

Homefront 2: New Guard and Midgard

December 10, 2005 (Boston)

The new Revolution entered the massively over-sized conference room (it matched the rest of the place) to meet the team's senior member. Scott Silver was "sitting" at the table, along with Sphinx and Muse, having successfully defeated the fire-breathing ant infestation in the tunnels that ran below the city.

"So how did it go?" Sphinx inquired.

"It was rather confusing," Pachy understated.

"I think we destroyed the troll, and we got most of the people back," Isis supplemented, still feeling terrible about the ones who hadn't made it.

"Most of?" Scott said.

"Yes, two casualties," von Blood told him.

"Were there bodies?" the robot wanted to know.

"Yes."

"Okay, that's better. Not going to find they've been strung up somewhere injected with troll eggs, or something."

"Does that happen?" Isis asked, wide-eyed behind her brand-new mask.

"I have no idea."

"No," said Ashwam.

"Young lady, you're the mystic here, please, tell us, does that happen?" the Muse inquired.

"I have very little practical experience with trolls, I'm afraid."

"The troll seemed to be some kind of mammal, I'm sure it does not lay eggs," Pachy asserted.

Horus, do trolls lay eggs?

I don't think so. They're fire elementals.

Thank you.

"And the dragon?" Scott asked.

"We drove it off, I don't know if we killed it," von Blood told him.

"It's alive," Isis put in; Horus's tracking spell was still on it.

"Maybe we can farm this out, just call the Windjammers and let them deal with it," Scott mused.

"You anticipate the dragon's going to be a problem?" Larry asked him.

"There's a giant destructive thing swimming around in Boston Harbor. How much do you want to put on Manta Master?"

The two henchmen looked at one another and chorused, "No bet."

"I would like a rematch with the dragon," Pachy said. "It was very invigorating."

"Okay... I'll see if I can line up some cameras," Isis told him. Easy for him to find tangling with a dragon invigorating; he could regenerate when hurt. Of course, she'd found it pretty invigorating herself....

Full introductions were carried out, getting the senior member up to speed on the new team's background, powers, and cover identities. This included Horus, who manifested in her actual form rather than the male body she had worn publicly, although of course Scott couldn't see astral forms.

"Is she projecting a hologram?" Ashwam wondered.

"No, she's dead," Amy told him patiently.

Hm, she's cute, but she might be psycho, he thought.

Lieutenant Reilly, the team's main contact with the Boston police departments, was expected at eleven o'clock, to meet the new team and give them the latest problem reports. While they were waiting, they reviewed known villains; Felix pushed a few buttons and started a list up on the screen.

"Patricia Hoagland is still at large. That's Storm Crow, an archaeologist who found herself bound to an avatar of upcoming battles. Rather than gracefully accept her position as those who are touched by archaeological remains should, she has started killing people with skills she wanted and binding their souls to her. The last time anyone saw her was at the Caduceus Building—what remained of it—she is also being hunted by the League of Nations, because the last person she killed was Mr. Sean Mort, a League of Nations representative in the city of Boston.

"That brings us to League of Nations."

"Not really gunning for us at the moment, as far as I know," Scott said. Between them they explained how the League had gone about stealing Revolution funds to the tune of several million dollars, which they had used to set up weapons facilities in Boston, all of the known ones either destroyed or abandoned during the Day of Fire.

"This must be the first priority!" Ashwam insisted. "We must get lawyers and sue these League of Nations people!"

"I'm not sure anybody has attempted to sue a supervillain organization," Scott said thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes."

"Actually I do remember something like that happening—not me, the Iron Claw, I think—it did not end well," von Blood noted.

"It really is the kind of thing we ought to farm out to a Chicago-based law firm," the robot agreed.

"It's very difficult to find attorneys that will represent you in that kind of case, after the first couple of massacres."

"Not to mention the poor foot-schlogger who has to go serve the guy."

"Piranha tanks," the doctor nodded sagely.

Ashwam sighed. "Yes, yes, superheroes do not use lawsuits. But there must be some way of getting the money back, right? Right?"

Maybe, maybe not, but at least they weren't stealing any more.

"What else is there?" Isis asked.

"Money," Ashwam said firmly.

"We might almost be able to subcontract the crack accountancy team at 1-800-HENCHMEN, it's the sort of thing they would probably do," Scott mused.

"Yeah, but then they would steal it all," Isis said.

"And there is 1-800-HENCHMEN," Larry said, putting that name up on the screen. Most of the new members weren't familiar with the group, and needed to be filled in on this enterprising bunch. Horus, much like Sphinx and Muse, approved of the group's bent toward doing villainy the *right* way, with properly followed motifs, not killing anyone, and keeping their hands off young ladies.

"These are very strange people," Ashwam shook his head.

"You could do a case study," Amy told him.

"It's a shame to see something like this getting commercialized," was the doctor's judgment.

The senior staff admitted to being torn on whether it was really important to go after these guys.

"I'm working up a theory on the ecology of supervillains," Scott explained. "The environment can only support so many, and if we can get ones we can at least deal with existing, we'll get far less Spydres and mutant drug dealers."

"Hm," von Blood said. "In an ecological sense, you want to displace the feral species with domesticated ones?" Scott moved so that Felix's glare didn't scorch him.

"Here's a list of the people we've encountered from 1-800-HENCHMEN so far," Larry added a very long list of names and their current status:

- General Motors; in custody
- Count Bastard; in custody
- The Postman; in custody
- The Babe; at large (this necessitated a lengthy retelling of this skilled villain's exploits)
- Worcester Rooster; in custody
- Roy McCoy and His Hyperalloy Decoys; in custody
- Circuit Board; at large
- Librarian & Archivist; at large
- Fox & Hedgehog; at large and still somewhat mysterious
- Porcine Aviatrix; never encountered as anything other than a name on a blackboard, but you never know

"And the one that we actually object to," Scott said. "Some of them are extraordinarily annoying, but the one we actually object to is the Resurrectionist."

"Who may or may not still be active--"

"May or may not ever have been active in the last fifty years," Scott interpolated.

"—And may or may not be responsible for 1-800-HENCHMEN," Larry finished.

Horus growled, for Amy's ears only; she remembered the Resurrectionist well. The team's encounters in recent months had seemed thematically in line, but they had no firm leads, and all of Larry and Felix' research had not been able to reach a solid conclusion on whether or not it really was him. The Oscar R. Bourous connection led into a maze of falsified records; the man had either died in the fifties or the seventies or hadn't, or had never existed.

"It could be a cover identity used by a series of evil architects," Scott mused.

"While there are such things, they generally don't have to operate under hidden names; quite the reverse," von Blood noted. "They get paid quite well for designing hideous, unusable things." Boston City Hall being a prime example.

"So forgive me, I am new at this," Pachy apologized. "These people will attack the headquarters, no?"

"Actually, probably very few of them," Scott said. "The ones who are free—and we're not done with the list yet—one of the ones will likely attack the headquarters, because Manta Master has a mad on for us."

"But his primary mad on is for the Mariner Corporation." Larry added Manta Master to the list.

"We should probably call TJ and let him know that there's a giant reptile swimming around in Boston Harbor for his ex-idiot to control."

Ashwam's eyes brightened at the mention of the famous explorer and industrialist. "I would very much like to meet Mr. Mariner!"

"We can introduce you, he's just across the harbor."

Larry gave the new team the low-down on Emmanuel Masters, AKA Manny, AKA Manta Master. "And one last one I feel a need to bring up, we got a report flagged in the 'watching for weird things' this morning. The park rangers up by Mt. Katahdin had to cut down an oversized individual who had tied himself to a tree at the top of the mountain. Apparently he had been up there for several days, they felt he was emaciated and in no condition to do anything, and instead he overpowered them and disappeared into the woods."

"Is he pining for his semi?" Scott asked caustically.

"Perhaps. But it no doubt means that Odin made it out of Gretchen's parallel reality in one form or another."

"Couldn't have been eaten by the ice toads, no...."

This was Odin, a former wrestler with cybernetic implants, now a mechanical genius who was firmly convinced that he actually *was* Odin. And his sentient flying eighteen-wheeler, Sleipnir, though that was in custody on the West coast. Odin had in the past hired four high-end henchmen from 1-800, ones Scott had encountered under different names when they worked for Phil Chlora (Master of Evil Plan Life) in Seattle.

"See, this is nice and rational," Ashwam approved. "This, I can understand."

Amy looked at him. "You have strange standards."

"Which of these is most dangerous to the public?" von Blood wondered.

"That depends on your definition of dangerous," Scott replied. "To the public, most of them are not actually all that dangerous, as for the most part they are thieves. Exquisitely trained thieves, but thieves. Odin, on the other hand, will crush anyone who gets in his way under the wheels of his giant truck. Manta Master is the sort of villain who is sloppy about hostages."

"I know the type."

"He's unlikely to actually come up with a plan that involves killing a whole bunch of people, but on the other hand if all those people die, he doesn't really care. Odin will come up with a plan that involves planting bombs around the city, and while they're dealing with the people dying we'll go rob a bank."

"That does sound like more of a priority then," Amy noted, frowning.

"There is also Toy Man," Larry said. "Toy Man is currently in the hospital, unlikely to get out any time soon."

"Wasn't he on television that one time?" Ashwam asked.

"Yes, yes he was," Scott replied. "Unless it's a highly lifelike animatronic doll left behind."

"The Toy Man," Larry went on, exchanging a smirk with Felix, "is easily the most cunning and dangerous villain the team has ever faced." This was only a slight exaggeration. Von Blood was startled to hear this; he had worked with the man on occasion, and was intrigued to hear about his (extremely involved) plots against the Revolution. But again, he was a professional who was fairly conscientious about collateral damage and certainly didn't kill anyone on purpose.

"We could do a lot worse," Scott concluded. "On the other hand, he is a recurrent whack job."

"And bad for the ego," Larry added.

Speaking of doing worse, there was one more name to add; Felix Javelin, or the Aerosol Assassin, as Scott referred to him; no hint of his presence had been discovered since his disappearance.

Gretchen's crew, at least, was gone, but the team certainly had plenty on its inexperienced plate.

"Add Needle's marelith to the list," Scott recommended.

"Needle's... marelith," Larry typed, unhappily.

"It's a six-armed, female snake-daemon thing."

* Half the world away, Phoenix Talon sneezed, and got very angry for no reason he could fathom. The zen monk behind him whacked him sharply on the head for not concentrating.

"No it isn't," said Ashwam, getting testy about all of this rampant illogic.

"What are the odds of us actually encountering a six-armed I'm not saying any more," Larry decided.

"That's a really long list," Isis opined.

And they'd forgotten about Lord Fimbulwinter, seen in Gretchen's world and probably now in Maine or southern Canada or something like that. At least if he ran into Odin, Odin would try to kill the man he would no doubt perceive as a Frost Giant.

"Still feeling safer?" Larry asked Ashwam.

"Actually I am feeling a little safer, because you see none of these people want to kill *me*. They might want to attack the base, but I have met a lot of people who wanted to kill me directly, it's more personal."

"And there are of course your friends and mine, the Wuxia," Scott remembered. Four of them were in prison, and the other two weren't likely to break the others out after their split, though they might, as Scott noted, burn down a large part of the city in some internecine crime war. However, since Yen Shiu Hai tended to keep his crimes in the non-superhuman realm, he wasn't technically a Revolution problem.

"And the purely criminal, usually not our problem—though it is your problem, boss," Larry noted, "there's Don Vincent Giuiliani."

"The man who has the remote control for my brother." More team history to pass along, including Silverblood. "His body vanished, and we're not real sure where it went."

Von Blood nodded sagely. "When things vanish, you know you're going to see them again."

"That does not make any sense!" Ashwam protested. "When things vanish, they are gone, surely we can all agree on that. When people are dead, they are dead, that is how the world works."

Horus manifested to frown at him. "I'm afraid you have a great deal to learn."

"Death is at best a transitory inconvenience for most people, and a hard system reboot for the rest of us," Scott opined.

"It is my experience that if the heroes fall into the icy water, they're going to come out again, and it applied to villains, too," von Blood said.

"In fact, I've discovered that with heroes and villains it's just a time delay. When the heroes fall into the icy water, they'll come back out within a few hours and blow up your base," Sphinx said ruefully. "When the villains fall into the water, it takes us *months* to get everything back in order."

"That's a logistical issue," Scott argued. "Heroes die, mostly what they have to do is reorganize themselves. They don't have to go out and secure new housing, find a new team, find somebody who can put up all of the stucco pseudo-Egyptian cat motifs on the building...."

"That's always been your problem, Felix; you're too committed to your stuff," Larry sighed.

"*I'm* too committed to my stuff? *You're* the one who wants to build a theater and attach it to the transdimensional gem so that you can put on performances of King Lear wherever you are."

"I fail to see a problem with that."

"Transdimensional gem?" Isis asked, cuing another round of historical updates.

A sound like a vast gong being struck startled everyone.

"That would be Reilly," Scott said, heading out to let him in. "Hi!"

"Scott, how are you?"

"Not bad, yourself?"

"Little chilly, little wet."

* Jim claims to be following all of this.

"Come into our big drafty stone edifice."

"I have to admit, it does outshine the old base. No smell of mildew. I got to meet some of your new team last night, they did good work."

"We're all down in the conference room. There are a lot of villains in this city! We were making a list," he explained.

"Well, I've got some news that's gonna make you happy." They reached the conference room; a round of greetings went around.

"Someone found easy access to the underground antediluvian ruins?" Scott said hopefully.

"No—underground antedil--" He stopped with a pained look.

"He's been doing that all morning," Isis told him.

"Attempting to come up with things worse or weirder than...?"

"Under the city, they're great!" Scott enthused. "Huge step temples. At least there were, we're not sure they're still there anymore. Might not have been really here."

"Is there any debate as to whether or not it would be a good idea to go down there?" Ashwam wanted to know.

"Going down there just lets you control the timing of when it becomes a bad idea," Scott explained. "If you just let it sit behind your back, it's going to burble up all on its own when you're not looking."

"Except of course for those times when you open to the door to the thing you're not supposed to, and something slips past you that you don't see."

"Poke the cosmic evil with a stick," von Blood nodded.

"Or look in the room with the big locks all over it and the sign that said do not open, and say I wonder what's in here?"

"Well, that's when you go get a trained archaeologist," the robot explained.

"I think it sounds like fun," Isis shrugged. "Irwin? How'd you like to pick up a minor?"

"I am not minoring in archeology," he said firmly.

"There are some considerable parallels between Egyptian technology, archeology, and high-energy science," Felix noted. "It would be worth looking at, young man."

"I've always encouraged him to take an interdisciplinary approach," von Blood approved.

Reilly was staring at the screen in horror.

"It hasn't tried to talk to us yet, it's okay," Isis assured him.

"That is rather a lot of names, isn't it..."

"Officer Reilly, I understand there's a bunch of outstanding young men called the Blood Boards in this city," Pachy said.

"The Blood Boards are doing well, inasmuch as they can. The city is pretty favorable towards them at the moment, everyone has these lingering memories of them helping hold off jack-booted thugs. Jack-booted, dog-faced thugs... it all gets very strange. But the police are certainly comfortable with them at the moment."

"It should be written into everyone's work manual—especially yours, Irwin—time travel is never a good idea," Scott said firmly.

"But—" Irwin started.

"Don't listen to him, young man," von Blood said.

"It's just inevitable. You go back in time, you meet some woman in a bar, the next thing you know, you're the grandfather of your own arch-nemesis."

"Have you had this problem?" Ashwam asked.

"Well, no."

"The dangers of tampering with the fabric of reality itself are vastly overrated," von Blood asserted.

"Well, that all depends," Scott replied. "Do you want to wake up one morning and find an ice toad sitting on your bed?"

"Did you say an ice toad or a nice toad?"

"Ice toad."

"Two things of note," Reilly said, in an attempt to return the meeting to near-Earth orbit. "One, the Circuit Board was active again today."

"What did they do?" Scott asked.

"Another robbery of one of the buildings near MIT, stealing some more high-tech gear."

"Anyone have any idea what they're trying to build this time?"

"No. Last couple times they were just attempting to rob banks, and then from Needle's report they were trying to break into the electronics shop that was housing the League of Nations' weapons depot. We don't believe they knew it was the League of Nations weapons depot," he added.

"And really, Needle taking them out that day pretty much saved their lives," Scott noted.

"Probably. In any case they are still at large, something to be aware of. No one was hurt, several people were stunned, here's a list of the equipment that was taken." He handed it over. "And then, this got sent to me from my counterpart in Florida... Manta Master turned up outside the Everglades, robbing the headquarters of Speckled Band LLC, it's a herpetology company. Antitoxins and that sort of thing. It's also generally assumed to be a cover for Commander Cobra out of Seattle, one of his satellite agencies."

"Either that or its a front for the World Crime League."

"Well, at least that will make it more difficult for him to get hold of the white dragon in the harbor," Ashwam noted.

The new team members were briefed on protocols and jurisdiction (leaving aside hot pursuit, of course). Florida had subcontracted the whole superhuman defense thing to Disney.

"We're not entirely sure what it is that Manta Master stole from Speckled Band LLC, because Speckled Band LLC is claiming that what he took was a bunch of doses of antitoxin for a variety of snakes, because that is what they are purported to make."

"What type of snakes?" Scott wanted to know.

"Coral snakes. Sea snakes."

"Well, that would mean he's planning ahead, which shows a frightening regression for Mr. Masters. I can see him deciding to attack Windjammer Island preceded by a wave of coral snakes."

"And this letter came for you, to the police station," Reilly concluded.

"For me?" Scott didn't get much mail. He formed a pseudopod into a letter opener. It was a typed sheet of paper with half of every word missing. "Guys, have we checked the mail?"

"I'll go now," Sphinx said, and came back with a few envelopes. "This came in as well." It was antique paper, mailed from a government building in DC, which few people would know had once been home to the Paranomal Activities Administration.

This one had the other halves of the words. He laid one over the other and read.

Dear Scott. Adam had requested that I make contact with you on this, as I have foreseen certain things happening around the Florida area. Just to let you know, Speckled Band LLC is constructed in a rather unfortunate location. There is a distinct possibility of sentient leeches. It was an earlier case of the PAA that involved an offshoot of Atlantis that attempted to survive in the Everglades, began to sink, and made steps to

survive by magically bonding themselves with the local environment. I have no guarantee that this is the case, however.... Just something for you to know. Adam sends his regards. Eve.

"Are we going to Florida?" Amy asked. "That would be kinda nice..." It was November in Boston, after all.

"So the question becomes, what's your agenda?" Reilly asked the group at large.

Leeches in Florida, they could all agree, were the Disney team's problem. "Although," Scott added, "I really, really revel in the thought of Masters with a hyper-intelligent mind-controlling leech stuck to the back of his neck."

"I'm not coming here any more," Reilly decided. "Ever since Needle left, you've just gotten increasingly weirder. And it's only been a week! I've talked to you three times since she left. And then it went from 'there are flame-breathing ants under the city, yippee!' to 'I can't wait to run into Manta Master with an intelligent mind-controlling leech on the back of his neck!'"

"I didn't say I wanted to run into him," Scott contradicted mildly. "I just revel in the idea. Frankly, I hope he gets beat up and stuck in jail in Florida, because I don't want to talk to him ever again. Masters is an idiot. And not a lot of fun to fight with."

"I think we'll be happy to look for the dragon," Isis said, looking around and seeing agreement.

A vigorous discussion ensued about how best to go about capturing the dragon. Horus had a tracking spell on it, which provided a direction. There was the possibility that PETA or some other group might get involved to protect a clearly endangered species. Perhaps it could be lured into a trap?

* * *

In the burned-out remains of the Toy Man's Worcester facility, rubble was shifted out of the way by several construction workers directed by a man in a suit and hard hat.

"Come on, Mr. Jenkins said we had to get all this cleared up and out of here so that we can just pour cement into the area and just call it gone.... Okay, and what's underneath that?"

The small crane lifted another piece of concrete, revealing the cracked one-way glass dome holding the miniature scale model of Boston.

"Well, what do we have here? Miniature scale model of Boston, one," he noted.

"Uh, there's stuff moving around inside here!" one of the men called.

"What is it?"

"Looks like several hundred thousand robots?"

"Several hundred thousand miniature robots, check." The suit wrote that down, too.

"Don't tell me we have to get an exact count of those?"

"I wouldn't think so. You have any idea how much money got spent on this?"

"Well, I know how much per hour you're spending for us to clear it out of here," the crane operator replied cheerfully.

"Right. It just seems such a waste. Like we should be able to use this for something..."

[The camera pulls back from the miniature Boston to a wide shot of Worcester, then focuses back down to the local penitentiary.]

"Okay guys, time for lights-out, let's go. Smitty?"

"Right."

"Karpinsky?"

"Right."

"Shinecky?"

"Right."

"Waddle?"

Silence.

"Waddle?" He paced closer and yelled to the other guard, "Waddle's not in his cage."

"Oh, great, is there anything missing from there? Remember, he's one of those psychos."

"As in kill people psychos?"

"No, as in theme villain, dress up in a costume psychos."

"His sheets are gone, and some of the wire and stuff from his bed."

Up on the roof, Richard Waddle, master of glider technology, spread his wings as the guards kicked the door down and charged out.

"Hold it right there!"

He cackled and flapped off.

"Better call the Revolution," one of them said. "Better let them know the Worcester Rooster has flown the coop."

* * *

Scott's phone rang. "Scott Silver," he answered it.

"Um, Mr. Silver? This is Lieutenant McDade at the Worcester Penitentiary. I just wanted to... touch base, you know? See how you're doing... and let you know that, um, Richard Waddle broke out of his jail cell."

"Was anybody hurt?"

"No, no."

"Okay. How did he get out?"

"We're not entirely sure how he got out of the locked room, but he managed to construct a set of glider wings for himself out of his sheets and his bed."

"I see." Pause. "Well, I'm glad nobody was hurt. Thank you for the call."

"You're welcome. Any... anything you need us to do, just let us know."

"Keep an eye out for him, let us know if you see him anyplace."

"Okay."

Scott reached out a limb and moved the Worcester Rooster over to the "active" column, passed on the news to the rest of the team.

"Perhaps they should comb the city," von Blood suggested.

"Certainly something to crow about," Pachy nodded.

"What is with all of you people?" Amy demanded.

"It's a lot better than having Phoenix around, he'd be brooding and swearing," Scott shrugged. "So one more for the active column."

"Perhaps we could lure *him* into a trap," von Blood suggested, not wishing to let go of a good idea.

"Perhaps we could feed him to the dragon," Amy piped up.

He probably wouldn't be difficult to deal with; they would just have to watch abandoned KFC franchises and look out for chickenwire purchases. They let the Windjammers know, of course, about the dragon and Manta Master's recent activity. Gilly and Marco were already out in a sub trying to locate the former with sonar.

The dragon discussion resumed, revolving around the possibility of trapping it, perhaps by tying a virgin to the rocks (Amy and Irwin both blushed). Scott was concerned about being sued, and also about possible collateral damage.

"Can you make a force field bubble big enough to trap a dragon?" he asked von Blood eventually.

"That's an interesting question... it would probably take a little time to set up, and it wouldn't be particularly portable, but I'm sure I could arrange something." The power source might be a problem.... "Nothing is beyond the power of science."

"We have a submarine," Isis noted. "Does it have any weapons?"

"We never actually got enough time to figure out what all is in the Black Whip's minisub. I doubt it has much in the way of weapons, because the Black Whip was at the height of things very married to his weapon motif, and after the height of things very much avoiding weapons."

The plan was made. Horus would attempt to locate the creature magically. Dr. von Blood would construct a large force field generator to contain the dragon. Scott made sure that everyone who wanted one had a room, and taught Pachy how to fly a hovercycle, though he was going to need a custom one for his elephant form. He wanted to get regular patrols set up as soon as possible.

"Pachy and I have classes," Amy noted.

"Fine. So do I, but not sleeping makes that much easier," Scott told her.

"Wow. That would be really handy...."

"You just have to not be alive."

"Amphetamines do the job," the doctor said in passing.

She rolled her eyes. "My parents are already paranoid about me being here."

"I think people with superpowers are the last ones you would want to be paranoid and violent," Ashwam said.

Dr. von Blood gave him a bemused look. "You just spent an entire morning listing people you believe to be your enemies and thinking of ways to destroy them, and you're concerned about people being paranoid and violent?"

Amy was thinking of a series of interviews, "Inside the Superhero Mind." These people were great.

It was getting late, and they had been up all of the previous night. The dragon was going to have to wait until morning. Amy was the only one with an identity to maintain, so Irwin suggested that he give her an escort, since he still had to set up the teleport location under Boston Common.

"So... you see all this as being normal?" Irwin asked as they left. "I mean, this wasn't what I... I don't know what I expected when I signed on with a mad scientist."

"Did he give you a nondisclosure to sign, a waiver?"

"No, he just hung up signs on campus, said he was looking for someone in the masters degree program for off-site work, solid pay, lots of experience, hands-on... he hasn't lied to me," he added. "He's been scrupulously truthful."

She considered the question, and shrugged. "It's not so much that I see this as normal, just that for the past few months I've been talking to a dead sorceress from 1930s New York so... your idea of normal changes."

"Okay, that's... I've spent the last semester working with someone who keeps talking about how he used to aim his displacement gun at the people who denied him tenure—although he's very broken up about that these days," he hastened to add.

"That's good, a good sign, that somebody like that could take a turn for the better."

"Of course the people with the pitchforks were always strange. The local Romanian society, in order to properly welcome him in to the area, would come by every day, and wave pitchforks and torches."

"Got to respect the ethnic folkways."

"They seemed very happy that he was there, came over with latkes and very heavy breakfasts."

"So, how do you like Boston so far?" She cast about for a new topic. "I realize you just got here..."

"We just got in, it seems like a nice enough city..." He seemed worried. "The doc told me he'd have the discussion with MIT, and everything would get smoothed over for me, transferring."

"Scott seems to have a lot of academic contacts here, too, he might be able to help."

"Yeah, I heard him mention he was taking classes...."

"Correspondence, I assume."

"I can't quite picture him in a classroom, surely he'd be some sort of disruptive influence. He seems very polite," he added. "But people do stare, if only to groom themselves in his reflection. He's very shiny."

"I've noticed that."

"So, uh... I don't want you to take this the wrong way," he said. "I don't know a lot of people out here, we just got out here, so if you know anyone or if you're doing anything, I'm out at the island and will be setting up the matter transmitter...."

"There's some good clubs in Allston that do all-ages."

"Oh." He smiled tentatively. "I gotta talk to Ashwam about it, too, he's apparently big into the club scene..."

"So I gather."

"I don't know how well I'd fit into Indian society, so...."

"I don't know how well he fits in here," she giggled.

"The doc always told me that once my Romanian's flawless, I'll be able to mock the English of the people who are waving torches at us. I think was him trying to convince me that I should learn more European languages, there's some very good works written in central European tongues about matter displacement, building bases, and...."

"Ruling the world?"

"Exactly."

"Hm. Well, it's always handy when you travel, at least that's what I hear. I'm studying French myself."

"Oh." After a pause, "Do you mind if, uh... I know that I said I'd escort you over here and all, but there have been monster attacks and stuff... do you mind coming with me to the plaza while I set up the transmat disk?"

"No problem," she said cheerfully. "I'm still pretty jazzed, it's been a heck of a day."

"What with saving people's lives, and fighting a troll and a dragon and stuff?"

"Yep. Lot more active than I thought it would be, somehow. I don't know.... Horus thinks I need to be more careful."

They reached the Common and headed down to the parking garage, where Irwin laid out the parts of the transmat disk. Amy held the flashlight while he put it all together.

"Okay... now." He placed a petri dish on the disk. "Planarian worm." He hit the button. It disappeared. Again. Reappeared. After a mutual moment of "ewwww," he said, "Huh. I need to recalibrate that a little bit..." He fiddled with things, repeated the attempt. "Looks good." By way of explanation, he added, "Generally if there's a problem, it's an explosive one."

"So you know right away."

"Exactly."

"Good. I guess."

"Doc says there's never been any lingering cancer effects. He's very cautious about those things," he added. "Has to do with the Prime Rule."

"Prime rule?"

"Don't experiment on yourself."

"Ooooh."

"He wouldn't let himself go through a transporter if it weren't safe."

"That makes sense. You want to live to be an old mad scientist."

"Do you need me to walk you back to your, uh?"

"Oh, no, it's just a few stops up the Green Line," she told him. "See you in the morning!"

"Nice meeting you."

There was an awkward shaking of hands, and he stepped on the transmat disk and zapped himself back to base.

"Sir, the teleporter's all set up," he reported to Scott. "Where's the doc?"

The doc had gone to bed. His minion followed suit.

Scott absorbed himself in his usual night-time routines: monitoring the scanners, listening to NPR, catching up on the paperwork, writing up patrol patterns, and so forth.

Early the following morning, the first rotation of Morning Edition came on. "We'll be covering these stories: the reconstruction of large chunks of New England after the post-fantasy environment: what is this going to do for the architecture?" A clip claimed, "Personally, I feel that minarets are going to come back, big." "More incidents of psychic leeches in Florida—ways to make Epcott Center exciting? And an interview with Patricia Hoagland, coming up after this."

Scott perked right up and dialed Reilly.

"Hello, Reilly," a groggy voice answered.

"Morning, Reilly."

"Hello, Scott."

"Do you get 88.5 on your radio?"

"Hang a second... yes, honey, it's work. No, it's not a murder yet. And I'm not capable of killing him. Okay."

"There's an interview with Patricia Hoagland coming up."

"Well, that's interesting...." He sounded a bit more awake. "Hang on, let me get that on."

They had to wait through the day's headlines and then the architecture piece.

"I'm sure that many of you are familiar with Miss Hoagland for the work that she's done recently. She's doing a book tour for her latest novel, and she also is putting forward some rather surprising statements. We're fortunate in order to be able to get her on the air today. Miss Hoagland, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing as well as can be expected, Linda," she replied. "I was in Boston at the time of the forcefield pandimensional incident."

"Do you have any real recollections of that?"

"Unlike what I've heard from many people, I have no clear memory of any of the incidents that took place there, other than the fact that I had three days go missing, much like the rest of New England. But it was the incidents directly prior to that, when I was attacked by members of the international criminal organization League of Nations—"

"Excuse me? You were attacked by—"

"M-hm."

"Are the police...?"

"The Revolution in Boston has been made aware of this. They were quite helpful in saving my life at the time."

"Oh. Well, that's excellent," Linda said, sounding a little unsure of herself. "Any idea why?"

"My personal belief is that the League of Nations feels that the work that I have been doing—the anthropological analysis of variants in contemporary human society, as well as the broad acceptance of the fictionalization of the events surrounding the Plovian Invasion, is somehow a threat to their plans for variant dominant of Europe," Patricia said calmly.

"I don't want to save you from getting murdered again!" Scott exclaimed, extremely annoyed.

"No offense, Patricia, but doesn't that sound a little grandiose?" Linda said gently.

"I understand that you might think that there's some sort of... solipsistic god complex here, after all, they are coming to kill me because my work is so important?" She laughed lightly. "But that's essentially what Mind Lazer and Kymrik were telling me—"

"Mind Lazer and Kymrik were trying to kill you?"

"The core aspects of tis are already on file with the Revolution, I'm sure they'll be willing to support all of it. Of course, I have reason to believe that they might be harboring some long-term programming."

"Long term programming?"

This went on for a while more. Patricia was going to go into seclusion to protect her life; this would be her last interview. She had very positive things to say about the Revolution, which did not make Scott much happier, since she was also claiming that any negative press that appeared about Patricia herself was only part of the larger League plot against her, and anything the Revolution said on that score would be due to Mind Lazer's mind-control of *them*.

"Well, thank you very much Patricia. It's been very nice talking to you, and I'm sorry to hear that you're going into seclusion."

"Well, that doesn't mean I'll be stopping my work, of course."

"Oh, we're quite certain you're not going to be stopping your work, you psychotic soul-sucking succubus," Scott muttered.

"Just until such time that I feel that I'm going to be safe in public, I don't have any other choice."

"Given what you're saying about the people who are arrayed against you, I would have to agree with you. In any case, best of luck to you, and next time you feel like giving an interview, please, give us a call. we'll try and stay in touch with you in a way that's not going to put your life at risk."

"Thank you very much, Linda, and have a nice day."

"You, too. that was Patricia Hoagland, author, anthropologist, and sociologist, and now woman on the run. Next up, psychic leeches."

Scott kept an ear tuned in case Mind Lazer deigned to call into the show, but it was just more about the effects of the fantasy world on the New England economy, specifically the reconstruction of Boston—already a federal disaster area after the Day of Fire, though there were some fears that the economic stimulation would end up feeding the city's theme villains—and something about heat blooms on Neptune and the need to send probes. NASA was working on it.

"Well," said Reilly. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but from the reports that you filed, Hoagland's the one responsible for Mort's death, and likely a string of other killings across Europe and America?"

"Yep. Which are now effectively unreportable because I've been mind-controlled by Mind Lazer," Scott sighed. "Remind me to send him a telegram complimenting him on his ability to mind-control machines."

"We did have a distinct lack of physical evidence."

"It's rather hard to print for souls," Scott pointed out.

"I still have no desire to see her get away with it, of course."

"It does limit our ability to have our reports taken seriously. At least by the populace. Although if I can steal a couple of forms I suppose we could file her with the PAA as an alien poltergeist..."

"Then the gorilla could just shoot her? There's something to that. That dingy sound in the background is my coffee machine letting me know that my life infusion is ready."

"We will see you later, sir. Bye."

* * *

Meanwhile, others across the city were noticing the sunrise. Some of them were the shadowy individuals moving around the abandoned boardwalk in Hull.

"Do we have everything that we need?"

"We've got everything that we're going to be able to find tonight."

"Will the humans find us?"

"I'm too fast for them to see, and they don't want to pay attention to us anyway. We must remain hidden, though."

"Why, why?! What happened to the master?!"

"I don't know. He's.... gone."

The sound of sobbing came from the shadows, and a voice from deeper inside gave a guttural, inarticulate moan.

"What will we do? What will we do?"

"I don't think we have any choice. We'll have to brave the city. It's the only place we can get what we need."

"Five hundred pounds of confectioners sugar?"

* * *

The hour rolled around when normal people would start getting up.

"Is there tea?" Ashwam asked, wandering into the cavernous kitchen.

"Coffee's on, and hot water," Scott told him, having been well trained by previous teammates to always, always, always have coffee ready.

"I cannot drink coffee."

"There should be some tea in the cabinet, I guess. Somewhere."

Ashwam determined to do something about this. "I cannot stomach coffee, coffee is for Americans and Muslims."

"Feel free to pick some up. There's nothing in the cupboard that's mine, so there's plenty of space."

"I must go to HBS," he informed the others. "I will take the..."

"Oh, I got the transmat disk set up," Irwin told him. "You can just blink yourself over to Boston Common. I came back on it last night, absolutely nothing wrong."

Well, that was handy. He didn't really like the looks of the hovercycles anyway, and the transmat instructions were simple. He blinked himself there and took the T the rest of the way to class. His classmates were used to him looking tired after a night at the clubs. The professor informed them that it was time for them to select a Boston company to use for a financial case study; the university would of course try to help arrange access, and this was intended as a setup for a future internship. Ashwam had already decided on the Mariner Corporation.

Amy woke up to Horus saying, *There's a dragon out there!* She had spent the night maintaining and strengthening the location spell. The dragon was a couple of miles to the east and several hundred feet under water. It wasn't in pain from the earlier day's fight, which suggested regeneration.

She rolled over. *Yes, I know. It's early.*

We have responsibilities. The sun's up.

She opened her eyes a crack. *No it's not!*

That's because you're looking out your window to the west. The sun will never be up if you look in that direction.

She threw a pillow at the ghost and got up. Amy didn't not have any classes on Tuesdays, but she did need to see her adviser about this whole "internship" thing. Apparently Mr. Silver was looking forward to meeting her.

"Be careful," he stressed. "Get the story, but don't take a lot of risks."

"Don't be the story," she nodded solemnly, suppressing an urge to giggle.

"Exactly."

"Gotcha." She headed over the base to see what was going on there, somewhat disappointed to find that no one was ready to run right out and take on the dragon immediately, but that Ashwam was gone and the others seemed to be buried in preparatory work. She wandered around the base, stared in fascination at the computer screens, perused the trophy room, introduced herself to the base cat, Newton, and read through the files on Storm Crow in case Horus could think of anything useful there.

After a good night's sleep, von Blood began work on the force field generator, using his best guess on the dragon's total size. The volume required was considerable, which made power consumption a problem... unless he could link it to the reactor in the basement... Yes, that would do nicely. The power source was fascinating, not such much a quantum drive as pure, constrained chaos. No doubt that would reassure Mr. Silver, who had appeared concerned that it might be a Plovian artifact (known to be unstable). Hooking up the generator took an hour; creating a force field to spec was going to take quite a bit longer. That would make it possible for them to leave at mid-day or early in the afternoon.

Further discussion occurred around whether they should try to capture or kill the beast, and if they did capture it, what they would do with it afterward.

"Maybe Horus could send it home," Amy suggested. In life, the Gray Mage had been an expert in magical interdimensional effects, but either death or captivity in her own ruby seemed to have weakened her powers considerably.

The phone was ringing; Marco and Gilly had returned, having found the dragon's lair, with no dragon present. They had also detected drops in temperature that might be the beast's heat trails. Mostly it just seemed to be eating fish in the harbor, but given the size of the thing it was probably going to need to eat more.

"And seeing as we haven't really had much of a whale population in the harbor in a hundred years or two..." Scott nodded.

"I'm seeing the Salem whale watch industry really appreciating the fact that 'oh look, there are some dolphin, look a dragon!'"

"Natural predation in action."

The coordinates for the lair were close to where Horus sensed the dragon. Scott set up a meeting with the Mariners for later in the afternoon, and had a quick conference call with Reilly and Senator Snow to see just exactly what they wanted done with the dragon, since the team couldn't exactly arrest it. As a dangerous, life-threatening animal, but one that had yet to kill a human, they would prefer its removal to where it could live a natural life, or confinement until the city could figure out what to do with it, but if that was not possible, take whatever action was necessary, and they would just have to hope that Greenpeace didn't get involved.

"See, if we had a pit, we could put it in the pit!" von Blood suggested, still feeling that the island was lacking a great deal in the way of traps, spikes, pits, etc.

At one o'clock Scott had his meeting with the Mariners, and von Blood was finished with his generator. They took it outside and switched it on. Irwin took a whack with a sledgehammer, which it absorbed nicely.

"Would you like me to test it for you, sir?" Scott offered, and slammed his entire improbable length against it.

"Excellent! Excellent! Our plans are coming together marvelously," von Blood smiled.

* * *

At Don Vincent Guiliani's Cape Cod beach house*, ten junior and mid-level Mafioso were sitting around a table, which was slightly too small, so some of them were in chairs nearby. There was still, however, one empty chair at the head of the table. They had been up all night and well into the morning, the table littered with cigarettes and cigar butts, drinks, and latterly coffee cups.

"Look, it's very simple. What it comes down to is that all of us have to start working together again. Things got *insane* last month when those Chinese psychos ripped through everybody, and they were not that great prior to that," one of them said grimly.

"Oh, so we're all supposed to do what you tell us, is that it?" another asked.

"No... Look." He pulled out a map. "Your patch, my patch, his patch, and none of them are big enough to compete with the Chinese psychos. All of you realize that things are completely chaotic." He swept the room with a glance and received a number of grudging acknowledgments. "All of you realize that we're currently having to fight off *theme villains!*" Again, nods. "All of you realize that things were better when we had two heads of organization?" Again. "So why can't we work together?"

"Cause I don't trust you," one said simply.

"I don't you trust you either," another agreed.

"All right, here's the question then," the first man sighed. "Who do we trust enough?"

"I dunno... if Vincent were still alive...."

The door opened. The man who walked in looked just like the aforementioned don, minus twenty years. "Will his son do?"

There was a brief buzz of conversation, as it seemed few of them had been aware of this man's existence; apparently he had been raised in Italy.

"Wait a minute. Do you know what's going on?" one of them asked dubiously.

The man smiled. "I know that my father worked with all of you. I know that he was close to all of you, and he kept me very informed as to where... everything... was." He moved in a sinuous fashion toward the empty chair and seated himself. "And I can guarantee you, that if you have the same trust in me that you had in him, and the awareness that I have the same files that he had," more smile, "that I will work for you. Six days a week, twenty-four hours a day, and twenty hours on that last day, week in and week out, until we can reorganize ourselves and reclaim control of crime in this city."

"Okay...." The bit about the files certainly had their attention. "No offense, Mr. Giuiliani...."

"Call me Michael, please."

"Michael. We're still not bringing in enough cash to reasonably consolidate," one pointed out.

"I understand that," he assured them. "However, like my father, I have contacts with some organizations outside this city. And believe me—they owe us support. You just have to realize it works better when you're all part of the same... league." More smile. "It's the only thing we can do to keep chaos at bay."

* * *

In the streets of Chinatown, a man laughed maniacally. "I, in my buffalo battlesuit, will rule this area!" A man wearing, indeed, a battlesuit in the form of a water buffalo, ran down the street and smashed his way into a building.

A few brief, violent moments later, the man and his suit were lying semi-conscious in the street. A half-dozen Chinese individuals in antique-styled armor sheathed their swords and assured the shop owner that there would be no further problems.

A short while later, the police found the buffalo man dangling from the arch that marked Chinatown, with a sign on him reading, "Theme villains: stay out of Chinatown." They were somewhat surprised to find that he was

* Which really should be available as part of the Revolution toy line.

still alive.

"Who's this guy?" one wondered.

"Looks like a... cow?"

This town got weirder every day.

* * *

It was time for the meeting with the Windjammers. JT met the team on the dock, apparently unbothered by the raw weather.

"Scott, how are you?"

"Well enough, sir."

"You must be the new team."

"Mr. Mariner, we meet again," von Blood greeted him jovially.

"Well, I'll be damned."

"Accident with a mind reversal ray," Scott explained.

"Oh. Stable?"

"Seems to be."

"Good to see you again," JT decided.

"Mr. Mariner, it is being a great honor," Ashwam shook his hand a lot. "My name is Ashwam Tabor, I am a student at Harvard Business School, it is very nice to be meeting you."

"It's good to advance your education son. May I have my hand back now?"

"Of course. I was hoping to discuss a school project with you, if you have a moment... if it's okay."

"Looking to set up an internship?"

"Yes, and also something I need to talk to you about besides that."

"Once we've handled this reptile problem, I'd certainly be willing to set aside some time for you."

"It is very good to be working with you, sir!"

"Miss." He took Amy's hand.

"Pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Isis."

"Aren't you cold?"

"A little bit, yes," she admitted. The Isis costume looked great, but wasn't really suited for the weather.

"Let's go in. Marco, could you arrange some coffee, tea, hot chocolate in the meeting room? The Revolution has just gotten over, and some of them are a little worse for the wear from the cold." They went inside and got down to business. "We've been doing some tracking of the creature's movements. Gilly has for reasons unknown started calling the thing Kermit. There's a location right down there that we believe to be the lair, an unnatural rock formation. I don't know whether it carved it out or found something that was down there previously, but there is a cave space that it seems to have moved in to occupy. We were aware of the existence of it before, but our initial reconnaissance didn't produce anything a few months ago, and things have been coming up. I'm sure you understand. However the local fish stocks have dwindled significantly in the last week, which leads me to believe it's rapidly running through its available food supply. We're gonna have to move it from there unless we want to completely change the ecological balance inside the harbor," he concluded.

Scott explained the government mandate on the matter, such as it was, and the doc's force field, which would do for the short term only. "So, we'll have to come up with someplace to put it. Someplace isolated, with an absurd fish supply. Unless someone happens to have a magic saltcellar that makes trout or something."

"No, I don't think there's anything in the Egyptian technology we just got back from the museum that would give us that sort of abilities. Let's see if we can't contain it for now," JT advised.

It's moving, Horus told Amy. *Up.*

"Oh, I hope it doesn't start flying somewhere," Amy said aloud, touching the map. "This might be our chance."

"Did you bring your submarine? We can try to corner it from two directions," JT said. Scott pulled out a small red gem.

"Have we any bait?" the doctor inquired.

"Hang on. Marco!" A little Filipino man entered. "That side of beef you've been keeping."

"It's not aged yet!"

"Get it anyway, we need it as dragon bait."

A scowl, and he stamped away.

"That gem," the doctor said. "Can it store living things?"

"Well, that's sort of the issue. The last owner found out that the answer is 'not for very long.' As far as I can tell, it displaces a limited amount of air."

"That's too bad. Still, that would be a very useful backup to the forcefield."

"It could be."

The Windjammers were snapping into action, slightly more slowly than they snapped twenty years ago but still impressive. Scott dropped the gem off the dock and said "Black Whip," and the Revolution sub appeared, Three of the team (plus Irwin) climbed in, manhandling the force field device down the ladder.

"I'll keep aerial watch," Isis said, creating a shadow-roc and climbing on.

The Mariners explained that they were going to come up from the other side and underneath, and the two subs got underway.

Sonar was showing four pings: the dragon, a boat on the surface for which it seemed to be heading, and two submerged items, one of which was no doubt the Mariner sub. Two of these things were unaccountable.

The boat was a commercial shipping vessel out of Greece, about fifty tons, on the shipping lane where it should be, with nothing obviously odd about it.

Dr. von Blood attempted to hail them.

"Yes? This is the Katsoulas, can we help?"

"There is an underwater creature approaching your vessel, veer off!"

"Excuse me, who is this?"

"I am von Blood, you fools! There is an underwater creature approaching your ship!"

"Sir! Dr. von Blood's about to attack our ship! Radio the police! Turn, turn!"

The boat started to turn. Scott radioed the Mariners about the Unidentified Submerged Object.

"I'd say that Manny made good time getting back up the coast," JT said tersely. "He stole my ship design, the little bugger! We're circling him right now, preparing for—please tell me that didn't just happen." Pause. "Gilly, prepare to depressurize, we're about to surface!" To the radio he said, "We're encased in eighty tons of ice."

"See you on the surface," Scott sighed. This was going to get energetic.

The dragon's head emerged from the water, hissing like a hundred snakes. The people on the boat's deck ran around screaming at the immanent attack of von Blood's creature.

The Revolution sub steamed ahead, von Blood lamenting its lack of torpedo tubes, and realizing somewhat belatedly that someone was going to have to put the force field device on or near the dragon. This could get

tricky.

Isis tried to herd the dragon away from the ship, creating a curtain of darkness. The dragon's head reared back, surprised. She could hear a tinny voice from the dragon's vicinity, saying, "No, you fool, the sonar says there's nothing there! Continue to attack the boat!"

She guided the roc down for a closer look. There was a sort of collar on its neck, and probably probes from that into its nervous system.

The Mariner sub surfaced, encased in ice. Manta Master emerged from the water in his paraglider cloak in the shape of a giant manta ray. He brought four people with him, wearing SCUBA gear, and dropped them on the deck of the boat as he glided over it. They pulled their masks off.

"Quickly! Secure the ship, my stinkpots!" The four fired tazer-like devices at the ship's crew, causing some consternation among them.

"Why attack this perfectly ordinary ship," von Blood wondered.

"Good question. Worry about it later," Scott said, bringing the sub in closer to the dragon.

Horus's astral form appeared near the dragon and attempted to zap the gizmo on its neck with a mind-bolt, cursing the unreliability of her post-mortem powers as it lacked force enough to damage the object. The dragon roared, and the tinny voice said, "Freeze the ship! Freeze the ship! Ignore the woman in the air! She is not important, she does not matter!"

Pachy climbed out of the sub and once in the open air, transformed, and began swimming toward the dragon, entering its wake. The thing's back legs churned the water, keeping it half out of the water.

Von Blood climbed the ladder behind him and drew his energy pistol, taking aim at the control device on the dragon. The thing began sparking and shorting, and the tinny voice attained an even higher pitch and then fell silent.

The dragon smashed through the shadow wall and leaped with surprising grace, breathing on the ship as it passed over it. Pachy grabbed hold of the tail, lost hold mid-leap, and landed on the now-iced ship.

The control device no longer working, the dragon seemed to want out of this whole mess. Isis decided to try to get its attention, decoy it away and free the others of the team to fight Manta Master. Once it resurfaced after the dive, she flew close to the head and made a quick gesture with her left hand.

The dragon breathed in, paused, and made a questioning sound, staring at her. At ten feet, she could feel the cold leaking from its nostrils, see each scale and tendril.

"Growf?"

"Good dragon..." She directed her bird away a little bit to see if it would follow her. Horus tried again at the device, which added smoke to the sparks it was putting out.

The stinkpots remained on deck with Pachy. Manta Master pulled his cloak in around him and dove past them, into the cargo hold, directing, "Deal with that monstrosity!"

The four of them turned their guns toward Pachy. "All right, whatever you are. Just—stay back!"

"What is it?"

"I dunno, he said it's a monstrosity."

Scott turned the sub's controls over to von Blood and headed for the boat himself; confident in Pachyderman's ability to handle anyone willing to be called a stinkpot, he went after Manny.

In the boat's hold were spool after spool of platinum wire.

"Platinum, Manny?"

Manny spun around, thoughtfully leading with his chin.

"Hah! I've upgraded my armor since the last time we met, android! There's no way you'll be able to defeat me now! Taste electricity!" He fired a tazer. "No wait, you're the one who's... immune to..."

"I absorb electricity, yes," Scott sighed, doing so.

"Don't come any closer!"

Scott switched to gas form and struck again. Much harder this time. Manny flew across the room and struck a bulkhead.

"No! I can't be defeated this way!"

"So far your henchmen are being beaten by a were-elephant, your dragon is off chasing women, and I'm beating you up in the hold of the ship as I expect that any moment we're going to find out that JT has been mounting artillery on the iceberg you so handily gave him, so he can fire at you as you try to leave." He paused thoughtfully. "I pretty much think we can defeat you any way you'd like."

Manny fired bolts into the side of the ship, letting in massive gouts of water.

"Oh, you idiot!"

"Let's take this battle to an environment slightly more to my liking, android! Follow me if you dare!" He was strong enough to make his way against the intruding water, out into the open sea.

Scott plugged the hole.

Meanwhile, above, Pachyderman lowered his head and charged the four stinkpots, striking two of them.

One of the crew shouted, "Another of von Blood's mutated creatures! Aaagh!"

The henchmen fled down to the hold, pulling their rebreathers back on. Two of them began attaching something to the spools of wire, while the other two played their weapons over the hole in the hull, melting it larger. The ship wasn't going to sink, what with all the ice around it.

Scott lashed out at multiple henchmen, knocking out three of them. Two of the rolls of wire were dragged out through the hole in the hull. Scott headed out after them, and Manny.

Manny was on the back of his Manta-Sub and accelerating away, dragging the two spools of wire. Scott reached out and grabbed one of the spools. Manny dropped it as soon as he registered the change in drag, his threats lost in a stream of bubbles.

Scott sighed, acknowledged that this one was a loss, and headed for the surface, leaving the platinum wire on the sea bottom.

Meanwhile, von Blood turned the submarine's course toward the dragon and, when he judged it close enough, grabbed his force field device and climbed to the hatch. There, he hesitated, wondering if teleporting onto the thing's back was feasible. Perhaps not. He elected to jump to Isis' roc, startling her considerably.

"Um, hi."

"We need to place this onto the dragon."

"Okay, we should be able to do that. Here, have a carpet." She conjured a flat shadow for him to ride on. He stepped aboard.

"If you wouldn't mind steering me down to the creature...." This maneuver completed, he placed the device neatly on the dragon's back, where it clung as designed. *Just like that time we tried to kidnap Shamu. If it hadn't been for those children and that rottweiler I would have gotten away with that....*

The dragon continued to stare at Isis with unnerving intensity. It lunged forward and wrapped its tongue around her, pulling her into its mouth. And then it dove.

Well, Miss Thinks She's So Clever, what's the plan now? I'd rather not spend the rest of my afterlife inside a dragon belly.

"Oh, shut up." It wasn't chewing on her, at least—because thanks to her spell, it thought she was the most important thing in the entire world. She couldn't think of anything to do that wasn't more likely to make it mad than be of any help. "Dragon, I don't suppose you're amenable to letting me go, please?" No response. Jasper flew underwater loops in and out of the mouth.

The carpet under von Blood vanished as Isis was carried out of range. Seeing this, Pachy dove into the water to rescue him, though his force fields protected the doctor from the cold.

"Dr. von Blood, I am being here to save you!"

"I believe it has swallowed Miss Isis," he told Pachy.

"What! I will tow you over to the submarine." From there, they gave chase.

Eventually Isis was spat out onto the ground in an air pocket inside the dragon's lair. *All I have to do is keep it occupied until they get here with the force field control.*

It even had a hoard of shiny things: cars and other items that had fallen into the harbor, now piled in a huge barnacle-encrusted nest.

"It's very nice," she told it. "Very shiny." It nudged her toward the pile. "Good dragon... nice dragon..." She patted it gingerly and winced at the cold.

Outside, the sub reached the dragon's lair.

"This submarine has no torpedoes," von Blood complained. "Well, Mr. Tabor, shall we proceed inward, or do you have a better idea?"

"Let us proceed inward."

They moved forward, into range of the device, but without knowing whether Isis was still swallowed did not wish to activate it.

She saw the dragon's head whip around, and it growled. "Good dragon, nice dragon," she tried to coax its attention back towards her as the sub surfaced behind it. Pachy climbed out and transformed, relieved to see Isis on the ground.

"It's right in front of me, activate the force field!"

"Now we see if it works... I mean, now we see how well it works," he corrected himself.

The dragon snapped at the submarine; Pachy thumped it on the nose. The impact shook the cavern and sent them both stepping back a bit.

Horus wanted attention. *There is some sort of dimensional energy still wrapped around it. It's not native here, shouldn't be here to begin with. I can't do anything with it right now, I'd need an egregious amount of magical power...*

But we might be able to send it home? Amy asked.

If you can find an egregious amount of magical power, yes.

I'm sure there's one lying around somewhere. I trust in the resources of this group.

The dragon whipped its head back, inhaling for an ice blast. Von Blood hit the button. The result was a lot like a dragon in a snow globe. Momentarily confused, the dragon slammed furiously against the field, but to no avail.

"Poor thing." Amy summoned a carpet and headed for the submarine. While they tried to decide what to do with it now, the dragon made more aggressive attempts to get out. The power gage on the force field kept edging further into the orange. They decided to leave it there for the time being; von Blood contacted Irwin and told him to disconnect the fuses.

Meanwhile, Scott surfaced to find two icebergs. The ship crew and the Windjammers were all staring slack-jawed at the sky as a wicked thunderstorm poured over the area.

"Do you think it's him?" JT shouted.

"I really hoped he'd lost that device," Scott muttered.

"I thought he had!"

"It is just like Mark Twain, if you do not like the weather in New England wait five minutes, and it will change," Pachy commented.

"As an expert I'll tell you: this is not natural!"

"I didn't think it was. I'll go take a look," Scott sighed, turned to gas and went up. No giants or floating fortresses, just an enormous thunderstorm. It had the same feel as the one Manta Master had created last time; lots of power in an abnormal configuration.

"Scott, Reilly here. You noticed the storm, right?"

"I'm in it currently."

"I think we've figured out what's going on. Nine-foot-tall psychotic with a spear standing on the tarmac at Logan."

"He made good time down from Mt. Katahdin."

"One way or the other, I'm figuring he's probably responsible for this one. At least, he's standing out there ranting, and lightning bolts are landing around him. Any idea what he's doing?"

"I don't know, but at the moment he's providing excellent cover for the getaway of Manta Master."

"Oh, great. I love it when they provide unnecessary cover for one another."

"Like the dragon Manta Master was controlling wasn't enough."

He sighed. "Just try to make it through the day. And the good people at Logan would like to be able to take off, today."

The Revolution sub surfaced; Scott radioed at once while Irwin warned that things were going into the red zone.

"You any good with unnatural thunderstorms?" he asked Isis.

"I think we might be able to channel it."

"Okay, we've got to hurry, Odin's busy summoning a thunderstorm to Logan. This thunderstorm."

"Do you think you could--" von Blood started to ask Amy.

"Horus is looking at it. If this is a magical storm, this is her business." Horus meanwhile studied the energy to see if she might be able to control it, realizing in astonishment that all of this was merely spill-off from whatever Odin was really doing. As far as using this to get rid of the dragon: dicey, she judged at last. "The dragon isn't going anywhere right now... perhaps we could go and see what Odin is doing. If this is the side effect, what's the effect?"

The sub was too slow; they took a carpet, with Scott absorbing lightning strikes.

Odin appeared to be drawing supernatural energy toward the goal of binding a significant entity to him. Lightning bolts played down around him, standing shirtless at his full height with Gungnir in his hand, surrounded by a circle of glowing rune-stones. The planes had been grounded, of course.

"This never would have happened if he hadn't gotten sucked into the fake mystical past," Scott grumbled.

The giant's voice was thunder, the storm a mere aspect of his personality. "Come to me, serpent! Come to me!"

The force field gage moved into the red and stayed there.

"He's getting his motif wrong, that's Thor," Scott added, still more vexed. "So. Wanna help me distract somebody who thinks they're a god?" he asked Pachy.

"Of course," he answered. "I will be wading into it with him."

"Okay, so you guys do that, and Horus will try to redirect," Isis nodded.

"You think you can... steal his magic?" von Blood said.

"I'm really hoping."

"Perhaps I should say, tap the psionic energy he is using to open an interdimensional bubble."

"Yeah, that."

Fortunately he's working just on raw power. All we have to do is make on subtle adjustment...

"Okay, I'm trusting you here," she told her spirit guide.

Pachy jumped off the carpet, aiming for Odin and landing a couple of feet away. The tarmac exploded upward around his massive feet. Scott poured himself after, lashing out at the would-be god.

The rune-stones flared. The dragon's power level as registered by the force field spiked. Von Blood drew the displacement gun.

Isis grabbed her onyx while Horus yelled commands in her mental ear. *We need you to tap into it now, while he's confused! Repeat after me exactly this time!*

And just like she did the last time, she muffed it.

Your Sumerian stinks! Horus growled in a near-panic as Isis found herself tapped into the storm of mystical energy, but without anything like control, and with a distinct burning sensation around her edges.

Von Blood hesitated, then fired at the rune-stones on the theory that anything glowing was a worthwhile target, and they weren't alive, so he didn't have any pangs of conscience about using the gun. One of the stones was cut neatly in half, resulting in a massive power spike and then a drop. The storm doubled in intensity as Odin was using less of the energy, wind ripping at the flying carpet and nearly throwing the two of them off.

"Now would be a good time to land," von Blood opined.

Scott struck at Odin again, finally getting his attention through the man's berserker rage. One eye focused, the other glittering madly with pulsing red energy.

"Hi, Odin! Been a while. Oh, by the way—giant elephant!"

Pachy charged, embedding the two of them in an emergency vehicle. "It is good to be meeting you."

"What are you doing here?!" Odin roared.

"We have come to defeat you. I think we will be doing that now."

"Think... again!" He lifted the truck and threw it, and actually managed to hit them both with it, carrying Pachy back some distant. He forced his way through the wreckage.

"So, I see going back to the past has been good for you," Scott remarked to Odin.

"It has unlocked my true potential! No more do I follow the false god of technology!"

"And yet you still have a big lump of it stuck in your head," he noted.

"No longer! Pure magic!"

"There is no such thing as magic," Pachy asserted. "He is a crazy one."

Horus tried desperately to get a handle on the free-floating energy, preparing for another attempt at the dimensional travel spell. Now she just needed to funnel all of that energy through her apprentice and into the spell.... Only problem being said apprentice's low control level, which meant that it might turn her into a charcoal briquette. *Well, I told her it was a dangerous line of work.*

Irwin was radioing the doctor.

"We're a little busy here, Irwin, can it wait?"

"Okay. Just it looks like there's a face forming inside the reactor!"

"Oh, that's good...."

"You're on top of that, then? Okay."

"Call me if it does anything." After an exchange with Scott he asked, "Does it look like a frog?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"That's not good," the robot opined.

"All right, Irwin, pull the plug," he commanded his minion, then told the others, "We now have limited time, the dragon has been released."

Isis pulled herself together despite the burning, asserting control over the energy stream. She could see the shadowy forms of animal-headed gods forming, offering encouragement and advice, and blinked a few times. This was no time for hallucinations.

Von Blood fired his displacement gun at the man who seemed to think so little of high technology. Having a small piece of his arm disintegrated should distract him somewhat...

Scott pulled back and struck the runway, sending a shock wave through the ground that tossed Odin into the air.

"Someone's trying to take control of the spell!" He tried to stand up, raising the spear, as Pachy charged again, landing a ferocious blow that drove the man four feet into the shattered tarmac. Despite everything going on around him, Odin managed to drag control of the magical energy back from Isis. And the dragon was on its way, clambering out of the water onto the tarmac. Isis discovered that Horus knew how to swear in about twelve languages, even as she put the finishing touches on the dimensional travel spell.

Odin reached out to the dragon as it lumbered towards him. Lightning played down around him, occasionally touching the spear, and the runestones glowed fiercely.

"Now, the Midgaard Serpent is—"

It disappeared. So did the storm. A light rain fell. Odin screamed like a world ending. Every piece of glass within a half mile shattered.

Scott knocked him over before the shock waves could reach the city. Pachy threw himself at the man-god again, burying the two of them even deeper.

"You could fall unconscious, you know," he remonstrated. "We are going to be on the Blue Line any moment."

Von Blood fired again. Odin grappled Pachy, squeezing him fiercely as he jumped. The two of them flew up out of the hole and apart from one another. Odin landed near a stack of jet fuel barrels.

"This conflict is pointless," he snarled. "I'll be leaving now!"

Scott struck at the spear he carried, sending it flying from his hands. It embedded itself in a concrete wall nearby. It didn't seem to be the hyper-technological device it used to be, but it was also powerful.

Isis sent a cloud of shadow-ravens to attack him. Scott momentarily freaked out, seeing Gretchen's signature, then recovered.

"Don't do that!"

The clouds parted. Sunlight streamed down. Von Blood fired again. A rainbow appeared and vanished. Even as Scott struck him again, Odin reached out to the rainbow, touched it, and vanished.

Isis looked around. "Well, it's been a day of partial thwarting all around, hasn't it."

"We got rid of the dragon," von Blood shrugged. "That was what we set out to do this morning."

"This is very true," Pachy agreed.

"And we stopped Odin from controlling a dragon, I'm big on that. And we mostly stopped Manny," Scott added.

"Oh, what was he after? What happened?"

"Giant spools of industrial platinum wire."

"I find myself wondering, was this just a coincidence that they both happened to arrive, the same afternoon?" von Blood said.

"No," Pachy said grimly. "There's something going on here."

"This was no boating accident," Scott agreed. Odin had left his spear behind.

* * *

The camera panned back from the scene of destruction at the airport. Three people sat sipping tea at an antique wood table. Two of them long-time readers would recognize as the accounting people for 1-800-HENCHMEN. The third was Molly Irish.

"So, how did the day play out?" she asked.

"Rather confusing," one of them confessed. "Although Mr. Masters did pay for the equipment he picked up and the henchmen he hired with the platinum wire that he dropped off, he's still in our negative books a little bit. He was supposed to be getting four spools of it and taking half of the money from it in cash; instead he got away with one. Still, due to the inflational markup we applied on it, we still squeaked through without a positive or negative, and he's still free. And the dragon... well. He didn't get it."

"So we can pay for him to try and get it again?"

"No... Odin got involved."

"Oh dear me. Did he get it?"

"The Revolution somehow managed to obliterate it."

"Oh. Well, we made some money off the thing anyway, no great loss," she smiled. "Anybody get seriously hurt?"

"No, no major injuries."

"Still, the Revolution being more involved... I think I have to go forward with the plan that I mentioned earlier," she said.

They looked at each other. "I really wish you'd reconsider, you've been a wonderful franchisee."

"No, I think I do have to divest myself of it at this point, the risk level is getting too high. Why don't you put the word out for new buyers?"

* * *

The Revolution returned to headquarters, limping only slightly. Irwin was watching TV.

"Is the frog face still there?" von Blood asked.

"No, once I killed the power and stopped the energy drain... hold on, Holly Shapiro's on TV talking about what you just did."

"... And further Revolution activity in their rather rapid-cleanup of the supernatural entities still infesting the city since the rather fantastical events earlier this month. Their response time has to be credited; a large, dangerous, spear-wielding man, whom we believe to be Odin—last seen fighting Godzilla several months ago—was attempting to summon a dragon onto the tarmac. The dragon's gone, Odin's gone, and a large portion of Logan Airport is also gone. Given how bad it could have been, we have to be grateful. And one of the things we have to be grateful for is the fact that the federal funds we should have been getting since the beginning of the Revolution's activities here, nearly a year ago, are finally being put to their proper use. Many members of the state senate are already advocating for the majority of those newly rescued funds going toward reconstruction of battlefield sites, other ways of cleaning up from the damage superpowered conflicts cause, and of course further training of our police forces, and holding facilities for variant criminals. Given the Revolution's new base," she pointed at the distant form of the castle on the horizon, "given their new facilities, I wonder how much the Revolution will mind. I'm Holly Shapiro."

"She's getting subtler," Ashwam noted.

"Yeah, she almost didn't sound like somebody was pulling her toenails to be complimentary," Scott said.

"And you know, in a way she has a point," von Blood mused. "Perhaps we should focus at least some of our efforts on dealing with the effects of these things."

No one minded that, it was the implication that they *would* mind.

"There was a phone call," Irwin spoke up. "Anthony Taurus' office called. He was wondering if he could come up to visit."

Ashwam's eyes got very wide. "*The Anthony Taurus?*"

"The mayor of New York? Ex-CEO of Taurus Industries? Yeah, him." Scott nodded.

"Oh, yes!"

"He was wondering whether or not a memorial service had been planned for Miss Banks and Captain Sutton."

"I will be going to a funeral with Anthony Taurus!" Ashwam swooned. "If I had known being a superhero was like this I would have done it a long time ago!"

"But there were no bodies found," von Blood protested. "You can't have a memorial service for people who vanish with no bodies found, they're likely to turn up at the memorial service."

Scott called his secretary and left a message to the effect that no, nothing was planned, and he wasn't all that sure they were dead....

Quotes

It's not a proper headquarters without piranha tanks! How else can one keep one's minions under control?
von Blood

Isn't the future of this world's version of CSI going to be creepy as all hell? Scott

I still think Peter Parker's tombstone should read, "Gave up, passed out." - Brian

I'm a teenager, I'm invincible! - Isis

Right now, we have a dragon in a snow globe at the bottom of the harbor. We have your minisub with the three of you in it, and Scott on the deck of the Katsoulas. You've just been informed that Odin is out on the tarmac at Logan Airport. What are you doing? Brian

I'm considering going to Leechworld. Scott