

Turn 10 - VnV PbEM The Four Winds

[the Nightcrawler]

Carl shouldered the bulky equipment bag as he walked from the bus stop to the quaint, dated grandeur of Rupp Arena. The brisk winter air bit at his newly-shaved head, though the mild Kentucky winters were a far cry from some Canadian ones he'd suffered in past years. His youth in San Diego had had climate going for it at least, though Carl allowed that if you pursue ice hockey as a career you can't really complain about winter weather.

He again crumpled the day-minder page in his pocket. It seemed like a lead sinker in his jacket, continually drawing his hand to it. Carl shook his head at his own stupidity. He'd been too conflicted by events, and yeah, self-pity, to think straight. He'd given out his agent's number instead of his own. The folly of it body checked him -- like anyone would have trouble linking him to Chuck after a few hours casual investigation. He'd have to get a lot better at this, assuming his humanity held out.

Carl smirked. A few re-transformations and he was already able to contemplate the change without feeling nauseous. Guess he had his 'Pax Avia' after all.

He pushed through the athlete's entrance and made his way to the locker room. Fyodr was already lacing up his skates when Carl made his way to the bench.

"Kiptain Amedica!" The Russian enjoyed ribbing Carl over his extra-hockey social work. Given the financial state of his family back home, the Russian relegated any activity that did not promise ample monetary reward to the realm of sainthood.

"Good to see you, Red."

"I like what you do with your hair. The knee is better? There is no limp any longer."

Carl's eyes widened slightly. Since leaving the Hershey game after the dirty hit, he'd been nursing a torn ligament. The prognosis had been rehab for the rest of the year, with an eye to returning next season. He hadn't even thought of the injury during the terrorist attack this morning, and had forgot to wear the brace to the arena. It felt fine.

"Benefits of American medicine," he quipped lightly. "Still have Doc check me out though."

"Take time -- no sense rushing back to ice. Damphousse likes your position vedy much." More seriously, "Too quick could make injudy more sedious."

"Maybe I should fake a limp?"

"Unmanly approach is one possible way," the Russian agreed slyly before he tramped along the carpet runway to the ice for warmup.

As Carl suited up for the infirmary, more teammates wandered into the locker room. He got some good-natured ribbing about the knee, but his haircut was the focus of most of the attention. Carl took it in stride, even the harsher 'Chi-Ko-Jack ' comments. Though he did make a mental note who delivered the latter. If he was back on the ice sooner than expected, that was information he wanted to remember.

Back on the ice. Was that such a great idea? If that glop came out whenever it wanted, it'd sure end a scrimmage. Mierde, what about his next drug test? Were they going to draw sludge instead of blood? Carl shoved his bag into the locker.

With a quick look around, he affected a limp as he wandered over to the infirmary. But on the way, he was interrupted by Eric Meyers, the big defenseman

from Long Island here on rehab. "Hey, De la Crosscheck, telephone," he boomed and jacked a thumb in the direction of the trainer's room.

"Ha ha. You so funny, Eric," Carl replied. He went in the sterile smelling room and picked up the phone. He wasn't surprised to hear Mrs Callahan's voice on the other end...

[Reflector]

"Hi Lydia! How are you? Sorry about last night, I guess I slipped. Well, have a nice day!"

She jumped, startled at suddenly recognizing someone in a place where she did not expect a familiar face. Still, Mark had to give her credit despite the continued unease he felt around her. "Mark! Happy New Year. Accidents happen, don't give that silly drink spill another thought."

"Gee, thanks, Lydia. You're too kind. Meeting someone here?"

"What?! I mean, yes, a new client, I'm waiting for him to arrive. I'm sorry, he may be at the bar right now. Great seeing you, Mark," she said in closing, her hand brushing his lightly. He felt a brief shock, but composed himself as he realized he wasn't being attacked. That same smile, the dazzling mane of perfect long hair that had kept lots of men coming in to work on time at Denham-Blythe, somehow repulsed him now. Mark saw these attributes as mere weapons in a small arsenal.

She had hurried away from him, down to a sunken dining area. Curious, Mark found a space near the currently abandoned host station and watched to see who she was meeting.

He didn't have long to wait. From a corner seat near the bar, a man stepped out of the shadows and strode to her table. He walked the walk of a man who could see his entire life unfolding before him, and everything he could see was golden. The suit was definitely something stratospherically expensive, Versace probably. But when Mark tried to look at his face, he felt a slight wave of nausea until he looked away. He tried again, but still couldn't focus on his features.

"Excuse me, is there anything open in non-smoking?" a voice said from behind him. Mark spun around to see a young couple looking back at him. Behind the host station. As they waited expectantly, he grabbed two menus and escorted them to the nearest table. "Um, bon appetit," he said as he dropped the menus on the

table and fled. Right into his mother.

"Mark..."

"Mom, I know you want to be independent because you think you'd be a burden to me. That's fine, but I'm simply not letting you stay in a hotel when I've got a whole guest room for you at my house. I've got plenty of vacation time, and I'd really like to take you to the Horse Park and Victorian Square, and definitely a day to spend in Louisville."

He watched her weigh the benefits of arguing with him, and decide not to do so.
"Ok, Mark. Let's go home."

[Sound and Fury]

Once Jake gets over the initial shock of Josh's statement he begins to contemplate the ramifications of his actions. "Don't you worry nothing about him brother, we handled him before, we can handle him again. We just want do it in here again", as Jake takes a look around the newly refurbished office. "Besides if we come through on this bond we might pick up some new business from the public defenders office."

Josh chimes in, "Yeah I know you, you're just trying to get Ms. Emma McBell back in here."

"Well if that happens, all the better." Then they both share a good hearty laugh together.

"All the kidding aside though, Josh, we might want to slow down the paperwork for Ms. McBell so we can take with the guys at the station to see what sort of condition Dodge is in," Jake says. He subconsciously rubs his hand over his heart, which wouldn't be beating today if Dodge had anything to do with it.

"Agreed." Josh says as he notices his brother's brave heart race a beat or two.

Crossing the office from his desk to another, Josh says "Besides, you have that 'prior commitment' tonight anyway don't you?" as he materializes Jake's ticket to the night's hockey game from Margaret's desk side filing cabinet. "Get out of here, man. I'll brush off McBell when she comes back and tell her the paperwork will be ready tomorrow evening. Given the mess we've been cleaning up all day after 'her client' was here last time she should be understanding."

Smacking his palm against his forehead, Jake says "In all the hubbub I almost forgot about the game." He strides over to Josh grabs the ticket and deftly crosses the clutter of the room to the coat rack in the corner near the office door. Suiting up for the winter chill, Jake glances back and says "Remember I saw Emma first!" as he departs.

Josh wanted to talk with Jake about the recent events for some one-to-one perspective but that will have to wait. Jake seems stronger, faster, and more durable than anyone has a right to be. What else had changed for his younger brother? What had changed in his own life--he seems to be able to hear with greater clarity and even manipulate sounds around him. So far he's created walls to protect bystanders, amped the sound of his own voice and fingers snapping into an attack on "evildoers", and changed sounds into others (that really embarrassing "air guitar" sequence earlier today). What else was he capable of? And if his new abilities were this intrinsically linked to his personality what

does that say about the others? And how does his brother's notorious temper fit into Jake's abilities as Fury? What was happening between Jake and that SORTie?

In addition to all of these concerns Amanda's trip to New York brought back memories. Things he can't really talk about with Jake without running the risk of opening old wounds. Josh knows he did the right thing coming back home but it doesn't mean he has to like it. Josh Faulkner has been fighting for the last ten years to not be George Bailey. He hasn't felt that he or his music has been as vital since his return 'home'. Josh fervently hopes that Amanda isn't making a mistake. He picks up the phone and dials a number long since overdue.

"Hello?" a ginger sweet voice says on the other end.

Almost choking on the words Josh says "Annie, it's Josh...how are you?"

[Phoenix]

"I'll take it," Amanda told the rental agent decisively. The apartment was only the second one they'd looked at this morning. The bedroom and bathroom were small, but compared to her place in New York the rest of the place was absolutely huge and dirt cheap--she'd somehow forgotten the difference in cost of living--and it was all hers. Reasonably convenient location in Brandywine, top floor, handy to the exits, carpeted, modern appliances.

"Are you from the area, Miss?" he asked; she suspected he was having a hard time with her (mostly) East Coast accent.

"Yes. I've been away for a few years, though." She wandered over a window and looked down at the street while he searched his briefcase for a rental application. She filled it out on the spot.

"Thank you. They'll want to check your references, but they're anxious to rent it, and it shouldn't take long. Where can I reach you?"

Amanda gave him the motel's number and headed back. The last time she'd moved long distance she'd been going away to college, and this time things were a bit more complicated. A rented van's worth of stuff was currently parked in her parents' driveway; she'd been worried about the prospect for theft if she left it at the motel too long. They'd been surprised when she decided not to just stay with them while she looked for a place, but despite the strain on her budget she wasn't willing to deal with the emotions an extended stay might arouse. She had tried to convince herself that she had imagined the deep-seated, instinctive hostility that arisen within her as soon as she had entered the dining room that day, but the memory was too vivid, and she was almost afraid to try to find out more.

She called Alex to let him know she was back and find out when the next rehearsal was (she suspected that he had worried she was going to disappear in New York and never come back, contract or no), and then there was nothing to do but kill the afternoon refamiliarizing herself with the city.

She passed Wiles and paused; New Years hardly seemed real. She hadn't had a chance to fly since.... When she got back to her room she found a message from the realtor and headed out to the office to sign the lease and hand over just about all of her remaining money. The place was vacant; she could move in whenever she wanted. She called the phone company, electricity, and cable, and spent the evening watching TV in her room.

Moving didn't take long the next day. She had her futon, dresser, a cherished old cedar chest her mother's mother had given her, a thoroughly battered table and two chairs, her music and instruments--the last two took up by far the most room--and a collection of souvenirs and odds and ends spanning the spectrum of her musical tastes and career to date.

Her neighbors across the hall turned out to be a couple of second-year med students; the guys were more than willing to help out in exchange for a promise of dinner at the restaurant of their choice as soon as she managed to scrape up a paycheck. They seemed uneasy about the number of noise-making items they were hauling up the stairs--"Not that we really mind, just that we need to do some studying _once_ in a while"--and Amanda promised to keep things reasonably quiet for them.

She was re-alphabetizing her CD collection when rehearsal time rolled around. After eight months with the Majestic Theatre's string section, the sheer enthusiastic noise level was both jarring and entirely welcome, exactly the sort of change she'd been looking for, though she'd never thought to hope that she'd fall into such a wonderful situation so easily.

"Alain's in a mood today," Jonas said as she arrived. "Seems his sister and her two year old twins arrived all teary-eyed in the night, yet another fight with the husband." Jonas hadn't looked up the whole time, instead focused rather intently on a piece of electronics that had been old the first time Hendrix jammed a screwdriver into a speaker cone.

"Easily solved," said Rob from behind his kit. "Couple of rounds from a .22, a 55 gallon drum, some quick lime..."

"Quick trip to the junkyard, few dollars to the operator of the crushing machine..." Alex picked up and continued. "We could do it Thursday."

"Sorry," said Jonas. "Pedicure's that day."

"Well there's that. Guess Alain will have to take his earplugs home with him tonite," Rob commented.

"Say, anyone expecting a call from Jann Wenner?" Alex asked.

"No, but it's for me. Tell him I died." Jonas rumbled.

"We did that two years ago."

"Sheesh. Bollocks. Ok, I'll take it." Jonas wandered to the booth of the studio as Alex walked over to Amanda. "Some special issue on guitarists they're doing. Maybe we can send you in his place, tell them you're him just back from Sweden, yes?" he grinned.

"Alex. Down. Be nice to the next generation, ya old bastard," Rob sounded as he ran through some five-rolls and other nifty rhythmic tricks on the drums.

So far at least the guys had been all right; she was rapidly finding her footing in their musical style, Alain was pleased by the addition of her vocal range on backup, and despite the age and gender difference, they didn't seem inclined to condescend to her when she made suggestions. It was after eleven when she got home, but the music had left her buzzing with energy.

She left the lights out--she didn't need them, and in fact had continually forgotten to turn them on while she was in New York, much to everyone else's annoyance--and drew the shades, pulled off her t-shirt and whispered the code phrase to herself. The living room was big enough for her wings to stretch. After a moment of enjoying that luxury she started rooting through her suitcases. She'd found a backless catsuit that almost matched her feathers, a sort of creamy gold (not metallic, the very idea made her shudder), with some subtle variations in the shading that verged on flame-coloring. The calf-high suede boots were a bit darker gold and flat-soled--she didn't even want to think about tripping while running at whatever speed she was now capable of--with matching gloves. She'd made the mask out of a length of silk, dyed in sunset colors; it was long enough that, when tied over her head, the free ends mostly hid her hair. The bedroom door had a cheap, dorm-style mirror attached to it; she planted her fists on her hips and frowned sternly at her image there, but couldn't quite keep an impish smile from breaking through.

"Not bad," she told herself; it was the first chance she'd gotten to see the ensemble as a whole. Despite showing almost no actual skin, the outfit didn't leave a lot to the imagination, but the overall effect was good. Given a lifetime spent performing, she wasn't exactly unused to being looked at anyway.

What now? She supposed she should check in with the rest of the group--with the Millennium, she corrected herself--and find out if there had been any developments during her absence. Probably too late to do so now, it was well after midnight, and the energy was rapidly draining out of her; it had been a very long day. She tucked her Phoenix outfit into a drawer, reluctantly retracted her wings, and went to bed. The next morning (well, early afternoon) was mostly spent on the telephone while she unpacked. First her mother, who was delighted to hear that she was already settled into the new place and listened politely while she enthused about the band (Rose's musical taste, while excellent, was also sadly restricted). Before she knew it, Amanda had agreed to come to dinner on Sunday. Well, I could hardly avoid it forever, she thought as she hung up, dismayed. Better to know--if nothing else, I'll be able to narrow the field now that Joe and Tony have gone. Maybe it wasn't as bad as Book made things out, he did have a bit of an apocalyptic bent after all. Maybe being dead for a while messed up one's brain. Maybe she'd been wrong....

She called her grandparents, too, and chatted with them for a bit, promised to visit all three soon now that she was back to stay, then turned her attention to business. No one picked up at Faulkner Bail Bonds, so she left a message--"Thanks for the tip! Looks like things'll work out," along with her new number in case anything came up. She then called each of the others in turn and touched base. Had anyone heard from Book or Bloomfield? Did they want to get together and discuss the group? Had anyone changed their minds about the whole enterprise? Was there a general plan of action or should everyone go out and find some trouble on their own? Or were they trying to stay low, at least for the moment? Had the papers said anything about the New Years events? Had there been any more exotic trouble since their own little explosion?

[the Nightcrawler, hours after learning the nuances of the neutral zone trap]

Carl walked up the sidewalk to the landing in front of Barbara's row home. It was an old neighborhood, and Barbara's family home was weatherbeaten and hadn't seen a new coat of paint in years. Funny how different it looked in a short twenty-four hours. With a sigh, he rang the doorbell.

Barbara's mother answered. "Oh, hello, Carl was it?"

"Yeah, Carl. Did Shawna make it home okay last night?"

Mrs. Callahan's face turned sour. "Yeah, she did. Thanks anyway for trying to find her last night. I'm about at my wit's end with that goddamn tramp. Sorry, this ain't your problem. I'll get Babs for you."

"Not too mad, was she?"

"I ain't in the middle of this," Mrs. Callahan said abruptly. She opened the door and started to call upstairs.

"Actually, I wanna speak to Shawna first, without Babs."

Mrs. Callahan's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but she didn't challenge him. "Shawna, door for you!"

The sixteen-year-old pounded down the stairs, then drew up short when she saw Carl. Carl noted that she was still dressed beyond her years, and under her self-esteem. "What do you want?" she challenged belligerently. When she noticed his bald head, she giggled, thinking the CC's had shaved him to teach him a lesson. "What'd you do to your hair?"

"I just wanneda make sure you were all right," he said, ignoring her question.

"Pfah! You need to worry about yourself. That stupid shit you pulled yesterday, you're a dead man. You think the CC's give a crap about some minor league hockey thug?"

"And you're fine with that? Bumpin' chests means you gotta kill the guy?" Shawna's face set in a surly expression. "What happens when RoJo wants more from you than you wanna give? What happens when you gotta tell him 'no?'"

"RoJo respects me," she said fiercely.

"You turnin' tricks for him?" Shawna tried to slap Carl, but the big man easily caught her slim arm.

"Asshole."

"Look, you're a young white girl. RoJo is what, nineteen? Twenty? All he wants is the juice he'll get, once he gets you on his arm. Once he gets tired, he's gonna move you into his stable."

"Babs is only twenty. 'Zat why you're with her? RoJo ain't like that," she retorted. "Not with me."

"Babs is a fan. Sometimes fans get to be more, but worse that happens is they stop gettin' good seats. Look, you know he's got ex's. They're probably passed around the gang -- you've seen 'em. Maybe that ain't you now, but what if he gets ideas? What if you want out?"

Shawna let her arm drop. "This ain't no big thing. We'd just stop hangin'."

"Yeah? Try him. Tell him you guys are friends and you'll never do him. What's RoJo say to that?" Carl could see the fear flash across her face as she pictured

his response. She suddenly turned to the stairs.

"Babs! You got company!" Shawna ran off to the kitchen.

"Now's the time to get out, Shawna," he called after her.

[New Circle Road. Closing time at SuperAmerica]

The clerk tossed a copy of Source in a bag and sent the customer on his way with a pleasant "Have a nice night." Only one more guy in the place, and she could lock up and go home to some serious sleep. Since he seemed to be enthralled in the magazine display, she decided to go ahead and make a final cash drop for the night.

With a pass of her hand, the drawer opened. But as she reached for the drawer, it floated in front of her face! Behind the drawer, the man suddenly appeared, grinning like a kid with a new toy. He had rough cut brown hair and crazy blue eyes, and he was wearing a grey sweatsuit. A stylized red letter E was embroidered to his shirt; not a very good job, as some of the stitches were coming out.

"Hehehehehe. Newtonian law has been suspended. Hello my darling. My name is Element, and I control the elemental forces of the earth. This is gravity. Uh uh," he admonished as she reached for a button. Suddenly she felt as if she weighed several hundred pounds; it was hard to breathe, and her bones began to ache.

"Not nice, my darling. All I want is the cash." He watched as the bills floated obediently out of the drawer and to a bag he held at the ready. When it was full, he turned his power to the safe, and it finally cracked violently open.

"A profitable night. Come to Element, my presidential friends. My darling, it's been a pleasure shopping here. Now you be a good little clerk, and run along. I have a message to send."

The weight vanished, and she nearly flew upward through the cigarette display cases. Coming down heavily on her feet, she ran for the door and fled toward the nearby roadway. Element watched her for a moment. "Now for my calling card," he said as his face tightened into a glare. From beneath the floor, hot earth and fire burst upward, in the pattern of a large E. Much of the store was burning now, and he smiled with satisfaction.

"Hahahahahahaha. All so easy. And in this burg, there's no one to stop Element from taking as he pleases. Hehehehehehehehe!" he cackled as a wave of seismic energy carried him across the ground at high speed, into the darkness.

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Recently]

Chance McCain reached up to touch the purple mask covering his face. It seemed a living thing, borne of the strange and wondrous power that lived within him. He was one of "them" now, a true powered person thanks to Brother Mayhem. And he couldn't think of himself as Chance anymore. No, the angry, quick-triggered two-bit thug Chance McCain had to go away forever now. He didn't want to be tied to a loser past, and Brother Mayhem didn't want that, either. Only one vestige of his past to throw away, and that would be that.

It was a Zippo lighter, a 'Marjorie' from the 40s and in excellent condition. His grandfather gave it to him just before he passed on, and it hadn't been more than a couple of feet away from Chance for years.

No. Not Chance. Throw it away.

Lydia came into the well-furnished office just then, still attired from the bedroom down the hall. Her smile radiated warmth, but the person behind her eyes held the world up to measure and found it wanting in many respects. Though she served him physically, she secretly worshipped the power he represented, the potential. Oh, she would continue to be "good to him", but only as long as Lydia Morry benefited from the relationship as well.

"Ah, my Purple Mask," she said. "Ready to chat with Brother Mayhem?" She opened a laptop computer on a nearby stand and clicked it to life.

"Yes. I don't understand his need for you to make our connection, though."

"He values his privacy. You know that." And without another word, she activated the tiny videocamera on the laptop and carried it to the desk. The cel-modem had made its silent connection with Chanc...Purple Mask's reclusive associate.

"Brother Mayhem."

"My dear friend," replied the cowed Brother Mayhem in his deep, Darth Maul-like whisper of a voice. "You've arranged for the downfall of the Double Cs?"

"Yes. Plenty of incriminating evidence is making its roundabout way to ending their operation. I estimate six days until we can assume their place in the drug chain."

"Acceptable. Tell me, what do you plan to do about this new Bluegrass Brigade, as some net wag has dubbed them."

"Nothing."

"Oh?"

"I already know who they all are, from various video that was shot during the Luminary attack at the parade. Should they prove bothersome, removing them won't be a problem."

"I'm not sure I agree..."

"Brother Mayhem, it isn't your place to agree. You've empowered me to organize the criminal activity of this city, to ultimately rule over it. Right now, these heroic fools aren't in my plans. The public will never know that the Purple Mask runs the underworld; why should a bunch of do-gooders have any more of a clue?"

Brother Mayhem sat quiet for a moment, then nodded, his cowl moving almost imperceptibly. "Perhaps. As you said, they aren't a concern now. I'll speak to you again in six days." The laptop image faded, replaced by the standard desktop. Lydia closed the computer and turned to the Purple Mask. "You're breathing rather heavily."

He was. He put his hand to his chest, as if to confirm what she said. "I feel different, somehow."

"Power. Quite the rush, isn't it?"

He nodded back, then pushed a button on his desk. "Manfred. A pitcher of ice water and some aspirin." Then he sat back, and looked at Lydia. "You were there. What did he do to me?"

"I wasn't there. Brother Mayhem sent me away. I don't know what they did to you. But I have to admit, I like the result. A lot." She gave him another perfect smile. "I'll be back in the evening." And with a turn that would pull an F-16 to pieces, Lydia departed as Manfred entered with the requested items.

The Purple Mask watched them, her walking, him pouring, in the manner of someone seeing strangers in a dream. Suddenly, he was aware of something in his hand. A lighter. How did it get there?

Without thinking anything else of it, he dropped the lighter in a pocket and took two aspirin, one by one.

[Turn 11]

Fury

Jake hates getting up this early. But he knows that if he is going to get his work out done he better get up now. So he can get over to Dodge's place before Dodge decides to skip. He thinks back to when he was going to UK and how he couldn't stand getting up for those early classes. He thinks now if he could have the chance to attend now he wouldn't care so much about how early class started. It's been two semesters since he has even had time to take a night class. That's one thing he hadn't thought about with his newfound powers, how it was going to affect his chances of ever finishing his degree. "I can't give up on it, not now, not after all that I went through." He knows it will be rough going until things settle down, but he has to keep hope alive. He grabs his duffel bag and heads out the door.

Sound

Even though he knows his brother is both professional and capable enough to handle a surveillance run on Clement Dodge, Josh can't help but think that maybe he shouldn't have let Jake go alone. That temper of his can get out of hand so

easily, and considering the history Dodge and Jake have with one another it wouldn't take much...

To clear his head Josh decides he needs a quick stroll to give his long legs a stretch. Reaching for the remote to turn off the stereo belting out some vintage DJ Shadow, Josh stops for a quick second, putting the remote down and concentrating on the scratches and back beats until the music is heard no more. He had been curious what less destructive uses could be applied to his powers and was quite pleased he was successful in his new attempt. Pleased with himself he makes his way to the office door. He lights up one of his ever ready Camels and raises his collar as he walks down the street.

Being chained to a desk for innumerable hours at the bailbond's office is only rivaled in sheer tedium by the time he spent freelancing as an HTML scripter at a New Media company in Hell's Kitchen the months before he left New York. He laughed to himself recalling all the margaritas that place consumed. Sure everyone else bickered about the pay (Josh didn't since it was the only thing keeping him from hitting the streets) but a drunk employee is a happy employee...

Coming back around to the office he thought about how much things had changed since then...sure the web work wasn't what he wanted to be doing and it wasn't until he swallowed a lot of pride that he actually took it up as the Alphabet City Opry gigs paid jack and he couldn't move in with Annie in good conscience. He wanted to be a bailbondsman even less but he had his obligations. Opening the closet door in the back office, Josh puts away his jacket and looks at the box where he had placed his "costume." He continued to think about obligation and what he wanted to do...

Fury

As Jake pulls out of the parking lot of "Powerhouse Gym" he can't help but wonder why the events of last night weighted so heavily on his mind during his work out. Why does it bother him that Pam is still seeing Clement Dodge? They never were that close in school, just didn't move in the same circles. But he had warned her about Dodge the last time he grabbed him on a bond skip. "She's not exactly a bright girl but come on what does it take. So when I followed Dodge yesterday when he got out of jail you can guess where he went. She still hadn't changed the lock like I told her to. Not like it would have stopped Dodge." He waited a couple of hours until she came home from work."

"But nothing changed, she didn't kick him out. How could she be so stupid?" He waited another couple of hours but once the lights went out in her apartment I knew Dodge wasn't going anywhere till morning. Jake remembered he has to run by the precinct house; John was running a search on the whereabouts of Dodge's usual accomplices.

Jake walks in to what seems like a mad house. He hasn't seen this place this busy since that Brink's heist a year and a half ago. "Hey, Mike. Where's John at?" Jake says when he sees his old buddy from the neighborhood.

"He's back in the ready room finishing up with the morning briefing." Jake heads back towards the coffee room to wait. He grabs a cup of coffee and a doughnut and waits for John. A couple of minutes later the patrolmen come out and head right for the side door to their vehicles. No chatter, no queuing up for coffee and pastries. "That's unusual," Jake thought.

Sound

After donning the ludicrous contraption he noticed that there was a voice mail message on the phone. Thinking the worst for a moment he feared for Jake's safety. Fortunately, he was pleasantly surprised, as it was Amanda's melodious tones on the other end: "Thanks for the tip! Looks like things'll work out," and by the sound of it a new phone number. She made it in the Red Sky Diary. He was really happy for her--their prior conversation revealed a big fan. He could tell she was professional enough to not get distracted by their comparable celebrity. Maybe coming back wasn't the worst thing she could have done for her music...

He was about to call to congratulate her when the phone rang. Jake was on the other line and Josh could tell by the way he said "Hello" that he was in an excited state. "What's wrong li'l bro?"

Fury and Sound

"You're not gonna believe this but I was in the precinct house with John when the weirdest thing come over the dispatch--there's a blazing E where the SuperAmerica on New Circle Road used to be..." said Jake.

"Get over here ASAP li'l bro--it looks like you're going to have an excuse to put on the duds I found for you!"

Josh then calls the rest of the Millennium in short order...

The Nightcrawler

Carl carelessly rattled his keys in the lock. The drive back from his daughters' (yeah, and ex-wife's) place had been less anxious and more puzzling than the ride out. Seemed T-Gold had somehow registered the car clear and legal to Carl de la Cruces, despite Carl's conviction that T-Gold didn't know him from Adam.

The paperwork in the car told him that. Plus gave some interesting info on the Double C's drug drops, which'd be as good a place as any to start rolling up the organization. Carl refused to feel guilty for not clueing in the rest of the Millennium on the lead after that weird encounter at Glassjack's farm. He'd been sticky and pumped up like a playoff game, and by the time he remembered, decided to wait at least until he could see his daughters.

Hell, it wasn't like the CC's were going to stop pushing, right? The voice in the back of his head that asked about Shauna during those long hours was silenced with firm resolve to bring it up now. He climbed into bed and slept soundly through the evening.

Carl flicked on the low wattage lights, throwing his apartment into beige glory. His bald scalp crinkled in curiosity as he noticed his answering machine flashing with two messages. "Damn! Forgot to turn the ringer back on last night!" Carl absently clicked on the TV remote as he replayed the messages.

"Hey, Carlos mi amigo" burst out Chuck's exuberant but helplessly gringo voice. "Just letting you know I got another cold call from that Millennium Investing group. These guys must think my fee's a LOT lower if they think you got money to burn. Anywho, I gave 'em your home number like you asked. Seriously Carl, don't be stupid with these guys. First one sounded on the up and up, but this last guy sounded like a con man. Anyway, gotta run amigo. Hasta la-wiji."

"Nightcrawler." The agitated voice was Josh's, but he used their codenames?!

Nevermind that Carl hadn't had a woman back to the place since his injury...it could happen. Did when he was married, he noted disgustedly. Josh's urgent tones snapped Carl's focus back sharply. "...some kind of super-normal vandal decimated the SuperAmerica. Get here as soon as you can." The toneless auto-voice marked the message as one half hour ago.

Mierde. Carl whirled from the countertop to his living room windows and caught sight of the TV. A traffic copter was slowly circling a rundown city block, lit orange by a flaming letter E that was losing resolution as the blaze spread. A half hour ago?! This was nuts, they needed to get beepers or something. Then he realized he was seeing a videotape, that the criminal had long departed the scene.

Carl stripped off his clothes and seemed to exhale the grey slop through his pores. By now it was almost like relaxing. Extending one arm across the room behind him, he killed the lights, while another arm reached just as impossibly forward to open the shade and window. With a soft glitch he launched himself into the night.

Phoenix

Amanda dreamt of flying, woke the next morning earlier than usual and with a smile on her face. It was going to be a good day. She got up, dressed, had some juice and decided to go running. It had been about two weeks now since her little "accident," and it was past time to get back into the habit. _Just because you're superhuman doesn't mean you should stop taking care of your health, right?_

She did two miles, took it easy and paid strict attention to make sure she didn't shift into "high gear," as she had begun to think of it, then stopped at the corner store on her way back for a gallon of milk, some granola bars, and the local paper. Her thoughts were on the last rehearsal, Alain's family, and the seed of a melody that had stuck with for part of the drive from New York as she glanced over the headlines on the rack.

"Uh--Miss?" the attendant asked, leaning forward with a startled expression as the milk carton hit the floor.

"Sorry," Amanda muttered automatically, stooping to pick it up again. She added a copy of USA Today to the items on the counter and dug out enough change to pay for them.

"Pretty weird, eh?" the teenager commented, glancing at the front page. "Just like the movies."

"Fsckin' creepy is what I think," muttered the guy behind her in line.

She ignored the latter comment. "Yep. Just like." Recovered from her shock, she smiled at the attendant and headed home, barely containing the urge to sprint the entire distance; once the door closed behind her she could move as fast as she wanted to. Her answering machine light was blinking; no doubt one of the others about the front page story, or stories. She read them both in a few moments. _Element, huh? Wish we'd known about this last night. Maybe I should get a TV. Or a police scanner._ Amanda turned on the radio and checked the local stations.

"...On. SORT still has the area sealed, and..."

"No one seems to be answering questions, though we're...."

"Damn," she muttered, clicking off the remote. She didn't dis_trust_ the authorities, not really, but she'd had too many friends hassled too many times, heard too many stories, to automatically think of the cops as the good guys, either, no matter how much money the NYPD had put into public relations in the past year. Granted, Lexington was a far cry from New York, but SORT in particular gave her the creeps, in those black uniforms and face-concealing visors.

Element's appearance in the neighborhood was bad--not entirely unexpected, given the warnings Book had issued, but he had made it sound as if they would have more of a clear space before guys like this started jumping out of the woodwork. However, the other article interested her more.

First of all, proof that whatever had happened on New Year's was not a local phenomenon--not that there had been any good reason to think that it was. The article didn't say anything about how many 'powered' people might exist, but she supposed it could be hundreds, or thousands worldwide, maybe. That was something to think about.

As for the CDC's involvement... that was a bit worrisome, actually. And FEMA? That seemed like overkill, no matter what their spokesperson had said. _Or maybe I've been hanging out with the fringe in New York too long, seen too many X-Files reruns. I mean, what else would they do?_she chided herself for her paranoia. _People start turning up with bizarre powers, the general population is probably going to freak out no matter what once word gets around. Best if it at least looks like someone is paying attention. They've even got a generic term for it already. 'Powered?' I guess it's pretty descriptive. Doesn't operate anything like any disease I've ever heard of, if that's what it actually is._

Regardless, Amanda had no interest in being "interviewed" or put through her paces by a bunch of doctors at the moment, and was pretty sure that none of the others would either, at least not until they were 100% certain this was legit. _After all, there's 'no cause for alarm.' So there's no reason to go talk to them. I wonder if anyone will?_

Probably, she decided--there would be plenty of people, no doubt, who hadn't been lucky enough to bump into a ready-made support group almost as soon as they changed, or had someone like Mr. Book to hand to give it all some aspect of coherence. She herself had nearly freaked out for a few minutes there anyway, after the fight on New Year's Day. They would be worried, maybe even scared about what had happened to them, or maybe just want to reassure their families that it didn't mean demonic possession or something terrible. She hoped it was all on the up-and-up, for their sake....

She went to the answering machine to see who had called. It was Josh, about Element; the Millennium needed a conference right quick. He suggested it should be a costume affair. Amanda grinned and wondered what everyone else had come up with; she was looking forward to seeing them all again. She hopped into the shower without waiting for the water to warm up and paused for an irresolute moment. Daylight made things a wee bit complicated. After some thought she dressed quickly as Phoenix, glanced out the window to see one car receding in the distance on the street the fire escape faced. She raced up the stairs to the roof with the spare key to the apartment tucked into her boot and her sweats in a plastic bag, left the bag on the roof, stretched out her wings and took off, carrying the two newspapers' main sections.

Oh, I missed this, she realized once she was in the air. Staying secret was

definitely going to be the hard part, for more reason than one. It was easy enough to read the street signs from the air; she oriented herself and headed for the rendezvous.

[Near the scene of the crime, watching from the concealment offered by a power substation's fencing.]

The Millennium arrived, mostly in costume. Mark, the Reflector, wore a set of wraparound mirrored Gargoyles and a dark suit.

"Hey, it worked for Tommy Lee Jones," Mark said.

"Glasses are wrong. They wore RayBans," replied Phoenix.

"Predator Two model," finished Sound. "I've got a set at home I could lend you."

"Sure."

"Excuse me," came the impatient gurgling growl of the Nightcrawler. I have two questions. First, what do we do next, and second, how many Super-America stores are there in town?

Mark pulled out a notepad and flipped to a page. "I can answer number two. There's five other ones. Richmond Road, Todds Road, North Broadway, Nicholasville Road, and Versailles Road near the airport. I picked up some company maps at the one on North Broadway, it shows where they all are.

"Good thinking," said Fury.

"Looks like the heavy artillery is pulling out," said Phoenix, floating just at the top of the fencing. "The SORTs are leaving. We can probably nose around a bit now."

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 12]

"I've got to go with the Nightcrawler on this one--what now? Anybody got a bloodhound?" Phoenix watched the heavily armored vehicles pull out of the lot and added, "Do you really think he'll hit another store like this one? It could have been a trial run and he'll move on to bigger and better things. From what the paper said, he might be an amateur but he's no lightweight. Places like this might be more careful not to leave too much cash around for a while."

She flew a little higher, surveying the scene of the incident, not really sure what she was looking for--anything odd or unusual, although given the state of the wreckage and what had caused it, it was hard to imagine what that could be. The grandiose "E" had cooled and faded in the late morning light, mostly covered by rubble from the collapsed store. Bits of debris and merchandise reduced to pulp by the fire hoses lay scattered about the small lot.

"We may have a bigger problem, anyway. Did any of you see the national paper this morning?" She landed briefly and handed the front page to Reflector. "Not that I want to be paranoid, or anything, but the world is sitting up and taking notice, so we'd better be on our best behavior. I have the feeling we're going to attract some attention." She glanced around the busy highway, then at the others; she'd had to cover amusement with a cough at her first sight of Sound & Fury's GWAR-inspired getup; no one was going to recognize them, that was certain. Reflector was reasonably concealed, and The Nightcrawler's translucent form made it unlikely that anyone would see him at all. She'd all but forgotten how unsettling his presence was. When she'd inquired after the missing GlassJack, she'd been told that he was away on business and had been since just after New Years. Pity; he'd indicated some prior experience that might have been helpful.

"So, where do we go from here? Look for a big spender in an ugly sweatsuit?" she asked.

Wiping his forehead with the good news that they won't have to encounter the SORTies again--Josh was still curious what that silent exchange was between one of them and Jake...er Fury. He looked at his brother standing there decked out in his black and red Fila spandex. Josh thought that at least one of them should have some sort of insignia, and since neither can sew the ready made "F" logo on the chest of Jake's workout clothes would have to do...besides who knows maybe after all this "Do Powered's have a disease" stuff dies down he can make some extra cash endorsing their product line! He still can't believe Jake would have ever bought something with red lightning bolts on the forearms but with those red leather racing gloves it worked as a "costume"---a hell of a lot better than this God awful contraption he thought as he adjusted the shoulder pads. If Jake can star in ad campaigns, maybe he could make it into GWAR!

"What we do know is 'nose around' as Phoenix put it--but we do it in an organized manner. Reflector hasn't been the only one thinking about strategy. I wanted to talk the last time we were out at Dame Vera but we got side-tracked by that plant freak," says Josh. He sees Phoenix's face wrinkle questioningly as he says "There's a lot we should all catch up on...I have a lot of ideas I'd like to bounce off of you guys but most of that will have to wait for now."

"Given what we know about our abilities so far I think we need to focus on short and long distance reconnaissance. That means Phoenix should spot for us from the air. I've been experimenting with my powers in our downtime and I've discovered I can completely silence sounds as well as augment them. If Nightcrawler expands himself a bit and does his hide and go seek routine, I should be able to walk alongside him unseen as well making us both quite as church mice so we can do some investigating up-close-and-personal," Josh continued. "We need to find out what we're up against."

"Sounds good to me," burbled the Nightcrawler, "tho' I ain't sure I can hide you without gettin' you a little sticky..." In the time it took the slimy hero to compose his thoughts, Phoenix had already whipped out a fast search pattern and lit back next to them.

"Ok, here's something. There's a trail of disturbed earth from the shop to the overpass," she said.

"Wouldn't that mean through a few parking lots?" asked Mark dubiously.

"As in up and through, yup," answered Phoenix, amused.

Nightcrawler started, as if something just occurred to him. "Hey, unless there's bodies we ain't heard about, somebody witnessed this thing. Howzabout one of you guys that cleans up good gettin' the story?" he asked, specifically to Amanda and Mark.

"Josh and I have connections down at police headquarters that I can check with later. But I think that while we are here we should investigate the site for a while." Jake adds. "While you three check out your areas why don't me and Mark check out that rubble trail over there." Jake says as he eyes the path of torn up asphalt and earth. "That appears to be the villain's escape route."

At the base of the overpass, it is obvious that the trail stops there and does not continue in any direction. While looking around, Reflector looks across the parking lot closest to them, where a security guard watches them from the doorway of the Tupperware warehouse.

Reflector goes up to the guy and does his best imitation of a cop, without so much as saying he is one. _I don't want to be nailed for impersonation_ he thinks to himself. Pulling out his organizer and pen, he says "Hello there. I'd like to ask you a few questions. You probably have been asked quite a few already. I just want a few clarifications."

The guard, dressed in standard security blues with a Safe and Sound Security company patch on his shoulder, nods back. "Sure. Afraid I didn't peek out here much last night, though."

"Did you see anything that could give us an idea as to who this guy might be?"

"No, sir."

"Do you remember anything strange... other than the obvious one of course..."

"After the explosion, I came running out from about the middle of the warehouse. I could see the flames up in the sky. Fire department got there right quick."

"What about people? Did you see anyone walking or...well, walking by this overpass?"

"Yeah, some guy who'd broke down, he came back and left not long after the explosion."

Reflector's eyes widened behind the mirrorshades. "Get a look at the guy?"

"Afraid not. I'd just looked at the explosion, and I wasn't seeing too good for a minute. He just got in his thing and left."

"His car?"

"No," the guard said. "He drove a thing."

"I'm not following you."

"You know, VW made a convertible years ago, real boxy looking thing. You never usually see them away from the beaches."

"A VW...Thing?"

"Yep. Might've been dark blue or black. Say, I gotta go. Got rounds to walk. Bye now." The guard nods and closes the door on Reflector. With a turn, Reflector returned to the group at the base of the underpass.

"Our guy has a thing," he announces.

"Do tell," Phoenix drily answered.

"No, a car. It's called a Thing. Like what you'd see in those war movies, the German staff car. Only smaller. Dark in color."

"Can't be many of those in town," Fury said. "So what's next?"

"Communication," replied Reflector. "Maybe it's time to take Mr Bloomfield up on his offer. A few celphones shouldn't be too much to ask. Then we stakeout these other convenience stores, and if a dark colored Thing shows up, whoever sees him calls the others and we all come running."

"Maybe I can narrow it down a bit. I'll wait til sundown, then I'll see if the streets have anything to offer," says the Nightcrawler while making the sort of face that implies he fully expects to learn something.

With that, plus the traffic jam that has built up from drivers slowing down to observe the Millennium at work, the heroes make their separate ways away from the scene of the crime.

Eight pm. A back alley one block away from Rupp Arena.

Tino OG is running hard. Small bags of crack fly out of his pockets and bounce off the pavement, the deadly contents shattering on impact.

From above Tino, a shape seems to melt out of the clouds and flow in a twisting column after him. The grey column picks up and discards refuse from the alley

like a gelatin whirlwind. Through a haze of dust and debris, Tino looks back into the very face of Hell, the face of the Nightcrawler.

A pseudopod slings out, pounding Tino into a wall. Then the column flows vertical, and congeals in front of Tino, still holding him in place.

"Here, I got 2 grand, take it! Don't kill me!"

"You're going to die."

"NO!"

"You aren't going to die because you're a piece of disgusting dealer crap. It's because you don't know anything."

"I know things, I know things! Who do you want? Ask me, ask me anything."

"I want the freak who blew up the store last night. And I know you know what I mean."

"NO! I don't know him. Ain't no one in the Double Cs takes off SAs, they got cameras and cops always coming in for doughnuts."

"Liar. I'm going to shove about twenty pounds of goo into your lungs..."

"Go ahead. Save me the trouble," interrupts a carefully modulated voice from above the Nightcrawler and Tino. Two floors above them, standing on a window ledge, is a figure dressed in slate grey striped clothing and wearing a motorcycle helmet. He drops something to the ground, landing at the feet of the Nightcrawler.

Both men look down at the glassine figure shaped like a small snowman.

"Oh no, oh no oh no no not him too..." Tino progresses from terrified to completely terrified.

"Leave him with me," the flat voice continues, addressing the Nightcrawler. "Or finish him off now yourself. Keep the money; I don't need it, if you're worried about that." The figure waits for a couple of heartbeats, then speaks again. "I haven't got all night. Do it or go."

The Nightcrawler tightened his grip on Tino, as he considered his next words.

"no no no no oh man please don't leave me with the Snowman," Tino pleads.

Element left the bar several hundred dollars lighter than when he had walked in. That was the trouble with bars like that; how can a guy choose from just one dancer when they all appeal to him? He smiled and whistled to the dark as he entered his car.

"Oh well, guess I'll make another withdrawal. It's not like anyone in this burg is going to stop me. Hahahahahahahahaha!" he cackled. But just as he turned his car into the parking lot of a small industrial plant, now empty for the night, a siren sounded from behind him, and red and blue strobe lights ignited from atop the police car that had followed him from the nightclub.

Element waited patiently as the officer approached his car. The officer had a flashlight in one hand; the other hand hung ready near his gun belt. Element wondered if this was one of those new flashlights with the built-in breath analyzer.

"Good evening, sir. I'm Officer Sturgess. Do you know why I've stopped you this evening?"

"Is it because your car is overheating?" Element asked. As the cop began to answer, a powerful explosion of earth and fire erupted under his patrol car, flipping it onto its roof.

And just in time to see it, on his way to staking out the North Broadway SuperAmerica store, the Sound watches in awe as bits of burning stone fall to the ground, falling on a patrol car, just behind a dark colored VW Thing.

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[turn 12.997 :)]

(earlier in the day)

Phoenix was a bit disappointed that they hadn't been able to do more right away, but encouraged by Mark's findings about Element's car--there couldn't be too many of those in a town this size. She cruised home to turn back into Amanda for a while, did some final bits of straightening up, hung her autographed Johnette Napolitano poster in a place of honor, and headed for rehearsal.

I suppose as long as I can't fly everywhere I really should get a car, she thought, shifting the strap on her shoulder for the umpteenth time. It would just have to go on the list of things she hadn't thought about when she'd decided on the relocation. At least the weather had held decently; no way she'd have been walking around dressed like this in a New York January.

Somewhat to her own surprise, she was early. Amanda tuned up and settled down to wait, wandering around the studio. Nice place; she really had lucked out with this gig. She hoped it would last a while. Her life in New York had been marked by nomadic wandering from job to job, none of them quite right and most of them quite wrong. _I suppose it's what you get for not specializing._ How many instructors had told her "You have a brilliant gift and could be world-famous, if only you would concentrate and stick with one thing for more than six months at a time!" "Who wants to be world-famous?" she would ask with a shrug and a smile. Most of them had shaken their heads in despair and watched her wander away from the course they had charted for her when something new caught her attention.

Amanda settled at the keyboard, played a random assortment of notes. _Come to think of it, maybe that's what keeps happening to my love life, too...._

The door opened as she was wending her way through 'Strange Meadow Lark.'
"Bonjour, Alain."

He nodded silently in response; to her critical eye, he looked tired.

"They keep you up last night?" she guessed, her hands going still. When he looked vaguely surprised--and annoyed--she added, "Rumor travels faster than light. I know you don't know me very well, and I don't want to be a pain, but let me know if there's anything I can do, OK? I like kids, I could get 'em out of your hair for a morning or something if this is going to last a while."

He ran his hand through his straight dark hair, and shook his head. "Thank you. No, I don't mind at all that you know. If I've been short with you recently, I'm sorry. But they've went back home. Again. This time perhaps it'll work out better." A young woman came up to him, handing him a sheaf of notes. Amanda realized there were a lot more people hanging around than there had been previously.

Alain looked through the notes. "Jonas has went to Montreal...Rob is in Portland buying some new drumsticks..." he looked up at Amanda. "Sad, the indulgences of rich rock stars, isn't it. Rob wants a couple hundred new drumsticks, he flies

out to Portland to pick them up, just because he can. Hey, if you ever need to borrow one of the Gulfstreams, just say so."

Amanda nodded. A Gulfstream cost more than the GNP of some countries. And they have more than one? "Will they be back tonite?"

"Oh, of course. Alex has his second operation later today."

"What?"

"RSI. The reason for your being here. His prognosis is good, but he has to have four or five more surgeries before everything is sorted out. That's part of the reason we relocated here; his surgeon works with the University."

She had to be impressed with this. They could go anywhere in the world they wanted, but chose to stick by their bandmate through his treatments. Alain smiled his 'golly gee' smile, all teeth, as a couple of people approached from the studio. "I have a couple of tracks to lay down. Next week we'd like to get started on the new album. There's some DATs over there. You have a digital player?"

"Afraid not."

"Ok. Hey, Shelley?" he called to the young woman who had brought him his messages. "Can you have Mason take Amanda to whatever passes for a high-end audio store here, and get her some equipment?"

Shelley nodded, and approached Amanda. She was about Amanda's height, with the sort of wavy blonde hair and clean looks that screamed Midwestern girl. "Hi. I'm Shelley, and I handle the Red Sky Diary business affairs during their downtime. If you've got a moment, I can take down some information about you and see that the corporate office gets your American Express card overnighted down here tomorrow. Alain mentioned that you were new in town. Is there anything you need any help with, transportation, place to live?"

Amanda, still stuck back in the middle of the words American and Express, started to answer when she felt the vibration of her cellphone through her purse. "I'm sorry, can you pardon me for a moment?"

"Sure. By the way, that's a great outfit. The color really brings out your skin tone."

"Um, thanks." Amanda made her way toward the front door, reading the display. _Sound's in trouble. I better take the express lane._ With that, she went into what she knew was a private bathroom. A quick change of garb and one newly unstuck window later, the Phoenix was winging her way north.

(An alleyway, near downtown. The Nightcrawler has chased down a ganger called Tino OG, only to find he isn't the only one interested in the drug dealer. An enigmatic vigilante called the Snowman has arrived, and the confrontation has quickly escalated...)

In his best other-wordly gurgle, the Nightcrawler responds, "This banger's mine. Your business can wait 'til he's come clean...or not."

"All this one knows is how to mule and deal. You're wasting your time," says the Snowman as he steps off his perch and lands very lightly about ten feet away from the twosome. "And mine. Either cap him yourself or leave." And as the temperature in the alley seems to fall, the Snowman watches and waits.

"No hurry. I can dance all night with this lowlife." With an overgenerous layer of glop, Nightcrawler sticks Tino to the wall two stories up and behind obfuscating fire escape rigging. "Now you can bump chests over this thing or you can step out for a cup a' java, take the chill off, then find your own playmate."

The modulated voice flows again, a wave of pure cold that sends Tino into a louder screaming fit. "No deal." The Snowman advances quickly toward the Nightcrawler.

[The Nightcrawler - Phase 31]

Though every nerve rings through him as the adrenaline powers through his body, the Nightcrawler barely realizes that he feels no special antipathy toward the Snowman, as Mr Book had said he would when confronted with an enemy. Dismissing the thought and exploding forward with a pair of phlegm-pseudopods, as fast as he is capable, the Nightcrawler suddenly realizes the Snowman has baited him successfully. For the thick ichor has plunged through the Snowman, as though he were no more substantial than a cloud.

[The Snowman - Phase 31 (delayed from 35)]

Then there is a cloud surrounding the Nightcrawler, and the strange emotionless voice of the Snowman surrounds him too. "Stand very still and you'll live through this." Satisfied his ploy has worked, the Snowman backs away from the Nightcrawler, and approaches Tino. His hand fills with cold, and coalesces into a fine monomolecular edged blade as though it were cut from glass.

[The Snowman - Phase 20]

With the slashing motions of a well-practiced escrimador, the Snowman's fine ice-knife removes Tino from his slimy prison, dropping him to the ground. He slings the hapless ganger around, face-first into the wall, and slashes at his pockets. Crack cocaine and money fall to the ground, the bills drifting up and around the Snowman. "You're out of business Tino."

[The Nightcrawler - Phase 16]

No! thinks the Nightcrawler, though he is unable to speak or move. _Must...break...free_. But his efforts are in vain, for the command of the Snowman holds him fast. (Rolled a 90, ouch.)

[The Snowman - Phase 5]

He raises his blade, knowing the grim work he must do, knowing that satisfaction won't come to him when he is done. But the Snowman, devotee of justice, can do nothing else. Those who traffic in death must die, such is the essence of his law. And he goes about his business with a deadly weaving of his blade...until the alley fills with a million candlepower of flashing blue strobe light.

[Car 14 - assigned to patrol area 3A - Phase 5]

From a speaker mounted behind the grill comes the voice of a Lexington cop. "Drop the knife and hit the ground! Do it now!" he says as he opens his car door,

aiming a shotgun at the Snowman. (Delays)

[The Nightcrawler - Phase 1]

Still fighting the Snowman's command, the Nightcrawler's body screams for freedom. But the domination is too strong (rolled a 95) and he still stands impotent and enraged in the flood of the police lights. "Mierde, now I know why Mama said Chicanos and ice don't mix."

The fire burns with a primal beauty, from the very earth, as Element exits his car to watch the patrol car catch fire and blaze away. "Oh, wait, dialogue before the event. My mistake. Next time, I'll blow up the car first, then make the witticism, ok?" Element asks the darkness. The cop, traveling solo, lays on the ground, apparently unconscious.

In a cacophony that is part muffler and part honk the Thing finds a voice. "Element...Where's my cut of the action? You think I haul your stinking ass around this shithole just so you can keep pumping me full of that regular crap?"

[Phase 18 - Element (delayed from 19)]

Mouth agape, Element turns to face his car. "Are you...talking...to me?" he asks in a surprised voice.

"Yes it's me talking to you--what do you think you're the only one special in this town? I changed too--and you just get used to walking Mr. Big Spender until I get my fair share."

[Phase 4 - Element]

"No one talks TO ME LIKE THAT. NO ONE!" And he raises his arms to wield his power again. In response, a blast of fiery earth explodes underneath the Thing, ripping a tire from an axle and sending flames cascading all over it.

Element watched, breathing heavily. "My car, oh my beautiful rare car. What could have possessed me to do that?" Then, after a brief moment of self-remonstration, Element straightens up. "Ah, well. No big deal. I'll just snuff some yuppie up here after I empty the safe at SuperAmerica and take a Lexus."

[Phase 3 - the Sound]

The sound of music fills the air...the strains of the theme to "The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly" to be precise. After hastily punching in the Millennium code into his cellphone, the Sound steps out of the shadows.

"This town ain't big enough for the two of us, pardner. Draw." As he makes his challenge, the Sound whips his hand to his hip in a fast-draw motion, firing a blast of sound like a gunshot at Element.
(Hitting for 12 points, knocking him back forty feet...and Element is stunned!)

"I hope the cavalry gets here soon," the Sound thinks to himself.

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 14]

The echo of Sound's "gunshot" fills the industrial park, carrying to every direction in the cold night air. Nearby, the burning wrecks of Element's 'Thing' and a Lexington Metro squad car belch choking smoke into the scene. What little breeze there is carries the smoke over the battle scene, adding a deathly haze to the already darkened battlefield. Somewhere beyond the smoke, Sound can hear coughing; he realizes it must be the officer from the car. While he agonizes over finishing off Element or attending to the officer, he hears Element's mocking voice call out from within the haze.

[Phase 26 - Element]

"Owwee," Element growls. "That, *pardner*, was some mighty fine shootin'. Mind sharing your name so I can make out the tombstone proper? No?" Element moves forward, peering through the smoke. "Unkindliness really burns me up; you'll see what I mean. No one puts Element down and...well, no one's ever put Element down before. Hmm. Ah, shoot, I'm still going to incinerate you."

With a swipe of his arms, Element angrily directs his power toward the Sound. Despite his limited vision, Element's does not miss; a column of burning earth and flame explode upward, and the Sound flies backward from the impact. Fortunately, his burning body is halted from further damage by what's left of the Thing's back seat as he lands heavily upon it.
(17 points, rolled for 5, taking 12, but the percentiles are kind and leave you conscious. Unfortunately.)

[Phase 24 - the Sound]

Pulling himself to his feet, the Sound glares back at Element. With a look of pure defiance, despite the horrid attack he's just suffered, he plants his feet, leans forward, and gives Element a lengthy raspberry. :-PPPPppPPPPppppppPPpp

Don't know if this will help...his attack comes from the ground, where my force field isn't as strong, thinks Sound. Preparing one of his decibel traps, Sound tosses forth some bait.

"Element, if that's the best you can do, I'm going to have you roped and tied in eight seconds flat. Ready to git along, little dogie?"

[Phase 11 - Element]

"I don't think so, kazoo boy. I'M GOING TO COOK YOUR..." Element's voice trails off as he is suddenly buffeted on all sides by the Sound's decibel manipulations. But most of the impact dissipates harmlessly. (5 points, Element rolls, but loses his action to surprise.)

[Phase 9 - the Sound]

With the upper hand for the moment, the Sound lashes his hand forward, and another loud KAPOW echoes through the industrial park. Element is slammed on his

butt by the impact, and looks even more crazily angry now. (Rolled for 6, took 3.)

As both combatants consider their next moves, Element enraged beyond comprehension, the Sound clinging heroically to consciousness despite severe burns, both find themselves drawn to look to the skies...

In the alley, where Tino OG lays in a pool of blood while the Nightcrawler rages impotently against the hold of the Snowman's power, a policeman has interrupted the confrontation. Without a word, the Snowman cloaks himself in a cloud of frozen vapor, and is gone.

With a shudder, the Nightcrawler shakes free from the Snowman's domination. His anger knows no bounds, yet he realizes he must not act impulsively for the next few seconds.

"Policia. This man is hurt. I can help him," the Nightcrawler says, his horrid visage turned to look over his shoulder at the shotgun-wielding policeman. A second ticks by, almost suspended in the night air. Will the cop do the right thing, wonders the Nightcrawler. Will I?

"I've got a first aid kit," says the cop. He leans into his vehicle, and the Nightcrawler moves forward to Tino, who lays in a rapidly cooling pool of blood. The Snowman's work was gruesome to behold, but he didn't seem to have struck the lethal cut across Tino's throat.

"Don't count on Snowman to rescue you from me next time. We're still gonna have that heart-to-heart, you'n me." With malicious gurgling, the Nightcrawler whispers a nightmarish "Get Well Soon" as the cop drops next to him with a black First Responder bag.

"Christ. Lacerations everywhere." The cop began sponging away the smeared blood, looking for wounds to patch. "It's ok, Mister, um, whatever you're called. Sergeant filled us in that some new...help would be in town. Course, he didn't mention you exactly, so I'm hoping you are one of the good guys." The Nightcrawler only nods. In the distance, the Nightcrawler hears more sirens approaching. And of course, the insistent rattle of his new cellphone has his attention too.

With a last glare in the direction of the Snowman's escape, the Nightcrawler mutters to the darkness.

"Alright you twisted ice cube, you just turned up the heat. Don't count on the element of surprise to protect you next time." And, lacing upward with a viscous tentacle, the Nightcrawler made his way roofward, drawing the cellphone from beneath his translucent gore.

Fury sees the pager function of his new cell phone alert as he begins to tire of staking out the SuperAmerica he selected. "Dammit! Josh has all the luck" he jokingly thinks as he realizes his brother has spotted their quarry. "I hope he's not boneheaded enough to take him on alone." Beginning to fear the worst he quickly starts his motorcycle and heads toward the developing situation.

Then, his other pager, the one from the office, starts to chime. Jake doesn't even need to glance at the alpha-numeric screen other than to confirm what he's guessed: Emma McBell has called, and Clement Dodge has apparently escaped from the urban county holding facility.

Jake stops his bike on North Broadway. _Josh or Clement? Damn! I don't need this now._ In a couple of seconds, Jake has made up his mind, and hopes he's made the decision that won't end up paid for with blood. A twist of the accelerator, and Jake is again roaring through the night.

After that sniding comment about the glasses, Mark decided his superhero wardrobe was lacking in style. Going from shop to shop in the Fayette Mall, he hasn't seen anything that hooked him. He still has that suit in the car and the glasses too, just in case..

Never know when that pager will go off..

BIIP BIIP BIIP..

Mark glances at the pager and sees the number he expected to see: 2000.
"Naturally."

He looks around, sees a Zorro-style mask in a pile of discount left-over promotional stock from the movie of the same name.. As he grabs one, he smiles, at least he found something that caught his eye..

He pulls out a \$10 bill, drops it at the cash register, winks at the cashier and says: "Gotta run! Keep the change!"

He gets to his car, quickly changes into his suit, yes, in the middle of the mall's parking lot and dives into his car. As he begins to speed away, he starts dialing his pager number for more info..

Then he stops. Someone is opening the passenger door and getting in. With a shocked look, Reflector can only sputter, "You!"

"I'm going to snuff you like a melted candle. Your little ventriloquism tricks are no match for my mastery of the basic elements of the planet," Element snarls.

"Come and get some, Element. This Sound isn't done making noise yet," the Sound snaps in reply, hoping against hope his force field of sound will be enough to hold out just one more time.

It's either the cavalry or a shotgun going off in his ear. Windows shake and Phoenix stops tormenting the sound barrier, shedding velocity and a glorious halo of flames that completely obscures her figure as the sonic boom rolls out over the city. The Sound can hear the grin in her slightly breathless voice in the silence that follows: "You rang?"

Phoenix sizes up the situation quickly. _The man on the ground must be Element, given the burning remains of the two cars. Looks like Sound has already gotten some pretty solid licks in, but Element is shaking it off! And he doesn't look

real happy about it, either. There's a policeman lying on the ground nearby. Right, then, Phoenix. Let's see if you learned anything after what happened last time. It looks like the ground burst up underneath the cars, that fits with what they saw at the SuperAmerica. The woman had told the newspapers that he seemed to have some sort of control over gravity. And that could really ruin my day, when things were going so well, too. So let's see now...._

[Phase 3 - Phoenix]

She soars upward and arches into a loop that will bring her back down behind the stunned Element, then lets loose with a burst of flame. The column of fire rages around Element, then fades. He doesn't look at all amused. (Spent 2 PR to change facing, which means his back is to the Sound now, but Phoenix manages a measly 5 points of damage, which he rolls for 4 and takes 1. Uh oh.)

Element screams a curse at Phoenix. "You just float around up there for a second, missy. After I cook your boyfriend's gizzard I'll attend to you. And believe me, you're not going to like it one bit."

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 15]

[Phase 54 - Phoenix]

"Aaaw," Phoenix drawls. "Looks like someone's up past his bedtime and has a case of the crankies." She's hoping to keep Element's mad rage focused on her rather than Sound, who is looking somewhat the worse for wear, she notes with concern. "A nap should do the trick--unless you're scared of little ole me, that is?"

Phoenix raises her hands and the flames pour forth again before she darts higher, staying tauntingly near but--she hopes--out of his reach. (14 points! Ouch. He didn't have quite that many after rolling.)

Sound hasn't been hurt like this since he and Mickey Rourke got into a bar fight at "Hogs and Heffers" (some crack about only having 9 and a half weeks of acting classes got his ass in a sling that time). He can taste the blood coming up from his lungs; the tenderness throughout the left side of his body tells him he's bleeding inside. As Phoenix's wrathful flames cascade around Element, Sound hears Element's last comment before going unconscious: a quiet "I'm not afraid of you."

Phoenix lands to inspect Element's unconscious form; if his eyes could display Out Cold, they would. "Hey, Sound, we did it!"

"We sure did. Let me ask you something."

"Sure."

"When you...kaff...think of me...think of...music..." Sound's voice trails off softly as he slumps to the ground. A small pool of blood forms beneath him, his costume sticky with blood and layered with dirt and burnt carbon.

"Sound? JOSH! NO!"

"But," Reflector began to ask. Mr Book shushed him quickly.

"Just drive like you planned to. Fast."

Reflector nodded, and pulled the transmission into drive. With a screech of rubber, Reflector and the Millennium's early mentor and guide, Mr Book, hurtled toward the scene of the fight.

Jake hated this situation. He knew Dodge would skip as soon as he got a clear chance. "I should have kept a closer eye on him when I had the time. Too late to worry about it now." He knew he only had one option: go save big brother. Dodge would have to wait. "Clement will not get far before I find him again."

As Jake speeds off on his bike he can't help but laugh at the irony. As kids, Mom

used to always tell him that he should behave better and stay out of trouble like his older brother. The funny thing was, Josh wasn't any better at being behaved, just better at not getting caught. Then he remembers that he hadn't been by to see Dad for two days. "I better stop in and see him in the morning before I take off after Dodge. I know Mom's probably there now. I wish she would take better care of herself; she's been looking kind of pecked lately." He resolves to do something about it when he gets a chance. "Yeah, like I'm going to have any extra time soon." With that he thought he gives the throttle a little extra squeeze and off into the night he goes.

In his mirror, Jake sees one of the SORT vehicles, a modified HUMVEE, roaring behind him. He didn't have to guess where they were headed. As Jake burned down North Broadway past Transylvania U, a strange sight caught his eye. Running along the rooftops of the closely-packed buildings of the old neighborhood, the Nightcrawler was making pretty good time going the same direction. "Hope some old lady doesn't look out her window and have a heart attack."

Then it was Jake's turn to feel icy fear. The industrial park was a blazing mess, with upturned earth everywhere and several small fires burning on the grounds. Two vehicles sat wrecked; one was a police car, where a cop slowly pulled himself to his feet and reached for his radio mike. And in the middle of the debris-strewn scene, he could see Phoenix running toward someone laying insensate on the ground. His brother.

"Oh dear lord no." Jake twisted the accelerator hard, nearly laying the bike down as he came to a stop by Sound and Phoenix. "What happened!"

"He was facing Element down when I got here. I didn't see what happened. I took Element out, and Josh just fell. Element must have hit him pretty hard. Jake, he's losing blood. I think I can carry him, but I don't know if I should move him. Do you know anything about moving an injured person?"

"Bro, why did you take him on? You knew I was coming..." Jake says, not seeming to hear Phoenix.

"Jake, listen to me. Can we move him? I've got to know now."

"Madre de dios," came a deep voice, like rocks at the bottom of a 55-gallon drum. The Nightcrawler whistled softly at the scene. "Is he..."

"He's breathing, but barely. There's blood coming out of his mouth," Phoenix said as she tried to keep his nose and mouth clear. "Call an ambulance. God, he's bleeding everywhere."

"The policia are here. The SORTies."

"Screw them," said Jake. He whipped out his cellphone and punched the 911 button. With a few words, he told the dispatcher to get an ambulance on the way.

Footsteps approached quickly as the HUMVEE roared to a stop. Quickly, armored members of the squad emerged; two returned to the vehicle and came back toting large orange medic bags. While one ran toward the police car and the officer there, the other approached the Millienium members.

Jake immediately felt a tickle of anger; without looking up, he knew the approaching SORTie was the one he'd noticed before at that first meeting with Bloomfield. He glanced up, briefly, to the officer, and saw the 7 on his uniform.

Seven stopped hard in his tracks. Then, he continued, coming to the ground next to Josh and checking his vital signs. Jake's head began to swim. He could barely see clearly; everything was like looking across a desert as the heat rose from the ground in waves.

"Um, any idea what's wrong with Fury?" the Nightcrawler asked Phoenix, who tried to make some sense of the rising anger on Jake's face. Surely he was concerned about his brother, but there was something else there that she couldn't immediately place...

"Wow, sure is quiet here," Josh said as he took in the expanse of white and gold skies surrounding him.

I LIKE PEACE AND QUIET. I DON'T GET TO ENJOY IT VERY OFTEN, echoed a sepulchral voice from next to him. Josh looked at the speaker, a grim, black cloak clad figure holding a long scythe in one hand and an hourglass in the other. There was very little sand in the top of the hourglass, Josh noted.

"Oh damn. Guess I'm not going to make it."

THAT HAS NOT BEEN DETERMINED YET.

"It hasn't?" Josh asked.

NO. SOMEONE IS GOING TO INTERFERE WITH YOUR DEPARTURE. OR TRY TO, ANYWAY.

"I thought we had to play some sort of game for my life."

WE JUST DID. WHAT DO YOU THINK GOING AROUND DRESSED LIKE THAT, TOSSING AROUND BOLTS OF COHERENT SOUND, IS ANYWAY?

"But I haven't lost?"

THERE IS ANOTHER PLAYER.

"So what happens now?"

WE WAIT. WOULD YOU LIKE A COOKIE?

"Uh, no thanks. I think I remember something about not eating in the land of the dead.

THAT'S HADES. THIS ISN'T HADES. HIM AND ALL HIS STUPID BY-YOUR-LEAVE RULES REALLY GET UP MY NOSE.

"Oh. Sorry."

THAT'S ALL RIGHT. WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, THE RULES DON'T APPLY TO ME ANYWAY.

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 16]

Jake doesn't understand what is happening to him. He can't seem to shake this nauseating feeling. He could tell that the SORTie, #7, felt something too. Could it be that reaction that happens between two 'Powered' people? "It does seem a little bit like the way I felt when we fought Dodge only different. Maybe just a stronger reaction, but what does that mean? It doesn't matter now."

"Snap OUT of it!" Phoenix hisses at Fury. "He needs you now. Leave it for later!" The apparently sourceless hostility is almost palpable and somewhat contagious; her wings mantle protectively over their fallen comrade, and it takes an effort of will to smooth them back, giving the man room to work. Her own heart is racing with fear and the leftover adrenaline from the fight, but all those years of stage training are good for something, and she holds onto her composure, at least outwardly. "Look, why don't you guys go check on Element?" she suggests clearly, giving the Nightcrawler a "help me here" glance in hopes of diverting Fury. "I think I hit him pretty hard, but when he wakes up he'll need to be restrained." Not that she's at all sorry, now.

The Nightcrawler stepped up to Jake's side, pointedly turning away from the SORTie. He hissed down into Jake's ear, "I don't know what this is about, hermano, but that's your brother on the pavement. If you don't want them to take charge of him, we're with you, but let's stay focussed on him."

Everything had happened so fast. _I suppose I'd better get used to it,_ Phoenix thinks, more grimly than is her habit. _We knew the risks, but oh god, please.... How long does it take an ambulance to get here, anyway?_ Kneeling beside Sound, she watches closely and fervently wishes that she'd learned something more useful in school, keeping tense count of every labored breath. Her gloves and the ends of her mask are soaked in blood; as if from another planet the thought appears that the stains'll never come out.

"Is he going to...?" Unable to speak further, she glances at the SORTie questioningly. Her lingering distrust of that armored presence has been compounded by Fury's clear animosity, but it seems that for the moment there is no choice.

Seven speaks, and his voice emerges flat and dull, hammered into anonymity by some sort of subvocal device. "I'm checking now." From his armored gauntlet, he draws two leads with small plastic discs on the ends. After cutting open Sound's costume shirt, he places the discs on Sound's chest. Phoenix and the others are amazed to see the blacked-out arm portion of Seven's gauntlet light up with a blue glow; an EKG reading, blood pressure, and pulse display on the gauntlet.

"Vital signs indicate significant blood loss, likely from internal bleeding." Seven pulled out sponges and mopped up more of the stickiness from Sound's chest. "Two ribs broken, seventh and eighth positions; possible...no, likely lung penetration. UK Medivac 40 seconds from arrival."

Fury looks up at Seven as he continues checking on Josh's vitals. "Will he make it?"

Seven looks over at him, quiet for a moment. Furu can see his own concern reflected in Seven's faceplate. "Unknown pending surgery. Medivac arriving 28 seconds; step back and away from the patient." Phoenix and Nightcrawler move back a little, but Fury remains. He clutches his brother's hand just a little bit tighter. "Come on big brother, hang in there we're almost to the hospital."

Whether Fury noticed Seven's start at that, no one can tell at the moment. The Medivac, a huge life-support vehicle, has arrived, followed closely by Reflector's car as Phoenix notices with her enhanced vision further down the road. She is shocked to see the passenger.

"It's Book! He's with Reflector, look!" she says to Nightcrawler. He looks as the car arrives behind the Medivac, and Reflector leaps out quickly to join them.

"Phoenix, I don't see him."

"What? But I just..."

"Ohmigod. Is he all right? What happened?" Reflector babbles before catching himself and waiting for answers.

"Sound tangled with Element and got burned," Nightcrawler observed as the paramedics loaded Sound quickly into the Medivac, with Fury hopping in the back with them and daring them to order him out. Seven stands and watches everyone impassively as the Medivac departs in a screaming high-decibel wail.

"Reflector, who was with you in your car? Was it Book?" Phoenix demands.

"Yes, he got in at the mall and told me to drive. Hey, where'd he go?"

The paramedics swiftly set up an IV for Sound as they tried to offset his blood loss with fluids until they can get to the hospital. As one paramedic goes toward the front of the large truck, Jake is amazed to see Mr Book step from the front compartment.

"Book! How did you...what..."

"Easy, Fury," says Book, mindful of the paramedics. "I'm here to help."

And the words help Jake feel as if a burden has just lifted from his body. He almost breaks into a smile.

"That's right. Old Mr Book has been here before. Let's see if experience has taught this old man anything," Book said as he knelt beside Sound.

"Can I do anything?"

"Yes," answered Book. "I've found a little light reading will get a soul through the darkest times." His smile bright against his dark brown skin, Mr Book reaches under the well-worn pea coat he wears and draws out an oft-thumbed Bible, and passes it to Jake. "Now you think good thoughts while I see if I can help our man here get himself sorted out."

[Later in the ER lounge]

Jake paces back and forth across the tile floor. What's taking so long, why haven't they came and told him something? He approaches a nurse walking by and asks about his brother. She says she'll check and get back to him. Sure that's what the last one said and that was 40 minutes ago. The more he paces the angrier he gets till he can't take it anymore and he's going to find out for himself. As he approaches the swing double doors a doctor comes out carrying a clipboard.

"Faulkner. Is there a ..." He checks his clipboard. "Jacob Faulkner here."

Jake rushes up to the doctor not giving him a chance to respond first. "How is he? How's my brother?"

"His vitals have stabilized for now. Darndest thing too. His blood count quadrupled from what the paramedics read on the way here. He must not have been as severely injured as they originally diagnosed. We're getting ready to take him to surgery. If you want you can see him briefly before he goes up."

"Yes, I want to see him." Jake follows the doctor through the doors and down the hall to the examining room. Jake looks down at his brother laying there and all he feels is an overwhelming feeling of relief. "Man you look bad. I mean real bad. But you should see the other guy. I think their still scraping him up off the road. How you feeling?"

He waits, hoping Josh will answer, but he is quiet. Only slow breathing in response.

"It's going to be all right man. They're going to take care of you. I've got to go upstairs to see Mom. I haven't told her yet. Didn't want her to know until I had found something out. You take care, I'll be there when you wake up." Jake leaves the room and talks to the doctor briefly to find out details of the impending surgery and than heads upstairs to face Mom and Dad. _What am I going to tell them? We hadn't thought about that when we started this._

Jocelyn Faulkner quietly sits by her dying husband's side. She can't even recall how many countless nights she's done this since he became sick with the cancer. She lets her auburn hair down from and it flows in waves down to the small of her back and holds her head in her hands. Briefly composing herself with a resolute sigh she wipes away her tears and curses herself quietly. She's mad because something about the wait tonight reminds her of the equally countless nights alone when the two of them were in their prime...John out on another binge (they only got worse after he was thrown off of the police) and her worrying needlessly where he would be found this time. What's worse is she can't help but remember that one night when she knew where to find him...and who she would find him with...

"Hi Mom."

"Hello, Jake."

"How's Dad?"

"The oncologist was here about thirty minutes ago. So was a minister. I guess he works for the hospital I haven't seen him before. There isn't much time left." She looked at her husband, wired and connected to various breathing hoses. "Jake, you understand that your father has a living will, don't you?"

"No. What's that?"

"It means that if he cannot continue to live without the aid of machines, that I am to have them turned off."

"Mom, you can't!"

"Jake, if I don't do as he wishes then his attorney will file to have it done. He didn't want some stranger to be the one to help him stop suffering. He wanted it to be family."

"Well I won't allow it, Mom. There's always hope, there's..." Jake stopped. "Mom, a minister was here, you said. What did he look like?"

"Small black fellow, dressed for the weather. I have to admit that I felt better when he was here."

But Jake didn't hear her finish, for he had already bolted from the room to the hallway. He hoped against hope he could find Mr Book, and he did. Seated across from a coffee machine, warming himself in the vapors from a cup, Mr Book sat and watched Jake approach him.

"My father..."

"I know. And I can't help him."

"But...you did something for Josh! They said his blood count improved."

Mr Book nodded. "I know."

"Mr Book, please. My father has little time left."

Book exhaled sadly, and set his cup on top of a trash can next to his chair.

"Jake, I did try to help him. But I couldn't because I can't."

"I don't understand."

"He isn't one of us, Jake. What I can do, what I did for Josh, I was able to do because he and I, and you, have all been changed. I've been to twelve states and I know what I'm sayin'. I can't heal someone who isn't a powered person. I hoped it might be different, being he's your father, maybe something in the genes. But I couldn't affect him."

"That's not fair, Book! There's loonies running around with knives for arms, and blowing things up, and they can affect people just fine!"

"Jake, easy. Please."

"It's not fair to him. It's not fair to us."

"I know. And I'm sorry."

And they sat in silence for several minutes, with only the cold fire of the television burning from atop the coffee machine for warmth.

Sound: Ok, I'll take a cookie. Got milk?

Death: YOU ARE A SMART ASS AREN'T YOU?

Well, if you're gonna go around and offer cookies...

HRUMPH...ALRIGHT FOLLOW ME TO THE FRIDGE

....and the two continue on their way down a tunnel of light...presumably to not Death's door but his kitchen.

Never being good with uncomfortable and potentially permanent silences, Sound asks, So, ah, how does a guy end up with a gig like this one?

YOU DIE.

...and I thought taking subways to job interviews was a bitch...

YOU SEEM A LOT MORE AT EASE THAN MOST WHO MEET ME -- WHY IS THAT? DON'T YOU HAVE A NUMBER OF LOOSE ENDS YOU'RE LEAVING BEHIND?

It's a reflex--you have to admit this is all pretty absurd -- what with you and the robes and scythe and the bright light and all...

YOU'RE ONE TO TALK.

Hey! Criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot and... oh alright, I figure if nothing else they might break out in laughter long enough to be distracted.

getting closer to the end of the tunnel, Sound can make out a rectangular shape...

SERIOUSLY THOUGH, WHAT WILL YOU MISS THE MOST, IF YOU SHOULD "PASS ON"? ANY REGRETS?

Plenty. Things have been really confusing for me lately -- even before the new year. My life wasn't working out the way I had planned -- since coming back to Lexington has stalled my music...

YOU'RE JUST BEING A BIG BABY -- YOUR ART'S NOT ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE IT'S ABOUT WHO YOU ARE.

That's easy for you to say...and besides that my romantic life has been pretty barren...

MY LIFE HASN'T EXACTLY BEEN LIKE...WHAT WAS THAT MOVIE...REMAKE OF I TAKE A HOLIDAY...

You mean "Meet Joe Black"?

BRRR. YES. WE'LL SEE HOW BLOODY WELL BRAD PITT LIKES MEETING JOE BLACK. SO...YOU MUST BE THINKING OF A GIRL?

Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about Annie lately especially since New Year's...

ARE YOU SURE IT'S HER THAT YOU'RE REALLY THINKING ABOUT?

What do you mean?

JUST AN ATTEMPT AT PSYCHOLOGY. I'LL LET YOU KICK THAT AROUND ON YOUR OWN...

being just feet away from the shape, Sound now can make it out (the light is pretty bright at this end of the tunnel) to be a refrigerator.

Ok (already beginning to suspect that he might be projecting newer feelings onto his older relationships). I would've liked to have gotten to say goodbye to Jake...I don't know what this is going to do to the poor guy...

RIGHT, ANYTHING ELSE? AND BEFORE YOU ANSWER CAN YOU GET TWO GLASSES OUT OF THE CUPBOARD?

Sure. (he pulls two glasses down from the recently materialized cupboard and hands a glass to Death) I've never had a great relationship with my father but I had hoped to have some more time to iron things out...it's kind of funny that I beat him to you...(thinking for a moment) how much time does he have left? is there anything you can do for him? (Sound notices that the milk pouring into his glass comes out massively curdled.)

Um, how long has it been since you stocked your fridge? Sound watches Death scratch his head; to help find an answer he looks at the expiration date...and the photo of Charles Lindbergh Jr. on the back of the carton)

TOO LONG...

I could go get you some more.

FINE, GO AHEAD. AND MAYBE SOME OF THOSE SANDIES TOO. SORRY, I DON'T HAVE ANY CASH IN MY CLOAK RIGHT NOW.

with these words Sound comes to in a hospital bed...as he awakens he could swear he hears a somewhat irritated yet sepulchral voice go "BUGGER."

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 17]

Back at the studio, Amanda spends a few moments putting herself back together; everything seems slightly unreal, as if another, more dangerous world had momentarily intruded into her own. In the mirror she looks somewhat strained and pale, but she gets herself straightened up and returns to the real world.

"Are you all right?" Shelley asks, blinking at the change in her demeanor. Alain has vanished, and none of the others have shown up yet, it seems.

"I'm fine," Amanda tells her, forcing a little smile. "Sorry I took so long. What were we talking about? Equipment?"

"Right. Did you want to head out now? If I know these guys they're not going to want to waste any time getting you up and running."

Well, I can take that hint. "May as well, I suppose." Maybe it'll help take her mind off things. Think of music. _Stop that,_ she tells herself. _He's not going to die._ It's much too soon to call and check, and she's not even sure if they would tell her, not being a family member. Maybe she can stop by later.

"Did you need anything else?" Shelley asked again. "Alain says you're new in town, so whatever we can do...."

"Thanks. Um, I'm pretty much all set, I think, except if you know where I can find a cheap car that might be a help."

"Right," Shelley says, scribbling on a Palm Pilot V. "That won't be a problem. The car can be an advance on future royalties. See, you'll have to stick around now." she says with a friendly laugh. "Ok, back to equipment. All of the band's rehearsal work is on DAT. As such, it's the property of the band and the record label, which the band owns. While they've never really dissuaded any sort of tape trading, they've not really encouraged it either. That's one stalemate I don't want any part of. Anyway, what I'm getting at is please don't lose a tape. Let me go get Mason, and I'll give him my credit card. He can take you to get a DAT machine, and if you want to have a shopping spree, new bass, amps, cords, anything like that, this looks like a good time to do it."

Shelley nods and goes off toward the staircase. The band's studio/dwelling, a three story house with plenty of space, resides a half-mile south of Man O'War Drive, on Richmond Road. Outside, Amanda can see the covered swimming pool and what looks like a huge hot tub shelter. Most of the first floor is studio and hastily converted office areas in what was the dining area and the den. She hasn't yet explored the other two floors.

After a few minutes of wandering around the studio, where Amanda has time to examine a portion of Jonas' legendary pedal collection and Rob's Yamaha kit, she notices off to one side a well-played, white Jazz Bass, sitting on a stand next to the practice area. The Fender shows no dust; it's been recently cleaned. _Alex's bass._ she realizes. Behind it by the wall are five heavy canvas sacks,

bearing the logo of the US Postal Service. But before she can examine them, Amanda hears Shelley return.

"Amanda, this is Mason," she introduces a tall, trim young man with a Swedish mop of blond hair, gold-wire round spectacles framing blue eyes. He stands about 6'2" and has a thoughtful appearance; she also guesses he's someone who runs a lot. "He'll take you in the Lexus and arrange for delivering whatever you get today. Oh, and I almost forgot, but MTV will be here in two weeks to do an Unplugged special. You'll want to pick out a couple of outfits to choose from for that."

Amanda blinks at her several times and finds to her confusion that her voice won't work. She clears her throat, twice. "Okay. Nice to meet you, Mason." She shakes his hand. "Shall we?" _MTV, for pity's sake. The gang in New York isn't going to believe this._

"Nice to meet you, Miss Halle, or is it Miz or something else?" Mason asks, his hand flipping back what she'd guess is a perpetually overhanging lock of blond hair out of his face.

"Call me Amanda, actually," she suggests.

"Ok." Another hair flip. "I'm almost always Mason, except for the occasional crossing of wires, when people usually call me 'Sparky' or 'Ohmigodisheallright?'"

After a while in the Lexus, watching the city go by, Amanda says, "I'm not usually this quiet. It's just I'm not really used to this yet."

"Rob's a good one to help you keep centered. Being the drummer he's a very steady guy. All that Isshinryu karate I think. With you playing in the rhythm section too, I imagine you two will talk a lot." Another hair flip, then a wonderfully shy smile as he turns his eyes briefly to her and back to traffic.

"I'd expect so. I haven't gotten a chance to get to know anyone yet, really, I've only been in town a couple weeks." After such a long absence, it seems misleading to say *back* in town, after all. Things have changed.

"Enjoy the silence while it lasts. Once everyone sees you jamming on Unplugged, you won't be an anonymous musician any more" Mason replies.

How do you say, 'Sorry, I've never been a rock star before,' without sounding like an idiot, anyway? The closest she's ever come were a couple of brief stints in New York bands which quickly proved that it took more than raw talent to get somewhere in the world--staying sober for more than twelve hours at a stretch helps, as does being able to speak coherently to other humans--and promptly self-destructed. Most of the past seems like a different world; the old theater and the endless petty infighting, the weeks between jobs, the constant tension of knowing that there were always a dozen people ready to drag you down and take your place, however low. This--this is like falling into a dream. _If part of today was a nightmare, and part a dream... when am I going to wake up?_ she wonders suddenly.

Mason startles Amanda out of her reverie. "I'd hoped to ask you something, and I hope you don't mind me bringing it up now. I think that's why Shelley asked me to take you around. You see, everyone has their own tech. You probably haven't met the others, I'm guessing. Anyway, I'm Alex's bass tech. I handle all his tuning, monitor and cabinet setups, repairs, changing batteries. All of that, for the

past 8 years. I guess what I'm asking is if you're bringing in your own tech, or if you want to keep me on for a while to see if you want me to keep the job."

"Oh." She can't help but laugh a little despite her worries. "For most of the past year I've been hauling my own cello up and down the New York subway system, and if something needed fixing it was my own darn problem. You're most definitely welcome to stick around if you want to. Alex's recommendation is more than good enough for me." Eight years. What was it about these people, she wondered, that could inspire that sort of devotion in a business not exactly known for such.

"Well, thanks." Another of those sidelong glances and a quickly arched eyebrow. "Cello? That's a bit of a switch."

"If it has strings, I'll at least give a good shot at playing it," she answers the unstated question. "Haven't learned harp yet, though. The theater job paid the bills. This whole thing here," she gestures around at the car's plush interior, "just kind of fell into my lap when I decided to move back here, so if I seem a little spaced sometimes I'm just getting to used to it all."

"I know what you mean about 'falling into' this. I had just finished my electrical engineering degree, and I was at the Armory in Philly for a show. My friends and I had managed to get in early because one guy's dad was on the security crew. The band was setting up and doing sound checks. Alex was getting some epic feedback, and the sound guys there weren't helping. He finally leaned into a mike and said 'Is there an electrician in the house?' My friends were like, 'go, go, you know all about this stuff'. So I did. I walked up to the stage and Alex looks down and goes 'Can you fix this before I kick the colorful metaphor deleted speaker in?' And I'm going oh sure, I can do that. And I did. He told me I was hired for the rest of the tour."

"That's as good as CJ joining the Ramones," said Amanda.

"I know CJ! I told him that story; he said we should form a club of fans who join bands."

Time passes in a blur; she can't help thinking about how drastically her life has changed in the past few weeks, while the one thing she had counted on changing--the pace of existence--hasn't slowed down at all. And now, today, she is thinking for the first time about the costs. Eventually, though, she finds herself relaxing somewhat. Mason is likeable--they all are, apparently--and efficient. Amanda manages to stick to the essentials as they shop, wryly remembering the times in her life when a set of strings was a major financial outlay. That won't be a problem in the future, but she is still acutely aware of her newcomer status; it would definitely not do to jeopardize the situation by getting greedy. She's comfortable with her old stuff anyway, and intermittent parental largesse has ensured its quality. Still, she takes mental notes for next time.

"Thanks for all the help," she tells Mason when they're through and everything has been arranged. "I really appreciate all of this. D'you think anyone will mind if I'm not right back? I'd like to stop by the hospital and check on a... friend. I can take a cab."

"Oh, right. Alex is in post-operative, room 527. We're about a block away; I can drop you off there and get everything unloaded at the studio."

"Thank you."

Amanda closes the Lexus' door gently and stands there for a moment on the concrete apron, watching it drive away, then shakes her head, goes inside and pauses, irresolute. She heads for the emergency room desk, hoping that they'll know something about the situation.

It takes almost a half hour and liberal applications of all the charm she can summon, but she finally finds someone willing to talk to her.

"Faulkner, Faulkner... first name?" the staffer inquires, running a finger down the computer screen.

"Joshua."

"Uh-hm... what was this, a car accident? Still serious, but stable, looks like. They've operated, things are looking a lot better than they were." He glances up from the screen with a smile. She answers it with one of her own as the leaden fear evaporates from her heart.

"Thank you!" It's all she can do not to skip down the hall. A quick stop at a somewhat overpriced floral shop--talk about a captive market--and she heads upstairs.

Jake sits there for several minutes just thinking about his dad's plight. He had known for sometime that his father wouldn't live very much longer. He thought he was ready, that he had dealt with the pain. But now he realizes that he was nowhere near ready to deal with it as it comes to pass. And Josh, he should have been there for him. "Here I've got these powers and I could help Josh, and I can't help dad. What good are they?" He looks up to Mr. Book. "What good are they?"

"You can't blame yourself for what happened to your brother. There are risks involved in the mission you all have undertaken. But you have to persevere. There is good to come of your powers. You or I can't help your dad. It's not destined to be. We can't help that. But we can help many others. We must keep the balance."

Jake just looks down at his hands for awhile. Book is right there are things going on that are on a grander scale than individual lives. It appears to be true what Book said about others out there that use their powers for evil. Someone has to stop them before they get organized. Then Jake remembers SORTie #7. "Let me ask you about something?" Jake says as he raises his head again to look at Book. But when he looks up the chair next to him is empty, apart from a worn Bible. Jake jumps up and looks up and down the hallway and around the corner. Nothing. Gone just like that. "How does he do that?"

Jake picks up the Bible. It's the same one he left in the ambulance. He ponders for an instant, shakes his head than turns and heads back to his dad's room.

Jake quietly enters the hospital room. He notices the eerie stillness of the room. He hadn't noticed it before. He shakes the feeling and moves to his mother's side. He places his hand on her arm as he squats down beside her. She starts at his sudden presence.

"Didn't mean to startle you."

"I was just remembering better times."

"Mom, about earlier...you're right. We have to carry out dad's wishes no matter how much we disagree with them. You know I'm there for you when ever you need me. I know now I haven't been around too much the last couple of days, and I have to go out of town tomorrow. But I'm going to try and spend more time with you two."

"You know I understand," she replied. "You and your brother are busy with the business. You don't know how much it has meant to your dad to see you two taking care of it like that. I know you two have given up a lot to help your dad out. Where is your brother anyway? I haven't heard from him since yesterday."

Jake can feel his stomach come up into his throat. Now is the moment of truth, what do you tell her? "There's something I have to tell you. Don't get excited, but Josh has been in an accident..."

"Oh my gosh. Is he all right? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"It's ok, he's here in the hospital now. There was an explosion or something and he has some minor burns and some broken ribs. But there seems to be some internal bleeding. He is in surgery now. The doctors are very optimistic."

"So he is going to be all right?"

"Of course he is. Don't worry I'm going up to see if he is out of surgery yet. I'll let you know something later." He leans over and gives her a peck on the cheek and leaves. He pauses once he is out of the room and takes a deep breath. 'She took that better than I thought she would.'

As Jake walks down the hall towards the elevators he overhears a television news report from one of the rooms he passes.

"....and with the Milwaukee response to the increasing presents of 'powered persons' other cities and communities are debating over what to do with this new menace. Here in Lexington, Mayor Miller declined comment and has not returned calls. Back to you Bob."

"Oh shit, this is getting out of hand. That's right, I forgot about the guys. I wonder if they are still down stairs." Jake takes the elevator down to the lounge. He gets off the elevator and heads to the last place he remembers them waiting.

"Hey you guys, you're still here?" he asks of the Nightcrawler and Reflector.

"How's he doing?" Reflector asked.

"He is still in surgery right now. But the doctors are real optimistic. Apparently Book has healing powers and helped Josh out in the ambulance on the way here."

Mark speaks up. "Book was in the ambulance with you guys? I wondered where he had sent to after we got out of the car at the scene."

"He has that thing about popping up when you least expect it an popping back out when you not looking." Jake says shaking his head. "He was upstairs awhile ago." Jake pauses. "But he is gone now. But anyway have you guys been watching the

news. They are starting to ban the use of 'Powers'. You better get out of here before the press or the police show up."

"But what about Josh?" asks Carl, the Nightcrawler.

"I'll let you know how everything turns out and you can come back and visit him when it is less conspicuous. We need to get together in a couple of days to talk about what has been going on. I'm going to have to leave town tomorrow on business but when I get back I'll get in touch with you."

With that, Fury paced narrow circles around the nondescript and thinly padded waiting room chairs. The night shift of UK Hospital had no doubt seen some strange things in its checkered history, but a stewing, pacing man in spandex surrounded by a translucent humanoid slime and "Man-in-Black" stood out even so.

"Well, if you want a change in subject, ask me about my night," rumbled the Nightcrawler.

Fury looked up at the slimy hero with miserable reproach. "Change in subject? This boring you? My brother's in there fighting for his life..." The Nightcrawler's body language was sympathetic, but Mark stepped in, laying a hand on Fury's arm.

"He knows that Jake. We're on your side here..." To Nightcrawler, "Something else to think about might do us all some good."

Carl related his encounter with the Snowman in as dispassionate terms as possible, which meant not very.

Jake shrugged. "Yeah? And? We got help out there, sounds like to me. You thinking we can't use it?"

"You didn't see that kid he cut up," said Nightcrawler in a dangerously low voice. "We're talkin' low-level mule. Punk kid makin' bad choices. I got nothin' against shakin' these scum up, but if that cop hadn't come by...all I'm sayin' is ten years ago that coulda been me. Knucklin's one thing. He mutilated that kid. Nearly carved up any chance at turnin' himself around. There's lines to what we do here."

"Well, 'scuze me if I don't get worked up over a drug-dealer's flesh wounds just now," said Jake, his eyes drifting to the door to Josh's room.

Mark quickly jumped in with another attempted change of pace. "Hey, where did Book get off to?" He too was interrupted, by a tired night nurse announcing to the waiting room. "Mr. Jake Faulkner? Your brother has regained consciousness. He wants to see you." Relief swept all hints of tension from the group.

Amanda approached just in time to hear the announcement, as the group looked up to see her approach.

"Flowers for me, chica?" the Nightcrawler sloshed.

"Afraid not. He's ok?" she asked.

"Seems so. Let me go first," Jake said, and stepped into the room, leaving the group behind.

"Hey, little bro," Josh started to speak, but Jake cut him off.

"What in the hell were you thinking? The guy leveled a building by himself. What the hell is the matter with you?"

"There was a cop there, Jake. He had no way of knowing what Element was capable of doing."

"They get paid to take that chance."

"I'm going to forget you said that, since we have a lot of friends on the force and you are not thinking clearly."

"Damn you, Josh..."

"Jake? Stop. Chill. You're doing it again."

Jake felt the blood racing through his veins. His temperature was sky high, and his fists were clenched so tight he was surprised not to see blood coming from them. But while he listened to Josh, who had started to hum quietly, he felt himself grow cooler.

"We're losing Dad, Josh. I can't take two losses. I don't know how I'm going to handle one."

"Jake, 'handle' is something 'we' will do. Not just you. Jake, I had the strangest dream...and now I can't seem to remember it."

"Do you remember Mr Book?"

"Of course!" Josh replied.

"He saved you. On the ambulance. He's got some kind of power to heal."

"For real? Jake, you've got to find him again, get him to see Dad..."

"He did. It didn't work."

"What? But why?"

"Cause you're a powered and Dad isn't. Mr Book thought it might work because of him having similar genetics to you, but it didn't. That's what he told me."

They both waited in the quiet cool of the room for a moment. Then Jake spoke.

"You've got another visitor. The Nightcrawler brought you some flowers." Jake moved to the door and opened it slightly.

"Go on in." Jake says to Amanda.

"Hello?" she inquires softly, pushing the door almost closed behind her.

"Oh, hi. Those for me?" He sounds somewhat groggy, but he's smiling. _Jake you

smartass._

Amanda glances down at the flowers. "Uh, actually, these're for Alex. He's upstairs, I thought I'd embarrass him as long as I'm here. You two can talk shop later, maybe. *This* one's for you, though." She lays the second, wildflower bouquet down on the table. "How are you?"

"Better than I thought I was going to be for a couple minutes there."

"Glad to hear it. I won't stay long, I just wanted to know--see how you were doing," she corrects herself mid-sentence. "You gave us all a little bit of a scare."

"I know."

It's the first time she's heard him say something completely seriously. She's not sure what to say in response, and glances around the barren room for a moment.

"Mr Book saved my life on the ambulance, Jake told me. He can heal powered people. But it doesn't work on anyone else. If he could only have been able to do something for Dad..." Josh sighed, and they were quiet again for a minute.

"Well. I don't want Jake throwing me out of here, and you need to rest, so... oh, here." She sets her shoulder bag on the chair and digs around for a few moments, pulls out her Discman and pops it open to double-check what's inside. It's a "homemade" CD with "Chaos Theory" scribbled on it in indelible marker.

"What's that?"

"Mix. A friend of mine burned it for me while we were in school. Mostly old stuff--by definition better than anything on MTV," she pronounces with a grin, setting the player on the bedside table. "You might like some of it, anyway, and since you might be here a bit longer.... There's even a track from '9:30 Live' on there." The smile fades, her mood growing serious again. "Get better, okay? I think we need you."

Impulsively, she drops a quick kiss on his forehead and is gone in a blur. Amanda notes that her erstwhile comrades have departed, but an older woman is waiting outside the door with Jake to enter. They nod to each other, and Amanda can't help but notice a small smile on the woman's face.

"Damn, she's fast" Josh thought as Amanda departed the room with what was definitely a use of her powers. He didn't want her to leave so soon--screw getting rest. He wanted to spend more time with her. Out of all of his new "acquaintances" the two of them shared some real connections: Both were musicians, both had had dreams of life in the Big Apple, hell even earlier when Reflector showed up decked out as an MIB agent they were practically finishing each other's sentences.

Touching his forehead and glancing over at the wildflowers he is touched at the shy sweetness behind all of Amanda's gestures. Josh reaches with some difficulty for the discman Amanda left for his listening pleasure. Half expecting to hear the Insect Surfers (know that he has their cover of "Ex Lion Tamer" stuck in his head he'll have to dig up their "Wavelength" EP once he gets home) he is pleasantly surprised to hear "Washington" by Tru Fax & the Insaniacs. It makes sense that Amanda would like Diana Quinn. Being more exhausted than he thought Josh folds his hands under his head, closes his eyes and concentrates on Michael

Mariotte's drumming.

Hearing light footsteps at the door, Josh pulls the headphones out of his ears as his heart skips a beat in anticipation. He says "Amanda?" as he opens his eyes and his mother steps through the door. "Oh my god! Josh what happened to you?" Jocelyn raises her hands to cover her mouth. "Jake said something about an explosion?"

"It's another one of those wrong place at the wrong time stories. I was at the SuperAmerica over on North Broadway when that "Powered" nutjob decided to knock it over."

Jocelyn sits down next to her son and grips his hand. "So how bad is it really?"

"Couple of broken ribs and some burns." "I've had close calls before Mom--do you remember Grizz?--I'll pull through."

This is a pretty familiar scene for the two. Josh was always in and out of the hospital as a child. He was born prematurely without a fully developed set of lungs (The family folklore suggests that his lungs developed later thanks to being bottle fed moonshine once by his mother's brother Bill). Later he was mauled by the neighbors German Shepherd (Grizz, who had to be chased off of Josh by his father Jonathan and a Louisville Slugger) and in high school he had to go in twice for an appendectomy (as weird as that might sound).

"How's Dad? Jake said things don't sound good..."

"They don't." She says shaking her head. "He has a living will and I don't want to do it, Josh."

"Shussh." Josh says as he straightens up and draws his mother close to his chest. "Let it go. Jake and I will figure things out--you've had to deal with too much of this for too long." She pulls back feeling a bit more calm. Josh raises her chin up and says "I came back home to help out remember--let me be here for you."

"You know I didn't want you to come back--you had such a future ahead of you--I don't want you wasting your life away..."

"Trust me, Ma--I'm not. I've been aimless since I came back but I've been thinking a lot since New Years and I've come to some decisions. I know what I want out of life now."

Appreciating her son's reliability and honesty it's her turn to play coy, "...and does this Amanda have something to do with that?" she says glancing at the bouquet on his bedside table.

"Mom! Maybe she's does. But I know that tone in your voice...she's just a friend..."

"...that's what you always said about Annie too..."

"Excuse me. The doctors need to see the patient now." A nurse says as she opens the door and sees Josh has company.

"Saved by the bell, Ma. We'll talk later"

And with that comment of laser-like precision all Mothers seem to be able to

focus on their children, Jocelyn manages to cut through much of Josh's recent confusion. Reeling at the simplicity of his Mom's comment, Josh now realizes that he had been hiding emerging feelings for Amanda by recalling his past experiences with Annie. They had waited too long to start their romance fearing they would destroy their friendship. Josh won't make that mistake twice...

The guard looked unimpressed, and at 6'6" and a very solid 250 pounds, he was quite impressive at not looking impressed. "No visitors, miss. You can leave the flowers at the nurses' station down the hall."

"But I'm in the band."

"Miss, at least be original. Most women say they're a sister or a cousin or a common-law wife."

Amanda inhaled sharply, and began to wonder if anyone would notice if she just happened to sprout wings and fry this rent-a-cop on the spot. Of course, that would mean dropping the flowers, and for what she paid for them in the gift shop she wasn't about to do that.

As she debated the rest of the guard's life, the door opened, and the bearded face of Jonas leaned out. "Willie, we've got Chinese delivery on the way from Imperial Hunan; would you knock when it gets here?"

"Of course..." Willie was interrupted by Amanda calling to Jonas.

"Ah, there you are," Jonas smiled his broad pirate smile. He looked his normal comfy self, in a black tee shirt and camouflage pants and boots. "Willie, this is the next generation, Amanda Halle. She's got the 4-string spot now that Alex is involuntarily in management."

"Oh. I'm sorry miss, I didn't know."

"That's all right. Can I go in now?"

"Sure, sure," Willie said, as he opened the door for her. Inside, Amanda could see Alex, with both of his arms bandaged from the wrist halfway up the forearm. His face held the expression of someone whose physician was very generous with the painkiller prescription.

"Hi. I'm on drugs." Alex said in a voice much stronger than his appearance belied.

"Hi. I brought you some flowers," Amanda replied as she drew forth a pink coffee mug with pink rosebuds and baby's breath inside. Alain and Rob began laughing, and Jonas pointed at the mug.

"Amanda, did you read the mug?"

"Huh?" she said as she raised it up. 'Congratulations, It's a Girl' it read. "Woopsy."

"Now, now, be nice," said Rob. "It's the thought that counts."

"Thassright Rob. 'Sides, you guys didn't bring me anything."

"We've got Chinese on the way. General Tso's chicken, your favorite."

"Ooooh. And spring roll?"

"And spring roll."

"And Tsing Tao beer?"

"No, Alex," Alain said. "Sheesh, you're on enough painkillers to stun an elephant. You know what beer would do?"

"All too well, I'm afraid," Alex sighed. "Amanda, it's good to see you here. Anyone mention the letters M and T and V to you yet?"

"Shelley did. I've got some outfits for the show."

"Ah, you can wear whatever you want, you're in the Diary now. So let's hear a little music. Rob?"

"Yup." Rob reached under the bed and pulled out a hardshell case, and opened it. Inside was a Carvin acoustic bass, which he handed to Amanda. "We weren't sure if you'd come by tonite, best to be prepared. See what you think of that."

Jonas produced a Takamine 12 string acoustic-electric, while Alain strapped on a Gibson J-180 black jumbo body six string. Rob had a small drum and two brushes in hand.

"So, what are we playing?" Amanda asked.

"Let's just start with something in A. Rob, give us a few beats. Amanda, just lock in with Rob for a few bars til we get the melody down. Then we jam for a while." Alain said.

And that's what they did, sitting on the windowsill and various seats, and kept playing even after the Chinese food arrived. Rob had ordered an extra vegetable lo mein and gave that to Amanda. "Nice to see someone besides me who can manage chopsticks," Rob said to her.

She thanked him and ate; she was amazed at how hungry she was. And then, during a quiet moment while everyone was eating, something popped from the back of her mind to the front.

Josh had said "Mr Book saved my life on the ambulance, Jake told me. He can heal powered people. But it doesn't work on anyone else. If he could only have been able to do something for Dad..."

Then Amanda made the connection, with the memory of that first time she realized she had powers of her own...

((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...

"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."

"He'll be fine. I got to him just in time."

"I'm Mister Book."

Josh had said "He can heal powered people. But it doesn't work on anyone else. If he could only have been able to do something for Dad"

"I got to him just in time."

"He can heal powered people."

"I'm Mister Book.))"

(Dave's note: way back in turn 2 is where Phoenix first met Mr Book; turns are on the web site. <http://powered.iwarp.com>)

A phone call that night (late). Richmond, about twenty minutes south of Lexington.

In Carl's earpiece the other phone buzzed again and again. Finally, a ring was interrupted with a clumsy rattle. His ex-wife's first words were equal parts sleepy and irritated. "Who is this? Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Roxy...?" Carl began, belatedly hearing his words in the Nightcrawler's eerie burble.

"Who is this? Listen you sick..." Carl clenched and drew his plasm back into his pores. He stood hairless and naked in his darkened apartment.

"Roxy, its me. It's Carl."

"Christ Carlos, look at the clock will you? Are you drunk?"

"Roxy, put Allie and Rae on the line. Please Roxie, it's important."

Roxanne's voice grew a little less belligerent. Carl's tone, and not rising to the bait of his father's name, blunted her belligerence.

"How important, Carl? You won't have to sit up with them after they wake up, then go to work tomorrow."

"Roxy, I'm asking you please. I got...reminded something about family tonight and you'n'me may not be but they're still my daughters. Please Roxy."

"Goddam late in the game to be learning about family," she spat, but he could hear her lay down the phone and get out of bed. Moments later, he could hear his two angels, probably on Roxy's shoulders, whining about the unexpected waking.

"...here's Daddy on the phone, Allie."

"Daddy?"

"Hey sweetie, I'm sorry for waking you."

"I read Pooh bear to Mommy, and she said I got almost all the words but then I had to go to bed."

"That's great, honey. Your Daddy loves you, you know that? Te amo, chica."

"Te amo too Daddy. You sound sad."

"Daddy has a friend that got hurt. His family was sad. I wouldn't want to get hurt and make you sad like that." In the background, his ex-wife was quietly telling Allie it was Rae's turn. Allie's whiny "I wanna talk to Daddy, he's not hurt, he's sad" faded into the background.

"Hola Daddy," came Rae's sleepy little voice, showing off her Spanish.

"Hola chica. Te amo."

"You amo too. I'm very sleepy."

"Tell Mommy nighty-night."

"Night-night Mommy." He could still hear Allie whining in the background, wanting to talk and winding into a full blown tantrum.

"Ok Carl, you done?" asked Roxy brusquely. "Thanks for everything. I'll be sure and call when you've got them in two weeks."

"Thanks Rox, really..." though the sound told him the phone was rushing to the cradle. Abruptly it whistled back. "And Carl, don't make a habit of this." Then it went dead.

Surprisingly, Carl felt a little better anyway.

North Broadway, the following day. Transylvania University (and yes it is a real school; <http://www.transy.edu/indexsm.shtml>); High School Senior Visitation day.

Chase Ulrich flopped his Eastpak over his shoulder after unstrapping his skateboard from it. "These new bungee cords on the pack come in handy," he thought as he made his way through the crowd toward the parking lot. At the lot, the bus driver told him they wouldn't be leaving for about twenty minutes.

"You can sit on the bus and wait if you want," the driver said.

"Nah. It's a nice day for February. Besides, there's all that construction across the street just begging to be thrashed."

"Just be back in twenty minutes."

Chase crossed Broadway at the light, enjoying the many co-eds strolling around campus. "Stylin'. Hey, it's only 20 grand a year to come here. Dad can handle that, I hope."

To Chase's delight, the construction site had a concrete pad already laid out, and plenty of obstacles to make a ride more challenging. He wanted to really test himself and his new abilities out, but it was daytime and even though you couldn't see much of the site from the road, he still didn't want to get caught

doing a 720 in midair for a lot longer than gravity should allow.

But as he leaped over a large, round section of concrete, part of the cylinder disintegrated with a shattering crash.

"Holy...I didn't do that!" he yelped.

"That's right, Ulrich. I did." A tall man with a bowl cut of dark hair and a craggy nose stepped from behind a section of material. In his hand was a billiard ball, and on his hip appeared to be a bag holding more.

"C..C..Coach Meyers!"

"Oh please, punk, why not just call me dealer, like you did when you squealed to the cops. Lousy little punk bastard. Since you've put me behind the eightball, that's what you can call me from now on. Until I've killed you in the next few seconds, that is."

"But, how, the concrete..."

"You mean how did I impart such extreme velocity to this small, heavy aerodynamic object, enough to crush concrete? Don't know, don't care. When my New Year's hangover cleared up, I found I could put quarters into a brick wall just by flicking them. So imagine how it's going to feel when I've shoved this eightball... (Woops! That's all the time we have for this week, readers. Say hi to Magna-Flux, the new PC in the game. He's about to get a rack-clearing welcome to the world of powered people. Responses due July 31. Quick administrivia: this might be a good week for everyone to discuss Nightcrawler's little treasure trove of drug dealer info via group email. I'm open for questions or comments. As for Magna-Flux, you are now in combat. Please let me know what you want to do with each action you have in the coming turn. You can list as many or as few contingencies as you wish; I do the dice rolling.)

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 18]

Phoenix, jamming with the RSD in the hospital, evening of February 4.

"Oh god," she whispers aloud; her eyes close and her fingers have gone white where they grip the paper carton. Because following that memory, inexorably, is that of the following night's dinner, when that sense she could put no name to had driven her retreat from the last family meal of the holidays. Had he felt it, too?

"'Manda? You okay?" Rob inquires.

"I--no, I--excuse me for minute." She heads for the door, blindly.

The rest of the band exchanges a puzzled look. "Hope it's not the food."

Amanda walks carefully down the corridor and turns the corner. There's people around. There always are. She spots the international icon a little ways away, goes in and closes the bathroom door behind her. Her mouth is bone dry and she feels so cold and shaky that for a few moments she's not sure if she's actually going to be sick, but after a few impossibly long minutes the nausea fades somewhat.

"This can't be right," she tells herself. "Can't be real, it can't be."

I don't know what to do, she realizes with something of a sense of shock; it's not a state of affairs she's accustomed to. _This can't be right, but if it is I have to know._ She thinks of her mother. Thinks of the fact that it's Thursday now, and she said she'd come to dinner with her parents this weekend.

Talk to the others. Maybe one of them will have an idea. Maybe.... Without thinking any further than that, she leaves her little haven again, then pauses as a new thought strikes her. It's gotten much later than she realized during their little jam session. The rest of the Millennium have no doubt gone back to their own lives, except maybe Jake. From what Josh told her the Faulkner family has far too much on its collective mind just now--the attendant's question, "Which one?" has taken on a more foreboding meaning. And there's no way to guess where Mr. Book might be, or even if he's still in the neighborhood, drat his disappearing eyes.

First thing in the morning, then. She turns her steps back toward Alex's room, nods at Willie. The others give her a series of questioning looks, which she answers with a half-hearted smile. "I'm okay. Don't worry, it's not the lo mein." Rob makes a show of mopping his brow. She curls up in her chair and picks at what's left of her dinner--with no appetite at all, any more--listening to the easy banter going on around her. Her responses to their attempts to include her are somewhat distracted, and after a bit she covers a quiet yawn.

"It's been a long day," she apologizes. "I'm bushed. See you all bright and early

tomorrow?"

"The youth of today," Alex rumbles. "No stamina."

"Better hope you're wrong on that count," she manages a quick grin, and heads out. Fortunately, it doesn't take her long to find a cab, and traffic is light. Her mind a blurred jumble of dissociated images, exhausted by the day's back-and-forth emotional wrenchings, she realizes after a moment that she's crying. The driver maintains a tactful silence back to her apartment. Once there, she stands for a moment, closes her eyes--the only darkness she knows, any more--and tries to remember the last time she prayed for anything.

Early morning. Atop the old Liberty National tower at sunrise.

It's even colder 30 stories up than it is for the rest of the city as the Snowman stares at the horizon, as the first rays of the sun reach out. Their touch too angled to offer any warmth to the city, or to him. Not that the Snowman notices something as mundane as the temperature these days.

Despite the cold, the breath that emerges from the concealing motorcycle helmet the Snowman wears gives no hint of exhalation, no frost hanging in the air from the mouthpiece. He pulls a cloth-bound journal from his many-pocketed uniform, and begins to write.

--February 5 - Encountered a powered last night. Appears to have ability to control some sort of secretion or fluid, including extension of limbs/pseudopods. Ultimately ineffectual and bombastic, and unwilling to take a true stand against the polluting filth of the city. Rendered him helpless, but correction of dealer interrupted by police. Followed subject Stearns for an hour. Naturally he had no plan to obey the protective order against him (wife? girlfriend?) Police likely will rule him a suicide by shotgun outside the woman's home. Observed movement of CDC and FEMA personnel into the veterans hospital grounds late evening. Precursor to legislation? Must learn more.

Nightcrawler in the A of M, checkin' in at the office

Carl wandered into the Kentucky Office of Human Services where they kept a desk for him. It was still piled high with files, the way he'd left it before the holidays. The rest of the 50's-vintage office bay still had a smattering of 'Year 2000' New Year's decorations. The sprayed-on snow still half-covered the grimy windows that looked down on the main street.

"Deadhead" Beeson was already in, in tie die and sandals even in the dead of winter. When all the hippies got Wall Street jobs, they apparently left their idealism on the Beeson doorstep. Carl smiled at the anachronistic figure he cut, despite knowing it would invite conversation.

"Heard about the knee, man. Dag. Looks like you can walk on it anyway." His long, white-boy dreadlocks bounced with the spasmic jerking of his head. Carl was sure drugs were somehow responsible for the trait.

"Happy New Year, Deadhead. We lose anybody?"

"Cooter tried to OD on Christmas, but I was watchin' an' got the Man to come get him. Everyone else stayed mellow. Hey man, that's a victory." Carl half-heartedly returned the pantomimed toast.

"I heard something funky, from some of the punks. They're findin' ice-ball snowmen snowmen and carved-up soldiers on the streets. Some psycho like they're lookin' for in Atlanta I guess. You hear anything? We lose anybody to him?"

"No 411 on my end, compadre. Say, seen my Phish CD?"

A little later that morning, on the south side of town, we welcome back Stephane with...

Mark Reinard, the Reflector, made his way through downtown to Southland Drive, where Backstage Inc was located. He had some ideas about a costume, preferably something in basic black, but no idea where to go about finding something. Then he let his fingers do the walking through the Yellow Pages.

"Backstage Inc - providers to Broadway and Hollywood; over 23 years in business." Hmmm, why not, he thought. Then he heard the ring of his cellphone. Mark's adrenaline kicked into action, but he quickly realized it was his personal phone and not the Millennium phone he'd received from Mr Bloomfield.

"Hello?"

"Hello, son."

"Hi Mom, how are you?"

"Doing great, Mark. I haven't seen you in a couple of weeks now. Any chance of getting together for breakfast tomorrow morning?"

"Sure! Where would you like to go?"

"Well, my neighbors tell me this Cracker Barrel place is kind of quaint. I know you have work, so I can be ready as early as you like."

"Ok. Say about 7:30 in the morning, I'll come by."

"Love you, son."

"Love you too, Mom. Bye."

Sheesh. He hadn't realized how busy those sheiks from Dubai had kept him. No complaints from Denham-Blythe, though. Mark had a basic idea of how much the sheiks were paying for the design of their new thoroughbred farm and training facility, a number that wouldn't look out of place in a Rolodex that was for certain.

As he pulled in to the parking lot for Backstage, Mark opened his briefcase and pulled an object from one of the pouches. It was the jeweled dagger one of the sheiks had given him, a reward for his yeoman duty on working 20 hour days. He whistled, and replaced the blade in the briefcase, and went inside.

The proprietor, a tall dark-haired man, looked like someone straight out of the classic magician posters of the Forties. He had a lively smile and a gambler's eyes. "Good morning. Ian Gulliver, proprietor. You're my first customer of the day."

"Hi. Um, I'm looking for something in basic black, like a bodysuit. Boots and gloves to match too."

Ian nodded. "Yes, of course. And a mask of some kind?"

"Yeah, like Zorro's."

"I see. And as to material? Linen, cotton, a hybrid perhaps?"

"Well, no, I was thinking more like a Lycra, but thicker."

"Certainly. If you could step up on this stand, so I may take your measurements?" Ian asks as he produces a measuring tape from a previously empty hand.

"Hey, that's pretty good."

"Thank you, I do the occasional party as mystical entertainer at times." Ian walks around Mark, quickly extending the tape to take a number of measurements. "I hope I can expect a few more customers today. A benefit party?"

"Huh?"

"Just curious. I'd not heard of any local benefits holding a costume gathering. Usually the United Way or someone gives me a call, ahead of time. I offer charity attendees a discount."

"Oh, it's a private party for my work. Valentine's Day coming up. Silly boss of mine. He wouldn't have called in advance I think."

"Of course," Ian says in a soothing manner that seems to indicate he's willing to accept the fib as a fib and move on. "Will you require any props?"

"No, I think I've got a few things at home, from Halloween."

"Very good, sir. Please, step down. May I offer you a coffee? I'll be just a moment checking my stock."

"Oh, no thanks, I'm fine."

With a nod, Ian leaves Mark to consider the conversation he's just had. _Maybe I should have went with mail order or the Internet..._

Soon, the mysterious Ian Gulliver returns with a large white garment box. He produces a set of formidable looking gauntleted gloves and high black boots to match. Then, a bodysuit not unlike a skier's, in frictionless black. Mark is somewhat surprised to notice what looks like heavy ridged pads built into the knees and elbows, and a thickened collar.

"The knees and elbows have a heavy gel for padding. You've noticed the collar is raised; offers some protection from whiplash. The fingers of the gloves are padded with powdered lead, and the boots have safety-toes. Non-metallic of

course."

Taken aback, Mark begins to speak a bit haltingly. "Uh, but...how..."

Ian gives him a look of complete innocence. Poker-faced innocence, but there you go. "Why, it's that whole futuristic millennial look, of course. I'm betting that when Halloween comes along it'll be real popular. Given the presence of all these so called, what's the word? Powered people, all over the country. Why it's a matter of time before someone makes them popular icons. Anyway, what do you think, Mr Smith?"

"Mister..."

"Smith, of 123 Main Street, pays in cash. Sorry, can't describe him offhand," Ian smiles. "Would you like this wrapped for your private party, Mr Smith?"

Mark shrugged, paid for the suit, and departed. This he'd definitely have to share with the group.

And meanwhile, we pick up with Josh, the Sound...

Doctor Karloff walks into Josh's hospital room glancing at a clipboard. Pushing his reading glasses onto the top of his head he takes a seat next to his extraordinary patient.

"Mr. Faulkner...can I call you Joshua?"

"Josh is even better--given that you've been pretty intimate with my innards in the last few hours you don't have to be so formal. Thanks for stitching me up, doc."

"That's just it, Josh--we really didn't have as much to do as you might think. I'm looking over your records here and the paramedics that brought you in have you listed in far worse condition than what we treated."

"Well it felt awful...Lucky me, I guess."

"Normally, we'd keep a patient in a situation like this for a few days, but considering the state of your current well being we'll be releasing you today. Give me a call at my practice on Monday and let me know how you're doing--broken ribs can be tricky." Doctor Karloff gives Josh his card and wishes him a good day on his way out. At the door he says, "The staff will be serving breakfast soon. Try to eat something would you?"

"There's always room for Jell-O, doc"

And almost as soon as the Doctor is out of the door it swings open again.

"Yes, Yes--I understand that visiting hours haven't started yet, but I just have a few questions for this gentleman and then I'll be gone."

"Tuck?"

With the door shut Sgt. John Tucker says, "Did I hear the doc right? They're letting you outta here?"

"I guess so."

"Damn good news. I've been phoning in off and on since I heard and I was told it was real touch and go there for awhile."

"You can't keep a good man down"

Sitting down at Josh's bedside the athletic but slowly plumping physique of John Tucker stretches his legs out, crossing them at the ankles as he says, "Where's Jake? You two are usually inseparable--I figured he'd be here."

"He was here earlier. Standing guard, practically. Now he's tracking down Dodge." Josh says with some concern as his callused hands push his hair back.

"There's an APB out on the nutjob, but I'm betting Josh brings him in first." Tuck says pushing his hat up at the bill. "That boy's a damn good hunter."

Josh chuckles "Doesn't hurt that McBell's the client either."

Tuck retorts "Can you picture those two together--Jake and McBell, I mean? My god he's almost a full foot taller than her!"

"You should have seen his face when she walked into the office--it was straight out of a Warner Brother's cartoon." Josh bites down on his thumb to stop from laughing to hard at the recollection.

"I bet" Tuck joins in on the joke. "Speaking of bets tho'--didn't you lose the last poker game?"

"What poker game?" Josh looks faux quizzically into the air.

"Just 'cause you guys have bagged since New Years doesn't mean you're getting off that easy." Pulling his notepad out of his back pocket Tuck pretends to read from it. "Says here that on Dec. 29th that you lost to my FOUR OF A KIND with a crappy PAIR OF NINES, I might add."

"...You can't be serious..."

"I'm gonna hold you to the bet, chump! I want to see you at Tattoo Charlie's as soon as you're out of here."

"Christ...alright but you're going to have to drive me there kicking and screaming."

"Deal"

Later that day. Transylvania University construction area, North Broadway near the campus.

Chase looks at Coach "Screw-Ball" astonished and wise-cracks, "You mean, you get caught for feeding your team drugs, cheating, and breaking the law and you're gonna take all that out on me, an underage street-punk?!?! ULTRA-LOSER! Seek therapy!"

"Don't preach at me, you little piece of dirt. I did what every coach does to get his boys ready to compete, in games and in life. And that means using every advantage available to you."

Another reason I hate sports, thinks Chase, _No Sportsmanship!_ When a sharp step on the back of his deck, Chase's skateboard pops up and he grabs it by the front truck.

[Eightball - Phase 22]

Coach Meyers reaches into the pouch at his belt, drawing out another billiard ball, and whips it at Chase. But Chase, anticipating the attack, easily evades the hurtling globe of death. [Evasion from phase 30]

[Magna-Flux - Phase 15, delayed to 7]

"Maybe every coach graduating from Psycho U.! If they were any good to begin with why couldn't they win fair? Answer that Coach HATE-ball!" Chase thinks to himself_I must be too scared to be smart enough not to agitate this nimrod_. He whips around behind the maddened coach, who turns around (PR spent to change facing), and leaps up, bringing his board to bear on Eightball's head (doing ten points, special attack to the head!)

[Eightball - Phase 7]

Clattering to the ground in a heap, his breathing ragged, the would-be villain seems in no condition to continue the battle!

"You better stay there, loser, or I'll bust you again," Chase threatens as he makes his getaway back to the bus. _Glad I didn't have to go all powered on him. I am ultra-gone._

The bus departs for the return trip, and Chase settles in next to his friend, Jill.

"S'up?"

"Hey, Chase!" Jill seems almost shaking with excitement. "I won, I won!"

"Great! Won what?"

"Z-103's Red Sky Diary contest! I scored two tickets and a limo ride to their new place to watch them do an Unplugged special for MTV! You wanna go, or are they not your taste in music?"

At about the same time as Eightball is trying to crush Magna-Flux's head...

Carl slammed the car into park, noticing Reflector's and Sound's cars already arrayed on the massive traffic circle in front of Dame Vera Manor. "Crap, crap, crap," he muttered under his breath. A team meeting in anticipation of their road stand had lasted longer than usual, mostly because of the wrangling he'd had to do to try and get out of it. Coach was less than sympathetic to his daughters' visitation, and of course that was the only excuse he could publicly offer. Rather than dwell on his agent's predictable disapproval, Carl popped the trunk

and hustled around back.

Tehsin, the helpful Hindu batman was suddenly at Carl's side. "Shall I assist you, sir?"

"You gotta go back inside anyway," agreed Carl. The two manhandled the large boxes of documents and registers that T-Gold had left with Carl, and wrestled them into the elegant southern mansions' sitting room. Amanda and Mark were standing around admiring the well-stocked, rich wood bookshelves and bay windows. Josh was sitting uncomfortably in a handsome leather wingback chair, still wearing more bandage than clothing.

"King George here this time?" asked Carl as they thudded the evidence down on the delicately stained Cherry desk. Carl didn't notice Tehsin's raised eyebrows at the 'King George' comment, but a glance from Sir William settled Tehsin down.

"Indeed I am, my flexible friend," said Sir William as he entered the sitting room from another entrance. He bore a silver tray of mint juleps and iced tea, which he set on a sideboard. "Please help yourselves."

"Jake not gonna make it?" Carl asked Josh, who was accepting an iced tea from Amanda.

"Don't think so. I'll fill him in. What's this all about?" Josh asked pointing to the leaning stack of papers.

Carl walked over to the sideboard frowning, unsure how to start. Yeah, they'd been together for a few weeks, but none of them really knew each other all that well yet. This was not Carl's milieu. He took his best shot at a start. "Before New Year's, I was already runnin' in gang circles..."

Mark's eyebrows shot up. "Is that what you meant at the hospital..?"

"No no, that's somethin' else," said Carl quickly. For some reason, he really didn't want to get into that in front of Glassjack, who he just didn't want to think of as Sir William. "What I mean is I was workin' with kids that live that stuff. Anyway, after New Year's onea the worst of 'em suddenly turns to the side of angels and dumps this stuff on me. The gang is the CCs, but this stuff points a lot deeper than punks on street corners." Carl looked around the room. They were all looking back at him, waiting for the punch line. Carl took a sip of mint julep, pulled a face and walked back to the desk with an iced tea.

"See, so far we been reactin' ta stuff as it comes up. Th' parade, Element, Snowman. I'd like to take the next step. There's plenty a problems out there -- we don't need ta wait on one. The CCs been pushin' on these streets for years, ruinin' kids on both sides of the gun. Looks like these papers point to moneymen milkin' it, lettin' the kids burn and rakin' in the profits. I'm thinkin' we got somethin' to say about that now."

"Assuming we can decode those volumes, you realize this rather changes the equilibrium," observed Sir William quietly. "The gendarme can hardly begrudge bringing powers to bear on an uncivilized Powered. But to explicitly intrude on police prerogative?"

Snowman? Did I miss a memo here?" Josh says lifting himself up with the support of one arm to get more comfortable in the chair. "Who the hell is that, Carl?"

Carl managed a near-clinical retelling of the encounter in the alley. He concluded with, "Me'n'him got serious differences. That kinda permanent solution don't speak to me, not with who he applied it to. He's somethin' we may need ta address sooner or later, but frankly he's poppin' kids one at a time. The CCs get more'n that every day."

Phoenix listens with her brow furrowed, dismayed at this evidence of multiplying complications but somewhat intrigued by the glimpse into the normally taciturn Nightcrawler's past and personality. So far, she has said nothing of what is weighing so heavily on her mind, and little of anything else, responding to greetings and comments with nods and monosyllables for the most part. Her wings, normally relaxed, keep tightening around her in an instinctive sheltering gesture.

"Are you suggesting that we simply turn the evidence over to the police, Nightcrawler, or did you have something more... elaborate...in mind?" she asks quietly.

Carl compulsively fingered his small, gold Mexican Eagle earring. "To tell the truth, didn't even occur to me to turn this stuff in. With all the money the biz moves, I ain't so sure it wouldn't just disappear or get filed away. Even if it didn't, there's a lotta Johnny Cochrans in the dough they're pullin' down. Least with us, we know each other -- or got feelin's about each other -- ta make corruption not a problem. Plus, no one knows who we are, so we can't be made." Carl took a deep breath. He was very conscious of his size and modest dress, of how out of place he was in that room. "So yeah, I guess I do got something more elaborate in mind."

"I'm not so sure how "secret" our identities are--think about it, Bloomfield and all those SORTies saw us out of costume on New Years'...and thanks to Element there's probably a handful of doctors over at the hospital who can connect the dots and label ol' Josh Faulkner as Sound."

"Well--like what did you have in mind, then?" Phoenix inquires, still frowning. "If the police aren't going to believe the evidence, or they're going to ignore it, even if we did bring some of these guys in for them they'd just let them go, wouldn't they?" She perches on an ottoman, arms clasped around her knees. Gangs, drugs--she is ruefully reminded of just how sheltered her own life has been, in many ways. Not that she hasn't known enough people who used drugs, but they were old enough to know better and take their chances for the most part, not kids without a clue or a future or a way out. "And Sound's right," she adds somberly. "We can't get careless, not if we're going to get involved against people like this."

"Let me get this straight...he begins to say as he reaches into the inside breast pocket of his blue denim jacket, pulls out a cigarette raises it to Sir William for approval and lights up. Swirling the match around to extinguish it he continues "you've been spending your down time working solo on the streets? And instead of canvassing the SuperAmerica's for Element you were interrogating one of the CCs?"

"Hey, I was down with the plan. Snowman just rearranged my schedule at the last minute. As far as my time, it ain't like we got exclusive contracts, right? I see somethin' needs doin', I do it. This needs doin'. Yeah, maybe we ain't as anonymous as I thought. I was all slimy at the parade but I made plenty of bone-head moves since then. And these are some nasty pieces a work in this business -- they'll eat us alive if we get sloppy."

"We got advantages, though. These bangers don't fear the cops. They fear us. We ain't got warrants and whatnot to sweat. We can do stuff, wild stuff cops can't do. I seen enough 'Law and Order' to know cops can use illegally gained info if they don't use illegal means themselves."

Sir William's eyebrows raised slightly at the last statement, but Josh spoke before he could interject.

"We have disadvantages too" Josh says as he blows smoke in the air. "Right now we're totally disorganized. If were going to be more pro-active than reactive then we definitely need to get our acts together. That means training together frequently, developing strategies, and finding out what our strengths and limits are, finding out what exactly we're up against out there, and being totally upfront with each other" looking at Carl as he zings that last line. Muttering, "I'll be damned if I see any of you laid up in the hospital" he says as he takes note of Amanda's postures.

At the unexpected jibe, Carl immediately stopped fidgeting. His eyes narrowed at Josh. His response was gentle but firm. "Hey, what's your problem, hombre? I spent most of my childhood makin' trouble for my neighborhood, and a good chunk of my adult life tryin' ta give back. That ain't gonna change 'cause I got powers. I'm ready to be as committed as you guys wanna be, but I ain't ready to not be as committed as I wanna be. You want info? Here's a table full. You want disclosure? C'mon out with me one night. Hell, ask me about my night -- I got nothin' ta hide, not from you guys. You want training and organization to go after these poison pushers? Ain't it obvious? SO DO I."

Mark broke in, "I don't know if I want to tackle the mob quite yet, to tell you the truth. We are barely beginning to understand the powers we have and we still don't know what the legal ramifications of our actions are..." Mark pauses as he sees Carl's face harden slightly. "Don't take me wrong, there's nothing more that I would like to do than dismantle a whole mob group saving the kids on the streets. But we have to do it right." He pauses again. "Think about this. If we don't do this right what happens? We catch them, bring them in and they get out faster than it took us to bring them in. For do we gain? Nothing, other than the fact that they know we are after them. If you want to slaughter them all that's another question and I'll be no part of that. I don't want to become another Snowman, and from what I saw at the hospital, I don't think you do either, Carl."

"I have to say that I'm thinking of something between what both of you have in mind. I would want to work WITH the police on this one. This would be a double whammy. We get those guys in jail for a long time, and we, as The Millennium, will get the friendship of the police out of this one." Mark turns to Josh, and says "You guys have had dealings with the police as a group, do you think what I'm saying makes sense?"

"Jake and I run a bail bonds shop that my Dad started after he was thrown off the force, so yeah we have some experience with cops--let's make sense out of this info here before we decide who else out there we can trust." he says to Mark as he stands to make his way over to the table with T-Gold's information on it. "I have plenty of friends on the force that I'd trust with my life, but that doesn't mean I'm naive nor does it mean I automatically trust a cop because he's a cop--the guys I know have that trust because they've EARNED it." Josh punctuates that last line by extinguishing his cigarette in a large marble ashtray on the table vaguely commenting on the weird "Powered" effect that they all feel.

"I know you've got my back, Carl" Josh says, "but who's looking out for you on these secret raids?--you should have called us in earlier. You want me to come along--fine I'm there, in a heartbeat. Reflector's right tho' we have to do this right. With all that nonsense coming out of Wisconsin it's only so long to some not too bright light bulb of a politico tries that here--and if you're running around half cocked they'll be able to point to you as well as the Snowman, Element, Dodge and the rest of those nutjobs--you want that?...and we might already have problems on the PD. SORTie number 7. I want to know why he has it in for Jake.

"Guys, please let's not argue... I think we're all pretty much agreeing with each other anyway. For what it's worth, I agree with Mark, too--we could really mess something up if we aren't careful to work around the police," Phoenix remarks quietly. "I mean, I don't have any real experience with this kind of thing, but I don't want to think about the headlines if we accidentally mess up a major bust, or something. If you guys have contacts you know you can trust, I think that would be the best way to approach things. I don't know about SORT, though; they're not likely to be involved in anti-gang action, are they? So may be we can leave them out of it, at least for now? Or until we find out what's going on with that one--Jake looked ready to kill him for a minute there. What happened in Wisconsin? I didn't hear anything.... and speaking of being upfront," she glances over at Sound, "when we're done with this there's something I need to tell you guys, or ask your advice about." She smiles a bit wanly. "I know it's not on the morning's agenda, but it might be important."

Carl rocked back, and perched on the ornate desk. "Yeah, I guess. I know I ain't the sharpest blade on the ice, an' confidence has never been my problem. I can play it cautious, I just need to know you guys are with me on this one." Carl smirked ironically, "You mighta guessed I feel kinda strong about it."

Mark looked around at his companions. "I think I speak for us when I say we can do this. As long as we do it smart."

Amanda hugged her knees, paused, then nodded in agreement.

Josh winced slightly, as some internal bruise decided to make itself felt. "And smart means no Lone Rangers, right?" he said, indicating his approval.

Sir William, who had been observing the exchange over steepled fingers with almost fatherly amusement, quietly broke in. "Right. If we are decided, then, perhaps I might take charge of the evidence? I have had some small experience with information gathering. Rest assured I will digest and report with all due haste." The old man rose spryly to his feet, and leaned on his cane as he gazed out his large picture window. Not for the first time did he pay silent homage to the sound-deadening MI5 glass that was part of his retirement package. "The Reflector's comments are duecedly pithy. Your legal system will waste no time with its quaint concept of 'precedence,' and doom betide those that fall on the wrong side of the line. On the other hand, our large friend's observation also bears consideration. If there is a grey area between the constabulary and lawlessness, it would behoove us to occupy it, to operate unfettered as it were. Let me explore that as well."

Sir William turned back to the group. "Now, if we men are quite finished beating our chests, I believe the young lady has something to say?" He bowed gallantly to Amanda giving her the floor.

"Oh." Somewhat taken aback by the sudden attention, she pauses to organize her

thoughts. "Well. It goes back to New Year's. When everything started happening. We were out at the Singletary Center, for the Boston Pops. There was this kid--some powered punk, he threw a lightning bolt at my father, knocked him halfway across the parking lot into the side of a truck. I'm sure he should have been seriously hurt, or worse, but Book showed up out of nowhere and helped him. Then the next day," she takes a deep breath, "at dinner, it was that--we've probably all had it by now, that weird feeling? Just that something was completely *wrong* about someone there. Kind of the opposite of being around you guys. I couldn't even stay in the room." She looks down for a moment, her bangs hiding her eyes. "I guess I've been trying not to think about it, since I got back, I was hoping I was wrong, but what you said," she glances over at Sound, "about how Book can only heal powered people? it looks like..." she trails off, wings curled around her like a cloak. When she looks up again, at each of them in turn, her expression is calmly unhappy, her tone matter-of-fact. "I don't know for sure it's him, I haven't been home since I got back in town. I'm supposed to visit this weekend... I don't know. I don't know what to do now. But I thought you all should know, in case--if something happens." She gives them a quick, slightly tremulous smile. "I guess they're right when they say you can't go home again, anyway."

Knowing that she's just putting on a good poker face, Josh says "'Manda, I'm so sorry." Unfortunately, being able to log yet another similarity between the two--paternal ails. He makes his way over to her gently brushing the bangs out of her eyes. "What's the plan for this weekend--anyway you can get him in a public place I can be there and confirm whether or not your suspicions are dead on?"

"If it's any consolation, I had the same feelings with the Ex, even before New Year's," offered Carl helpfully.

She smiles a little at the attempt. "Thanks. As for finding out for sure," she glances up at Josh, a little startled by his gesture, "I don't know enough about how this works, really, how close they have to be. It seems it would be hard to do without maybe giving you away. Depends on if he knows what that feeling means, I suppose. I thought about following him home from the office tonight, or something." She shakes her head slightly. "I just can't believe.... I don't know, maybe I'm making more out of this than I should, but I'm worried. If nothing else, I'll go to dinner and see if anything happens. I just thought you should know," she repeats.

"I'm...(pulling back a bit after seeing her Amanda's startled reaction) We're (correcting himself) here to help--whenever you need it" Josh says registering that it's something that she doesn't want to talk about anymore. Amanda's words still ringing in his ears "I thought you all should know, in case--if something happens." Josh dismisses the worst-case scenarios already running through his head. Even if he were "one of the bad guys" her father wouldn't do anything to his own daughter would he?!? Despite Carl's really funny joke (that guy does have a sense of humor after all) the mood of the room is still tense to say the least. Josh clumsily tries to remedy this by saying "Umm...my birthday's this weekend--who wants to buy me a pair of underoos to adventure in since my last "costume" got trashed?"

Phoenix can't help but roll her eyes a little at that, but chuckles and accepts the change of subject gratefully. "Well, happy birthday. Between that, and Jake and his Fila gear, we'd have to start calling you the Endorsement Twins." She looks him up and down mock-critically. "I think we can do better than Underoos, though...Garanimals, maybe." She feels relief now that the issue of her father has been aired; knowing that the others are there for support makes a world of

difference. _And I've probably learned more about all of them in the past half hour than in the previous couple weeks._ Wondering about that moment....

A series of half-formed thoughts drift through her mind, then vanish as she uncurls herself and stands up. "Pax avia. I guess we'll get together again when you've gone through this stuff, and make more specific plans?" she glances at Sir William. "Such as who, when, and how we're going to go after these guys? And I'll let you know if I find anything out about... the other thing."

Carl drew himself up as well. "Yeah, we all got these phones. Let's not be afraid to use 'em. If we're gonna step careful on T-Gold's stuff, I'm gonna peek a little more into Snowman." With an amused glance at Sound, "Just recon stuff, no leg-breakin', I promise."

"Carl, be careful--he's got the drop on you once before..." Still mad at himself for getting whacked by Element, Josh would offer to go with Carl on his prowl but he'd be more of a liability than an advantage at this point...

"If we're done, is anyone going back into town I can beg a lift from? If I keep using my apartment building as a landing pad the neighbors are going to notice," she smiles a bit ruefully.

"My dear, my man would be delighted to take the Bentley anywhere you need to go. Gentlemen and lady, the house is yours. I am afraid other engagements call me away. Be assured I will contact you all in the near future."

"I realize my Volvo's not as cush as the Bentley, but I was thinking of swinging by to try and meet Rob and Jonas...they'll probably make you work but if you'd like I can take you with?" Josh says to Phoenix...clearly needing to get some things off his chest.

Phoenix hesitates a moment as she absorbs his tone, head tilted slightly, then nods. "Sure. Sorry, I'd have sent them by to see you the other night, but I didn't know what kind of story you wanted to give them about getting hurt. And you're right, I think yesterday was my last day of getting to take it easy. Work time, now." From her smile, she is not at all displeased about this. "And you," she frowns sternly at the Nightcrawler as she adds her own warning, "don't hesitate to hit the pager, okay? We're all in this together." Her frown turns into a brilliant smile; she's left her uneasiness behind her for the moment, taking comfort in the group's solidarity of purpose.

Carl put up his hands, suppressing a chuckle, "Give, give. Madre de Dios, we're not the Millennium, we're the Millennium Mamas." They left with a lighter mood than could have been hoped for.

That evening, we catch up with the Nightcrawler after hours :)

The Nightcrawler slithered down the side of UK Hospital. The light wash from the distant street was nowhere near enough to reveal his passage. He'd managed a peek at the register, waiting on the good news about Josh. He was pretty sure he knew which room he was looking for. At the window, he snaked a finger through a small gap in the frame and with a stretch, unlatched it. He extended his torso into the room, reassured to find Tino bandaged but breathing in the bed.

He woke the unfortunate punk with a sticky hand across the mouth. A generic,

elongated, translucent visage glared down at the young man. Nightcrawler easily caught the scream.

"Told you we'd talk. I'm movin' my hand. You scream, I'll fill your guts with slime."

In a plaintive whisper, slightly slurred from pain-killers, Tino hissed, "I told you. I don't know nothin' 'bout no arsonist..."

"Forget him," burbled the Nightcrawler as if from the depths of a watery grave. "Tell me about the Snowman and his body count."

"See, the Snowman done capped four of my fellow businessmen..."

"Dealers."

"Hey, we're just catering to a market."

"The Snowman?"

"Man, the brother is totally evil. My step-dad has put me through some walls, but I ain't never been punished like that. It's a good thing 5-0 showed up and saved us."

"You mean saved 'you'."

"No, I think you heard me right. You just stood there when the Snowman stepped to you. So don't try pushin' this act on me. He stepped to you, and that was that."

The Nightcrawler growled, a sepulchral tone that reached to Tino's spine and shook him. But it was the machines that sent the Nightcrawler back into the darkness, as they cried electronic wails at Tino's distress. At the sound, the Nightcrawler poured out of the room via the window, and to the darkened parking lot below.

WKYT TV 27 news - Special Report, 10:43 pm

"This is 27 Newsfirst, I'm Angie Gravano. Police Chief Larry Walsh and two other officers have been brought to the UK Emergency room, victims of a shooting in the police department headquarters on Main Street. Early reports indicate that a fellow officer may have been responsible for the shooting, but we do not have confirmation of that yet. Mayor Pam Miller has just arrived, and is being escorted by members of the Special Operations Response Team into the hospital. While we are waiting for more information, we have Jennifer Mulligan, a paramedic with the hospital. Jennifer, what can you tell us?"

"We received a call at 10:17 that there had been a shooting at the police station, and that there were injuries. Chief Walsh and two officers, kind of dressed like those guys..."

"Like the SORT officers?"

"Right, but without all the gear. We began immediate treatment of all three officers and they were transported here."

"How would you characterize their condition?"

"I'm sorry, I can't, you have to go through the hospital for that. I have to go."

"With 27 Newsfirst, I'm Angie Gravano, we are live at UK hospital, where Chief Larry Walsh and two officers, possibly members of the elite SORT team, are being treated for shooting-related injuries. We do not have any information on their condition yet...ok, I'm giving this back to the anchor desk for an update with Brian Patrick. Brian?"

"Thank you, Angie. We have been asked to make this announcement. Lexington - Fayette County police are seeking Jason Faulkner, shown in this photo. If you see Jason Faulkner, please call this number immediately. Do not approach him, as he is believed to be armed and highly dangerous. I repeat, if you see Jason Faulkner..."

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 19]

[Early morning of February 5 during the overnight hours and into the morning]

Jake had been sitting there for several hours, not really able to sleep. He can't help but think about the changes that have taken place in his life the last couple of days. He thought things had finally settled down a little from what they were a couple of weeks ago. Things have gotten too crazy now. He has been through a lot of rough scraps since he has been working with his dad and now Josh.

But Jake knows he has never been this scared before in his whole life. It just seems as if everything is falling down around him. Sure, Josh puts on the brave front but Jake doesn't know what he would do without his brother. Sure he was angry and hurt when he ran off to New York. It took him a long time to get over those feelings. Since Josh has been back it seems their relationship is stronger than ever. And as for dad, Josh and him were never real close. Jake was always much closer to his dad even though he really was his Momma's boy. The youngest siblings usually are.

When faced with losing both, Jake felt he just about lost it. But Josh is fine now and will probably be released soon. It was just too close for comfort. Jake is going to really have to watch out for Josh from here on out. Suddenly, he's jarred out of his reverie by the chiming of his watch. Three o'clock. "I better go home and get some sleep, I can't do any more here."

After a rough night of tossing and turning, Jake gets up early and gets in a quick workout before heading back to the hospital to check on dad and Josh. Afterwards he heads over to the precinct house to check with some contacts on the whereabouts of some of Clement Dodge's old associates. He heads back to the office to make some phone calls. He had given Margaret a couple of days off since there wasn't going to be much going on with Josh laid up. Ms McBell had called twice but he didn't return her calls. "I'll talk to her when I get Dodge."

After several calls and several dead-ends he finally starts to make headway. Dodge had been spotted near Decatur, Georgia buying a used car under one of his aliases. It look like he headed south after that. Jake knew of contacts Dodge had in Columbus. So there was as good a place to start as any. He grabs his duffel bag that he keeps at the office for those quick out of town trips and jumps on his bike and heads for Georgia. 'When I catch up to you Dodge you're going to learn once and for all that you don't mess with the Faulkners, especially this one.'

February 5, daytime, Transylvania University

"Red Sky Who?" Chase say looking at her puzzled. "How did you win a contest while we were at T.U.?"

"I keep forgetting your dad is stuck in the Dark Ages," Jill replies as she waves her cellphone at Chase.

"Oops. Ultra-duh." Chase looks over his shoulder out of the window at the construction site where he just fought Coach Myers to see if he can see if he's still there or gone. But the heavy traffic on Broadway makes it impossible to tell. "I guess I'll go, I mean as long as they don't have a dress code. I don't want to look like an ultra-dweeb!"

"Too late, genetics took care of that."

"Harsh. So is it for tonight or do I have some time to deafen myself with music I like?" He reaches into his backpack for his "Blain - Anything We Can Do, You Can Do Better" tape and "listens" to it by touch as internal background music for effect (_...even though no one else hears it, it's funny to me_ he thinks).

"It's a couple of weeks off. Don't worry, I won't let you forget." And she pulls on a set of headphones and stares out at the campus as the bus pulls away.

Chase, somewhat distracted by his encounter, wonders if "Coach" Eight-Ball will come after him again..._Wait a minute!!! How did he know to find me there today at all? And what if his entire team of basketball losers is powered? Even if they aren't he's bound to round them up and do something crazy! I can handle myself easily enough but if he tries to hurt Jill...I better find out more about this whole "powered" thing... I wonder if Jill has it too._

Later (that night?), Chase pulls some boxes out the garage attic. _My failed attempt at motocross racing and surfing. I thought it was a waste but I guess some of the gear is usable._

Chase pulls out his wetsuit he got from the days his father was based on the coast of California and an old helmet he'd used for racing. The wetsuit is black with a pattern of blue ripples striped down the sides. He was just getting good at surfing when he had to quit because his father said they had to move...again. Jerk. So he took up motocross racing in Colorado at the next posting, only to wreck the bike before a competition. _Serves the military mastermind who poses as 'Daddy' right for entering me when I didn't want to compete to begin with. Jerk._

He detaches the black plastic mouthguard from the helmet and tosses the helmet back in it's dusty box. Turning to face a cracked mirror in the garage, he places the guard over the lower half of his face. "Some goggles, a bandana, my wetsuit, and this Darth Vader looking thing, Coach Myers and others like him will get their butts handed to them on the silvery metallic plate of my metal deck under the magnetic control of...of...oh man this is mega-crazed!" Chase drops the faceguard and looks at himself in the mirror. _What do I do next?_ he thinks to himself, certain that he's in danger but more concerned that his only friend might become a target.

Suddenly, he realizes he smells food. Someone cooking in the kitchen. _Great, General Patton probably making SOS. Still, it smells a lot better than his normal roast of Rice Krispies._ Chase puts the box back and heads into the house, to the kitchen. Then he stops.

Dad's not home yet...his car's not here. Chase then decides Jill has let herself in with the spare key. "All right, that works. Hey Jill, you know I like..." But Chase's voice trails off as he realizes the small, weathered fellow with the dark skin and third-hand clothing doesn't resemble Jill one bit.

"Magna Flux," he says, and he said it like two separate words. "Congratulations

on your...hold up. You taken ACT yet?"

"Not til April," Chase replies, confused.

"Right." The man chops up an onion with the skill of a veteran short order cook. "You can still handle three burgers by yourself?"

"Uh huh." _Ok,_ Chase thinks, _there's a strange dude making like Emeril in my house and I'm not wiggling. In fact, I feel pretty good, like I know him._

"I knew you could. Say what you want about your pappy, he does stock a fridge up right. All nice and orderly."

"I think this is the part where I ask you who you are, how you got in, and why you're here."

"You can call me Mr Book, I came in through the front door, and I need your help." Book turned from the stove, where he maneuvered a large skillet off the burner and deftly flipped three burgers onto arranged buns on a plate. "But we got some time. Eat. Co-Cola ok for you?"

After the meeting at Dame Vera Farm. Josh and Amanda, in a car headed back toward town.

On the way to the car, Amanda inquires cautiously, "Um. Is there something up with you and Carl?" It's chilly out; she pauses to shrug into the sweatshirt she brought with her (she's wearing jeans and a racer-back tank top). "No offense, but you were kind of...." she searches for a diplomatic word.

"A tuckus? I know."

"Kind of... sharp, I was going to say," she amends with a little shrug.

"It's not directed at him--I just don't want Carl to get worked over by the Snowman or the Double Cs." _Like I did by Element,_ is how he punctuates the last sentence in his head. He unlocks the driver side door and steps into the Volvo. Reaching over he opens Amanda's door. Once she gets in he glances over at the tape deck saying "You'd be a real dear if you'd grab something from the glove compartment to listen to..."

"Sure." Amanda pops open the compartment and surveys its contents with interest; a pleasingly diverse collection. She's relieved to find that there aren't any real issues behind the almost-quarrel. "I think he'll be careful. This Snowman sounds like a serious problem in the making. With the way people are freaking out about powereds in some of the cities, he's making a good argument for them... not to mention what he might do to some poor kid whose biggest crime is being stupid."

She pulls out Miles Davis' 'Sketches of Spain' and pops it into the deck, closes her eyes with a fleeting smile as the notes drift out. Good speakers. She's tired -- the previous night hadn't included much sleep--but determined not to worry about anything for the time being. "So can I ask you something?" she says after a few silently appreciative moments. "How'd you end up here? I mean, looking at you, I can't say that 'bail bondsman' leaps immediately to mind," she admits with a little smile. "You said your father started the business? You mentioned him at

the hospital, is he...?" she trails off questioningly.

Amanda's questions quickly take his attention away from "Concierto De Aranjuez" even tho' he still keeps in time by tapping his fingers on the wheel. "He's not doing so well...bad case of black lung from working in the mines in his youth."

His tone says more than the words do, and she looks down for a moment. "I'm sorry," she says softly. "That must be very hard, for all of you." It explains the marks of long grief and stress on Mrs. Faulkner's face, that night at the hospital.

"He and my Uncle Jim started the Bail Bonds Company during their last attempt at trying to bury the hatchet. They're practically Cain and Able, those two--unfortunately the apple didn't fall far from the tree. You think Jake and Seven have it in for each other? You should see him around Jim's son, Jason."

Switching gears to turn the corner...

"I certainly didn't plan on taking over for Dad, even tho' that's what he wanted. I bolted to New York to study music when I was 18...and never planned on coming back." "...But I'm not about to let him down so I'm here."

Amanda blinks at him, surprised. "You were in New York? I'm surprised we never ran into each other before, here or there."

"Yeah--me too. I studied at Mannes College and lived above a bar called the Living Room in the Lower East Side", he says attempting to find out more about her time in the City.

She nods recognition. "I've been there. That's so funny." She studies him more closely, searching her memory. _No, I think I'd remember those eyes if I'd seen them. _ "When was this?"

"Few years back--I graduated from school in '93 and came back here in early '98. My jazz trio played there a lot. The locale also made it real easy for me to get to Coney Island High and CBGBs whenever my punk band gigged. It wasn't until I hooked up with Greg Garing's Alphabet City Opry that things really started cooking."

Amanda grins. "From jazz to punk to... well, however you classify those guys? Don't know how I managed to miss meeting you. Though, I didn't graduate until '96 and I didn't get out as much until then, that might be it. I tried two bands while I was there--didn't work out well at all. The singer for one of them wanted to be a druid and he changed our name every new moon--I'm serious," she adds with a laugh, catching his expression. "Complete flake. The other one was worse." She falls silent for a moment, remembering how that one had ended -- blue and red ambulance lights at 3 a.m. -- then shakes the memory off. "But the Opry, that's really cool. I met Greg one time at some other show, very talented guy."

"Damn straight. He and the rest of the guys released an album last year, I have it and it's pretty good. Their new bassist isn't sooooo bad", he says jokingly.

She shakes her head a little, still bemused. "No, not really, but...you just dropped everything and came back?" She sounds faintly astonished. "That's kind of amazing. I don't know if... well, it's not like it would ever have been an issue with my family," she admits with a shrug. "If anyone ever has to take over my father's business it'll be my brother Tony, and he'll probably sell it for three

times what it's worth a week later. He's Veep of Looting and Burning at Time Warner these days," she adds in response to a questioning look. "Not really a bad guy," she feels compelled to add. "Just kind of...driven."

Not wanting to continue along the family track for fear of rekindling Amanda's concerns about her father he continues to answer her questions "It's been rough since I've been back, musically speaking especially. I was so worried that you were making a mistake by coming back..." he pauses, "but I'm glad you did." he says as he catches a glimpse of her gray eyes.

She smiles back, suddenly shy. "Me, too." It comes out a little softer than intended, and she feels her cheeks heat slightly, glances away to cover. "I'm kind of surprised you don't hate me," she admits after a quiet moment. "I mean, giving all that up...." Maybe I spent too long in New York, but I'd expect most people to be kind of bitter about it, she thinks. And here I come waltzing into town and things just seem to fall into place....

"I was plenty bitter." Seeing the shocked look on Amanda's face he quickly adds "No, no not about you and RSD, I was glad I could hook you up, really."

"Oh." She sounds relieved. "Well, I'm glad it's okay. I still can't really believe it's all happening," she confesses with a little laugh. "I was thinking about moving back to get some peace and quiet, and time to write, and instead... everything's so different. Not that I mind," she adds hastily. "It's certainly interesting." To say the least.

"No kidding! Up until New Year's I was running around doing my best George Bailey impersonation. Things have changed way too much for me to piss my life away," he says with some larger sense of scale.

"This might sound weird but do you think there's any rhyme or reason to what happened to us? I mean think about it-I'm a musician who ends up with sonic abilities, Jake's temper fuels his powers, and you were even thinking of a "new life" back here when you changed...sort of rising out of the ashes you know?"

"I thought about that on the drive back here, actually," she smiles again. "It does seem to make a weird kind of sense. Though it kinda makes you wonder about Carl, then," the smile becomes a grin, but fades quickly into a more serious expression. "But I don't really think anyone could have predicted what happened to any of us this year." She glances down at her hands, the long, graceful bones much like her mother's, thinking of what they seem capable of now. Wonders suddenly what the SORTies have done with Element before she looks over at Josh again. "So what are you thinking of doing, now? Seems like we'll have plenty to keep busy with, after this morning."

"We have plenty on our plate: Seven, The Snowman, The Double Cs...and whatever other loons that end up a little power hungry. We need to focus our attention right now. We'll wait for Bentley to crack the files Carl left behind and then plan for the Double Cs...but if my friend Tuck has anything to do with it my first stop after Rob and Jonas will be a tattoo parlor..." he says laughing.

"A *tattoo parlor?*" she repeats, laughing as well. "Didn't you have enough of getting needles stuck in you yesterday? And I'm almost afraid to ask what it's going to be...."

"Trust me it's not on my own volition--I lost a game of poker before the holidays and now Tuck is calling in his marker. I have no clue what to get, maybe

something will leap out at me. Knowing Tuck he'll suggest something like a tattoo of a butt on my butt" he says sounding frighteningly like Beavis.

"Sounds a bit painful... That's kind of eerie," she remarks on the voice. "Hardly anyone would see it, anyway. Hm."

"That depends on whether or not I start going into the field wearing my Garanimals", he zings at her with a smile and raised eyebrows. You can almost hear his chuckle before it happens. "Maybe Reflector and I should go shopping at the nearest Rochester Good and Evil together--that guy needs some new threads before he gets sued by Barry Sonnefeld."

She laughs and half-turns, leaning back against the side door to get a better look at him. "Showing that particular tattoo, I think we'd have to worry about you getting **arrested** before Mark getting sued, but yeah, you could both do with something a little more reliable than a pair of shades and domino masks. As for tattoos, I've seen people with some pretty strange stuff, but that's usually the result of a late night and a bottle of JD.... Nothing's really coming to mind, I'm afraid." The half-formed thought that visited earlier that morning is back, tugging at her attention but still not quite ready to reveal itself. She frowns for a moment, shakes her head. "And I'll have to remember you don't play for small stakes -- that's a pretty permanent way to lose a bet," she adds with a grin. "At least you get to pick it out. This guy's a friend?"

Bringing the car to a halt at an intersection, Josh half-turns to face Amanda with his left arm atop the steering wheel and his right stretched over the back of his seat. The sounds from his breath acting as sonar indicating how close they are right now. Shaking his head in distraction he says, "Yeah, Tuck's one of my best friends here. Jake sort of turned to him as a brother figure while I was gone. He's been on the force for almost ten years now...I've learned I can trust him with my life" recalling a case from two years ago where the two brother's and the officer tracked down a child molester. Samuel Jenkins almost got the drop on Josh; if not for Tuck's itchy trigger finger, he might not even be here in the boonies today....

Amanda finds herself smiling again, returning his gaze, still not sure if maybe she's reading him entirely incorrectly--would that be embarrassing. "Good friends are hard to find. It's been kind of strange, moving back here and not really knowing anyone any more," she admits. "I'm used to having a lot of people around. I think," she frowns again, speaking slowly as the thought that's been bothering her finally figures itself out, "I've actually been a little down these past couple weeks, since I got back, and I think that might have something to do with it. And with the whole Millennium thing, suddenly there's a whole huge part of my life I can't really talk to anyone about, which is new. I mean, even my mother--she might not really understand a lot of stuff that goes on in my life, but we're close, and there's never been anything I **couldn't** tell her. Until New Years." She shifts position to face forward again as the light changes, one knee tucked up, her tone thoughtful. She notices that her heart seems to be beating a little faster than usual. "I suppose it's just something else to get used to."

"It's all a big adjustment--trust me I've been there before and I know what you're going through now. If you ever need ANYTHING I'm here for you," he says with the greatest amount of sincerity and emotion he's felt in a long time. "...And I would be even if you didn't save my hash--thank you for that, really."

Amanda quashes a fleeting urge to say something silly that will veer the conversation back to inconsequentials, and shakes her head slightly. "I wish I'd

gotten there faster--I'm just glad you're all right." The night seems even more like a bad dream, something that couldn't possibly have happened, despite the occasional glimpse of bandaging and the unusual degree of care in his movements. She knows that when she gets home the bathroom window will still be open to let out the smoke, from when she'd incinerated her blood-soaked gloves. "And--thank you. That means a lot," she says very quietly. Her eyes are watching him closely, but most of her attention is on the words. Tone, timbre, unspoken meanings. Wondering suddenly what, in fact, she does need....

Hoping that he's not too forward and that Amanda would have said something about a significant other by now if there was one. He says with some great hesitation, "I know how hard good friends are to come by but a good friend who can be _something more_ is even harder to find..." The beating of his heart sounds like crashing waves drowning out the unusual voice in the back of his head that goads him to be cautious.

Hers skips a beat.

"Yes. Yes, they are," she replies slowly. "Sometimes--they show up when you least expect it, though. And..." she trails off, not even sure what she was about to say. "Josh, I--" After a hesitation, her fingertips brush the back of his hand where it rests lightly on the gear shift. "I don't really know what to say," Amanda confesses. "I can't even think of any songs to quote just now," she adds with a quick smile. "That's pretty unusual...." Wondering why she has to pick the best possible moments to be tongue-tied, and why every single thing she can think of to say is either hopelessly corny or will give the wrong idea.

Still virtually out in the middle of nowhere, Josh slows the car and pulls to the side of the road. Thinking to himself if he's going to do what he so desperately wants to do it'd better be memorable. "Trust me, right?"

"Yes..." she says a bit hesitantly, wondering what he can have in mind.

He gets out of the car and beckons for her to exit. Doing so he grabs her by the hand and runs to the middle of a field. Pulling her close he says "Show me what it's like to fly."

For a moment she stops breathing, lips parted, her gaze locked on his eyes. "You're serious, aren't you."

"Absolutely." Josh says breathing deeply as he exerts what little willpower he has left from _showing_ her right now how he feels.

She shakes her head with a little laugh. "I thought I was the one who moved at mach speeds around here... all right." The last thing on her mind is the possibility of backing down from this challenge. There's no one around, she confirms with a quick glance, no other cars that even her eyes can spot on the road. "I've never done this before and I'm not even sure I can, but... all right." She backs off a step and pulls off her sweatshirt. Closes her eyes, as always, while her wings stretch free, thinking that maybe someday she'll never need to hide them....

"Hold on tight," she murmurs, stepping close again--very close. Her arched wings provide a sort of shadowed alcove for a long moment before she closes that last inch. "I'll try to watch your ribs." For a half second, she wonders what on earth she thinks she's doing, if she's lost her mind, or what, but this is not, she decides, a time for being reasonable and rational about things, thoroughly

distracted by his hands on her shoulders.

For a moment she's not sure if she'll be able to do this after all; getting off the ground takes every ounce of her strength. Her wings blur, hummingbird-like, as she gains altitude, the winter-quiet countryside spreading out slowly below. It's not the exertion making her heart pound that way, though, as she comes to a hover at a good height.

"How's that?" she asks, a little breathless, paying very little attention to the vista in any event, given that they are necessarily **very** close together. She can feel his heart beating, hard, and wonders if he can hear hers.

"Wow..." He actually does look around for a moment -- it's a rare view -- before looking straight into her eyes. They close as his lips brush hers.

It's as memorable as anyone could ever wish. She has to break off sooner than she'd like, panting a little for air.

"Sorry... this would be a bad place for me to get dizzy," she manages with a grin.

"Yeah, I guess so," he admits, looking a little dazed himself. "Ah... thank you?"

"My pleasure," she murmurs sincerely. "I'll take this slow."

Back on the ground, he doesn't give her a chance to pick up her sweatshirt right away; the kiss can last quite a bit longer this time. That sort of silly, half-awkward quiet prevails on the rest of the drive. Amanda's aware that she's grinning like a fool most of the time and doesn't mind at all. Eventually they pull into the studio driveway.

"Um. I have to find Mason, and then see what's going on today," she pulls herself together enough to say. "It'll probably be another late one... should I come by tomorrow?"

"Hm," he reflects for a moment. "Jake should be back, if things went OK... I'll give you call?"

"All right." She gives his hand a light squeeze, and they head on inside. There's another guard, same uniform as Willie's at the hospital, but this guy is very Italian, with wavy dark hair and brown eyes, and built like a d-back. He nods as Amanda appears, and looks quizzically at Josh.

"He's with me," Amanda says.

"Yes, Miss Halle," he opens the door for them and watches them pass inside. Shelley is waiting for Amanda, and with a dazzling smile she separates Amanda from Josh, who a little disappointedly turns his attention to the rehearsal area. "Man this place is huge," Josh marvels as he looks around. Rob is behind his kit, tuning a snare. Jonas moves his vaunted pedal rack aside, and plugs a wireless set into his guitar, then checks the connection. The two of them acknowledge Josh, but shrug and indicate that it's not the optimum time for a social call. Brooding Alain is watching Amanda and Shelley with a look of impatience.

"Amanda, I don't know who your representation is, but I've got about 120 pages of documents you need to review and sign. Can you give me your agent's address, or whoever handles this stuff for you, and I'll get FedEx out here right away."

"Wow," she says. "All this necessary? I thought I signed something when I was first out here."

Shelley nodded. "Sickening, isn't it? But if you want to get paid, you have to make a lot of lawyers scream with pleasure first."

"So how much am I making?" Amanda asks rhetorically, but Shelley pulls up a Palm Pilot and taps on the surface of the screen.

"For the MTV special, royalties from CD and video, corporate sponsorships, merchandising, your share should be up around 4, maybe 5 or 6 depending on overseas sales."

"Oh. Forty thousand?"

Shelley seems confused by Amanda's response as Alain approaches; he's overheard the conversation. "Amanda, you have to raise your sights a bit. And add two zeroes."

"Oh you have got to be kidding. Four million? How can anyone make that kind of money for two hours of work."

"Not you if you don't get those papers signed. Shelley, we really need Amanda now."

"Hey, Amanda, come on! Rob isn't getting any younger over here."

"Ha ha. Nibble me, Jonas."

"Four million..." Amanda mumbles.

"And it's not two hours work, either. Rehearsals, media, a little bit of a sacrifice of some of your personal time for certain," Alain shakes his head as he walks up to them. "You'll think you're working for free after a while." He puts his hands in his pockets, stops. "That's the real key, Amanda. You have to love the music enough to work for free, to feel that the performance, the lights, the people, all of that, is what you live for. You're generously compensated for that passion; we'll all know soon if that's enough."

"Thus endeth the sermon."

"Yeah, Alain, shut up already. "

"Right preachy for a Frog still."

"Jonas, jealousy will not enhance your life or your looks one bit."

"Oh that's cold."

"2 - 3 - 4," Rob claps his sticks in time, and the bantering segues straight into the set list taped to the floor in front of each person.

Josh leans against a chair, almost stunned by how quickly the band goes from a full stop right into gear. He feels the way Jeff Beck felt upon hearing Hendrix the first time, when he said that the rest of us may as well apply for postal jobs. For all the hype and publicity, these guys, and one special lady, were damn

good.

And the band played on...

ante de TV, casa de las Cruces, late night February 5th:

Carl idly flipped the hockey puck from hand to hand, with an eye on the evening news. The familiar texture of it turned Carl's thoughts to the ice, ultimately focussing his attention on his knee. Specifically, the lack of pain there. Whatever else it had done, New Year's had made a malingerer of him.

Physically he felt as fit as ever, more so even. It felt wrong, profoundly wrong, to feel this fit and not be competing. He missed the flow of body on ice, enslaving momentum to do his bidding, the transmission of a subtlest thought to a curve in the wood three feet away, the moment when consciousness is planted in the puck as it spins for net. But all these thrills were second to that other nerve-to-nerve combat.

On the ice he was among those pushing the limits of contact, matching will and sinew against the other guy until the other guy cracked or it erupted. The fights were fine, just a fact of the game. The art, the finesse, was to push that tense moment before the fight, until the crowd vanished, the game vanished and it was just two raw nerves scraping on each other until one blinked. The rules were all about setting up that moment over and over. Sometimes you answered with the assist that breaks the tie, sometimes you push him until he blows, draw the penalty and take the power play. Sometimes you just make him think twice about taking the step, and beat him to the biscuit. Sometimes, he beats you and you swing first. It was all about pushing the other guy until he forgot the rules and you didn't. Not so different from his new life, it was all about naked aggression.

Carl wondered about the others' comfort with this aspect of what they were doing. Jake seemed down with the aggressive aspect of it, but Mark? Josh? Were those guys ready to start pushing on people? Amanda?

The more he turned it over, the more Carl wondered if he was as prepared as he assumed. The nerve combat on the street was different. It showed hockey for the artificial playground exercise it was. Physical courage mattered on the ice, but the most you lost was face. On a patrol, the net was gone. Nerve on nerve, with no laws, no authority, no rules of any consequence at the moment of conflict. Except those you put on yourself. No wonder the Snowman did it the way he did -- the fewer rules you put down, the more the other guy blinks. Rules are weaknesses to those guys. How easy would it be to play it that way...?

Carl shook his head in annoyance. Mierde. When you got rules, the winners push them. When you got no rules, the winners make them.

Hockey's a recess from society, not a renunciation. At the end of the game, done's done. On the street, done's death or hard time and no penalty box or timeouts. Worse, the decision's in the hands of kids with no ability to make it. Having to make it. The thrill, hell, the imperative there, is to apply rules with as much force as it takes and get the decision away from them. In the end, the Millennium gig had more in common with his social work than hockey.

The danger was, the adrenaline and physical stress shot him into hockey mode

without recognizing that.

The Nightcrawler's uncommonly reflective mindset shattered with the words coming out of his TV set. "...seeking Jason Faulkner..." At the artist's sketch on the screen, Carl shot forward.

"Sonuva..." He punched up the "2000" code on the Millennium phone. When it buzzed several minutes later, Carl bellowed into the phone before even seeing who it was, "Jake, if you're home get out, get on the road and call me back. Tell your brother the same thing. Cops are looking for a badge-shooter who looks a hell of a lot like you guys."

And in another section of the city, Mark Reinard sees the news and reaches for his cellphone, The 2000 code is ringing through even as he fishes it from his coat pocket.

Josh, the loser , looking at various flashes in Tattoo Charlie's after dropping off Amanda, February 5th:

"You know you could always get a tattoo of a butt on your butt" Tuck says with his T-shirt pulled over his head Cornholio style.

"Or maybe one of those Hula Girls"

"Or an anchor"

"Shut up. I'm never playing Poker with you guys ever again"

"You wanna bet?"

"...That's what got me here in the first place. I've learned my lesson. And I've picked one, thank you very much."

Calling one of the employees over Josh says "What does this character mean?"

"It's Japanese for 2000."

"Even better," Josh says as he steps into the chair...listening to the news on the TV over the blaring stereo belting out "Story of My Life" by Social Distortion, as the tattoo artist applies the first needle to Josh.

As the tattoo artist finished his work, Josh had to remain in a somewhat uncomfortable position for a few more minutes to let the work settle in. Tuck and the others had a great laugh, but one by one had to depart for various duties. As he finally made to leave the shop, his cellphone's pager went off. 2000. He wasn't even surprised.

[Amanda, later that same evening, while Josh gets his treatment]

The rest of the rehearsal goes by in a haze of alternating elation and worry, her thoughts torn in a half dozen directions--Josh, who had to leave upon receiving a

page from his office, and what it might do to the group; things that happened in New York; her father and a thousand imagined worst cases; and oh yeah, the music. She has a hard time concentrating, and finally Rob gets up, walks over, and taps her on the shoulder with a drumstick saying, "Yo, space cadet? Earth to bass, anyone home?" after which, embarrassed, she makes a more concerted effort to keep her mind on what she's doing. He's grinning when he says it, though.

He sits down next to her on the floor and motions for her to do the same. She's never been up close to Rob before, and she can't help but notice his slightly turned nose and the faint scar that marks his upper lip. One of those notorious moments in rock history, when the band were playing a small club in Ohio well before they became a household word. The gig ended around 2 am, everyone was happy, but the club owner decided he didn't want to pay the band, and thought the presence of his two ex-offensive line type bouncers would persuade the band to write off the fee.

The owner's judgment proved to be quite wrong, and the ensuing fight lasted nearly thirty minutes. Rob took a Jack Daniels bottle in the face, and it had exploded on impact. Everything came down to Alex to finish the issue with the club owner, everyone else being wiped out from the melee with the bouncers. And of course, Alex did what needed to be done, an axe handle to the owner's knee in this case. He collected the money and toted Rob out the back door as the cops came in the front. The story grows a bit with each new generation of fans, because from that point on the band became more focused on their work. The first contract with Capitol came not long after that.

Rob doesn't say anything for a minute, just sitting there Buddha-like while Amanda's mind races. Finally she drew in a breath and started to speak. Rob interrupted her.

"Don't say you're fine, everything's fine, you're sorry, or anything like an apology. Everyone has things going on in their lives. We understand that. If you can say what's on your mind, maybe we can help. Maybe you're someplace we've been already."

I really doubt that, unless you can sprout wings. Amanda thought. "I can't."

He didn't pry, just nodded. "Trust takes time. Everyone here, they've been with us for years. They all had a starting point where they weren't sure if they belonged. When they finally stopped thinking and just accepted being part of this thing the press likes to call the Diary, life got easier. Because they weren't trying to do it all, you see. They share a problem and we, emphasis on the 'we', deal with it." Rob nods at Amanda, and realizing that further rehearsal isn't going to get anywhere today, tosses his sticks back to his kit.

"Thank you," she replies.

"Don't worry about the songs. You'll be wearing an in-the-ear monitor during the session, and I'll have a channel open that only you'll hear. I'll let you know if you need to push or ease up."

"Speaking of the songs, I have got to know something. I've been trying to learn the line to..."

"Wire." Rob finishes.

"Yes, how the heck does Alex play that bass solo? I have listened to it a hundred

times and I just cannot get it."

Rob leaned back, chuckling a noiseless laugh. "You can't. Nobody can, not even Alex."

"What?"

"Alex only played the first half of the solo. Some engineer copied it, and physically flipped the tape and patched it to the end of the solo. You're hearing the first half of the solo being played backwards, basically being 'unplayed'."

"I'll be."

"That's why we never play it live; it wouldn't sound right."

When she gets home, the apartment is cold--that open window--and very quiet. She knows she really ought to think about things, not just fling herself headlong into something that might have real ramifications, but the morning is occupying her thoughts with little room left over for anything else.

Her answering machine is blinking a dim red 2. Amanda heads for the kitchen, looks into the refrigerator, and makes a face at its bareness. She grabs a Diet Pepsi, briefly ponders the wisdom of caffeine at this hour, shrugs and returns to the living room. The first message is from her mother, sounding a bit wistful, hinting at the fact that Amanda hasn't really been in touch since she moved back. The second is Marie, wondering caustically if she's fallen off the face of the earth, or into a sinkhole in that godforsaken part of the country she's moved to, and perhaps she could deign to let her friends know if this is the case or not? That brings her thoughts back to something a little closer to the planet's surface. _Ow, two guilt trips in one day. I guess I should try to do a little better than this. Time to act like my life is normal...._ She calls her mother.

"Hello?" Rose's voice answers.

"Hi, Mom."

"Amanda!" She sounds delighted. "It's lovely to hear from you. How is everything?"

"Things are good. Sorry I haven't called," Amanda apologizes ritually. "I've been kind of busy getting things sorted out and stuff with the new place, but I think things are coming together."

"Yes, you're settling in all right? Meeting anyone? I'm sure hardly anyone is left in town that you used to know, but you've never had trouble making friends."

"I've, uh, met a few people so far," she acknowledges, smiling to herself. "They're very... interesting."

"Anyone I ought to know about?" Rose inquires archly.

"Mo-om!" Amanda drawls in mock rebuke, grins and flops on the futon. "Jeez, I've only been back for a few weeks...."

"True. But?" her mother prompts--she knows her daughter very well.

"Well, I don't know," she admits, smiling more broadly at the memory. "It's kind

of early to say right now, but yeah, I've met this guy."

"And what does this one play?"

"Bass," she answers automatically before catching the trap, and has to laugh at herself. "Oh, no, I said no more musicians, didn't I? Well... this one might be different."

"Really? What's he like?"

Amanda frowns to herself, thinking over the morning's conversations.

"Complicated," she decides eventually. "But not in a messed-up way," she adds, thinking about a couple of other people she's applied the adjective to. "More like depth."

"Hm. Well, you'll have to keep me posted. And how is work?" she changes the subject.

Amanda has to grin to herself; her mother's boundless toleration notwithstanding, she is evidently still somewhat bemused by her daughter's recent career choices. "The band is great, mom. Perfect, actually. Oh, and guess what? We're going to be on TV!"

"Really? That's wonderful." She sounds genuinely pleased. "How did this come about?"

"It's an MTV thing, they're going to tape in a couple weeks, I don't know yet when it'll air. But I should be able to get you guys in if you want to come... I know it's not really your kind of music, but I'd like to have you there."

"Of course we will. And I'm so happy things are working out well for you now that you're back."

"So am I. We still on for dinner this weekend?"

"Of course. Sunday at 7?"

"Sounds great." She takes a deep breath. "So, how's dad?"

"He came home at one, said he had to go to Washington right away. Packed a bag and ran out the door. He's supposed to call later on tonight."

"Oh." Her brow knits as she wonders what that can be about. "Well, tell him I said hello."

"I will. Haven't heard from him yet. I'm not sure, but I think it has something to do with the governor. I'll let you know. Bye, now."

"Ok, bye." The governor? Oh no, what is Dad up to? The shriek of the cellphone pager breaks her thoughts. Code 2000 on the display.

12:03 a.m. February 6th. Within the corridors of Commonwealth Stadium, Phoenix, Sound, Nightcrawler, and Reflector meet away from the prying eyes of the public.

"I guess you're wondering why I've gathered you all here tonite," echoed the

glitchy puddled voice of the Nightcrawler through the halls of the stadium, near the locker rooms.

"I heard about it on the way here. Jason Faulkner, some cops got shot..." Reflector said.

Sound interrupted. "A cousin, before anyone asks. He's a bit younger than me. I knew he was on the force, but I didn't know he was one of those SORTies."

Phoenix added a bit of illumination to the meeting, her corona glowing mildly. "The Chief was out of surgery, the news said; he's ok. No word on the others."

"Sound, any chance that Jason is Seven?" Reflector asked.

"I'd bet on it, but I'm still hurting from the last bet I had to pay off."

"Speaking of payoffs, the weirdest thing happened to me this morning at breakfast. This guy I don't even know comes up to our table and drops two hundred dollars like he's paying me off. And yesterday, I went to this costume place, and the owner was really weird." With that, Reflector recounted the story of his visit to Backstage Costumes and insisted that some sort of surveillance of the proprietor be initiated.

"That's going to have to wait, and besides, those are some styling threads," Phoenix replied.

"I've tried checking with Jason's parents, but they haven't heard from him in weeks. He's not at his apartment on Locust Hill Drive either, and doesn't look like he's been there for a while," Josh said.

"So what do we do next?" demanded the Nightcrawler.

[Late Saturday night in Columbus, GA]

It had been a long drive down from Lexington, but it gave Jake plenty of time to think about the direction things were going. He had finally got everything settled in his mind. He was ready to get down to business. Spotting a Super 8 motel up ahead at the next exit, he figured this was about as good a place as any to stop, having just crossed into the city limits about two miles back. Jake goes in and gets a room. After a quick shower and a change of clothes Jake gets out the Columbus map he had picked up in the lobby. He makes a few phone calls and gets the information that he needs. He jumps on his bike and heads out to the west side of town.

Jake turns off his bike and lets it coast a little ways down the street. The area was your typical low rent residential housing. Jake can't remember how many times he's found himself on the job in just this kind of slum. They just seem to breed the kind of low life scum that jump bail. The house in question is alive with what appears to be quite a party. There must be ten bikes in the front yard and half a dozen cars line the driveway and street. Now would not the best time for a confrontation. But tomorrow morning would be perfect. From the sounds of it Dodge will be sleeping it off come morning. That will be the time to drop by for a visit. Jake heads back to the motel and to get some rest.

[Sunday Morning, February 6, 4:00 a.m.]

Jake pulls his bike up to the curb in front of Dodge's hideout. It was as Jake figured; after the party everybody headed home and the house was dead. There was one bike and two cars in the driveway, one of which matched the description of the one Dodge purchased in Decatur. "Well he's bound to still be here." He pulls his cellphone out of his jacket pocket and dials 911 to request police assistance at this address.

"It should take them a while to respond to a call in this area of town. Plenty of time to finish off Dodge before they get here." Jake gets off his bike and sneaks around to the back of the house, careful to avoid stepping on the numerous beer cans scattered about the yard.

"Boy, that must have been a great party. I hope Dodge enjoyed it, it will be his last for a while." Jake quietly checks the back door and pleasantly surprised to find it unlocked. He opens the door and steps into the kitchen. Stepping around the trash that lays about the floor Jake makes his way down the hall toward what appears to be the bedrooms.

The first room Jake comes to the door is ajar. Peeking in sees a guy and a girl asleep but it isn't Dodge. Glancing around Jake spies a shotgun leaned against the dresser by the door. Jake quietly takes the gun and removes the two shells it contains and places the gun back. Jake sneaks down the hall to the next door. It is shut so he tries the knob. As the door opens the hinges give a slight squeak. Jake pauses, not even breathing as he continues to push the door open. There in bed was Dodge and some blonde that Jake didn't recognize. Jake steps up to the bed, "Well Dodge, if you're through with your party it's time to head back home."

The two looked at Jake, the girl shocked, Dodge smiling. Before Jake's eyes, Clement Dodge's left arm morphed into a wickedly curved katana blade, as his right hand seized the girl by the hair. "Party's over when I say it is, dumbass. Think you'll keep your hunting license after'n I lop Brandi's head off her shoulders?"

Just after midnight, at the palatial dwelling of the Purple Mask. His office, as Lydia Morry enters with a guest.

"You certainly took your time," the Purple Mask chastised as Lydia escorted a tall, muscular man dressed only in shorts into the room.

"You did say you wanted him thoroughly debriefed, my Mask."

"I didn't expect you to be so literal. What about his gear?"

Lydia went back to the door and motioned to someone outside. Manfred entered pushing a rolling tray laden with lots of deadly gear. The kind of gear a SORT officer would carry. The Purple Mask walked around the cart, admiring the lethal arsenal, nodding with approval.

"So what's his name?"

"Jason, my Mask."

"Well, Jason, sit down. We have much to discuss about your SORT tactics and staffing."

As Jason took a seat, moving as if in a fugue, the Purple Mask drew Lydia aside.
"I'll be done with him in an hour. Have Julian and Vinnie ready to take him for a ride at that time. I'll expect him to be dead and quick limed by three a.m."

[Back to the turns page.](#)