

Turn 1 - The Four Winds VnV PbEM

12/31/99 --- 2231 hours

Lexington - Fayette County Police got a call from a woman on a cel phone, said she just drove by the Hyatt and saw a man face down on the pavement near the fountains. There were a few units nearby, since there were so many revelers already jamming the various downtown bars to celebrate the beginning of the last year of the millennium.

Tucker rolled up in his car just as O'Neil appeared on his Raleigh police bike. Together, they examined the body.

"That's old Joshua Book, right?" Tucker asked.

"Yeah. Always walking the streets, telling people the world was coming to an end."

"Think he might be right? Year 2000 and all that?"

"Pfft. Come on, John. You think we're that lucky? Sheesh. I'll call the wagon."

Faulkner Bail Bonds. About two blocks away from the Millennium, on Main Street.

When midnight comes around, and through the night, Joshua and his younger brother Jacob would be profitably busy. The cops would spend the night hauling drunks to jail, and a lot of those drunks would be calling the friendly brother/owners of the bail bonds office just across the street. But right now, everything is quiet. With no business inside, Jacob pulls two bottles of Miller Genuine out of the fridge, pries the caps off with his teeth, and hands one to his brother. Unspoken, they raise a toast to their father, Jonathan; the waiting continues.

The Polo Restaurant at the Hilton Suites. Three miles from downtown, near the Lexington Green Shoppes.

Mark Reinard hadn't even planned anything for New Year's Eve, hed been so busy. But his employer, Denham-Blythe Industrial Consultants, had taken care of that. A profitable year meant some serious end of year partying. They paid to have Comedy Off Broadway open only to Denham Blythe staff; Tim Cavanaugh opened for Bob Zany, and everyone had a great time. Then they made the short walk to the Hilton, for a private buffet and a jazz band. Mr Denham had made a little speech, and singled out Mark's accomplishments. There was polite applause, then everyone headed for the open bar. After picking up a Chivas and soda, Mark walked to the windows overlooking the outdoor fountain pond, and stared into the future.

UK Hospital Morgue, Fayette County Coroner's cubicle. With quick speech, the coroner recorded his findings pending contact with any of the late Joshua Book's family. Natural causes seemed most likely; still, if there were any family who wanted the autopsy done...oh well. It wasn't like Joshua would be going anywhere in the near future.

Singletary Center for the Arts. UK campus, on the Avenue of Champions.

Amanda Halle wouldn't even have considered going out this evening, but it was the Boston Pops, and her brother, Anthony, had arranged for her and her father, Robert, to have dinner with Keith Lockhart and many of the musicians before the performance. She wasn't about to turn down this invitation.

"But Amanda, where's the trashcans and brooms?" Robert chided. Three months after Amanda had dragged him to Stomp, he still kidded her about liking it more than she did...and it had been her idea to go!

Dame Vera Farm, Winchester Road about six miles away from downtown Lexington.

Strains of Tchaikovsky filled the elegant manor home of William Eric Payne, KBE, OBE. Tehsin Syed, his loyal batman, entered the master's library with a snifter of Cognac. Sir William looked up from his typing to accept the Remy Martin (\$1400 per bottle, of course) with a gracious thank you. Tehsin nodded and spoke quietly.

"Mr Pileggi will be in Lexington tomorrow, to film some promotional spots for the local Fox affiliate. His wife and their baby girl haven't been on a horse farm before." Tehsin said.

"Please tell him I would be delighted to have him and his family visit Dame Vera for late lunch," Sir William replied. "Arrange for a photographer to be here; I'm sure he'd like pictures of his daughter with the ponies."

"Very good, sir."

"There's something in the air tonight, Tehsin."

"Phil Collins, 1981, "Face Value" album."

"No, no, I wasn't trying to quiz you there. I've a feeling of something imminent. Ah. Must be the deadline for this script." Sir William absently opened and closed his pocket watch. "Must be."

Downtown - the countdown to midnight...

In distant Times Square, thousands of people chant backwards to zero...

2000 --- a beginning of an ending

Zulu hour. A private laboratory, near the outskirts of the city. One woman, working late and extremely frustrated. Doctor Leslie Walsh finishes nearly

fourteen hours of rechecking computations and formulas. After carefully keying them in to a powerful Cray machine, she counts down the time to the start of her experiment. 3...2...1...0. A surge of power. She watches the screen, readouts coursing by in a stream of digital consciousness.

But again, the efforts have given back nothing. Disgusted, Doctor Walsh throws a clipboard at the screen and storms out of the lab. She hammers the lightswitch, plunging the lab into darkness. Above her, a clock reads midnight.

And deep within the genetic code of hundreds of beings around the planet, on a level unseen by the human eye, aided or unaided, several bits of information suddenly realize the presence of the others. And begin to interact.

Main Street, outside the Faulkner Bail Bonds office.
Clement Dodge, freshly released from jail, wouldn't mind taking a crack at Jacob Faulkner. Jacob was the one who tracked him down when Clement skipped town a few months back. Clement didn't want any part of the trafficking charge he was facing. Turns out the Feds didn't want him either. Still, Jacob had cost Clement quite a bit of money and kept him from meeting up with his woman south of the border. This was definitely the time to pay Jacob a visit. Something about Clement's hands made him believe it was time to collect on this check. Maybe it was because his arms had morphed into sharp blades of steel...He kicked hard at the front door and went inside.

The Polo Restaurant at the Hilton Suites. Absorbed in the sight of the fountain and the singing, laughing people around him, Mark didn't notice for a moment when Lydia Morry slipped up behind him. "Hey, Mark, join me on the dance floor? I'd hate to be the only woman not dancing right now." When he looked at her, with her long straight blonde hair right out of a shampoo commercial, he definitely felt drawn to her. With footsteps not entirely controlled by him, Mark followed her, obediently, across the dance floor, and toward the elevators.

Singletary Center grounds, University of Kentucky.
After a tremendous performance by the Pops, culminating in a midnight explosion of sound, Amanda and Robert departed, giddy with the energy that only truly well-performed music provides. She danced little circles, feeling warmer and warmer by the moment. As they approached their car, Amanda heard a voice say "Hey, look what I can do!" She turned, almost in slow motion, to see a wiry youth about 6 feet tall holding his hands out. They glowed with the blue fire of electricity. Then, they exploded outward, into Robert, and Amanda had no time to scream as he flew backwards across the car park and slammed hard into a SUV. "How about that?" he continued. "Now gimme your car keys, lady."

The grounds of Dame Vera Farm. A solitary burglar makes his way across the darkened grounds to the main house. "Just one old guy and a servant. I'll have this place picked clean in no time, and if someone interferes, heh." He cracked his knuckles. "Let 'em. Nothing like a scrap to get the blood going." With that, the burglar approached the house, deftly undid the French windows with a clever knife, and stepped inside. Straight into the path of Sir William, who was until

that moment on his way to bed.

UK Hospital Morgue. As midnight strikes, Joshua Book opens his eyes. There is a smile there, a feeling of beneficence and warmth. He climbs down from the table, and with a scissors clips off the tag from his toe. As he collects his clothes from a plastic bag in a corner, he sees his reflection in the metal doors of the storage unit. His chocolate skin still looks as weathered as ever, but he feels like a young man. In his mind, there are images, all trying to fight their way to the surface.

"Got to get out of here, and figure out what's going on." Joshua reached for the door, and though it was locked it obediently popped open without his needing to turn the bolt. "Everything has changed. I have memories I've never had before. Got to find out what I know..."

Pulling on his wool cap, Joshua slips unnoticed into the streets of Lexington.

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Turn 2 - The Four Winds PbEM

Faulkner Bail Bonds, on Main Street, shortly after midnight.

Before Jake came back from the Blades games, Josh had been listening to Ornette Coleman's "The Shape of Jazz to Come." He had planned on riffing off portions of Charlie Haden's bass lines from that album tonight at the Polo Restaurant at the Hilton Suites before he had to turn down the gig because of the anticipated work load at the office. Once Jake returned it wasn't long before the two decided to ring in the new year with some ZZ Top...

Jake thinks to himself as he takes a swig of his beer, "Why did I have to leave the Blades game early for? I told Joshua it wouldn't get busy until after midnight. Sometimes he just seems to overreact to some things. I guess he just wants to make sure we get as much business as we can tonight. With Dad the way he is I guess..."

Just as "Sharp Dressed Man" came on the two heard the sound of the front door to the office being smashed into splinters. Always impulsive Jake made a break for it as Josh loaded shells into the shotgun they keep in the back office.

[Phase 28 - Fury]

"Clement Dodge!" Jake yells. "What the hell are you doing?!" [evades]

[Phase 21 - Sound]

The shotgun loaded, Joshua raises it and yells "Get down!" with surprising results, as Clement crashes violently to the floor! (5 points, no chance for Clement to roll as he had no way of knowing it was coming) Papers and desktop objects followed Clement in a shockwave rush of frenzy.

[Phase 19 - Clement]

Bouncing back to his feet, Clement waves his bladed arms like an angry spider. He hadn't been entirely sane when Jake Faulkner caught him the first time, and evidently a lengthy incarceration hadn't helped. "Say hello to yer guts, Faulkner!" Clement yells as he swings both deadly arms at Jake, but he misses badly, instead tearing out a good chunk of the nearby desk.

[Phase 13 - Fury]

Ducking through the onrush of razor sharp steel, Jake launches a thunderous punch. But the swirl of metal keeps him from landing the blow!

[Phase 6 - Sound]

With Jake and Clement so close, firing the shotgun doesn't seem like a good idea. Once again he tries to order Clement to the floor. "I said GET DOWN now!" And the yell erupted like a primal roar. (6 points of damage, Clement gets knocked back six feet away from Jake)

[Phase 4 - Clement]

"Shut yer mouth, you. This here's 'tween me and Jake" With a bellow, Clement

Dodge powers his way off the floor, the points of both blades as one, striking Jake heart high! But to Clement's slow-witted confusion, there is no joyous rewarding cascade of blood, no death shriek of pain, as the blades separate and slip to either side, ruining Jake's shirt in the process. (6 points, taken to Invulnerability)

The Polo Restaurant at the Hilton Suites.

As Lydia and Mark walk to the elevators, he comes slightly out of his daze, "Lydia? Weren't we supposed to dance?"

Standing by the elevator, Mark feels the cold wind of reality bring him to his senses. Something's wrong, he hears in the back of his mind. He sees Lydia step back as if struck. Her eyes and features blaze with unconcealed anger.

[Phase 28 - Lydia]

"Fine, Mark," she snaps. As a waiter passes by with a drink-laden tray, Lydia grabs a tall glass and flings the contents at Mark's face.

[Phase 23 - Mark]

But the contents never arrive. In a weird twist of physics and gravity, the ice and alcohol seem to stop inches from Mark's face before flying straight backwards to drench a shocked Lydia!

[Phase 13 - Lydia]

"You beast!" Lydia shrieks as the elevator doors open. She looks inside, and with a voice so soft and warm it would melt any man's heart, says "Look what he did to me. You're not going to let someone treat *me* that way, are you?"

The occupant steps out, all 6'2" and 208 pounds of him. Immaculately dressed for the New Year's Eve festivities stands local amateur heavyweight boxing champ Monquise Webb.

[Phase 13 - Monquise]

Though wearing a slightly confused look, there is no mistake about the crispness of the piston-like left jab Monquise fires powerfully at Mark. How it could have missed crumpling Mark's face like a piece of tin foil gave both men pause. (punch connected with the Field and bounced off) Mark did feel the punch go by the left side of his face, and an odd force seemingly moving his face out of harm's way!

"Nice slip," says Monquise. "Got anything else?"

[Phase 8 - Mark]

Filled with confidence and a sense of being able to handle himself, Mark punched back. Perhaps a little too enthusiastically, as Monquise easily ducked the wild swing and snapped back into a position of readiness.

Dame Vera Farm

With that, the burglar approached the house, deftly undid the French windows with a clever knife, and stepped inside. Straight into the path of Sir William, who was until that moment on his way to bed.

Sir William stops. Closing his pocket watch that he was checking for bedtime, he

lets the watch dangle by it's thick chain in his hand. A hand that is now hidden within the folds of his smoking jacket. "Terribly sorry. I really have no intention of discussing the end of the series with you."

Paine smiles ruefully, as it is obvious this guy is a common thief. However, in America, there are ARMED common thieves. He yawns politely as a distraction as he surveys the room for other implements and/or bullet-resistant furniture. "Now do be a good lad and go wish a Happy New Year to someone else. Perhaps Mr. Blythe next door."

The burglar couldn't help be confused for a moment.

A slight pause.

A gentleman's raised eyebrow of modicum. "Oh. Wait one moment. You're not a Jehovah's Witness are you?"

"Not me, limey, but I'm going to send you along to visit God. Sound good?" the crook replied.

[Phase 28 - GlassJack]

"Then I suppose a good thrashing is in order," Sir William replies. Yes, it is in order, he thinks to himself. I feel like I've caught a second wind, and a third. His hand lashes out and connects squarely with the thug's jaw (rolled a 1! 6 points of damage, knocking him back out the French window and onto the lawn).

[Phase 20 - the Treble Man]

Sir William cannot help but observe the thug get up from the ground and stand, then do so again, then a third time. Three where there was just one a moment ago? They move forward and surround Sir William. "Your turn to eat grass, gramps." Three voices speak as they grab for Sir William. Though two clumsily miss, one grabs him from behind and forcefully propels Sir William toward the closed French door! With a shattering of glass, he disappears into the darkness...

[Phase 13 - GlassJack]

...only to fall face first at the foot of his bed _on the second floor_! With nary a ruffle nor a scratch, Sir William seizes his cane and immediately heads back downstairs. The three men are still standing near the French door, conveniently close together. Perfectly situated for one of Sir William's handkerchief bombs (which hits for 15 points of damage, sending the trio flying in all directions!)

[Phase 5 - the Treble Man]

Picking themselves up, one of the trio spots Sir William and charges at him. Clumsily (rolled an 18). With one at his feet and two more coming, Sir William is besieged. And he hasn't felt better in decades.

Singletary Center for the Arts - UK campus.

"Father!" Amanda runs across the parking lot. Robert Halle is a strong man, but his gridiron days have long since been traded in for the golf course, and as he tries to stand it's clear that he's hurt.

"Call an ambulance!" Her trained voice snaps like a whip at the nearest stunned bystander; she can only hope they'll have the wits to call the police as well

before she turns her attention to the grinning man with the glowing hands.

Never argue with people with unnatural powers. Spying the keys their attacker covets glittering on the asphalt where her father dropped them, she picks them up, bounces them thoughtfully in the palm of her hand, then tosses them. "Here," she says.

[Seven years in New York and I never even had my purse snatched, and now this, here, she thinks. Please, let him not be too badly hurt... thank goodness Mother isn't here.]

[Phase 23 - Phoenix]

Maybe it was the shock and the stress, but the toss went a little harder than it should have. There was a glow to the keys, and the shocking mugger's eyes grew wide as the now fiery keys landed at his feet and exploded in a corona of fire! (12 points of damage; 04 to knockout!)

With a surprised, smoky expression, the mugger toppled face first into the asphalt.

Amanda turned back to her father, to see another passerby had stopped to help. An older man, one who lives on the street judging by his clothes, with dark brown skin and kindly eyes, talking quietly to Robert. Robert nodded and said something, and leaned back against the SUV behind him, while the passerby stood up. He was barely Amanda's height.

"Hello Phoenix. He'll be fine. I got to him just in time." Seeing her expression, he tilted his head and thought for a second. "Uh oh. You don't know me yet. I'm Mister Book. You ain't gonna feel real well tonight. When you're better tomorrow, come down to the old Wile Department store, back entrance. Say about 1 pm. No questions now, child. I've got other to find, and only a few hours left to do it."

Mister Book stood up and seemed to dance in place for a second as he stepped away from Amanda. A moment later, he vanished into the gathering of passersby, leaving Amanda keyless and filled with dozens of questions.

Responses due February 26

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Turn 3 - The Four Winds PbEM

Faulkner Bail Bonds (cont)

[Phase 32 - Fury]

Jake looks down at his chest fully expecting to see blood spurting out like Old Faithful. But all he sees is his shirt shredded. "This was a brand new shirt, Mom gav it to me for Christmas. You're going to pay for this, and pay with blood."

With a heretofore unknown reserve of emotion, Jake feels his anger at the attack flow outward to Clement Dodge (and nail him with a 1; I've got to replace these dice :) Fr this wellspring comes a surge of physical power beyond anything Jake has ever experienced!

[Phase 22 - Clement Dodge]

Already inflamed from the battle, the fury radiating from Jake triggers something bestial within Dodge. He leaps into the air, about a meter, spins 270 degrees and lunges with both blades, one neck high, the other aimed for the femoral artery. With sickening shriek, both thrusts connect. (8 and 10 points of damage; 2 to Invulnerability, the rest rolled with. I will assume anyone attacked will roll with a incoming hit unless they state otherwise) But except for the new tears in Jake's clothing, he is still amazingly unhurt.

[Phase 20 - Sound]

Josh wants this to end quickly. His newly augmented hearing registers the noise made Dodge's razor arms as they rip through the air. He begins to focus on this and lays a "decibel trap." But Dodge is too fast, and the attack detonates under him while he is airborne.

Getting horribly concerned over his brother's safety (and then his own) he damns his friend John for working the beat tonight instead of joining them for the midnight toa to the New Year. "If John and a few other boys in blue were here Dodge would probably flee..." Suddenly Joshua has an idea...

[Phase 17 - Fury]

Buoyed by his newfound strength, Jake stays toe to toe with Clement and clobbers him with a powerful right. (10 points of damage, Clement goes back three game inches to land in the street).

"That felt real good."

[Phase 5 - Sound]

The danger past, Josh lowers the shotgun. Sirens fill the air as Lexington Metro pull up. Officer John Tucker, long time friend of the boys, nods tightly at them as a bike patrol also arrives. "I say," says John. "Someone sure needs a manicure. This looks like your old pal Clement Dodge, Jake. Pressing charges?"

Dame Vera Farm

[Phase 30 - Sir William]

"A little exercise before bed is a fine idea, but "two's company", and all that." Sir William raps the fallen Treble Man with his cane on the back (rolling a 2, doing points of damage, and sending this Treble Man over the bannister and into the marble floor (3 more points) as he walks down the stairs regally, straightening his smoking jacket.

[Phase 20 - Tehsin]

"Either the onion bhajis were a little too potent, or that was an explosion!" says Tehsin from the kitchen. Grabbing a five foot length of bamboo attitude adjustment known as a lathi, Tehsin quickly moves to the drawing room, where he finds two men pulling themselves from the floor. With a bounce of his feet, Tehsin tucks and somersaults through the air, extending the lathi to catch both men (with a pair of 4s each takes 9 points; one of them goes heavily to the floor unconscious 01).

[Phase

18 - Treble Man 1]

"Ouch. Old man, yer gonna pay for that," he says as he rises from the Italian marble. With the second Treble Man busy, this one heads back up the stairs toward Sir William and attacks, but his swing goes amateurishly past Sir William's aristocratic head."

[Phase 15 - Sir William]

"I shall not retreat. 'Into the valley of death charged the ten thousand...'" With a clarity of thought, he turns and runs towards the floor length mirror down the hallwa He "hits the dirt", facing the mirror, and points his cane toward it. A reddish-purple beam hits the mirror, then to the Treble Man's surprise, the beam comes arcing into h shoulder (barely) from a mirror on the opposite wall. (11 points, and he only had 10 left. THWUD.)

As the laser lanced into the Treble Man, Sir William was heard to say: "The Charge of The Light Brigade. Tennyson." As the body thudded to the ground: "Excellent reading."

[Phase 5 - Tehsin]

Dropping to the floor in a near crouch, Tehsin lashes out with a leg sweep, dropping Treble Man 2 completely. (10 points, but a nice knockout roll of 03).

The Hilton Suites

[Phase 22 - Mark]

Mark, seeing that he's outmatched mano a mano, says: "Hey there, big guy. Is this you way of celebrating New Year's Eve? Why don't I buy you a drink and laugh it off?"

[delays action]

[Phase 19 - Monquise]

From behind his cabled fists, the heavyweight contender shakes his head. "Yeah, that sounds all right. Wait a minute. Where's the blonde? I don't like being played for a fool."

"She ducked into the elevator after you got off."

"Women. Nothing but trouble." The big fighter relaxes, his features taking on the relaxed, Holyfield-like confidence of a champ. "Look, I'd really appreciate it if thi doesn't get out, you know, to the news. I could lose my license if Nevada or New Jers finds out I took a swing at a guy in a bar. Let me take care of your bill, whatever y

got, dinner, bar tab, room, no problem. What do you say?" he asks earnestly.

UK Campus, moving to the Halle residence.

With a shake of her head Amanda turned back to her father. The peculiar Mr. -- Book, had been? had said he was all right.... "Father? Are you OK?"

He had a hand pressed to his head. "I think so... what happened?"

"I'm not really sure," she confessed, bewilderment coloring her tone. Four hours before, Keith Lockhart had been (she was pretty sure) flirting with her. Now it was after midnight, the world seemed to have gone crazy, and she was suddenly incredibly tired. "Let's go home."

Robert straightened up and glanced around the lot. "Where'd my keys go?"

Amanda spied a glitter near the unconscious body of the young man and walked over toward him. The keys were a shapeless smear of rapidly cooling metal at the bottom of small crater. "I think we'll have to call a cab." She realized that she heard sirens. What else was happening on this strange night? No one had gone to phone help, of course; they were too busy staring by turns at the still form of the attacker and at her. More people were coming out of the center, though, and they were going to add their questions to the rising babble of the crowd. She really didn't want to try to explain this to anyone.

Fortunately, no one tried to stop them, and her father was still too dazed to object her taking the lead. He leaned on her a little as they crossed the lot and twice asked her to slow down; she was a little worried that he might have a concussion, no matter what that odd man had said. But the long cab ride home seemed to give him a chance to recover. The cabbie chattered about all the things he'd heard were going on, quite aside from the expected New Year's violence. Amanda didn't pay him much attention; she spent the trip in increasing discomfort but was unable to quite pin down the source. was a relief when the cab stopped at the end of the winding driveway. Robert gave him \$100 tip and told him to enjoy what was left of the night.

I must be more tired than I thought. She didn't remember actually passing through the house to her old room. Her mother's window was dark; the headache which had kept her from enjoying the evening with her husband and daughter had probably sent her to bed early. Her brothers' rooms were dark too, but that was because neither one would be home until dawn. Anthony would make the rounds of every yuppie bar in the city unless he'd already found someone young, pretty, and easily impressed by a Rolex to ring in the year 2000 with, and Joseph would likewise be out partying, probably with people their father wouldn't give the time of day to....

And David & Co. (as Robert somewhat testily referred to his workaholic middle son's faraway family) had left the day after Christmas, just like always. She tried to turn the light out and realized that she hadn't turned it on--the room seemed much brighter than normal--then shed her clothes and fell into bed without bothering to put on a nightshirt, only to hear a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"You okay?" her father's gruff voice inquired.

"I'm all right. Just not feeling too good right now. Something at dinner, maybe," she lied. Her stomach felt fine, it was the rest of her that didn't seem quite right. "How's your head?"

"Fine now. About what happened...."

"Can we talk in the morning?" she interrupted uncharacteristically. Her head was swimming and she just wanted to sleep.

He hesitated. "St. Elmo's Fire. Never heard of it acting like that before. Your great grandad nearly got sunk in the Caribbean during a storm. He said that St Elmo lit up the ship like a city. Damnedest thing."

The north side of town, after midnight.

He crawled through the trash-strewn field adjoining the old RJ Reynolds property. Double C's people were riding by in their SUVs and chatting into celphones, all looking for him. He knew if he could make it downtown, he could use the old Wile store hideout for the night. Chuck was out of town, and going by his place was not an option. Still one of the kids he worked with had told him about the backway into now-closed Wile store. Best to just lay low, deal with this during the day. Tonight, everyone was too tightly wound to listen to reason.

The night started out not too bad, went to pick up Barbara to take her out for New Year's dinner and then the Modern Art Hop. But Barbara's mother was upset, and Barbara couldn't convince Carl to just leave things alone. Barbara's younger sister, Shawna, was out with a bunch of boys, ones Carl knew as gang-bangers and dealers in Double C' crew. He had to volunteer to go find her first.

Carl found her the second hangout he checked, the Sonic drive-in. Of course, being a year old know-it-all, she didn't want to leave. And her date and his friends decided play it tough, told Carl to get lost. Carl taught the one guy, RoJo, a neat trick involving his face and a plate of hot chili fries. Next thing, out came the guns, Carl's car had two new flats, and he was on the run.

RoJo was Double C's brother, after all, and disrespect must be paid for, always.

Bringing us to this fields, where Carl tenses as the latest vehicle stops, and footsteps approach his hiding place. Two of them, splitting up, one going a bit north

And one right here. Carl stared up, into the cold mouth of a Mac-10. Of all the people to find him, it had to be T-Gold. T-Gold had a nice head start on most of the young criminals in the Lexington area, The only crime not on his record was murder, and Carl sickly felt this going to change real soon.

Their eyes met, and Carl saw a hint of red in each one. Then, an odd feeling of camaraderie and friendship. 'I could not hurt this man, and he could not hurt me. We' on the same side...'

"Larry, I got nothing," T-Gold said as he raised the gun. "I ain't wasting no more time out here, you got that." Turned and headed back to the SUV. Larry quickly followed, and the pair vanished in a stream of red taillights.

Carl gave a quiet thanks to whoever watched over him, and made it downtown. He found the loose board behind Wile's and got inside. All the fixtures were gone, but the

offices at the back were still intact. One of those would be good enough for the night. He opened one door, to encounter the smell of eggs and bacon being cooked over a small stove.

"The Nightcrawler has arrived. My name's Book. You care for a late breakfast?" said the smallish, dark skinned man in a well-worn wool coat and knit watch cap.

Carl's shock wore off quickly. The feeling he had when confronted by T-Gold was oddly magnified now. This Book was someone good, almost holy. Carl felt the kind of safety barely remembered from the few good moments of his childhood.

"You best sit down and eat quick. The change is gonna happen real fast." Mr Book led Carl to a cot covered in a heavy sheet of vinyl. And as he sat down, Carl felt his muscles bunch and loosen all over his body, making eating impossible. Wracked with pain, he looked at the odd man standing by.

"Yeah, I know, feels real bad. I was dead when it happened, so I missed out. You'll be all right tomorrow, when the others get here." Book said. Then, he sat down and pulled out a candle and lit it, and drew a well-thumbed leather book from his coat, and began to read aloud.

"And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor the sea, nor on any tree..."

Late night. The city sleeps.

The Faulkner boys see only a fraction of the business they predicted. The only action seems to have been Clement Dodge kicking in the front door. Lucky. He barely missed with those blades. He slipped when Josh shouted. Nothing strange about that...

Mark Reinard enjoys a full suite and a magnum of Dom Perignon, well after the party has broken up. Monquise was as good as his word; the hotel staff proved extraordinarily polite and helpful after Mr Webb's manager had a talk with the hotel manager, and laid down a generous stack of Franklins by means of exclamation point. "I wonder what became of Lydia?" Mark thought as the credits for Basic Instinct played across the television screen.

Sir William, assured by Tehsin that the damage will be quickly repaired, waits only long enough for the police to arrive and tote away the three burglars. He sleeps full as a man preparing to embark on a grand adventure across the Silk Road, or into Tanzania, might.

The Halle Household, New Year's eve continuing into day.

"OK. Happy New Year," says Amanda.

"Happy New Year, sweetie. I'll see you in the morning." His footsteps went away down the hall.

"Happy New Year," she mumbled at the world in general, and fell into something like sleep.

Amanda woke the next morning with her face pressed into her pillow and a deeply unpleasant dream fading from her memory. She stretched and gasped in painful shock--what had she done to her back? Must've slept funny. She lifted her head and blinked at the clock on the dresser. She'd slept past noon?

"Good grief." She got up, carefully.

"Amanda?" her mother's voice inquired at the door. "Are you up?"

"Yes," she yawned.

"How are you feeling? Your father said you weren't well, he said there were some strange things happening last night and I watched the news this morning--well, you wouldn't believe it. May I come in? I brought you some juice, and some ginger ale in case your stomach was still upset."

"That's o--" She turned toward the door and caught her reflection in the mirror. "Oh god."

"Amanda?" She sounded concerned now. The door handle was turning.

She crossed the room almost before the thought that she should could complete itself, held the door shut. "No, don't... don't come in right now." Somehow, her voice remain steady. Think fast. "Don't. Uh, I'm not dressed."

"Really, dear...." Rose sighed.

"No, please. I, uh, I think I'll just go back to sleep for a while. I'm not thirsty."

"If you're sick you need some fluids."

"I feel fine. Really. Just... just tired, still."

And I have wings.

"OK," was the patient sigh. "Well, let us know when you feel up to joining civilizati again."

She thinks I have a hangover. That's fine.

The mirror over the wide dresser reflected a woman of slightly above average height a trim build; at the moment, her grey eyes were wide with shock. She watched herself li a hand and reach gingerly over one shoulder. Feathers. They felt soft and slightly wa under her fingertips, their color a few shades paler gold than the winter-sunlight of her hair.

"Those dreams," she said aloud, remembering. They seemed very far away now, but she knew they had been full of blood and violent birth, everything painted in gaudy color and peopled by monsters like those from the fantasy novels her brother Joe kept in th box under his bed. Not entirely a dream? Perhaps more like a delirium that had begun even before they reached the house last night. There had been pain, repeatedly jerkin true sleep from her grasp, but in the dream she had to stay quiet or the monsters wou come and find her, all newborn and fragile. So she had gritted her teeth against any sound and waited in the dark until it stopped, and drifted back into the dream, only wake again repeatedly. Finally, a little after dawn, it had ended.

Now she turned slowly, craning her neck to examine herself from all angles, too stunn

and amazed to feel anything else. No wonder it had hurt. Her new limbs certainly took up a lot of room. She tightened them without thinking, felt the muscles respond to her tentative wishes as she extended one slightly, then the other.

And knocked over the vase of flowers on the bedstand.

And caught it, before more than a few drops of water could spill. Standing there, shocked all over again, with the antique porcelain in her hands, she suddenly remembered the previous night. Recalling it now, she knew that there was no way her father should have been able to walk away from that impact, knew that the keys had taken on a haze of heat while still in her hand.

"Strange things happening last night," she repeated her mother's words aloud.

That man. Mr Book. He'd known about this. Known her. Knew it would happen. She had to talk to him. He'd said to meet him when she felt better.... She glanced at the clock again. 12:48. The Wile store, at one, he'd said. No way to make it in time... maybe. And anyway, I can't go out like this! she thought. There's no way I can hide *these.* But she couldn't spend the rest of her life in her room, either.

She wondered suddenly just how fast she could move now. Amanda set the vase down and went to the door, listened for a moment. No sound. She opened it a crack. No one. A visit to the bathroom was definitely necessary before she even thought about going anywhere. No one stirred in the other bedrooms during her foray. Hard to judge how quickly she was moving, but probably not too fast to be seen.

One thing at a time. She'd cross that bridge when she got there, if she got there. She had to at least try to find out what was happening -- preferably before she had to explain this to her family--and Mr. Book seemed like her only source of information if he was there. But first, she had to put some clothes on, just in case someone did see her. She pulled on a pair of jeans and her boots, grabbed the old t-shirt she used when she went running. A few quick snips with a scissors sufficiently altered it so that it covered the front of her but left her wings free. She was going to be cold, but there wasn't anything to be done about that.

Amanda moved the collection of her old stuffed animals her mother insisted on keeping from their perch on the window seat and looked outside. No one was in the backyard. She unhooked the storm window. It didn't actually seem that cold out. I haven't done this since I was seventeen and snuck out to the drive-in with Bobbie, she thought, hooking a leg over the sill. Momentarily giddy with the surrealism of it all, she managed to squirm through without losing skin or feathers and balanced there, looking down, for just a moment. If this doesn't work, I'll land in the holly bush and probably not break anything. A crow in the nearby elm made a sarcastic comment.

"Shut up," she muttered at it. "This had better be as easy as it looks...."

She took a deep breath and spread her wings.

Downtown, New Year's Day, 2000. Around 1 pm.

Jake and Josh watch as the crowds begin to gather on Main Street for the New Year's Day parade, street vendors already moving through with hot dogs and pretzels for sale.

In traffic, Tehsin Syed navigates the Bentley Arnage around the forming crowds. Sir William enjoys the view from the back, the floats and balloons, the cheerful people

milling under the cold clear skies.

After one of the best omelettes he's ever had, courtesy of the Hotel, Mark makes his way home, albeit somewhat delayed by rerouted traffic due to the upcoming parade. He finds himself briefly on Main Street, waiting to cross over. Across the intersection, he sees a rare vehicle for this country, a four door Bentley motorcar. "Wow. Must be some horse owner or something like that."

From the cracks of the boarded up Wile department store, Carl de la Cruces watches the various official cars queuing at the intersection.

At the intersection, the marshal's vehicle, a sleek blue Crown Vic with its top removed and flashing lights from every corner of the car, pulls up to a brief stop. Mr Alan Bloomfield, local philanthropist and owner of a massive public safety supply company, chats with his wife while people with radios begin to coordinate the movement of the parade.

Suddenly, from two sides of the crowd come six people. They are dressed in cobbled-together suits of football protective gear and toting rifles of a design never seen before. They converge on the Crown Vic and fire bursts of blue energy into the various surrounding people, who fall unconscious to the ground. One of the criminals leaps into the back of the car and seizes a bullhorn from a slumped passenger.

"Attention Lexington. We are holding the capitalist pig Bloomfield hostage until our brother, Raul Emperio Sanchez, is released from the Federal Medical Facility on Newton Pike and brought to us at the Bluegrass Airport." But the terrorist is cut short by cries from the crowd.

"Look, up in the sky!"

"Is it a bird?"

"No, it's a plane."

"It's..."

And, betrayed by a sudden shift of wind, the fiery form of the Phoenix can be seen by the crowd below.

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Previously on Homicide: Life on the Street :-]

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[Turn 4 - The Four Winds VnV PbEM]

[Phase 50 - Phoenix]

It is as easy as it looks, or almost so; Amanda can imagine the crow's voice is encouraging now as the ground falls swiftly away beneath her. Before she realizes it, she is in among the clouds; it almost takes more effort to move slowly than to dart. And she's not cold at all.

Making it to Wiles on time for her meeting will not, she suspects, be a problem. The pain in her back has diminished to a faint ache, easily ignored. She can take a few moments now to test herself, up here where no one will see. She recalls the night before, the way her anger and fear for her father had seemed to take shape around the cool metal in her hand, tries to summon that heat again and feels it waiting, ready to be commanded.

Surrounded by a comet's tail of flame, she practices a few swoops and heads toward her mysterious rendezvous, following roads she knows. Even at that height, when she reaches the area she can see without difficulty the gathered people, the line of cars. 'The parade. I forgot. Perhaps I could wait until they start to move, and the crowds will-

Then the shooting starts. She is too far away, too deafened by the wind in any case to hear anything, but the action as it plays out below is entirely too clear: men shooting into the crowd, people falling, the one leaping into the car and addressing the gathering while Mr. Bloomfield tried to shield his wife.

For just an instant she hesitates. Then someone in the crowd points, and people look

up; she's been spotted. 'So much for not being noticed. They have hostages. But the place is crawling with police, and maybe if I can distract them.... The one with the bullhorn, then.' A small part of her mind wants to know what in the world she thinks she's doing, they've got _guns_ and you're a freaking musician not a refugee from a b TV show.... But from another part she can hear a different voice (sounds like her roommate): "It's your debut, _cherie_. Break a leg."

'And everything is different now. No going back.' She dives, arms outstretched before her, an unlikely angel as the figure of the armored man in the Crown Vic grows rapidly larger, then blurs through the heat haze. She looses the fire upon him and continues a tight upward arc, arching against gravity's tug. She pauses there for a moment, just long enough for her image to register on those below. 'If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd have dressed better,' she thinks. But the lead terrorist raises his armored arms, the flames dissipating with the block (Four point attack doesn't beat his SR of 5; nice approach though.)

[Phase 35 - Fury (on AGL)]

Jake, standing in the doorway of the newly repaired store front, can't believe what is happening before him. 'What is going wrong with the world,' he wonders. 'First last night and now this. Something must be done.'

"Josh, call Sgt. Tucker, he should still be at the precinct house. Get some help down here." With that, Jake tries to make his way through the crowd. Focusing his anger on the nearest gun-toting maniac, Jake says "We don't stand for any terrorism on America soil." But the effort that was rewarded in the battle with Clement Dodge 13 hours earlier doesn't seem to take hold on the gunman, who now takes active notice of the approaching Jake. (emotion control attack misses)

[Phase 35 - Phoenix]

With another dive, Phoenix fires at the bullhorn-wielding leader. Under the fiery assault, the madman tumbles from the car, the bullhorn dissolving into a pool of plastic liquid. There is definitely smoke coming from under the armor this time.

[Phase 25 - The Nightcrawler]

Carl de las Cruces has had a long, painful night. While the enigmatic Mr Book sat quietly nearby reading, Carl felt the whole of his being dissolve and sluice into nightmares. But as the night progressed, he could hear Book, talking to him, with a sing-song cadence. "This is what you were. You have to relearn everything, just like the others. But you will. And the fire to win out over evil will relight and burn inside you again. Do not be afraid of what you have become, for it is what you were long ago."

And it is this memory that sees Carl off from the safety of the darkened old department store where he hid from Double C's gunmen. The light jars him, and the panicked scream from bystanders make him wince, but with effort The Nightcrawler slushes and gurgles his way, a humanoid wave of gelatinous plasma that bends light in ways it should never go.

A limb lashes out at a gunman who has just realized his presence, and pins him with a sickening glorpish sound to the ground.

[Phase 22 - GlassJack (by AGL)]

"Tehsin, take notes of that globular beastie to the left. Might make for good copy in my next script," says Sir William as he carefully sights along his cane and fires a beam of crimson energy at a gunman, giving him a substantial burn through a gap in the armor over the ribcage.

[Phase 22 - Sound]

Not about to let his brother go in alone against the armed terrorists, Josh follows after his brother hoping that any one of the cops already on the parade route will radio in for back-up. Jake's always been too headstrong and the incident with Dodge last night isn't about to diminish his impulsiveness by the looks of it. He can't let the innocent bystanders pay the cost for Jake's rashness either.

Josh begins trying to conduct as many people near him out of the sight of the armed gunmen, hoping beyond hope that he can protect as many of them as possible for as long as possible. Around this time, his keen hearing registers what can only be described as a "wall of sound" between him, most of the parade goes on one side and the criminals on the other. (sonic field in place, bystanders haven't had a chance to move yet)

[Phase 21 - the Luminary leader]

From the ground, he snatches a small device from his armor and attaches it to another. He aims it upward at Phoenix and fires! A blue globe streaks into the corona of Phoenix's form and detonates. (16 points. That's bad. Rolled for 6. That's good. 02 percentiles. That's bad.) With a scream, she begins to fall, Icarus-like, to the ground.

[Phase 20 - Fury]

"You heard me, creep. This is America, and we don't take crap from terrorists." His features pinched with rage, Jake throws a thunderous punch. But the burly gunman moves with well-practiced grace and slips the punch.

[Phase 20 - Phoenix]

The umbrella of a hot dog vendor cushions the falling Phoenix from any severe impact damage, and she rolls to the sidewalk.

[Phase 19 - Reflector]

"What the hell is wrong with everyone? First Monquise, now this? Millenia hysteria... Mark mumbles to himself as these yahoos proceed to ruin a perfectly good New Year's Day. Suddenly he realizes the gunmen have noticed him, as the apparent leader points from the ground at Mark's car and shouts instructions to another terrorist, who runs toward Mark. "Open the door!" screams the criminal at Mark.

Seeing how the gunman is standing right by the door, Mark agrees and opens the door...hard. Right into the villain, who is now gasping for breath in a soprano voiced sort of way.

[Phase 19 - gunman 3]

Singed from GlassJack's laser shot, he looks for the source of the attack and fires at the Bentley. A blue stream of energy dances around the car, and its engine stops with metallic cough.

[Phase 19 - gunman 4]

Regretting his last command to the man to open his car door, the gunman raises his rifle and fires at Mark! But the glass from the window dissipates the shot around the vehicle, which comes to a gear-grinding halt.

[Phase 19 - gunman 5]

"Ha ha ha. Death to capitalist patriots," he sneers and fires at Jake, but the bolt cobalt energy goes overhead as Jake expertly ducks the blast.

[Phase 10 - The Nightcrawler]

Having incapacitated one gunman with his first blow, one that seemed to flow from his newly mutable form, The Nightcrawler examines the rifle he had. It is nothing like anything he has seen, and from being around gangsters he's seen plenty of firearms. This one looks like it should be on a shelf at Toys 'R Us rather than in the middle of a somewhat serious fight. Hefting it by the barrel, he spies the leader nearby and lash out with an incredibly extensible arm. The leader doesn't see it coming, but his armor protects him as the rifle disintegrates on impact with his helmet.

[Phase 7 - GlassJack]

"Controlled EMP. Fascinating use of what should be merely theoretically possible now. I'll have to discuss it with one of these chaps when we've finished here." Taking aim GlassJack returns fire at the gunman; unfortunately, the EMP effect seems to have shorted out the power supply of the cane as well! (roll a 20, life sucks. Sorry.)

[Phase 7 - Sound]

Seeing Jake in peril, Josh switches his concentration to the rifle held by the villain. The rifle hums, and with a shriek explodes in the gunman's hands! He flies backwards and slams hard into Main Street's pavement. "Yes!" cries Josh. "Are you all right, Jake?"

[Phase 6 - the Luminary Leader]

"Arrogant dogs! I'll destroy you!" screams the leader at Jake and Mark. He fires a blue globe at the two men, who dive to the sides to avoid it as it detonates in a flare of azure energy.

[Phase 5 - Fury]

"Doing great! How'd ya do that?" But the battle continues, and Jake finds himself running toward the gunman attacking a lone driver in a car. Unseen until too late, Jake's fist connects with the back of the gunman, and Mark watches the crook eat a load of asphalt on his way down to the ground.

[Phase 4 - Reflector]

Mark looks at the angry bull of a man who just clobbered his attacker. 'This is my comrade,' he thinks. 'We should be fighting these crooks together.'

"Hey, pal, thanks. Want to clean up the rest of the bunch?"

[Phase 4 - gunman 3]

Seeing the attack on the leader came from behind, the gunman spots the weirdly define outline of the Nightcrawler, and fires dead center into the flowing mass (with a 1, ouch, 11 points, roll for 7, take 4).

[Between turns]

With the aroma of onion sauce and boiled hot dogs filling her nose, Phoenix pulls herself out from under the wreckage of the hot dog cart and shakes her head to clear it. Doing so, her flames reignite as her glare seems to blaze with its own fire. Meanwhile, citizens begin fleeing from the site of the battle.

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[In Between Time]

From within the astonished crowd, two men watched the Luminary terrorists falling to the surprise appearance of several powereds from the crowd. The taller of the two, with dark hair swiftly receding into middle age despite his youthful features, twitch his black mustache nervously. "Chance, this is definitely not what we expected to see here."

"Shut up, Northside. Gimme a cigarette," replied the small, light-haired fellow in a cowboy duster.

"Can't. You quit, remember. Told me not to give you anymore."

Chance glared up, his hand snapping open and closed a remarkably intimidating curved knife. "Cigarette. Lighter. Now."

"Your funeral. Here," said Northside as he handed over a Marlboro Light and a pocketworn brush chrome Zippo. Chance took both, flicking his fingers across the lighter's wheel. A spark ignited the bit of fluid that had leaked onto Chance's finge he lit the cigarette with that and waved out the fingernail flame. After a deep pull on the smoke, Chance exhaled and watched as the burning girl pulled herself from the wreckage of a hot dog wagon.

"And I wanted a Sabrett for lunch, too. C'mon, Northside. I'm just going to let Broth Mayhem deal with this."

"Really? I know these people look tough, but..."

"But nothing. One thing I learned from Johnny Boy, you see a problem forming, you handle it forcefully and finally. The Brother's methods may be a bit...intense..."

"Expensive," interrupted Northside.

"You get what you pay for."

"Do you believe he fixed the Minnesota elections?"

"I don't believe he only did it for two million. Maybe he's got a sense of humor, who cares. Let's go."

[Turn 5 - VnV PbEM The Four Winds]

[Phase 49 - Phoenix]

'That wasn't supposed to happen.'

A few moments of thrashing free her from the wreckage; Amanda shakily regains her fee and takes in the battle around her. 'At least it isn't just me. The whole world has gone crazy.'

It's painfully clear that her left wing won't bear any weight, and the rest of her feels like she's been hit by a truck, but at least she doesn't seem to be bleeding, aside from the cuts and scrapes inflicted by her inadvertent landing. And there are allies in the crowd; as panicked citizens begin to flee she picks them out as the one who stand their ground.

Those two--that one--that elderly man in the gorgeous old car--some _thing_ her eyes can't quite focus on over by the boarded-up store; its outline doesn't look entirely human, but then again neither does hers as her aura reignites. It had hit the man who had shot at her--the one who had just fired at those other two men--and then been shot at by another of the gunmen.

"Are you all right?" she calls to the person--or whatever--across the street, not yet knowing this is the Nightcrawler, then turns a smoldering glare on the terrorist leader. "I don't care about your politics, but I'm beginning to dislike _you_," she a but snarls, taking aim again. A powerful flare of energy cascades around the leader, but again his armor seems to hold and protect him.

'Time to give up on this one.' Phoenix thinks to herself. Then it occurs to her somewhat dazed mind how exposed she is there in the street; she takes cover behind the nearest abandoned car.

[Phase 34 - Phoenix]

Taking careful aim, Phoenix lobes a ball of fire at the gunman untouched since being struck by a crimson beam of energy emanating from the Bentley. FWOOSH! Although he dodged a bit of the blast, the gunman was knocked from his feet and straight into the side of a parade float. WHAM! Out he goes. As he sinks to the ground, Phoenix makes her way to where Fury and Reflector have begun to converse about the state of affairs in downtown Lexington.

[Phase 33 - Fury]

Looking to Mark, Fury asks "You ready to give some more? Let's go." With that, Jake leaps for the Terrorist leader, attempting to slam him to the ground. But the Leader ducks, and Fury goes flying overhead to land on the ground.

[Phase 31 - GlassJack]

"Bit of an odd idea has taken form, Tehsin. Keep the engine warm, I shan't be long." Sir William says. Then, tensing and curling up, he sprang forward, at the windscreen of the Bentley...and vanished...

...Only to reappear in the front seat of the open marshal's car, at the feet of the Luminary leader!

"Kerchief?" Sir William asks as he bows slightly and flings a bit of silk from his chest pocket. But the leader is preternaturally clever, and instead of watching the kerchief fly upwards, he ducks his head and avoids the blinding flash that comes a heartbeat later. "Ha ha ha ha ha! I am superior to your puny toys and clumsy charges, you heroic buffoons," he jeers.

[Phase 28 - Nightcrawler]

Taking advantage of the Leader's mocking hubris, the Nightcrawler slooshed around the marshal's car, its continually morphing form oozing into the back seat, sliding around

Mr and Mrs Bloomfield, and carrying them on a wave out and away from the terrorist.

[Phase 24 - the Sound]

The quickly moving footsteps of his friends and neighbors and fellow townspeople are sound for sore ears as they begin to make it safely out of harm's way. -- Making sure that there is a controlled approach to this exodus, Josh's voice increases in volume and calming clarity as he issues instructions for the escaping bystanders. Though he intended to attempt to shield the burning woman, she proved amazingly fast as she reentered the combat.

[Phase 22 - Reflector]

"So much for rescuing the girl," Mark mused as the burning lass brought herself back into the fight. Still, feeling confident after his last night, (why was that) Mark advanced on the Leader as he focused on the old man who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere in the front street. "Hey, you," Mark asked. When the Leader looked, Mark punched him in the stomach. The armored stomach, of which the armor easily absorbed a very strong punch.

[Phase 19 - Phoenix]

She rose from behind the two...heroes?...to face the Leader. Amanda could see into the madness of his eyes, and felt horrified at his obvious fanaticism. For a moment, she gave quiet thanks to the entity that had just removed the hostages from the vehicle.

Her arms rose, and vengeful flame spat forth. But he twisted with the searing flame, unwilling to acknowledge the harm it did him at all.

[Phase 19 - the Luminary leader]

Before Amanda's, Mark's and Sir William's eyes, the pieces of armor shifted and reformed on the Leader's body. He snapped off two pieces and fitted them quickly together, forming a wicked looking hand cannon! He looked to Amanda, then dismissed her with a sexist sneer that practically screamed 'insignificant.' His eyes found Mark standing resolutely before him.

"Goodbye, American. I respect your fighting prowess, therefore I will finish you quickly." He pulled the trigger, and a roar of electrical energy pulsed something forward at Mark. But the charged disc caromed from inches in front of Mark's chest to go dazzlingly skyward and erupt in a shower of white-hot sparks.

"Impossible! How could you have...reflected the Electro-Screamer?" shrieked the Leader.

[Phase 18 - Fury]

"You're asking the wrong question. You should be curious about how your insurance is going to cover your impending injuries," boasted Jake. But again the Leader infuriatingly danced out of harm's way and finally out of the car toward the sidewalk.

[Phase 16 - GlassJack]

With the Leader now in a more vulnerable position, GlassJack acknowledged the people surrounding him with a polite "pardon me" before springing backwards into the windscreen again. To their shock, he vanished.

The Leader reacted to the explosion even as it went off behind him, rolling with the

shower of glass from the abandoned store's front window as GlassJack appeared behind him. Glass shredded into the various components of his armor, but did him no harm. Sir William stood, hands folded on top of the cane in front of him, and waited for the Leader's next challenge.

[Phase 13 - Nightcrawler]

While the old fellow in the Saville Row suit calmly kept the Leader's attention, the Nightcrawler formed his morphous mass into a really large fist, and swung it downward like a piledriver. The Leader went to his knees under the assault, dazed but kept going by his insane inner fire. (12 points from impact, but even dazed he is able to avoid the worst part of the attack).

[Phase 9 - Sound]

With the crowd moving away, Josh makes his way to the scene. Seeing Jake is ok, Josh keeps moving forward. He forms his hand into a gun shape and snaps his fingers, aimed at the Leader. His power amplifies the sound dramatically, but only a couple of pieces of the Leader's armor fall to the ground. (curse that armor!)

[Phase 7 - Reflector]

Still surprised not to be wearing a smoking hole in the center of his chest, Mark runs to the Leader and swings. His fist connects with the Leader's jaw, and he drops hard to the pavement.

A rush of steam comes from Mark as he exhales into the New Year's day cold. Nearby, Jake pulls himself first into a fighting crouch, then to his full height, as his brother Josh carefully approaches from behind. To their left, cascading the light into a fractal pattern of effervescent chaos, the Nightcrawler drew closer to the wall of the abandoned department store where he had spent the night. The glass from the storefront lay scattered about the sidewalk, reflecting many colors as the living flame of the Phoenix drifted warily over the scene. Standing before the broken Wile's storefront, Sir William fiddled a bit with his cane, switching out a small power cell for another from within his well-tailored coat. When finished, he regarded the group and spoke, his voice clear as Big Ben cutting across the Thames.

"Seems we have a bit in common. My batman has an excellent picnic brunch packed in the Bentley; anyone wish to chat over brie and wine?" he asks. But the answer comes from behind him, within the shadows of the storefront. Phoenix and Nightcrawler recognize the voice of Mr Book as he commented out loud.

"I'll be batter-fried. The original group," he almost whistles in amazement. "But...well of course they would be. Can't keep the memories straight." Mr Book stepped forward, the rest of the group could see him. "I have a few answers, and even more questions. But I think what I can remember might be of help to you. Perhaps if you come inside, you can go out the back door and avoid questions you're not ready for yet when we're done."

He folded his hands together, fingers extended from the ripped gloves, and waited for the group's response.

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[Turn 6]

Previously on the X-Files :-)

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He folded his hands together, fingers extended from the ripped gloves, and waited for the group's response.

Amanda - the Phoenix - spares a deeply satisfying moment to kick the unconscious terrorist leader--'Not that I really mind you not shooting me again and all'--and flashes a smile at the man who dropped him. "Nice punch."

Mark, still rubbing his chest and flexing the fingers of his other hand, looks around with a calculating expression. He looks at each and every other members of the 'group', opens his mouth and then closes it again. Then with a somewhat boyish grin, he says: "Thanks. Um, Happy New Year everyone?"

Jake wonders to himself, 'What does this man know? Or what does he think he knows? Looks like some crazy street person, but then you shouldn't judge a...' He stops himself before finishing the pun. 'There sure has been some strange things going on in the last 24 hours. While I can't do anything flashy like some of these others I have noticed some changes in my reflexes and stamina. Not to mention I've never had razor sharp claws bounce off my chest before. But then I can't remember ever being attack by razor sharp claws before. Whole thing's just crazy.' Jake turns to his brother, "So what do you think Josh, is this guy crazy or do you think he might have some answers?"

Answering his brother, Josh replies "He's definitely crazy...but maybe crazy like a fox. Anybody's got to have more answers about all of this then we do. I say we follow the others in...who knows what other gun-toting lunatics might be waiting in the wings. We can't risk anyone like that recognizing us and following back to Mom or Dad." Josh takes the rear of the group and scans the area with his enhanced hearing to make sure that they are all going to be reasonably safe before entering the storefront. Other than the cacophony of sirens and shouting policemen, he hears nothing unusual. As he moves rearward, Josh withdraws a cigarette from his pack of Camel filters and coyly glances at Phoenix as he says "Anybody got a light?"

Even a few years being in New York's Lower East Side wasn't preparation enough for what Josh is now exposed to in his hometown: A woman with falcon like wings hurling fireballs, a gelatinous shapeshifter, a teleporting millionaire, and the rest all here on Gilligan's Isle...the situation reeks of absurdity and Josh can't help but shrug it off with a casual acceptance.

"Come on then." With that Jake jogs ahead to catch up with those that enter ahead of him. He catches up with Mark. "So what do you make of all this. I've seen that guy around town before just thought he was a flake. Always talking nonsense, maybe he wasn't so crazy after all."

Mark grins back to Jake: "Nice moves, by the way. No, I never saw this guy before; he does seem flaky, though. Then again, these last twenty-four hours have been rather strange to me. I still can't believe what happened back there." He then shakes his head. "The guy might have something interesting to say, or it could be just something to laugh about around a beer. Either way, I don't see it hurting."

They all hear the sepulchral rasp of the Nightcrawler rattle off the hanging bits of steel and glass from the ceiling and walls as he enters the building. "Hey, do what you want. This guy sat by me through a freakin' awful night. I'm with him. Fact is, I'm with anyone that can explain this," raising his malleable, gloppy arms. Waiting and listening quietly, Carl reforms himself from the astonishing mass of mutable genetics, allowing enough of his power subconsciously to mask his true features and form from the group; he appears now very close to human. With an effort, he lashes the t-shirt tied around his knee even tighter, and stands against a nearby mangled display case to listen as Mr Book waits for the others.

Amanda turns her attention to the small cluster of people forming in front of Wiles. 'Ones like me,' she assumes, although she notes with a bit of envy that they all look normal. Well, aside from the whatever-it-was that carried off the Bloomfields and now stands, all but invisible, nearby.

She has no inclination to distrust the peculiar man who stands waiting for them with such grave courtesy; whoever or whatever he is, he was a help the night before, and if he has answers she wants to hear them.

"The mysterious Mr. Book. I think that's an excellent idea," she responds in a quiet, precise voice to his proposal, dropping her flame shield now that the fight appears over and giving the rest of the odd group a quick, slightly wry smile. "I don't know about all of you, but I'm not feeling very camera-ready right now." Phoenix is quite a sight at the moment: one wing drags a bit, her face is puffy with incipient bruising, her eyes have dark circles from the long, painful night, her hair isn't combed, and she's wearing old blue jeans, brown Doc Martens, and a faded Cats t-shirt with a red circle and slash mark painted over the logo.

She heads into the abandoned store and looks around. Except for the dust-tinged sunlight streaming through the newly opened front window, there's little to see. A few broken fixtures remain, but anything of value has long since been removed.

"Although before going out the back, I for one would like some explanation, as you seem to know something about what has happened," she goes on. "I appreciate what you did for my father last night, but it's going to be a wasted effort if he has a heart attack the first time he sees me like this." She spreads her wings a bit and winces. "I'd like to be able to explain to my family--they haven't seen the 'new me' yet. And I'm supposed to go back to New York tomorr--never mind, I'm going to get fired, aren't I?" she realizes out loud, her shoulders sagging. "There's no room in the Majestic's pit for a winged cellist, and the equal opportunity laws don't cover freaks. God, this isn't happening." The pace of events since she woke up--a scant twenty minutes ago--had kept most of the

shock at bay, but now that defense is gone, and she sits down with a faint thump on the dusty floor, her head in her hands. After a moment she regains some of her poise and looks up at Book. "At least I'll never have to hear another Webber tune as long as I live. You said you had answers--and questions? Last night, you knew me. You can see the future?"

Mr Book looks past everyone to the outside, where the dapper gentleman from the incredibly expensive Bentley patiently speaks with a small gathering of police officers. "Merely a performance, gentleman, performance art, as it were. Come now, flying women and shambling masses of flesh? I hope a few of you play poker, hmm?" says Sir William to the small group outside, deflecting them from paying attention to the gathering inside the old store.

"Good man, that GlassJack," Mr Book begins. "No one quicker to step into the breach to save his friends. And while I do believe I know all of you, it's by code names. And it's not prescience. I remember all of you, to the point where I'm surprised you don't remember me. But I can tell that you don't. Phoenix, say 'Pax Avia'."

"Pax Avia?" she replies questioningly. But as she does, the tremendous beautiful wingspan retreats upon itself, until nothing remains except a long, barely discernable discoloration along her shoulder blades.

Mr Book continued. "Mental block. You know how to retract your wings, but you never could just do it. I don't understand how you forgot the phrase. You knew it the first time I told it to you. And I'm glad your father is all right."

"Maybe it would help if you tell us everything you know about yourself and us," Mark asked.

Mr Book nodded. "Rather than give you the story of my days, I'll bring you up to date quickly. Until last night, New Year's Eve, I lived in a men's boarding house off Limestone Street, and except for wandering the streets exhorting people to repent their sins, I was just waiting for any one of a number of old age illnesses to come along and take me. And that's what happened last night in front of Triangle Park. Only thing is, I ain't dead.

"I woke up in the morgue wearing nothing but a sheet and a toe tag. I feel better than I have in sixty years. And I have a mind full of...well, that's just it. You say it's not memories because it just happened to you. To me, a lot of events have already happened. Most of you figure in a lot of them. I don't know how to explain it.

"I do know that those who have changed have a bond with each other, a similarity of purpose. But when you confront those whose values are opposite to yours, bad guys versus good guys, you can feel genuine antipathy. Hatred for long time friends and love for strangers. Watch the news. You'll see important people suddenly start living their lives differently. Cops and preachers going bad, lifelong criminals making like Albert Schweitzer.

"That's what I know, clearly. What do you know?" Mr Book asks.

Mark, the Reflector, says "I don't know how I got this thing. Started last night, when", he blushes and looks away from Phoenix, "Lydia threw a glass at me. I still can believe how this can be possible, though. Some very real laws of physics say that I should be dead right now. This bothers me. What about you?" he asks the others. "And what's this thing about an *original* group? What do you

mean?"

"You six were...are the first to find each other and band together for the community good. Also, there's safety in numbers. But lastly, not one single person is going to unravel why this has happened, no matter how blithely the public now accepts powered people in the mainstream." Mr Book says.

"I'll be around back when you're done talkin' it through," says the Nightcrawler, followed by a stretch/ooze through the building, out of sight.

Mark shakes his head, almost in disbelief save for his own experience. "So we're to be this "Insert name" group. Who's the bad guy? There has to be a bad guy."

"They don't know yet," Mr Book answered. "For the first few months, the cops will be able to deal with them. But once the smarter ones, the stronger ones, get active in forming gangs, then you'll have the bad guys. As to who they'll be, I can't pick them out of my head. I'm sorry. All I know is, if the good ones who can take a stand don't, then no one will."

Outside, in the cold chill of New Year's Day, a dozen vehicles have gathered around the scene of the attack. Flashing lights strobe their importance at a million plus candlepower per shot, and radios sizzle with the terse patois of the emergency services professions. Voices have gotten closer to the opening of the store, and Josh can easily make out the conversation.

"Hey, everyone, the cops are coming in with Mr Bloomfield and the old guy with the cane. Bloomfield wants to talk with us!"

Lexington Cemetery in the late evening. Two men stand among the stones, watching a third approach.

Chance McCain and Northside Joe quietly watch as a young man easily scales the fence and makes his way toward them. Upon seeing them, he nods and unfolds a small table from a notebook sized box he carries. On the table he sets a laptop computer, and connects a small camera to the top of the screen. After a moment, the box flares quietly to life.

On the screen, leaning back slightly in a chair, sits the shrouded and cloaked form of Brother Mayhem. His eyes light up deep green, the color of money, behind and slightly above the low shades of his narrow RayBans. When he speaks, his voice is carefully neutral, without any trace of accent. Electronic modulation, perhaps.

"Heh. Chance McCain. How was prison?"

"A million laughs. You should try it yourself." Chance replied.

"No, thank you. But I do remember an agreement we had, something about my services and your early release from a justifiably lengthy sentence."

Chance exhaled, but said nothing. From under his duster he produced a paper-wrapped brick shaped object and tossed it to the wiry youth standing next to the computer.

"It's all there." Chance growled.

"I'm certain it is. Lawrence, the package can remain unopened until you return. Now, as to present concerns. Ten million."

Chance jumped, and Joe dropped his cigarette. "I haven't even told you about the job."

"No need. I already know what you want, Chance. My price for manipulating and discrediting these powered do-gooders will be ten million."

"Forget it."

"They'll have you back in a cell in two weeks at most. Enjoy your stay. Lawrence?"

As the young tough began to close the laptop and the table, Chance stopped him. "Hold on."

"Yes?"

"I don't have that much cash on hand. I have been in jail."

"Then there's only one play for you to make, Chance. You have to be the one to take control of crime in Lexington."

"What!"

"Oh, don't worry," soothed Brother Mayhem. "I'll mentor you through the early gambits. You'll brush aside the Mafia and the tongs, and every powered person with a criminal bone in his or her body will pay you tribute. No longer will you sit around the back of a butcher shop and keep going from little score to little score."

"Johnny B would say you promise too much."

"He'd be wrong, McCain. This is a new world. To the one who organizes it goes the spoils. But we have to give you a new identity, Chance. A new face, too."

From across the grounds, Chance and Joe could see someone approaching. Lawrence made no move to run, so the two held their ground also. A woman, they could tell by her walk and her long flowing hair.

"Chance, this is my associate, Lydia Morry. She'll guide you through the physical transformation and serve as our contact. She says, you do. Part of the deal, just until you get everything under your control." Lydia smiled her model smile at the two.

"Hello, Chance. We've got a lot to do together. Oh, Joe? Could you wait here for a moment?" she asked with an intense edge of emotion crackling through her voice.

"Um. Sure. I'll wait here."

"Good. Come on, Chance." Lydia took his arm and guided him to a waiting car, past Lawrence and the electronic stare of Brother Mayhem from the laptop. She drove a BMW M5.

When he got in, Chance realized he'd never see Northside Joe again. He didn't

mind one bit.

Carl oozed from the roof of his apartment building, down the side of the wall, to an exterior window. A quick glance inside seemed to show nobody waiting for him. He lifted the window, eager to have something familiar around him after the Twilight Zone his life had become.

His apartment was Spartan and reassuringly mundane. A few signed posters of 80's hockey stars hung about the living area, along with his first pair of skates, his first professional goal puck, a copy of his first professional contract (the Richmond Spiders), and a framed photo of his daughters. His television was up on cinder blocks, and the furniture was blandly beige and cheap. For all its modesty, the room was tidy, and only the pile of hockey equipment by the door seemed cluttered. The adjoining kitchen was darkened, as was the short hallway to the bathroom/bedroom suite. It was possible that the CCs figured out where he lived. Even so, Carl was loathe to disturb the precious normalcy of his setting, so he walked upright into the bed area to search it.

He swept his eyes across the room. The only pieces of furniture were a used king-sized bed, a makeshift sawhorse and plywood desk (with an out-of-date computer on it), and a worn Salvation Army dresser with a pile of dirty clothes next to it. The walls were bare. The room was clear. The last thing Carl glimpsed was his reflection in the full-length mirror that backed the bedroom entrance to the bathroom. It immediately commanded his full attention. Carl drifted toward it, mesmerized -- it was his first full-length glimpse of himself. The frantic pace of recent events had conspired with his own subconscious desire not to deal with his transformation, and now there was simply nothing to do but face it.

"Madre de Dios," he breathed. The immediate observation was that Carl could see through himself. The second-most immediate observation was that he was covered head to toe in a grey, viscous slime. It was so thick that his features and genitals were completely muted, like a slick, slimy mannequin. The haze that covered him caused his fingers to stick together lightly, and they made a sucking sound when he parted them. As Carl's mind reeled at the apparition he could not reconcile to be himself, his eyesight swam in and out. With each spin, the grey ooze darkened and lightened, occluding and revealing the room behind him. Carl's gorge rose at the nauseating effect. The human reaction burst him from his reverie.

He flew into his bathroom, cranked on the shower, and dove in desperate to scrub himself clean. The water sheeted off him, as did the soap suds he scoured on himself.

There was no change: he could see the sudsy water spiraling around the drain through his grey arm. He tore at the slime with his left hand, trying to dig down to his flesh. Any momentary gains were quickly reversed as the excretion flowed to re-cover any naked flesh. Self-pity and revulsion welled up inside him. He leaned against the shower wall as the water turned cold. His despair ate at his resolve, and only belatedly did he notice his tanned forearm. Then his tanned body. As he stared, the last of the excretion wicked into the backs of his hands and feet. The stuff had subsumed into his pores. He looked normal, but the crap was inside him!

Carl stepped out of the shower, and looked in the mirror. His hairs still glistened with remnants of the awful stuff but he was otherwise just as he

remembered. He scrubbed his hands through his hair, and found it stickier than rubber cement. His hair contorted wildly as if set with concrete mousse. Oh man. Carl resignedly reached for his straight razor. There was nothing to do but remove every hair on his body, if he had any intention of keeping this secret. His hair fell to the floor in sticky, wet clumps. Dios mio, what had he become?

From the small living room, Carl's phone shattered the silence. The answering machine picked up quickly. "Hey, it's Steve. Practice has been moved up to 12:30 since the WCW is using Rupp tonight. Be on time. Later."

And Carl's plans to meet up with Shawna and T-Gold had to go on the back burner for the time being.

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Turn 7

New Year's Day, outside the old Wile's store. Post battle wrap-up.

Alan Bloomfield, public safety supply magnate and personal friend to more highly rank cops here and worldwide than anyone, and his wife are at the center of a continually expanding circle of protective officers. The first on the scene, Lexington Metro, have been pushed outward first by a cluster of state troopers armed with Mossberg shotguns who were now being quietly but quickly moved outward by the local Special Operations and Response Team (unofficial motto: "We will sort it f***** out.")

The SORTies move with military preciseness, their features and genders concealed behind heavy black visored helmets and battle dress uniforms marked only with a number on the left shoulder, and threat level IV ballistic armor reinforced at the joints by hard polycarbonate pads. Four of them are wrapping a ballistic blanket around Mrs Bloomfield and whisking her to an armored Mercedes, while several of their comrades gather up the Luminary terrorists. They project intimidation, vests festooned with lots of noisy and deadly gadgets and tools. Arms cradling 5.7mm squad machine guns, loaded with lots of armor busting high-velocity ammo, and brilliant SureFire combatlights fixed under the barrels for use in darkness. Somewhere on the rooftops, two comrades have already unlimbered a sniper rifle and advanced optics to watch over the ground troops. Overhead, a helicopter buzzes dangerously close to power lines, while sirens continue to wail from all sides of the city as cops from every surrounding municipality pour into the city center.

'GlassJack. Phoenix. So we're going to have code names? It's got a nice enough ring. he _remembers_ it happening it sort of already has happened....' Inside the store, Amanda's not sure if her momentary dizziness is an after-effect of her fall or just the strangeness of it all. She stands up quickly, a little embarrassed about her momentary lapse into self-pity, brushes dust off her jeans and runs a hand through her tangled hair as the new group enters the store.

"All right. Phoenix it is," she says aloud; contained in the words is implicit acceptance of what Book has said. She's somewhat surprised at her own ability to adapt to this drastically new situation. For all she knows, this is another part of what went on last night, the subconscious knowledge that had urged her to silence throughout her transformation. Speaking of which, she casts a slightly concerned glance after the departed Nightcrawler; if she finds her own change disconcerting, how much more so must he? Perhaps he has his own version of Pax Avia. Her hidden wings are like a mental itch, and she can't fathom the mechanism that conceals them, but then she has no idea how she was tossing fireballs about earlier, so perhaps it's all of a piece.

Jake wonders how this all came to be. 'How did all of us come to be here just as this mysterious man says he remembers. How does he remember what has not happened yet. Unless...' "Mr. Book, the only way you could have these memories is if you had already lived this life before. Could you have come back from the future to lead our little group again?"

"No, you all were already in place as a group when we first...hmmm. Saints alive. You really don't remember me. Sturm and Drang. Sound and Fury, a play on Faulkner's work. says Mr Book, pointing at Josh and Jake.

"So this was all meant to be?" Jake continued. "We were all meant to meet like this a form a group of vigilantes. A group to quail the tide of evil that grows from this...this? What exactly is it that has happened to everyone? And why is it just som people are affected?"

"As far as being meant to meet...conditions were favorable for you meeting. You live in the same city; you have a certain empathy for each other. But the other questions you ask, I don't know what happened. Except that it was a deliberate act." Mr Book nods a the others register surprise. "I have no doubt someone caused this to happen. That's what I have to find out," he finishes quietly.

There seem to be a lot of things going on without Amanda's direct knowledge, between the dreams and the "mental block" and this business he claims of being able to recognize people on the same cosmic "side" -- which sounds as if it should come in handy, given the other things he's implied. Thirteen hours ago everything had been perfectly normal. Amanda shakes her head, amazed.

"You make this sound terribly serious, Mr. Book, and given what just happened I'm inclined to agree. If this has happened to people who would rather use these new... powers, for crime, it seems rather obvious that only other people with similar abilities will be able to stop them." This is not the time to think through all the implications of that. "I believe that things happen for a reason. Que sera, sera." Sh smiles a little and glances at the approaching group. "It would be best, perhaps, to appear to present a united front? Our English comrade seems to have taken the lead, b we might want to at least exchange names. I'm Amanda; you can apparently call me Phoenix."

Looking over to her, Mark Reinard says in reply "My name is Mark," and looks to the others for their introductions.

"Something else: All I know about the antipathy effect is that you have to be fairly close to someone, about twenty feet, to notice it," Mr Book says. "But you can't miss it. As for one side opposing the other...that's just how it turns out. There's gonna be lot of folks affected one way or the other who want no part of squaring off against a opposite number. They'll be able to put it off for a while. Eventually, they got to g to the store, or go to work, or somehow interact with society again. I don't know why they do, or you do, what you do. The compulsion will be there..."

Then, Mark spoke up: "Uh.. Mr. Book? Assuming this is all real and not just a psychedelic dream, are you saying that Lexington will be the site of the great battle of Good vs Evil, us," he points at the group in general, "being the good guys?"

"I don't know about any final battle. I know that here, and you all, are important. B I don't know on what scale," Mr Book replies.

"Is there anyway to reach you? And please don't say "I'll be around."

Mr Book smiles. "I won't be around. There's others who I need to find, friends I remember but haven't met. Then, I can find the one who's responsible for..." Book's eye glaze, and he trembles slightly. Then, with a boom, he suddenly shouts "RE-PENT! THE ENNNNNNNNNNNNNND IS NIGH!"

Josh clutches his head briefly, then recovers. Obviously, Book must be reacting to th approaching police. "Mr. Book, I have as many questions as the next guy here but if a of those blue bells recognize you and know that you're supposed to be dead, I'm sure they're going to have questions for you. It might be wise for you to hide or beat a

retreat." And his words have had some effect, for Mr Book has somehow vanished from sight. "Nice trick," murmurs Josh, who can't hear a trace of Book anywhere.

Phoenix glances at the others questioningly, gauges the men she is standing among; Book's words imply that these are people she will come to know in his remembered future. The man he calls GlassJack is poised and in control as he escorts the policeman and Mr. Bloomfield. Wonderful accent, and he moves with a grace that belies his apparent years. Mark, the one with the knock-out punch and the ability to deflect a point-blank attack seems to be a little shy, to judge from that blush. That one has quick ears and appears a bit flip -- got a light, indeed. She notes the calluses on his hands. Have to ask him what he plays, later. The other one has been quiet. No obvious thread of similarity to suggest why this change should have overtaken these particular people--and didn't Book just say that no one would ever know? -- except perhaps for the simple fact that they are here and were willing to stand against the sudden threat of the terrorists.

She notes with a flicker of amusement the way they have unconsciously closed ranks, a straightens slightly as the new group approaches, waiting a bit nervously to see what Mr. Bloomfield wants to say to them.

Turning from where Book was back towards the doorway Bloomfield and the others will be pouring through any second now, Josh runs his hands through his hair, pushing auburn bangs out of his distant blue eyes as he straightens his posture to its full 6 foot wiry frame. He takes a step forward to assist people through the mess of the derelict store. He hopes to casually greet any officers that he might know, but he recognizes none of the SORT members behind their tinted visors. Bloomfield and GlassJack talk easily, both men of equal status and means. "You've already seen the young lady, um," he glances at her as she mouths her name. "Phoenix. And we both saw this young man reflect that gunshot in the car." He points to Mark, the gunshot reflector. "And those two young men..." he says, looking at Josh, who remembers Mr Book's odd mention of a Faulkner book and mouths Sound and Fury back. "Yes, Sound and Fury."

Alan Bloomfield, a very healthy and tanned 60 year old, draws his fingers across his bald pate. His nose is craggled from a long-ago streetfight, and his voice is quiet and clear, the sound of someone used to making multi-million dollar decisions. Jake and Josh know of him from their many cop friends, how he started his business in '67 with a four page flyer he made himself advertising good prices on flashlights and Chief's Specials, and made his way to the absolute top of his profession. He looked around at the group, and turned to 3, the SORT officer standing closest to him. "I'd be grateful if you could keep a perimeter at the front while I chat with these heroic young people. I think I'm pretty safe considering two of them took a shot while saving my wife and I."

3 nodded once, and Josh could barely hear the man's larynx sub-vocalize a quick comma into a concealed throat mike. The black clad powerhouses turned to face the front of the building and moved away...but Jake couldn't help but feel that 7 was eyeing him closely...that 7 seemed to be a little more in position to bring that squad weapon to bear in a heartbeat...that there was just something - about - 7 that he did not like. Jake felt his temper rise, and started to move involuntarily forward toward 7. But Josh brought him out of his fugue. "Bro, chill. What are you doing?"

And 7 turned to join the others, not quite as crisply, but turned and moved just the same. Jake felt somewhat unsettled,

No one else noticed the exchange as Mr Bloomfield spoke. "I've seen performance art before. I'm not sure that was what I saw outside. Whatever it was, you saved our lives and I am deeply grateful. Thank you all." He waits while the group quietly murmurs in

reply, then continues. "I don't think this is the last we'll see of this sort of crim. Should your troupe continue performing together, I'd like to help. I've given Mr Pain my personal cel-phone number. I don't deal in firearms any more, but pretty much anything you can think of related to police or rescue work I can get. Just do me one favor: Mrs B doesn't like it when I get calls after 11 pm," he smiled. "Anyway, thank you again, and let me help you where I'm able."

With a nod, he left the group to consider the implications of what he had said. To wo as a group... The businessman, flanked by the armored SORTies, left to join his wife while the discussion began.

A translucent grey pseudopod crept into the room along the ceiling. In a disquieting burble, the Nightcrawler said, "Why should we believe...?"

The group jumped at his sudden return.

Josh was the first to recover. "C'mon man, you startled my frail brother."

"I thought we were boring you," said Jake with a hint of sarcasm.

The Nightcrawler stretched to the floor, then firmed into his humanoid silhouette. "I was listenin' in, just camouflaged from the cops."

"Does this mean I need to check the ceiling before I use the can?" asked Mark with a twinkle in his eye.

Amanda rocked back on her heels and crossed her arms. An uncomfortable look crossed h face, which she quickly banished.

"Unless you got a badge, you'll be ok," said the Nightcrawler pointedly.

Not wanting to exacerbate matters by mentioning that a number of his close friends ha "badges" Josh gives a concerned sideways glance to his brother and notes Nightcrawler seeming animosity for a future conversation...

GlassJack leaned forward on his cane and 'hmmphed' impatiently. "If we're rather done baiting each other, perhaps we could entertain the proposal on the table, hm?"

Mark looks at everyone and says: "This proposal is certainly unorthodox." He pantomim being on the phone: "Maw? Nothing new really. Oh, I joined a super-hero group and I'm going to save the world." Then Mark gets a look of horror on his face. Mom! That's wh he was going across town, to meet her at the airport! But despite all that has happened, little time has passed. Her flight isn't due for another hour. He continued

"I don't mean to be a sourpuss, but I can see some logistics problems in this endeavor. First and foremost is the Law. I wouldn't like to be wanted in 4 states on charges of vigilantism. I don't think that the cops are going to go: "Hurray, It's Superman!" Or whatever. At least not at first."

"I think with Mr B as a patron, that won't be too much of a problem. Provided the property damage is kept to a minimum." GlassJack replied.

"Second thing I was thinking was pointed out by.. Uh.. Sorry I don't know your name.. he looks at Fury, "that you've pointed out. Family, friends and neighbors may well be caught in the cross-fire."

"That out of the way, what are we gonna call ourselves? Surely not 'The Avengers'."

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Turn 8

The Nightcrawler squinted at his companions, having to strain a bit to read their expressions through some newfound myopia. Mark...the reflecting man's half-joking summary had given everyone pause. Everyone except GlassJack, who appeared for all the world to be impatient with these considerations. Easy for a man with a car like that do.

Carl jumped into the silence. "We don't need Bloomfield's permission to do what's right. I agree with ...Amanda? Amanda. We got these...changes...for a reason. If I don't make nothin' of them, that's on us. Law don't have nothin' to do with right and wrong. Hell, you guys jumped in on that hijack, same as me. I can't be the only one feelin' like this."

"You're not" Josh says waving his hand out and pointing his cigarette in Nightcrawler direction "but it's one thing to defend yourself from an attack like the one my brother and I fended off last night or spontaneously spring into action and it's a whole other ball of wax to start taking the law into your own hands...that said I think there's a helluva lot of good we can do out there if today's any demonstration.

"Look, not all of us share your police-o-phobia," said Jake carefully. "Mark and Josh just want to make sure anything we do doesn't snap back on us, that's all." The Nightcrawler crossed his arms with a glitching sound. I feel we would be better off in the long run if we actually keep the Police on our side. A few well-placed contacts could be beneficial.

"We aren't considering our grateful patron, who just departed. Alan Bloomfield's word carries a lot of weight in this city, especially with the police department. Certainly a well-placed contact by definition, and not one we should neglect." GlassJack began, only to be interrupted by Amanda.

"This is new to all of us, but there's a few things we're sure of. Mr. Book's trust effect for one. I can look at each one of you and know that we belong...if not together at least not as enemies."

Mark nodded quickly. "Agreed. If GlassJack thinks he can handle the legal end, and Nightcrawler doesn't care...are the rest of you ok with that?"

"I'm thinking if we play things straight, the cops will have to be more concerned with the bad guys than us," Amanda said thoughtfully. "Yeah, I'm ok with that."

"That makes sense to me," said Josh as he raised his cigarette for another drag and tried not to eye Nightcrawler with mild suspicion. He didn't remark that there were few markers he could call in if GlassJack couldn't oil the machine like he seemed confident he could. "Bro?"

"Hell, life's too short for dull jobs. Yeah, I'm ok with that." Jake replied.

"Ok," said Mark still unsure but willing to go along. "We are talking about professional law enforcement and detective agencies. What about our families? Even the law lets us go our own way, they're still vulnerable. To bad guys, well-meaning

cops, muck-raking journalists. Any ideas how to keep secrets, if we do this?"

The Nightcrawler bitterly kept his mouth shut. The rest of them were fortunate enough to keep their old appearances. Unless there was a magic password for him too, his daughters would never see their father again, now that he was something out of their nightmares. His form swelled slightly as he clenched his muscles in self-pitying anger.

Jake glanced at the swelling form of the Nightcrawler and stopped his tongue. He'd been about to say, 'We could all just go invisible like the Wonder Worm,' but reconsidered that maybe this was not the time. He does add, "There are always ways to conceal your identity. We just have to be a little more careful."

In an attempt to answer Mark's question, Josh answers "Mr. Book has already helped point us in that direction by 'remembering' code-names. He called Bentley there 'GlassJack'," Josh glanced to see if the old fellow would take the bait. Not even close. "Amanda was 'Phoenix' to him, and the 'Sound and Fury' pun is just too great to pass up for me and my brother," he says as he musses Jake's hair. "Now if anyone knows where we can get a bulk deal on domino masks we'll be set," he scoffs as he raises his thumb and forefinger upside down over his eyes.

"I think I'll go with Reflector," says Mark. "Things have been bouncing off me right and left. I just hope I can direct it. Don't want it bouncing off me and killing the guy next to me."

GlassJack pursed his lips, and his face softened. "Sometimes I forget how young those around me are. I have had some rather small experience dealing with such matters before. I would gladly lend my expertise where it might be of service."

"...which brings us around to that name thing again," said Josh.

"...and getting in touch with each other, and goals, and organization, and resources and teamwork, and tactics..." rattled off Mark, light-heartedly ticking off his fingers.

"Hey! Give us one easy one in all that!" laughed Amanda.

"So who likes Justice Squad?" asked Jake, "or is that just too corny."

Mark muses: "Names... Never my forte or else I would have been a writer not an engineer.. Hmm.. The Defenders? Ack.. it's copyrighted already.. hmmm..."

Josh begins laughing his ass off. "That's horrible...but I can't say much about it since I named my grunge band in high school 'The Flannel Firing Squad'," and as he air-guitars much to his surprise his laughter is transformed into a low pumping bass line from those days of yore. "God, that was embarrassing," he says staring at Amanda. Quickly averting his red cheeks toward Mark "...add training to that list of yours..."

"Hmm.. Power Team? Hmm.." Mark wondered out loud. "How about American Knights?... too close to gladiator..Batman and the Robins?"

"Only if we get our own signal in the sky." The deadpanned joke, in the Nightcrawler's wet, convulsive voice, gave them pause until they recognized it for what it was. Uneasy laughter followed.

"How about 'the Misfits?'" Phoenix suggests wryly. "After the band or that 80s TV show... as for the police not liking us, Mr. Book did seem to imply that... people li

us will be publicly accepted, come some future date. Wish he'd mentioned _when_." Non of them had thought to ask him how far his future memories extended.

"But look," she goes on, "I don't know about all of you, but this is something of a shock to me. Maybe before we make any decisions, either individually or as a group, w should think things over a bit? Book makes it sound like things are--fated, or something, but GlassJack and Mark are right, there could be some serious repercussion I don't think we should leap into this with our eyes shut. And I don't even _live_ here any more, I mean I was thinking of moving back but... I was just visiting my family for the holidays. And they're going to notice I'm gone soon if they haven't already, so I should be getting back. I'm supposed to be sick." She winces at the thought of trying to explain the open window, her absence, and her injuries.

"About family and such, I guess we could do the obvious and costume ourselves. That would do initially..", then Mark's face lights up mischievously as he pushed a curl o hair forward to his forehead. "I wonder if I put on glasses..."

Amanda groaned, then returned her attention to the group. "Maybe we could get togethe later tonight, or tomorrow morning, and talk? Somewhere a little more private than this," she adds with a glance after the heavily armored SORT types, who make her almo as nervous as the terrorists did. "If we _are_ going to do as he and Bloomfield suggest, there will be a lot of details to hash out, I think. My flight doesn't leave 'til four tomorrow." She looks around at the others for their response. "Or we could exchange phone numbers, or something?"

Mark pats himself. He then pulls out a battered pocket agenda and pulls out a page fo each one in the group. "This has been fun, guys, but I've got pick up someone at the airport. So here's my phone number." He scribbles a bit on each one and hands them ou "I'd like to get a number where I can reach any of you." After taking down the number Mark gives his pen to Amanda. "Here, pass it around when you're done."

Taking up the rear upon the group's mass exit Josh bashfully asserts "I'm really not that bad anymore, really I'm not."

"Anybody need a lift? I have to go out to the airport, if it's on my way or you're willing to wait there so I can drive you back." Mark asked, but with answers in the negative, he made his way back to his car. As Mark walks back out to get back into hi car, he thinks on the strange things that have happened today. Like a kaleidoscopic dream, he sees Phoenix arrive at the scene in all of her burning glory; Carl jump out of the shadows and, with an uncomfortably wet sounding swat, clobbers a man unconscious; the scenes speed up and slow down; Then the leader of the bad guys up close and personal, his armor reforming into a small cannon and shoots; (Oh My GOD!); The shot comes so fast, so close, mere centimeters away..(No, No.. Please, Please..) And the dream stops there.

Mark can almost feel those bullets, but not by the air they displace, more like he wa touching them? (No, that's not it, can't grab them, not quite touching, but not far from it either). He frantically tries to push them away. As he does so, the vision starts up again and the shot is reflected.

"Hey buddy, stop staring into space, get in your car and move out." Mark snaps out of his trance and smiles at the cop. "Yes, officer."

Mr Book watched them depart from Wile's. He hoped his shock at seeing all six of them together hadn't been evident. After all, one had been dead for a long time, by his

memory, and to see that face again had nearly sent Book back to the morgue. He sighed and hoped that what he remembered wasn't quite the truth. Still, all he could remember was that face, still as night, and the tears and anger of the rest of the group grow into a ferocious swell of emotion...

He had to go. He had to pray for direction again.

Leslie Walsh, PhD and a host of other trailing letters, watched them depart from Wile's. Her creations. Her fault. She took another drink from the bag-covered bottle Maker's Mark, letting the bourbon slow-burn its way down. How had any of this happened? She was an oceanographer by training, a computer engineer by self-motivation, and a geneticist by some intuitive twist of fate she did not understand. "What have I wrought?" she queried the bottle. But it gave her no reply, and the solace was quickly fading away too...

She had to go. She had to find direction, somehow.

Alex Collins leaped onto his skateboard and weaved his way through the departing crowd. In a few minutes, he was racing upstairs to his apartment. Mom and Dad wouldn't be home for hours, as usual. He could blow off his chores for a good hour and still have time to get them done before they got home. Alex logged in to his datanet account and began a new area on his web site. "Bluegrass Brigade Battles Bad Guys..."

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[the Nightcrawler] (gm's note: this is where this part actually takes place)

Carl oozed from the roof of his apartment building, down the side of the wall, to an exterior window. A quick glance inside seemed to show nobody waiting for him. He lifted the window, eager to have something familiar around him after the Twilight Zone his life had become.

His apartment was Spartan and reassuringly mundane. A few signed posters of 80's hockey stars hung about the living area, along with his first pair of skates, his first professional goal puck, a copy of his first professional contract (the Richmond Spiders), and a framed photo of his daughters. His television was up on cinder blocks and the furniture was blandly beige and cheap. For all its modesty, the room was tidy and only the pile of hockey equipment by the door seemed cluttered. The adjoining kitchen was darkened, as was the short hallway to the bathroom/bedroom suite.

It was possible that the Double Cs figured out where he lived. Even so, Carl was loath to disturb the precious normalcy of his setting, so he walked upright into the bedroom to search it. He swept his eyes across the room. The only pieces of furniture were a used king-sized bed, a makeshift sawhorse and plywood desk (with an out-of-date computer on it), and a worn Salvation Army dresser with a pile of dirty clothes next to it. The walls were bare. The room was clear.

The last thing Carl glimpsed was his reflection in the full-length mirror that backed the bedroom entrance to the bathroom. It immediately commanded his full attention. Carl drifted toward it, mesmerized -- it was his first full-length glimpse of himself. The frantic pace of recent events had conspired with his own subconscious desire not to deal with his transformation, and now there was simply nothing to do but face it. "Madre de Dios," he breathed.

The immediate observation was that Carl could see through himself.

The second-most immediate was that he was covered head to toe in a grey, viscous slim. It was so thick that his features and genitals were completely muted, like a slick, slimy mannequin. The haze that covered him caused his fingers to stick together lightly, and they made a sucking sound when he parted them. As Carl's mind reeled at the apparition he could not reconcile to be himself, his eyesight swam in and out. With each spin, the grey ooze darkened and lightened, occluding and revealing the room behind him. Carl's gorge rose at the nauseating effect. The human reaction burst him from his reverie.

He flew into his bathroom, cranked on the shower, and dove in desperate to scrub himself clean. The water sheeted off him, as did the soap suds he scoured on himself. There was no change: he could see the sudsy water spiraling around the drain through his grey arm. He tore at the slime with his left hand, trying to dig down to his flesh. Any momentary gains were quickly reversed as the excretion flowed to re-cover any naked flesh.

Self-pity and revulsion welled up inside him. He leaned against the shower wall as the water turned cold. His despair ate at his resolve, and only belatedly did he notice his tanned forearm. Then his tanned body. As he stared, the last of the excretion wicked

into the backs of his hands and feet. The stuff had subsumed into his pores. He looked normal, but the crap was inside him!

Carl stepped out of the shower, and looked in the mirror. His hairs still glistened with remnants of the awful stuff but he was otherwise just as he remembered. He scrubbed his hands through his hair, and found it stickier than rubber cement. His hair contorted wildly as if set with concrete mousse.

Oh man. Carl resignedly reached for his straight razor. There was nothing to do but remove every hair on his body, if he had any intention of keeping this secret. His hair fell to the floor in sticky, wet clumps. Dios mio, what had he become?

[Phoenix]

"Well, that was... interesting." So much happening, so fast, bizarre punctuation to tame holidays. She tucked the paper with its five scribbled phone numbers into her back pocket. She had woken up, flown -- flown! into the middle of her first fight, met a slew of strange characters, and apparently agreed to form some sort of vigilante organization, all in about, oh, fifteen minutes.

"Although if we were going to work together, the lot of 'em are going to have to stop blushing at the drop of a hat. Sheesh." It took her longer than she would have liked to get to her parents' house, even though when no one was watching she could run -- which would have been exhilarating if every inch of her body hadn't felt like it had been.. well, through an explosion. At least traffic was light. She kept off the roads as she got close to the house, and circled around to the back.

Her friend the crow had flown away, and she noted with a sinking heart that the bedroom window was closed; she had been missed. "I suppose it was too much to hope for, but now what am I going to do? Brazen it out, I guess."

She went back to the main road and headed up the driveway, walking slowly now. She was halfway there when the front door opened and her mother hurried out to meet her, exclamations and questions spilling forth in a torrent. Everyone else was out looking for her. That was good in that it gave her a bit more time to prepare, but bad in that she hated lying to her mother. And she had decided over the course of the long walk that she would have to lie, at least for the time being. Maybe later on she could tell her the truth, but right now, with everything undecided, it would be foolish.

By the time the miracle of cell phones had herded her scattered family back into the living room, she had outlined the story. The open window? She'd been too warm the night before and just forgot to close it. Well yes, she probably had been running a temperature. Her absence? She'd been feeling better soon after she woke up and decided to go for a walk. She'd gone out through the back door. She'd been quiet; she wasn't sure if anyone was still sleeping or not. No, she hadn't worn a coat; she had just planned to go down the road and back and get some fresh air. What had happened to her? Well, she'd gone down around the corner at the intersection and turned around, and then the car had come barreling out of nowhere... No one even asked what she had done to her T-shirt.

The trip to the hospital consumed the rest of the day. They were busy with post-holiday trauma cases, and she had to wait a long time before anyone was available to see her. Which was fine with Amanda, although it seemed to put her father in a temper; finally Rose suggested diplomatically that he leave the two of them there, they'd be fine, and she'd make sure that things were taken care of. That was a bit of a relief.

Amanda napped while they waited rather than be drawn into a conversation, aware that

her mother was undoubtedly thinking about her story and probably not believing a word of it. Not that Rose would every betray the fact by so much as a flicker of her expression, of course; she maintained her usual regal calm, but her daughter wondered what conclusions she had come to.

It was rapidly clear that Dr. Shaw didn't believe a word of it either, but when Amand stuck to her guns she didn't have any choice but to accept it. Did she want to file a police report? No point, really, she hadn't seen the license plate and couldn't even tell you what color it had been, she'd been so stunned. OK, if that's what you want..

The doctor found that she didn't have a concussion or any serious injuries, and her mysterious flu seemed to have cleared itself up as well. She suggested that Amanda ta it easy for a couple weeks and see her regular doctor in New York if she had too much pain or trouble breathing. And have you always had those birthmarks on your back? Um. yes. Might want to have those looked at, too.

"This has been the longest day of my entire life," Amanda thought as they made their way back home. After dispensing reassurances to the rest of the family, she dragged herself back to her room for a real nap before dinner, subliminally aware that every once in a while the door would open a bit as someone checked on her. She woke just before seven o'clock to the sound of clattering pans in the kitchen as her mother started dinner, took a long, ferociously hot shower, and felt a tiny bit better, although she had to admit that she looked simply awful. Nothing to be done about that. She ran an imaginary series of scales and winced. Bad enough that she'd taken the holidays off this year, if she didn't make it back to work this week they were not going to be happy....

She remembered that she had another option. The morning seemed like just another part of the previous night's dreams, but the sheet of paper was still there. She supposed she should call one of the others and see if any progress had been made on a consensu Names, costumes, secret identities... she knew some people who would just go mad with envy if they had any idea, but at the moment all she could see was a logistical nightmare, hazed over to some degree by the sheer adventuresome excitement of it all. She dressed with careful attention, intending to put the image of her from earlier in the day as far as possible from her family members' minds, and went downstairs determined to act as if everything was normal.

And stopped. The whole family was here...oh, they'd planned to get together after the N Year for some time, take a family trip to Orlando and visit Mickey and Minnie and wat the fireworks over the Magic Kingdom. But she couldn't go. Not now. Not after having that odd feeling of antipathy she was now busily trying to deny. With a rush, Amanda fled into the kitchen, the door swinging freely open and closed behind her.

"So how are things in New York?" Rose asked, running a bit more hot water into the sink. "It seems as if we haven't really talked since you got here, just the two of us

Amands goggled at her mother, then realized there was no way she could have felt the same feeling she'd just had. "Never changes. Lot more tourists this year, for the millennium stuff, so there's been more trouble, but nothing big." She accepted the glass dish her mother handed her carefully and dried it, set it on the counter.

"And how is Christopher doing?"

"Hm? Oh, I don't know." When her mother raised an inquiring eyebrow she elaborated, "haven't seen him for a few weeks now."

Rose sighed with gentle forbearance. "Another one?"

Amanda shrugged and couldn't help smiling a little. "Well, yeah. I know, I should know better than to date musicians, right? We're either immature or slaves to our muse. Or both. Though I don't know why 'everyone' I meet is so commitment-shy they think a third date is an offer of marriage."

"That being the case, is there anyone on the horizon I should be aware of?" Rose teased.

"Not really, right now. Hope springs eternal, though." She paused, plunged. "Um. I'm probably going to move back here. Soon," she added after a moment.

"You've mentioned that once or twice recently. You've made up your mind, then?" her mother asked, handing her a plate.

"Yes." The morning's events had given the question new urgency; dinner had finalized her decision. She managed a smile despite the horror she still felt at the memory. "I love New York, but just living there takes so much effort. There's so many people who all want the same thing, and it takes all my time just to stay in one place. I haven't gotten any real writing done in months. I've seen a lot of people my age burn out in the past few years, and I'd kind of like to avoid it. Make sense?" "Plus," she added silently, "I have these weird powers now, I've been drafted into something that's sure starting to look like a war no matter what Book says, and this is where I need to be fight it. Even if that means...."

"Of course. You know I want you to be happy, and you've always known what you wanted and how to get it. You take after your father a bit that way." She smiled at Amanda's startled look. "Not too many others, mind you, but you share that determination. I'm sure everything will turn out well. It will be nice to have one of you kids back in the neighborhood."

"I hope so. I just need a breather. And some peace and quiet." That didn't seem particularly likely, but the charade was necessary. And it was true that while living in the city was intense fun, it was also just that -- intense, and she had music to write that simply wasn't finding its way into the world amidst all the distractions of trying to make a living there.

Once everything was put away she pulled out the list of phone numbers. Josh, she decided, since he might be able to answer another question. She kept an eye out to make sure no one was eavesdropping; she felt a little silly about it, but it seemed foolish not to take precautions. She would not, she decided, mention what had just happened; that could wait until she saw the others face to face again.

"Hello? Hi. This is Amanda. From this morning," she added, just in case he might possibly have forgotten. "I can't really talk right now, just wanted to see if any decisions had been made about names and so forth?I don't know, they all seem kind of hokey. The Millennium? OK.... Like I said, I'm going to be heading back to New York tomorrow, this is my number.... Pass it around? I'll be in touch from there. I know, the timing isn't the greatest, but I didn't exactly expect this to happen. I'll be back in the area soon, I just don't know exactly when. I'll let one of you know... So, once I do get back, any idea where a piano player can find a gig these days? What? You're kidding? What happened to Speakes? Oooh. RSI. Will he be ok? That's terrible. Red Sky Diary was my first real rock concert when I was a kid... Hm. Thanks. Keep in touch."

On a notecard, she wrote down what Josh had told her. Red Sky Diary had relocated from Austin to Lexington, and founding member Alex Speakes was quitting due to advanced RS

He's stay on as manager, something they'd never had in their eleven year existence. But she couldn't just show up on the band's front door with her Roland and her fretle Rick 4001 and say 'hi guys, I'm here, let's get it going.' Could she?

She could. Did it just like that. Speakes and the singer, the bearded Frenchman Alain had bemusedly welcomed her into their new studio, seeming to humor her the whole time. Ten minutes into the rehearsal, Speakes had called the rest of the band in; the jam session lasted the better part of three hours. Speakes had a contract in her hands as she left. "Pretty please, with sugar on top, sign that damned thing," he had asked. She couldn't help but giggle a bit; this was the same bass player who tried to force-feed particularly obnoxious brand of reporter a set of Bartolini pickups, and reportedly tossed Henry Rollins through a Trace stack at the 9:30 Club a few years back.

Her friends were stunned. Her conductor was furious. Her agent was by turns stunned, furious, and entreating. And her roommate thought she was probably pregnant. But over the objections of all and sundry, she was firm in her decision: she was moving back to Lexington. She had been thinking about it for the past year, she reminded them all patiently. "Well yes, but we never thought you MEANT it!" was the general wail. Some of her friends had money. They threw her a wonderful going-away party. She cried. Most of them cried. They all had a good time anyway. She gently turned down a few offers to make it an even better time--last chance.... She promised to visit often. And then it was done.

With a whistled chorus of "My Old Kentucky Home" on her lips, Amanda Halle returned to Lexington. She did some shopping before she left, though. No point in doing this secret identity stuff unless you're going to do it right. Phoenix would require a suitably dramatic image to go with the name.

[the Nightcrawler]

Carl eventually found the Double Cs. Trial and error showed him he could control his translucency by focusing his vision -- the less focused, the less visible. Unfortunately, he needed to find and follow RoJo specifically, and clear sight was necessary. Nighttime worked in his favor though, and by sticking to the roof lines of buildings, in as many shadows as he could, marginal translucency was enough to secure virtually invisible.

It was a typical night for RoJo's crew. There was a large drug deal early in the night and the rest of the evening was spent splitting it out to their street vendors. Carl let the deal go through this once, to get acquainted with the players in the operation. They had apparently skimmed a bit off the top, as the night ended with a party in an abandoned tenement. It was relatively simple for Carl to squeeze his way in, as few of the windows remained unbroken.

Carl allowed himself to be hopeful when he noticed Shawna was absent, this time. Towards sunrise, things wound down. RoJo grabbed one of his ex's off the arm of her putative boyfriend. They were both too stoned to care. He led her, only slightly resisting, to an upstairs apartment that had mattresses stacked in every corner. Numerous couples in various stages of drug-induced coma littered the stained pads. Ro pulled her into the master bedroom, where there was an actual bed. He kicked the current occupant, who reached for a weapon until he noticed who it was. The skinny guy grabbed his partner and darted out in a flurry of clutched clothing.

When RoJo casually pushed the blank woman to the bed, Carl's beleaguered patience expired. A heavy fist crashed into RoJo's chest, seemingly from nowhere. A thick plasma sloshed over his torso, and as RoJo slammed to the ground, the slime splattered and spread to the weak wooden floor.

RoJo's drug-addled brain cycled from shock to fury and he reached for his weapon, only to realize the ooze held him fast. He could struggle, but could not break free. A ghostly face craned down from the ceiling, and into the surprised girl's view.

"Get lost," it burbled with a sickly sound. She scrabbled wildly across the bed and burst out of the room on all fours. A second later, her screams pierced the murky quiet of the tenement.

RoJo stopped struggling momentarily as he detected the elongated, ghostly presence on the ceiling. "Wha-what the hell are you?"

Carl stretched himself into RoJo's space aggressively. What was he? A good question. What was it Book had called him? "The Nightcrawler."

RoJo's face turned in abject fear. The horrific apparition was like something out of childhood nightmare. "What do y-you want from me?"

The Nightcrawler snaked a sticky arm around his neck. He applied no pressure, just let the weight and texture speak for itself. "This city is now under my protection. You scum got two choices: leave or get wiped out. And while you're decidin', if you hurt anyone, I'm going to hold you, RoJo, personally responsible." The Nightcrawler untangled his arm and retreated to the shadows of the ceiling. "There's nothing you can do that I won't know about. Never forget that."

Carl defocused himself to complete invisibility, and slid out the window into the night. He lingered on the wall, just outside. RoJo started screaming at the top of his lungs. "Sonuvabitch! T-Gold! Larry! Goddammit get in here!" Running feet rumbled through the tenement, and became a hopeless burble of profanity while RoJo tried to explain what had happened. They finally managed to pull him free of the floor, then he had to pull free of each other.

"Crap, RoJo, what the hell did you get on yourself?"

"I got no frickin' idea! Goddam freak burst in on me..."

Carl extended his head back into the room, and allowed himself to become partially visible. "Never forget, RoJo."

The gangster actually yelled out in shock. He shook as he grabbed the MAC-10 from Larry's hand. Carl pulled himself onto the roof and then onto the next building as RoJo cut into the tenement's ceiling with automatic fire. His panicked cursing could be heard even above the gunfire.

Carl let out an adrenalized laugh when he was well away from the seedy Bluegrass-Aspenhill tenements. Then a voice from the darkness sent Carl flying up the side of a wall.

"Relax. It's just me. T-Gold," said the quiet voice from the ground. Carl looked at the massive ganger, and he looked even scarier in the darkness. With a slapping gurgle, Carl descended to the ground. "Yes, I know who you are, Mr De la Cruces. I intend no harm toward you."

Intend no harm...Carl knew quite a bit about T-Gold, and one fact was that he hadn't completed school past the eighth grade. This was the same habitual criminal and notorious tough who had inexplicably not shot him the night before?

"You must have a lot of questions. I have a car nearby. Would you ride with me while talk?"

Carl nodded, and followed as T-Gold led him to a fully tinted Malibu parked under a streetlight. T-Gold pressed something in his pocket, and the car chattered a welcoming tone through its horn as the alarm deactivated. When both men were in, T-Gold drove west, toward the airport.

"Something has happened to me within the last 48 hours, Mr De la Cruces..."

"It's Carl, please."

T-Gold nodded. "Thank you. I think I'd best stay with my street name for the time being. Do you remember last night, when I found you in the brush?"

"Hard to forget automatic weapons."

"Yes. I suddenly had a revelation, that I could not harm you nor cause harm to come to you. Whatever happened to me also happened to you. Can you shed any light on this?"

"Um, no, not yet. I mean, I don't know what happened. Why are you talking like Miss Manners?"

T-Gold laughed, and it was a warm, sharing sound, not the staccato chuckle of the criminal he...is? Was? "That is likely linked to recent changes in my neurological structure. The hemispheres of my brain have become almost completely joined. I am currently using 33% of my brain's capabilities. Most people use at most 10%. There are no tests available to measure my newly enhanced intellect. Furthermore, I believe my capabilities will increase with time."

"Wow. What's this got to do with me, though?"

"I hoped you could tell me what happened to us."

"I'm sorry."

"That's all right." And T-Gold said nothing more until they reached the airport. The car stopped at the departures gate. T-Gold turned to Carl and smiled, offering his hand.

"I'm sorry to leave on such short notice. In the backseat is a briefcase, containing detailed information on the Double Cs drug importation and sales business. If nothing else, please get it to the police, though I think those who stand above RoJo and his crew will withstand official inquiries."

"Where are you going?"

"Baltimore. Johns Hopkins University. I'm going to become a doctor. Then I plan to find some quiet community where low-income folks need a general practitioner, and live my days atoning for my crime-filled life. The car is yours, Carl; papers in the glovebox I've tuned the carburetor so you should get about 100 miles to the gallon. Keep that our secret."

And then, with a smile and a wave, T-Gold walked into the airport, and quickly vanished through the security screens.

[Reflector]

Mark spent the extra money on the valet parking; no point in making his mother walk across a huge parking lot just so he could spend \$5 less on parking while he waited for her flight. Soon, the small Canadair commuter arrived from Chicago, and Marilyn Reina descended from the small craft.

She ascended the gate into the terminal, and quickly approached Mark, kissing him on the cheek. "Hello son. It's good to be on the ground."

"Hi, mom. Good to have you here. Let's get your bags."

"Actually, Mark, this is all I have," she replied, indicating the wheeled suitcase at her feet. Nearby, a man goggled at overhearing this. "Sheesh, my wife's purse is bigger'n that..." he muttered, as Mark wondered along those lines.

"I'll take that, then," he scooped it up lightly and held his arm out to her. She looked at the bag and then at him, then squeezed his arm.

"Mark, have you moved into a gym?"

"No, why?"

"Are you kidding, you've got arms like your great-grandfather, and he got his buildings during World War II."

"Really? I have been eating my vegetables." They walked together, and the valets quickly had his car back, freshly washed and vacuumed. Mark tipped them, and soon they were on Man O'War Boulevard.

"Are you hungry, Mom?"

"Yes, please, I'm famished. Mark, I have something to tell you. This flight I just arrived on?"

"Yes?"

"It was a one-way ticket."

Mark praised himself for remaining so calm, even after the Safety Officer had pulled them over and given him a warning for running a nearly red light. Over lunch at Applebee's, Marilyn explained the circumstances of her arrival...her pain of learning of Andre's frequent infidelities with 20-something coeds...the quick and painful ending to their status as husband and wife...her decision to take her money and relocate to the horse farms of Central Kentucky. He felt a little guilty at wondering how he was going to take care of her...he would do anything for her. Now he realized he didn't have to do anything, except maybe show up for dinner once in a while.

"I don't want to suddenly become a major concern in your life, Mark. I'm well invested and medically insured, strange a concept as that is. I'm here to start living my life again, not to live yours or have you live mine. Quite frankly, I've earned it."

And Mark hugged her and took her to her hotel; real estate paperwork would take a couple of more days, she explained, and she looked forward to having her room cleaned and food served at her leisure, after decades of doing it all herself.

If that wasn't enough to make Mark's day, imagine his surprise when he returned to the

lobby, only to have the elevator door open on Lydia Morry.

[Sound and Fury]

The cleanup took all day and most of the evening, but when Josh and Jake were finished Faulkner Bail Bonds looked great. Josh had spent a few minutes on the phone, and when he told Jake it was Amanda, Jake smirked and punched him in the arm.

"Hey! What was that for? And I think you nearly broke it," Josh protested.

"What's that for? You're kidding right? You're lucky you have eyes, the way they were bulging toward Miss Phoenix's flaming form."

"Oh come on..."

"Please, big brother, spare me the grief. So, you've got music in common, huh? How come you weren't bragging about knowing Rob and Jonas from Red Sky Diary?"

Josh prepared to answer, but they were interrupted by the opening of the front door. Still quite fresh in their minds was the battle from the other day, and they were prepared for anything when they went to see who had entered.

She was about 5'5" with hair as red as burned copper, and dressed in the latest DKNY businesswear. Josh and Jake felt like they were standing in front of the sun. With a graceful flow to her step, she crossed to the two and introduced herself. "Mr Faulkner I'm Emma McBell, public defender's office."

Jake rolled his shoulders forward and back. "Jacob Faulkner, proprietor. Oh that's Josh here too."

"Nice to meet you both. I have a client who needs a bail bondsman, but I've been turned down by the offices that normally work with us. My client is considered somewhat high-risk. I'll understand if you also say no, but I'm really running out of options."

"Well, ma'am, I've also worked as a skip-trace for a number of years. If your client decides to fly, I can get him back," Jake said with confidence.

"Great," Emma replied. "Here's all the paperwork, and the \$2000 in cash you'll need. It's ok with you, I'll be back in an hour for the paperwork?"

Josh started to speak, but Jake stopped him. "That'll be fine. Nice meeting you, um, I'm sorry, Mrs McBell?"

"Just Miss, I'm not married."

"Oh really?" Jake replied.

"Oh for cripe sake," Josh mumbled. Emma shook her head, and both men felt like they were back in high school. She departed, and Josh opened the paperwork she'd left on the desk. With a double-take, Josh read and re-read the particulars. "Oh little lovestruck brother?"

"Uh huh?" Jake replied dreamily.

"Care to know the name of 'our' client?"

"Sure, why not?"

Josh pushed the folder over to Jake, then grabbed him by the back of the head and aim his face at the defendant line. Jake took a moment to fully register what he was seeing, then leaped from his chair.

"We just took Clement Dodge as a client?!"

[Top of the Fifth Third building, sunrise. A solitary figure.]

With the first rays of the sun beginning to pierce the cold January morning, his features concealed behind a motorcycle helmet, the Snowman watches as the sun rises over the city. He wears slate grey BDU clothing decorated with a modified tiger strip urban camouflage. Heavy boots complete his outward wardrobe.

In his gloved hands, he writes carefully in a cloth-bound notebook...

__January 3rd, 1999: The war begins. I announced myself last night to a pair of would-be ATM stick-up men on Main Street at Bank One. No executions this time, though I did leave my calling card with them as a sign to those who will sadly follow in their footsteps. Soon, the Purple Mask will realize his plans are threatened, and when he makes his mistake, I will be waiting.__

He replaced the hand-sized journal in a large cargo pocket, then put his hands together. A small flat clean piece of ice formed there. With a few strokes, he remade it into the shape of a 6-inch tall snowman, three mounds high, and left the little Frosty on the cornerstone of the building. A cloud of frozen air swirled around him, and as it dissipated so too did the enigmatic Snowman.

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