then turned, grabbed the shadow lion—and ate it. A moment later it coughed and violently vomited shadow-stuff. "Doesn't count! Doesn't count!"

Horus attempted to make a mental connection—and staggered backward, almost falling through the wall of the car. It was clear from her perspective that they were in a dimensional pocket, but contact with the mind was not merely one mind, but all of those it had collected—fifty-four distinct psyches overwhelmed by one primal force. She could sense that the fifty-fifth had just flickered out.

Amy stared in horror as this information was conveyed to her. "Um, I think we shouldn't hurt it, people. It's got people in there, the people that it ate, are still there. I'm going to try surrounding it in darkness, see if we can confuse it." A cone of darkness condensed around the monster.

Pachy grabbed hold, plunging his arms into the darkness and trying not to damage it.

"I have no way to non-lethally attack something," von Blood mused. He set to work rapidly tuning one of his pistols to a different spectrum, so it would work to stun in the creature.

The head rotated again, trying to lunge out and bite at Pachy; the darkness writhed to keep it inside. Pachy

could feel its foetid breath against his face, though at least his trunk was well out of the way of the smell. The air rushes out and back in, and he could sense the gaping void within.

"Pay the toll!" it shrieked.

"I told you we do not have to pay the toll, the policemen said we could ride for free."

Horus was thinking that there was some kind of dimensional shunt inside the thing, and ways to reach through it.... *Jasper?* The raven was sent to explore. Inside, he found himself falling down an enormous pit, beating his wings madly against the pull. The deeper he went, he found intense cold behind him and intense heat before him, an unquenchable fire that absorbed everything around it to maintain itself. In that point, he could see forms writhing, and next to it, one small ember.

Von Blood finished tinkering and fired blindly into the darkness. The thing spasmed and fell over. "I don't know how long it's going to be out."

"Okay," Amy breathed. "We have to figure out how to get those people out... Jasper, can you hear me?"

I'm a little busy! That's okay, I'm just flapping my wings against the spiritual tug of all the world, no I'm cool! I'm losing this fight, could we speed it up, please!

She was trying to figure out how. The darkness wicked away. They turned the thing over and opened the mouth, shone a light down there. The light was absorbed as soon as it entered, and they could feel the heat being pulled in, along with air and even, it seemed to some of them, a tugging at their very souls.

"Other than turning it upside down and shaking it, I confess I am at a loss for ideas," von Blood said.

Horus manifested to explain. "This is a troll."

Amy shrugged. "It lives under the bridge and collects the toll, I can deal with that. Why does it have people in a sort of black hole in there?"

"Trolls need to be fed constantly, they're embodiments of fire. If you don't keep feeding it constantly, it will go out, but the more you feed it the stronger it gets, and therefore the more it needs, and therefore..."

"Hence the sequence, gotcha. We could ship it to a landfill."

Von Blood looked for a fire extinguisher. "What if we put it out? What is it likely to do to the lives it has consumed?"

"I'm hoping they'll come out... are they stuck in there forever? Can you dimension them out somehow?"

"From the inside," Horus told her.

"That's going to be kind of messy."

"The problem is that judging from the connection with Jasper it could be infinitely far away." And Horus could only travel twenty feet from the ruby her soul was trapped in.

"Well, there's thirty-five, or thirty-four people in there...." Its arms were beginning to twitch, no time to be worried. "Can I have that fire extinguisher? Thanks. Wish me luck." She jumped into its mouth.

And it woke up. Pachy stomped on its head, knocking it back out. Von Blood suggested using one of the poles to bind it, which was quickly done.

Inside, Amy and Horus were falling toward the heat. Three more embers fell off. She cringed at the implications. "I told them not to do that...." Hoping they were close enough, she pulled the trigger on the fire extinguisher; the central flame broke up into sheets and ribbons and began flowing rapidly back up past her; if not for her protective spell it would have burned her to cinders.

On the outside, they had just finished wrapping the thing when it exploded into flame. Von Blood teleported over for the other extinguisher and unleashed it, not even sure if this was a good idea or not. Magic wasn't really his thing.

The pocket dimension inside it was beginning to collapse. "We should get out of here," Horus said.

"I was about to ask if you could possibly magic up some sort of escape route, here."

"I'll need you to repeat what I say very carefully."

"Okay."

Horus began reciting the spell. Amy followed along for a few words, then stumbled. "I said very carefully!"

Outside, another mass of flame exploded. The car was suddenly full of people, most of them alive.

[tape ends, did we have a fourth? can't find it if so. segment ends with new Rev members silhouetted walking into conference room to meet Scott.]

Quotes

Minions are harder to come by if you can't promise them a cut of the loot, and you feel sort of guilty about threatening them with death if they betray you. - Dr. von Blood

If she picked me randomly she has really bad luck.... An entire club full of schmucks and she picked the one were-elephant? - Ashwam