

This isn't going to be one of the best turns I've posted. My adoptive father passed away late Wednesday evening in New Mexico, at the age of 91. He had been in a nursing home for the past year, and at his age we all knew that the time would come when we would have to say goodbye. My mother and he were married for over 52 years.

I've never known my biological parents, but I think I've learned that being a Dad means more than biology. I am glad my father was able to know that my son's middle name, Harold, was named for him.

Ave atque vale, Dad. Requiescat in pace.

[Turn 20]

I am getting tired of feeling totally out of my depth, Amanda realizes. _What the heck am I doing? I don't know anything about this kind of thing. I don't even watch cop shows on TV._ The fact that the others seem just as much at a momentary loss doesn't exactly provide comfort.

She tries to think. "If he's not any of the obvious places... the guys he worked with probably know best where he might hole up, but they'll be checking those. D'you think he'd just run?" she asks Sound -- she had really been hoping that their next chance to talk would be under more congenial circumstances, too. "I mean, it looks like he's completely flipped out, whatever caused it." Something certainly seems to have it in for the Faulkner family this week. At least Fury's out of town; heaven knows what he'd do with this kind of impetus, if there were already bad blood between him and Jason before all this.

"We could just fan out and look for him, but that doesn't seem all that efficient. And SORT would probably not be happy to trip over any powered person just now--unless we want to walk up openly and offer to help?"

"Or maybe we should try to talk to the chief? Jason might have said or done something that dropped a hint before he split."

"At the risk of statin' the obvious, he's family, right? There's gotta be a window the cops can't look into like you can -- aunt, uncle, somebody." The Nightcrawler paused, glistening with a sick sheen by Phoenix' firelight. "Don't take this the wrong way. Maybe there are some cops you can trust out there, but this is hittin' close to home. They find you, they gotta look hard at you. An' you _do_ got somethin' to hide now. Maybe you wanna steer clear long as you can. Or at least keep a tight fist on any meetings."

Processing the sheer suffocating weight of the situation behind a deep blue ski mask he says addressing Amanda and Carl's questions in order, "I have no clue where he would go to ground. You're right the other guys on the force might have some better ideas. Sure they'll hit his likely safehouses but maybe they haven't covered all of those locations yet. I could find out where they haven't been yet and we could get there first.."

Hearing uneasiness in her voice Josh continues to focus on Amanda's

contributions. "He may have left some clue with the chief...I might be able to find out about that too. Good idea." Turning to Nightcrawler, "I've already touched base with his father" he says in an almost pained voice "and he had no clue either--but it's not like he can be totally trusted either." he states bitterly. Defiantly he adds "and I'm in no position to steer clear now" he says with great resolve. The extra sharpness potentially contributed to the situation at hand but more likely due to his new found dedication towards their new roles.

"Jason's always been a loose cannon but this is not like him at all," Sound says. Reaching into the pocket of his knee length brown leather jacket he pulls out his cell phone and calls Tuck at the PD. But the sergeant has no extra information. Jason has an apartment at Raintree, and his parents live not too far away from there.

The Nightcrawler had silently stood by with folded arms during the recitation. After it was done, his gurgling voice shook the silence, only half-joking. "I'm about runnin' outta slack to cut you, Faulkner -- I thought your brother was the hothead. You took me to task for not thinkin' things through the other day. Whatta we got now? Two spots we know the cops're lookin' at, and a cop that knows he told you about 'em. The Millennium shows up, how long 'for even a cop to put together two an' two? All the 'Matrix 2' coats in the world ain't gonna fool a cop you're friendly with. Now maybe you're all right with that, but don't you think you oughtta check with the resta us before you 'out' us? Way I see it, we're down ta two options. Either you poke around in civvies, or we make like sneak thieves tonight."

Don't push me almost creeps out of Sound's throat but instead his cooler head prevails and he says in a voice deliberately modulated to not sound like his own. "Calling me Faulkner in public might make it even easier, 'Crawler. I asked a friend about my cousin's whereabouts--I don't think that's out of the ordinary. We just have to hit the spot before them, like I said. It shouldn't be difficult with your invisibility, Phoenix's speed and sight, and my hearing."

"Or...we just offer help to the cops, cold," suggested Mark quietly.

"Not a bad thought, either. Which is it people?"

Not *again*, Phoenix thinks. Emotions are obviously running higher than they should, and there isn't any time to resolve things properly.

"I think it's worth a try," she says, keeping her tone strictly business-like with some effort -- she's a little annoyed, tell the truth, and a lot worried. "Sound, you do know these guys better than any of us -- what do you think their reaction would be? Nightcrawler, didn't you say the one you met when Snowman showed up said that they'd been unofficially told about us anyway? Between that and the guy with Element, I'd think we look pretty positive." As long as we don't blow this, of course, she adds silently.

Phoenix continued. "The other alternative as I see it is to do some of that sneaking, check out these two places first and see what we can find, then get in touch with them. What are the locations again? I can fly over and see if they're already crawling with cops..."

"Quick recon couldn't hurt..." Sound says with worry laced in his tones.

Nightcrawler looks at them all. "Okay. Mebbe Phoenix does a fly-by -- if the cops are onsite we abort and approach at the station." He looks to Amanda and Mark.

"Meanwhile, why don't you two take the far one. _Sound_ and I'll take the near one."

"Fine." She's anxious to _move_, to do something. "I'll be *right* back. Try not to kill each other, 'kay?" she adds with a dubious glance at those two. "We can talk this out later." Her corona dims and goes out -- no sense making herself quite so visible from the ground -- leaving them in darkness as she takes off. She keeps a leash on herself, since she can think of few better ways to announce company coming than a sonic boom, but expects that it should take only a few minutes to fly over the two targets and see who's in the neighborhood.

Phoenix cuts through the chilly Bluegrass night, making her way down Tates Creek Road toward Trent Boulevard. Her extraordinary vision allows her to pick out the proper house number from her high vantagepoint. The house is dark, and there are no cars in the driveway. Since there isn't a garage, it seems like there is no one home.

Her suspicions are confirmed when she spots a note taped to the front door. A business card with the Lexington Metro shield displayed is on it, with a request for the residents to contact Ofc. Laura Wesley ASAP.

Cautiously, Phoenix takes note of the few cars in nearby driveways and on the street. But no one appears to be staking out the house in question. With a shrug, Phoenix ascends and turns east toward the Richmond Road area.

Jason's apartment is in the Raintree complex, behind Man O'War theaters. Popular with single people, the apartments also have an indoor and outdoor pool facility. Neither is in use tonight.

"Jason's apartment is 408," she recalls as she wheels behind the first set of buildings. 408 is part of a four-apartment building, it and 406 being walkups to second floor apartments. "I'll have to thank the police for making it easy to find." Her comments prompted by the copious amount of yellow Do Not Cross tape covering the doorframe, and the white and blue metro police car parked outside as a lone officer scribbles on a form.

"Hmm. What's this?" Phoenix's eye catches a small reflection on the balcony of Jason's apartment. A book of matches sitting atop a covered grill with gold lettering, yet it must be new as it is on top of a thin layer of snow on the grill. "Clementine's Jazz Club, at Doubletree Suites...that's just down the road a half mile." She turns and quickly flies back to the stadium, where the group waits.

"Nothing obvious at the parent's. The cops have been there, but I don't think anyone's been home for a while. I saw something at Jason's place, on his balcony. There was a matchbook from Clementine's at the Doubletree, just down the road from his place."

"Wait a second, you're sure about that?" Reflector asked.

"Sure am."

"You got something, amigo?" the Nightcrawler asks.

"Maybe. I'd like to go there before they close. Last call is in less than 45 minutes." Reflector begins heading to the parking lot, but the group catches up with him where the tunnels of the stadium open to the lots.

"Whoa, wait. What do you think you'll find?" Sound asked.

"Ok, way back on New Year's Eve, there was this woman, Lydia, at our company party. I don't know for sure, but somehow I think she was able to influence me, and then this boxer who came along."

"Mark, this had better not take a turn for the graphic," Phoenix says.

"I'm voting for graphic," leered the Nightcrawler.

Reflector shook his head quickly. "Lydia's one of those people who makes us uncomfortable to be around. Anyway, when my mother came here, I took her to the Doubletree. Lydia was there having lunch with someone, and that was the weird part."

"Lunch?"

"No, Sound, the person she was with, I couldn't look straight at him, and I'm guessing the person was a him. It was like my eyes would just slide off his face. Clementine's is the restaurant in the hotel where they were having lunch. Lydia hasn't been around the office at all since New Year's, and no one seems to notice that at work."

"That's thin for a lead," Nightcrawler said.

"Paper thin," Sound added. "But the only one we've got, unless we want to go to the parent's house and the apartment and search there."

"The cops've already been there, so they should keep for a bit longer," Phoenix remarks in her quiet voice. "You think she might be hiding out at the hotel?"

The Nightcrawler seemed to warm to the direction of the investigation. "You thinkin' of walkin' in in civvies? Prob'ly not a bad idea, but I'm thinkin' some of us should poke around sneaky like too. We got the phones to guide each other. Any reason to think this's more'n a nightclub, security-wise?"

"Unless there's a VIP staying at the hotel, I wouldn't think so," she shrugs with a glance at Mark for confirmation. "Maybe you can do your Man in Black routine at the desk?" She summons a quick smile despite the tension still in the air, the seriousness of the situation. "Nightcrawler, you're the obvious bet for sneaking around, maybe you could let one of us in through a back door, or something, as well? If nothing else we could pull the fire alarm, see if that scares up anyone interesting."

It *is* a tenuous connection, she thinks. I mean for pity's sake, a matchbook from a popular restaurant... but if Jason is Seven, then he and Lydia are both on the wrong side, and might have come across one another that way... and if she has some power to affect people's minds she might have been able to slip him into the hotel despite him having his face all over the 11 o'clock news. It's worth a shot.

Hoping against hope Sound adds, "Who knows? Maybe she "influenced" him to do it \ in the first place?"

"We should figure out who's being sneaky and who's going in openly," she goes on, adds (in an attempt to lighten the mood a bit): "and Sound, no offense, but if

any cop sees you dressed like that they're going to think you're on the other side -- should have gone with the Garanimals after all."

Trying to aid Phoenix in her attempt at levity, Sound chimes in. "It'd show off the tattoo then I'd definitely be headed for the slammer." Reflector quizzically chuckles and the humor is seemingly lost on it's intended recipient, the Nightcrawler.

The Nightcrawler's head nodded with a muted glitching sound. "Soundin' good. Maybe we oughtta get Mark ta narrow the focus, dig up this chica at the desk, if he can. Then you'n Sound can look'n'listen, see if you pick anything up outside. Ya never know, she might have somethin' for picture windows. That comes up empty, I c'n poke in, maybe with some silencing action."

Still using the modulated voice Josh says "It sounds like a plan then. Let's go."

As they're leaving, Phoenix touches Sound's shoulder lightly. "Hey." Subvocalizing, so no one else hears. "Are you all right with this?" she asks directly. "Family's not easy." She half-smiles, ruefully.

Thinking about his answer for a brief moment (the only amount of time he can allow himself all things considered) he feels as if he's betrayed his own family by reaching to Jason's for help in finding him...and dealing with Jason is never easy. It's especially complicated by the imminent likelihood that Jason is Seven, who according to Jake had some role in saving Sound's life recently. His answer is a shaky "I will be" and a heartfelt "Thanks" both subvocalized and carried to her ears by his aural manipulations.

"Be careful," she replies seriously, concern only partially masked by her smile. "Just for starters, I'd hate to have to explain to your brother how we let you end up in the hospital again...." At a more normal volume, she announces to the group at large, "I'll go on ahead and check the neighborhood out," Phoenix announces to the group at large. "Make sure we're not going to trip over Lexington's finest, or them over us, and so forth. I'll call in five minutes, whether or not I find anything," she adds Can't be too careful. She's surprisingly nervous; this isn't like New Years, or last night, when things were happening too fast to think about them. And they have no idea what they might be up against.

"We might'ez well hit the road. She'll have us spun up by the time we get outta the parkin' lot, an' we can park a couple blocks away. Reflector, why don't you lead us out. I'll tag a ride with Sound." The last was delivered with more grumble than usual. Mark cast a doubtful look back, but led out to the parking lot.

Out in the darkened lot, Nightcrawler silently piled into the Volvo, stoically ignoring the trunk blanket Sound hurriedly threw over the seat. As Josh put it in gear to follow the Reflector's taillights, Carl faded himself to near invisibility, to prevent rubbernecking. His voice was tight as he broke the charged, dark silence.

Carl turned to Josh. "We ain't done tonight till we say some things." By the light of oncoming traffic, Sound's face screwed up into a wisecrack-launching form. The Nightcrawler interrupted, "Uh-uh, _Faulkner_, you're gonna listen to me. If you ain't already deadening sound around us, you need ta be, so don't feed me that lame-ass loose-lips line again. I don't know if your problem is with me personally, or Mehicanos, or people in general..."

Sound, thinking "What the hell did I do to deserve this?

"...But I'm gonna tell you this, not teammates, not opponents, not nobody talks to me like you do unless they wanta take it all the way."

I'll go however far you want, big man.

"I understand your cousin's in this, an' that's set you on edge. Yeah, your brother's on his own, an' I'm thinkin' maybe our friend with the wings is settin' you off your game too. But I've cut the slack down to threads, an' there ain't no more ta give.

Jake shouldn't have gone on his own either, Einstein. Leave Amanda out of it.

"If you wanna make somethin' outta this group you're gonna have to get that your straight-arrow, cop-lovin' world ain't mine, an' you're gonna have to get that you ain't Father an' you don't Know Best. You talk to me like men talk to each other an' we'll get it done - I ain't an unreasonable man. You wanna puff up your chest to impress the ladies, I'm gone. Play white-man's angst on the other side-a town. I don't need this crap, not from folks that're supposed to be down with me."

Leave her out of this. You finished? Good.

Waiting for Carl to finish Josh grips the steering wheel, trying to curb his anger and sarcasm, "Let's review shall we? I got no problems with people, Mehicanos, or you---it's that paranoid chip on yer shoulder I got a problem with. It's only gotten worse since you tangled with Snowman--you and your "chest puffing" machismo got a problem with him not me...You wanna compare Angst sometime? Fine but we do it over drinks, not here, not now, and not like this.

Josh quickly followed up with... "That cop on the phone? Best friend I've ever had--saved my life more times than I care to count." _Which is more than I can say for your sorry ass._ "If I can pump him for some information then I don't see the problem."

Trying to tone his anger down he says, "Listen Carl, The group and what we can do for everybody means a helluva lot to me I don't want to screw that up because we're ramming heads--truce?" he says extending his hand with one eye off traffic.

Carl stares at the hand in disbelief. "You listnin' to me, or you takin' the time I'm talkin' to figure out what you're gonna say next? I know you don't see the problem. That IS the problem. Yeah, you got a good cop buddy. Bully for you. Ev'ry time you open your mouth, what I hear is 'Listen Spic, forget your lifetime of experience with the cops, I KNOW BETTER.' You might as well pat me on the head while yer talkin'. You got the sound powers, lissen to yourself for a minute -- you don't talk to Amanda like that, you don't talk to Mark like that. I'm tellin' you if you want this to work, you ain't talkin' to me like that either.

He continues. "Think about this, Padre. We got no idea how this Millennium gig is gonna play out. Say it becomes illegal, then what? Your buddy gonna turn his eyes from you? He got that little integrity? How d'you know who he talks to before we're outlaws? Hell, you two're so buddy-buddy, what happens you go to the law side an' I still wanna do my thing? You know 'nuff about me ta slam the doors forever." Nightcrawler leans in close. "The Millennium ain't yours, it's OURS. You play it like it's yours and it will be. Now, you wake up an' give me the same

respect you mouthin' off for, and I'll take that truce."

Shocked at how deep his distrust goes. Josh completely abandons his aggressive stance for the kind of conciliatory posture that comes from his recent years of experience as the lynchpin of his family (which while it comes natural to him not it does cause some internal friction with the devil's advocate that is at his center)

"Carl...listen, I'm gonna apologize to you right now if I made you feel that way--that was never my intent and I think you know that. I don't think that way and I know the group isn't mine. If I step to you it's because of that aggressive posture you always kick not because of you being Hispanic or because I think I know what's best--I'm not the sort to back down..."

Thinking about the bleak future Nightcrawler paints and Mr. Book's own seemingly prophetic notions about how it's going to get worse before it gets better, Josh continues. "You're right...we don't know how this is going to turn out but I do know I'm want you around when the shit hits the fan."

He still holds his hand out firmly...

Carl's shoulders relax slightly. "Yeah, alright, I know when the adrenaline gets pumpin', I ain't all sweetness and light. I can get past that if the respect is there. I listened to you guys at Bentley's place when it made sense. An' if I knew your head, there wouldn't be a problem. We're all still gettin'a read on each other." Carl retreats the slime from his hand and returns the firm shake. As the irregularly lit streets of Lexington sped past, Carl says slyly, "Man, if you're this hard-nosed, I can't wait ta get on with your brother."

[Meanwhile, we go back to Chase's house, and get him caught up to current time. Well, sort of.]

Chase raises an eyebrow "I just want some juice, but help yourself to whatever you like..." _like he hasn't already...but he sure looks like he needs my generosity more than I need his_ Chase thinks, noting the contrast of a well-cooked meal to the tatterdemalion cooking it. He gets a glass from the cabinet and opens the fridge. "As for the well-stocked fridge, you can credit that to Rita. If left to my "pappy", flies would buzz out of here and I'd a lot skinnier than I am." He pours some orange juice and holds it up offering some to Mr. Book.

"Thank you. Rita?"

"Housekeeper."

"Is that right?" Book says, seemingly trying to reconcile this revelation with something in his mind.

Sitting down in front of his plate, Chase squirts ketchup on to his first burger and takes a bite, _this is REALLY GOOD!_ He chews, swallows. "Maybe you should apply for Rita's job!"

"I was a cook in the US Navy for 30 years. The first meal I made was for General Eisenhower, when he was runnin' for president."

He finishes the first burger and starts a second before blurting every question circling in his head. "What is this all about? What could possibly need my help with? And why do you seem kinda familiar with me when I've never met you before?"

"The 'all about' part has to do with your newfound talents. Right about New Year's Eve, right? That when it happened?"

"I think so."

"And to me. I've known you for some time, but to you this is the first time we've met. I have memories, you see. But they might be premonitions, I don't know."

"What about my second question?"

"It's not 'what' needs help, it's who. You'll meet her later tonite."

Burger number three vanishes from Chase's plate. "Her? Her who?"

"If you're done eatin', you might want to get some sleep."

"But I'm not..."

"Sleep."

About 2 am. A rough hand shakes Chase awake.

"...mumblemuttersuresendHeidiKluntomyroom..." he sleepily says.

"Chase! Wake up, we've got to go."

Chase sits up startled, wiping his face of drool and sleepies. He looks to see whose hand is on him. "Who's there?"

"You are Chase, aren't you?" Female voice, from the darkness, with the breathless husky quality of Kathleen Turner's sultriest tones. She lets go of his shoulder, steps back to where he can see her in the dim illumination from the window. "My name is Dominique. Mr Book said you would help me."

"He was kinda vague..." Chase says, "Are we in a hurry or do you have time to explain this to me while I get dressed?" Chase doesn't look directly at her as he speaks. The taste in his mouth making him self-conscious of what his breath must smell like. _ wish he'd let brush after I ate before he knocked me out...I guess tooth care isn't a priority for Mr Book._ It suddenly dawns on him that he was PUT to sleep and he doesn't seem to mind. Chase takes a good look at Dominique, waiting for her to answer.

She stands about 5'7" with short dark hair; her silhouette is that of a runner's lithe build. "A man is going to die tonight. Mr Book said you are capable of handling the bad men in my dream?"

Chase looks at his clock to see what time it is. "Tonight, before dawn you mean? What man? What dream? Are you psychic?" Chase turns on a mini lamp, gets out of bed.

"Mr Book says I have future memories because I'm a powered person. I don't know

the man, but my dreams have been coming true for a while, ever since my accident. I dreamt two other men would take a man somewhere near here. One is a very German-looking guy, the other like a big Apache Indian. They both have guns, and they take this man out of the trunk of their car. They make him walk to a quarry, and then they shoot him in the back and let his body roll into the quarry. That's when it ends."

While she's talking Chase pulls his metal deck out from underneath his bed. In a brief moment of distracted realization he thinks to himself _Man, she's ultra-beautiful! I'm so glad Book didn't UNdress me before putting me to bed, snarf!_ He keeps his eyes on her as she tells him the story. "So we're looking for a quarry, and how much time do we have?" He grabs a black bandana from a drawer and motions for her to follow him out to the garage where he left his goggles_the mouthguard will have to wait for now_.

"Um, about fifteen minutes. Is one of these cars yours?" she asks.

"No, but..." Chase lays under the Aerostar's bumper and reaches under, sensing the magnetic key keeper and pulling it out. "...I know where the spare key is kept, just another thing the old man probably doesn't know that I know" He smirks at the thought of pissing off his dad, even if he won't do anything but yell about it.

Opening the car door he throws his deck in back and unlocks the passenger door. When Dominique gets in he opens the garage door with its remote and cranks the car, "Not that I do this often, but Pops is a pretty heavy sleeper. Why don't you point me to where we're going and tell me a little more about your accident?" He says as they drive out of his driveway.

"Um, turn right. Drive," she replies, trying to get her bearings. _Ok, so she doesn't wanna share THAT much, I guess,_ Chase thinks to himself. _Let it go, this is clearly serious business, Every so often, she has Chase turn left or right. While driving, Chase steers with his knee so he can tie his bandana over his head and pull his goggles around his neck. Eventually, they come to a quarry, well north of town off the Georgetown Road.

"This is it. Oh my gosh, that's the car! Look, can you see them? They're over there!" Dominique excitedly points to a place about a hundred yards from the car, where three human-shapes stand near a very dark place. While most of the surrounding land is flat, with gritty sand for topsoil, there are several high mounds of sand placed around the lip of the quarry pit

Chase pulls his goggles over his eyes and magnetically summons his skatedeck. He directs it out the backseat and opens the door quietly while the deck slips to about ground level. He steps on to the deck in a low crouch position, feeling his feet tingle as they adhere to it. Floating around the car, he pokes his head around to check their location.

[Phase 28 - Magna-Flux]

Magna-Flux zigs behind them to the top of a tall mound of rock and sand. He hops up and flip his deck over wheel side up and starts to thrash downward in their direction. "WhoooooHAAAAA!!! Ultra-Gear terra for thrashing but kinda early for a meeting of Aryan/Indian brotherly love, but it IS nice to see such cultural diversity is the gangsta' of our time, yo!" Magna-Flux reaches out with his power to pull the gun from the German's grip. Success! The Beretta flies out of the gunman's hand.

[Phase 22 - Julian]

Being relieved of his gun does not faze the big, stone-faced German in the least. As Magna-Flux goes zooming past, Julian runs toward his direction and leaps into the air. And while twisting Michael Jordan-fashion, he produces another Beretta and begins firing at Magna-Flux. Two shots whistle by Magna-Flux and careen into the night.

[Phase 21 - Vinnie]

Meanwhile, the tall Apache, dressed in an identical black suit and tie to Julian, seems surprised by Magna-Flux's arrival, and does nothing.

[Phase 21 - the intended victim]

The same can't be said for the intended victim, as he launches a vicious kick at Vinnie. But he misses wildly due to the gritty terrain at the lip of the quarry (uh huh, rolled a 20 don't you know), and goes skidding down the pit with a howl of pain.

[Phase 15 - Magna-Flux]

Using his superior speed, Magna-Flux comes rushing toward Julian and tries to smack him on the move. But Julian does a funny little stutter-step, and Magna Flux goes through thin air.

[Phase 7 - Julian]

Moving with a disappointing Chow Yun Fat-style fluidity (well, disappointing to Magna-Flux anyway), Julian taps two more rounds at the Magnetic Marvel. One round strikes, ahem, inside the left thigh, and the damage would have been considerable were Magna-Flux not moving so effectively. (Welcome to the game, you just took your first 2 hit points of damage, rolling for the rest.)

[Phase 6 - Vinnie]

Belatedly dodging the intended victim's attack, Vinnie swings around and looks down the side of the quarry pit. He produces an uncommonly bright flashlight and aims it into the darkness.

[Phase 6 - the intended victim]

A distant splashing sound, heard only by Vinnie, seems to mark the entry of the intended victim into the deep water at the bottom of the quarry.

[Let's go forward a bit. Sunday morning, just after 4 a.m., February 6th]

[Phase 35 - Fury]

"That's just like you Dodge," Fury said. "Always was got to drag someone down with you. You just can't play it like a real man. I told Pam you were no good. That she should leave town and start her life over again somewhere else. Somewhere away from you. She wouldn't listen. Maybe she'll change her mind when she finds out her big man had to use a woman to shield himself. Like the low-life

scum that you are. You are nothing but a weak coward. Come on let's see what you've got, just you and me. Mano et Mano." Fury tries to trigger his namesake emotion in Clement Dodge, but isn't able to influence him.

[Phase 21 - Clement Dodge, the Blademorph]

Dodge slides out of bed, easily dragging Brandi with him and keeping her between himself and Fury's gun. "Mebbe I'm jest smarter than you, Jake. I had a hard time cuttin' you up in yer place, an' I ain't fergettin' it neither." With a hard shove, he sends Brandi flying at Fury, and during the split second Brandi has Fury off balance, the Blademorph runs through the doorway.

[Phase 20 - Fury]

Easily catching Dodge, Fury spins him around and pounds him with a devastating right! The Blademorph clatters through a couple of chairs and a table, and goes sprawling on the floor.

[Phase 6 - Dodge]

"Here's yer iron supplement, Jake!" Dodge punches out, his arm forming a solid steel spear. The hardened point hits Jake in the chest, but he easily shrugs off the strike.

[Phase 5 - Fury]

Pushing the spear aside, Fury thinks better of it and uses it as leverage. With a quick downward shove, Fury uses one of the downed chairs as a fulcrum, and levers Dodge into the ceiling. Evidently the ceiling is made of sterner stuff than Clement Dodge, as he is out cold. (Yup, back to the old style dice rolls; 1 to hit, max on damage. :)

Taking Dodge by the scruff of the neck, Jake drags him outside, where a small group of Georgia state troopers and local sheriff deputies quickly arrive. After exchanging pleasantries, and presenting proper identification, Jake accompanies the officers and fills out the all-important reimbursement paperwork. As he writes, one of the troopers calls to him.

"Mr Faulkner? I've got Kentucky Attorney's office on the phone," he says. Jake takes the receiver and speaks a terse hello.

"Hi, Jack Fahey, Commonwealth's Attorney office. I was just hoping to leave you a message to call."

"Kind of early for you to be in the office, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it. No choice though."

"That's ok, I picked up someone you might be waiting for: Clement Dodge?"

"Hey, that's great work. Thanks. Emma McBell's office said they had someone looking for him."

"There was something you wanted from me?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to do you a favor. You haven't submitted your business license renewal for the bonds office. You've got a good rep down here, and I don't want

to see you get screwed over this. If you come by my office tomorrow morning with the fee, I'll make sure it gets processed down at the Clerk's office with Friday's leftover work."

"Damn. Thanks," Jake said. _How the heck did I miss that? Too much going on, that's how._

"It's ok, I know you've got a lot on your mind."

"Yeah, my father isn't getting any better."

"Oh? I'm sorry. But, um, I was referring to Jason."

"Jason? What's happened to him?"

"He's a suspect in a shooting at the police station. That's why I'm in the office at, good lord, 5:30 on a Sunday. Jake, there are two cops in ICU at UK, one of whom just happens to be Chief Walsh. A third died from her wounds not long ago. Jason's looking at murder one. I'm sorry, I thought you knew what had happened."

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Turn 21

A little after 2 a.m., a quarry on the north side of the city.

[Phase 33 - Magna-Flux]

Chase, in pain and very angry now, decides it's time to stop fooling around with these guys. _ STUPID! I may have just gotten the guy I'm trying to save KILLED!!! _ Chase hops up leaving his deck as he mentally guides it to swing around and pick up speed. Without the burden of his weight, it's velocity could be painful when applied on their bodies! "I thought I'd give you the chance to lose the weapons and give up, but NOOOO you had to shoot me you BEEEG MAN YOU!" Chase rants as his skateboard loops and circles its target under his magnetic command. The board slams into the German's back, knocking the wind from him as he hits the ground. (Nine points on a successful to-hit, and he is stunned!)

[Phase 26 - Julian]

Downed by the fast moving deck, the killer feels along the ground trying to find his gun.

[Phase 22 - Vinnie]

Gazing into the darkness of the quarry pit, the Indian finally steps back and shuts off his flashlight. With a disgusted grunt, he raises the mini-Uzi and aims at Magna-Flux. But the little machine gun jams immediately, and Vinnie's chance is ruined.

[Phase 18 - Magna-Flux]

"Have some more, ultra-goob." The deck whizzes around in a looping arc, then smacks into the German again. Julian can do nothing but absorb the blow as the deck knocks him another few feet along the ground, but more importantly, away from his gun.

[Phase 11 - Julian]

At the end of his skid, Julian flips up and over until he is again on his feet. He looks past Chase, then begins to move away from the fight as quickly as he can.

[Phase 7 - Vinnie]

With a nod to Magna-Flux, the huge Indian can be clearly heard to say, "Check." Then he too departs the scene as quickly as he can.

[Phase 3 - Magna-Flux]

As the adrenaline rages through him, Magna-Flux suddenly realizes he has no one left to fight. With the scorching heat of the gunshot wound still causing him pain, he takes advantage of the brief respite to surf down the quarry pit,

stopping short at the surface of the water. Though his concentration may be affected a bit by his wound, he is unable to detect any sort of the usual EM signs of a living person below the surface of the frigid water.

At the edge of the quarry, Magna-Flux hears Dominique's voice calling to him. "Chase? Are you all right?"

Tapping his foot on his deck, Chase tries to decide what he, Magna-Flux, should do next.

A bit earlier, at the Doubletree Suites, Richmond Road. Midair with the Phoenix, and at the front desk with Reflector, and dumpster diving with Sound and the Nightcrawler.

Josh parks the car in the outer rim of Clementine's lot. He rolls up his mask nose high and lights up a quick cigarette before exiting the car to rendezvous with Phoenix. He monitors Mark very carefully as he makes his way into the hotel in the hopes of uncovering Lydia.

"We'll keep this channel open. Reflector, you're on. Nightcrawler and I will get ready to make our way in through the back if you can't lure her into the open. Over and out." Josh says to all the assembled members. Listening closely to the rhythms of Carl's heartbeat, Sound is able to somewhat compensate for his teammate's invisibility as he waits for Mark to work his magic.

Again, the earth drops quickly away, loses all resolution except the pattern of the parking lot lights, and then those dissolve into the greater patterns of the city. Phoenix can't make out the Nightcrawler's gelatinous outlines in this light, but she sees the passenger door on Sound's car open and close, and shakes her head to herself. _Nothing personal, huh? Sink me if I'll ever understand men._

Well, she can only hope that whatever the problem really is, it won't get in the way tonight. _I guess we all have a lot to learn about working together._

For now, she gets as high as she can and still see the cars below her, keeping a sharp eye and ear out around her as well as below, in case she's not the only air traffic over the city this morning. Then she heads in the direction of the hotel.

First, a few moments of very high surveillance, checking the streets and lots around the hotel for any marked police cars or unusual levels of activity before she descends a bit for closer observation. The streets are busy at this hour on a Saturday night, people heading home from closing bars and clubs, or looking for further entertainment with more flexible hours. She watches the building, drifting silently in the darkness, for the full five minutes, then calls Reflector to let him know what she's seen -- he seems to have the lead in this little adventure, and heaven knows what she'd be interrupting with the others.

"Everything looks pretty quiet from up here," she reports. "I mean, there's a lot going on, but nothing that really looks out of place for this time of night. Where are you guys?"

"Just about there. Few more minutes."

"Okay, then, how do you want to play this? Once you three are in, I can move down a bit and start checking windows, but that's going to draw attention pretty fast." A fair number of them are still lighted, and most have the curtains drawn; she doesn't have a lot of hope that she'll find anything that way, to tell the truth, but doesn't have any better ideas. "Unless you guys want me to just hold off," she suggests reluctantly; she really doesn't like the idea of -- well, of doing *nothing* while the others walk into who-knows-what, but better that than she make the job harder. _Especially since going unnoticed isn't something I particularly excel at, these days._ "Maybe leave a channel open on the phone -- have to use up those free minutes somehow, right? -- and let me know that way if things aren't going well?"

Inside the lobby of the hotel, Reflector immediately becomes aware that it is a live music night. Finding Lydia isn't a problem; he spots her across the floor dancing with some linebacker-ish person to the sounds of a very cool jazz trio. "Never did get that dance with her New Year's Eve," he muses as he turns to the front desk.

The black suit commands a subconscious bit of respect as Reflector approaches the front desk and quickly flashes his wallet at the clerk. "Manager, please."

Behind the desk, the clerk, a young woman with brown hair and a "Welcome to Doubletree - I'm Michele" nametag on her brown blazer blinks as the wallet flashes by. "Um, that would be me, sir. Is there a problem?"

"I hope not, Michele. I'm with Lexington Ordnance Disposal. That's a big word for bomb squad."

"Oh my God."

"Easy, easy. I've got a squad of officers outside, but we don't want to panic your guests. I need your security chief to take me to a room in the name of a Lydia Morry," Mark helpfully points her out on the dance floor.

"Ok, ok." She picks up a phone. "Curtis? Get up here and take the officer to Room 502."

"Room 502, Michele?" Mark asks for the benefit of his audience. "That on the outside ring of rooms?"

"Yes, the southwest corner."

"Southwest corner, got it."

"Southwest corner, got it," Sound repeats. "So what do you think?"

"Easy climb. I c'n get there from here. See you at the party." The Nightcrawler finishes his answer by sliding out of the car in a column of goo. He quickly makes the bushes at the southwest corner, and as his coloration melds with that of the brickwork, he quickly slides up the side of the building as Sound watches.

"Colder'n my ex," the Nightcrawler grumbles as he easily gains the fifth floor in the brutal February night. But as he considers the continued merits of cursing

versus finding a way in, the Nightcrawler notices a figure in the darkened room. Then, something really strange happens. Without any warning, the layers of plasma that comprise his powers suddenly wick back into the Nightcrawler's skin, leaving him to helplessly dangle unprotected outside the window.

Phoenix's keen vision picks up on Nightcrawler's distress, and swoops down closer. "Hey, what are you..."

Listening in, Sound is terrified to hear Phoenix let out a shriek. Racing to the southwest corner, he looks up and sees Amanda hanging on to Carl's ankles. "What's happened? Why aren't you flying?"

The window opens at Nightcrawler's fingers, and a form appears there. Someone in a dark suit wearing a deep purple cowl that completely covers the head and neck. The figure leans out, an ice bucket in one hand, a lighter in the other. He speaks, and it seems to be a he, for his voice is timbered and rich.

"You have a choice. Drop or burn. I have a bucket of grain alcohol mixed with pieces of Styrofoam cups. Instant napalm. Decide," he orders, as his thumb flicks the lighter to life.

Behind the purple masked figure, the door can be heard to open. "Sir, hotel security is in the hallway demanding entry. Shall I admit them?"

"Kill whoever is out there and meet me at the appropriate place. I have to burn a little trash."

A little later, in the early morning hours just after 4 a.m. Jake at the Georgia State Police troop building, Decatur.

Jake is stunned by what is being said to him. Jake thinks to himself _Sure Jason is a jerk but I would never have thought him possible of this. There must be something strange going on that would set him off. Anyway this will be my chance to get that bastard and good._

"When did this happen? I hadn't heard anything before I left town yesterday."

"Saturday afternoon at the police station. They haven't a clue as to why he did it or where he is," Jack Fahey replied. "Again I'm sorry Jake. Look I've got to get going things are real chaotic around here right now. I'll talk to you later."

"Thanks Jack. I'll get that license renewal to you first thing Monday Morning."

Jake stands there kind of in a daze when he notices a deputy standing there waiting for him.

"You OK Mr. Faulkner?"

"Yeah, sure. Here." Jake shakes the fog out of his head and hands him the phone.

"We have a few more documents for you to sign off on and we still need your statement."

Jake finishes with all of the forms and documents and heads back to the hotel to get his things. By the time he gets there it is 6:30 a.m., too late to get any

sleep. Not that he could sleep now if he tried. He knows he has to get back and see what the situation is like back home.

Jake heads out about 7:00 a.m. after a quick breakfast. The whole way he wonders what is going on in Lexington. "I hope Josh doesn't do something stupid." Josh and Jason never got along too well. But it wasn't the same as the hatred that Jason and Jake shared. Jason was the same age as Jake and they had went through school at the same time. Josh, being a couple of years ahead of us, didn't have the same experiences with Jason.

Jake remembered his hours of detention and suspension on account of either a fight or one of Jason's pranks. Jason used to get Jake into all kinds of trouble by doing something and blaming it on Jake. And of course ole' man Harrison would never believe it wasn't Jake's fault, and it would be Jake serving detention and Jason getting away with it.

That would always infuriate Jake and of course a fight would ensue and more detention.

As the years went by the pranks grew in their intensity and degree. But the kicker was when Jason got Jake arrested for Assault and Battery while Jake was going to UK. Nearly got him kicked off the football team. That was the final straw. Luckily for Jason, he kept his distance after that. Jake has seen him but twice since Jake had to drop out of college. Both those times were memorable encounters too. The trip back to Lexington goes quickly and Jake arrives just after noon and immediately goes home. He turns on the local news and tries calling Josh to see what has happened while he was gone.

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Turn 22

[Phase 23 - Sound]

Shocked at the sudden turn of events Josh attempts to magnify the sound of the wind blowing as a force field underneath the two of them a story or so down. Seeing that this is successful (and that his powers haven't gone haywire as well) he also attempts to create another field in front of the Purple Mask to prevent him from coming through on his treat.

Quickly Sound relays a message quietly to each of their ears: "Let go."

He hopes that they won't notice the two story free-fall before they hit his sonically tuned wall of energy.

[Phase 20 - Phoenix]

No matter what you know about a person, or a relationship, there's always a first time. That time when you have to close your eyes and trust someone with something important. Emotions. Bank deposit. Sometimes, your life.

Above her, Phoenix hears the Nightcrawler say: "Ok. So I'm naked, dangling from a fifth story window in sub-freezing temperatures with a woman in spandex on my ankles. Fer cryin' out loud, do _all_ my dates gotta end this way?"

_Well hey, at least we found _something_. Even if we're not sure what it is.... Who keeps a bucket of homemade napalm in his hotel room... a trap? Save the thought for later, if there is a later. _

Despite Sound's assurance, the ground looks a lot farther away than it did a few moments ago. "I'll go first," she manages to whisper to the Nightcrawler. If nothing else, without her weight he'll be able to move more freely. And do what? Oh, never mind. Just let go.

She does.

Nothing but silence as she seems to hang frozen in freefall. She looks up at Nightcrawler, but he isn't looking down. Not with the Purple Mask offering him a permanent acne cure in the form of grain alcohol and crushed Styrofoam napalm. She wants to look down, but it's too soon. The fall has just started.

My powers aren't coming back. The thought of returning to what she was, before the fateful circumstance of New Year's Eve, horrifies her. The terror of losing the gift of flight. Of being normal.

That's when the gravity comes up to embrace her, to pull her to the bosom of Mother Earth at a speed just fast enough to crack her body in several fatal places. Ashes to ashes. Goodbye Josh, I'm sorry it didn't work out.

So cold tonight. It is February after all.

I'm going to miss the single biggest payday of my life. I can just hear the guys in the band. "So, Amanda fell out a window?" "Yeah, I always thought she was flighty, hur hur." "Guess she thought so too."

Why can't I scream now?

Impact.

Mom!

She slows and tumbles to a stop, near Sound's feet, and looks up to where she has fallen from, her eyes wild from the play of emotions.

[Phase 20 delayed from 22 - the Nightcrawler]

As he lets go of the sill, the Purple Mask's lighter flaring in the darkness and touching the jelly-like contents of the ice bucket, the Nightcrawler yells "REFLECTOR! He's killin' our powers, and you got incoming!" in his best arena-voice.

The drop begins, with the flaming mess pouring after him. The Nightcrawler thinks he hears two shots, muffled sneezes of an assassin's gun, from way across the room. "Oh no. If Reflector's powers are toast..."

But he had other thoughts to consider on the way down, the prospect of not seeing his precious daughters again. Or worse, seeing them after a few ounces of fiery doom had eaten his face to the bone...how could he expose them to such a horror?

The mass of napalm burned bright just inches above the Nightcrawler's face. They fell together, the flames two inches from the ripple of his jaw, his mouth, his nose. Then it spread out, a fiery bird of prey making its predator strike, spreading its wings before the dive.

Flames hung in midair, as the Nightcrawler fell away, tumbling, buffeted by low howls of wind and coming to a stop at Amanda's feet. And the fire consumed itself, and was gone.

[Phase 8 - Sound]

Realizing that Mark is potentially in just as much danger, Sound pages him with the familiar "2000" hoping that the Reflector will respond before anything worse can happen. "You two all right?" He then turned his attention to the fifth-floor window and listened. He could hear sounds of a scuffle escalating into a full-blown fight.

[Phase 7 - the Nightcrawler]

With a full body flex, the glorpig plasma seeped from the Nightcrawler's skin, warming him in the cold February night. "I'm gonna kick your ass, nancy-boy, and I'm gonna shove that ice bucket right..." But Sound and Phoenix didn't catch the last part of the Nightcrawler's 'promise', for he was slingshotting himself through a window adjacent to the Purple Mask's room on the perpendicular corner.

Definitely a different room, the Nightcrawler noted, as a woman in a red silk blouse and black skirt jumped from a chair across from a television. The lights were on, as opposed to the darkness of the Purple Mask's room. "Where's the way out?" the Nightcrawler roared like an angry typhoon. She pointed to a door, and

without another word he pulled it open, right into the middle of the Reflector ducking an older man swinging a Ruger Mk4 pistol like a club. Reflector stuck his hand into the older man's face. "You've got to get Lydia before she gets away! Blonde hair, red strapless dress, downstairs."

"Where's th' Mask?"

"I've been a little busy!" Reflector replied as the older man grabbed his arm and suddenly flipped him hard onto his back. Beyond the two, the Nightcrawler could see a third man, dressed in a hotel blazer, clutching at a bleeding wound at his stomach while bellowing into a cellphone.

"Dammit, where is he?"

[Phase 5 - Phoenix]

With a stretch, the flames ignited and the wings spread. Phoenix roared in all her glory. Then, she reached out and grabbed Sound, and buzzed him to the front of the hotel.

"Hey, what?" he started.

"Get Lydia. Quick, Sound! She's liable to bolt and she's our only chance of finding Jason."

"Where...would you believe our luck?" Sound pointed, and Phoenix saw Lydia walking across the parking lot. She flew over to Lydia so fast she nearly popped Sound's arm out of socket. Lydia stopped fast as the flames of Phoenix billowed against the frozen night.

"Where is he?" Phoenix screamed.

"Jesus! Who..."

"Jason. The man you took here to the club. Where is he?" Sound asked. "I can't control her, Lydia. If you don't want third degree burns..."

"Hey, fine. You've got nothing on me, anyway. But you're too late. He was taken to the Georgetown Road quarry some time ago. He did his work just fine for us. Not that you'll ever prove it."

"Stuff it. Sound, I'm going there now. You can catch up." Phoenix blasted into the sky, turned north, and flashed quickly from sight.

Sound looked at Lydia, who was trying to talk to him, and smiled. "Dampening field, Lydia. Afraid you can't tell me to let you go and make me obey," he grinned. She was not amused.

Chase looks at Dominique, a little more than irritated. Sure, doing the good deed for the day seems like the right thing to do, but now, with nothing to show for it than a flesh wound, things seem a bit more grey. Who were those guys? Why were they going to kill this other guy? And what is his relationship to Dominique? He looks at his hand, still levitating the first gun he disarmed from the German. _This may be my only clue, but I'm going to need to find someone to run this guy's prints._

He floats in Dominique's direction, "I'm fine. Lost our man, so clearly we saved his life. You should probably call me Magna-Flux while I'm powered up... you never know who's watching."

Looking around one last time, he steps off his deck on his good leg. The deck floats up to his back, where his e/m bio-adherence clings to it. "Let's drive around the area for a while, maybe he's hurt and wandering."

He starts to walk toward the car, trying to limp as little as possible. "So tell me again why this is so important to you or Mr. Book, cause either I didn't catch that or it wasn't said. Be straight with me here, because if I'm going to put my life on the line, I deserve to hear it all, not some evasive slag, but the truth. Why did this matter to us?"

"Mr Book says you can help me learn about this ability I have. I don't know what I can do, but Mr Book says I can do...things...like you do. Like other people in the news." She continues, "I was in a car accident, in New York. I was injured and unconscious for a long time. When I awoke, Mr Book was there, and we weren't in a hospital, but a truck. He asked me if I could do powered things, but I couldn't. He said if I don't remember who I am, then none of us will know why we've become what we are. I don't know what that means, Ch-Magna-Flux."

He considered this for a moment. _Teach her? Who's gonna teach me and get my back? Old Book didn't work that part out, did he?_

"Chase! Look!" Dominique points to the sky. Chase looks after her, sees the point of light become brighter and brighter, until it comes sweeping down in front of them. In a nebula of flames, Phoenix looks at Chase, then at Dominique. "Um, hi." Chase and Dominique relax, and so does Phoenix, the empathy described by Mr Book subconsciously telling the three they are all on the same side. "Seen a guy named Jason around?"

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Turn 23

Georgetown Road Quarry, early February 6th. A cold Sunday morning as Phoenix arrives.

"Seen a guy named Jason around?" asks Phoenix.

Chase, finding no end to how odd this night has been...wings, she has wings!!!_, begins his own hyperactive rant, "not that I mean to unload OUR problems on YOU, but the guy who was just shooting at me, didn't give me his name. Soooo...unless he's a big Indian or a big German guy or a guy who's in mega-trouble with the wrong side of the law and not even thankful enough to stick around when we just saved his life... um, no. By the way, who are you and," stopping to turn and face Dominique, Chase whispers, "do you have any other memories of this morning that might lessen the surprise factor a notch?"

She manages to take a deep breath and calm herself down just a tad. She also gets an inkling that the guy is younger than she'd thought at first glance. Time to start thinking again, not just reacting out of anger and fear. _Here I thought that fear of falling wasn't going to be something I worried about ever again...._

"My name is Phoenix. He got away? Did you see where he went? We have to find him, this guy might be psycho," she explains in an urgent tone. "He shot some cops in town earlier tonight."

Chase looks back to Phoenix, "I still don't know what he looks like, all we've seen are 2 hitmen out to kill some guy. Do you have a picture or a description?"

"Damn her... that must have been him, the one they were going to kill," Phoenix says, mostly to herself. She rattles off the description given out on the radio earlier in this apparently endless night. "Look, I'm sorry, but introductions, explanations are going to have to wait a bit. If you two could look around on the ground and see if he left a trail or anything, I'll see if I can spot him from the air. If you find him, give a holler and remember he might be dangerous." She takes wing without waiting for a response, sparing a thought for her comrades back at the hotel, hoping that they're all right. For both his own sake and everyone else's, though, they need to try to find Jason as fast as possible.

Flying a low, spiraling search pattern, her eyes piercing every shadow, she contemplates Lydia's words. It seems that perhaps Sound's hypothesis wasn't just wishful thinking, that maybe Lydia had coerced Jason into his senseless rampage. And then they were going to kill him. Even if he were still alive, after what he'd done his life would be ruined. The sheer coldness of the act infuriated her. And what had it gained... them? Yes, them. As Book had prophesied, the enemy had started to organize.

Chase stares at Phoenix as she flies off faster than he's ever seen anyone move. _Ultra-hot babe!_he thinks. "Let's go," he says to Dominique.

They get into the car and drive around looking for Jason. As they search more questions come to mind. Who is this Jason guy? If they find him, how was he

suppose to "give a holler" to Phoenix? Sure, THAT'll be listed in the phonebook. He suddenly stops the car as the realization hits him and turns to Dominique, "We just saved a COP-KILLER!?" Chase pulls the goggles off his face and rubs his eyes. _And "I" have to teach her...Wait a moment, that's it!_

"Dominique, you say you have other powers, like your future memories. Maybe they're all psychic in nature, I don't know. But if we are all looking for this guy, you might "remember" if we found him and where. Kinda like tracking, but in reverse. Can you try that? We might search around for hours and never find anything otherwise."

"I can try," Dominique replies. In the dim blue of the Aerostar's dash lighting, Chase sees Dominique almost as an outline, a trick of the light. She has the nicest cheekbones he's ever seen. "Can we drive back to the edge of the quarry, the last place you saw him?"

"Absolutely...I mean, sure, no problem." _Dude! Stop being an ultra-goob! You're goin' to start drooling in a minute._ Chase reprimands himself. With a turn of the wheel, he brings them back to their original parking space, and jumps out of the minivan. Dominique follows behind him, until they reach the edge of the deep quarry pit.

"Ok. I think I can do this. Tell me if this works," Dominique asks, her short bangs drifting a bit in the chill night air. Chase regards her again, telling himself it's just in the interest of finding out what's happened. "I'm trying to remember what just occurred here, right?"

"Yeah, if you can. If not that's..."

Chase didn't get to finish. The big Indian was standing in front of him, a mini-Uzi raised. The stubby barrel of the automatic seemed to find Chase's right eye. In a split second, Chase hit the ground, at the Indian's feet, and realized either he or Dominique would get shot if he didn't do something fast. He did, lunging forward, a gunmetal grey shiver of power flashing over his body.

But his lunge gathered him only air, as he passed through the Indian's legs and began heading down the slope of the quarry pit!

With a snap, he brought himself into the air, his deck spinning and diving to Chase's feet. Finds his balance in a nano-second. Aims himself back uphill, just in time to see the man Phoenix described come tumbling past him, noiselessly bouncing down the slope, his hands seemingly bound behind his back; he enters the dark water with a silent splash.

"Magna-Flux? Are you all right?" Dominique calls to him. "Did it work?"

Chase glided back up the sloping pit. "What did you do?"

"I did what you asked. I tried to remember."

"Didn't you see what happened?"

"I had my eyes closed." Dominique replied.

"You didn't see that big Indian pop out of nowhere ready to give me a glaucoma test with an Uzi?"

"I'm sorry, Chase. I can try again."

"Hold up," he answered. "Let me see if I can get Phoenix's attention." Chase looked toward the fiery aura in the skies, and waved. "Not like she can see me from up..."

Phoenix landed next to him almost a second later. "Find something?"

"You got good eyes."

"I take a beta carotene supplement."

"Right," Chase replied. "Check this out, and don't freak. Dominique?"

30 seconds and one fireball later, Phoenix muttered "Sorry. How did you do that?"

"I just thought about remembering what happened here, and making it easy for you two to see it."

Phoenix shook her head. _Just thought about it._ "Can you do it again? I want to go up high and maybe your...power will let me see where Jason may have climbed out of the pit."

"Ok." But after a few repeats of the shared vision power, and with Chase helping by rapidly skimming the quarry pit while Phoenix observed from on high, no trace of Jason could be found after his fall into the water.

"Maybe it's got a range. Dominique, could you..." Chase began to ask. Dominique held her head with both hands. "Um, maybe not."

"Feel dizzy. I have to sit down," she replied as Phoenix helped her walk back to the Aerostar.

"I'm sorry, didn't catch your pseudonym?" Phoenix asked Chase.

"Oh. Magna-Flux. She gonna be all right?"

Dominique answered him. "Fine, just need to rest. Got a bit winded all of a sudden."

"Magna-Flux, do you think you could help my friends and I find out what happened to Jason? You seem to be the last person to see him before his fall." Phoenix asked.

"I suppose so," he answered. Phoenix reached behind her, producing a small cellphone. Chase can hear a man's voice bellow, "Phoenix, what's going on?!?"

"We found out Jason was taken here, all right. We're coming back in town. Give us about 20 minutes or so."

"Good to hear," the voice says with a sigh of relief. "Remember the channel's open if your situation changes. Wait, who's we?"

"Thanks, Sound. I've met a couple of new...friends."

"Ok. I'm going to check on the Nightcrawler."

Chaos ensues. The brightly-lit hallway of the Doubletree Suites, outside of the Purple Mask's room.

As the gunman pounds the gun butt into Reflector's head while he's pinned to the ground, the Nightcrawler suddenly stretches his viscous sinews into view.

[Phase 24 - the Nightcrawler]

Snapping a pseudopod out like a whip, the mass of plasma cracks into the gunman, an older fellow with the prominent features of what we would call Prussian nobility a century ago. His surprise attack works perfectly, but perhaps a little too energetically, as he crashes through the wall into the room behind him, clogged in a massive cocoon of ick. (Not much SR, those walls. Ouch.)

"Bastard. Reflector? Hey, amigo," Nightcrawler leans down to check on him. He's seen the results of enough hockey collisions to recognize when someone's head is busted open pretty good. The Nightcrawler then feels that same feeling of shutdown, as his plasma once again wicks back into his skin, leaving him naked and vulnerable.

"Guess you didn't get away yet," the Nightcrawler asked as the Purple Mask emerged from the room. He was shorter than the Nightcrawler, maybe close to Sound's height. And there was the matter of the chopped down Winchester '97 he was aiming.

[Phase 19 - the Purple Mask]

"Turn and walk down the hallway to the stairs now," the voice came from the Mask, rich and sonorous, ordering the Nightcrawler to act.

"If I don't?"

"He dies, then you." Pointing to Reflector with the barrel of the shotgun.

"You'll shoot anyway."

"No, I won't."

Hombre's right. No need to shoot if I walk away. He wants to run. I can still get him. Hands raised in spite of his immodest lack of attire, the Nightcrawler complies, walking away and hoping his powers would kick back on soon.

"I also said turn around," snapped the Mask. "Now or I shoot."

"Ok, ok." Turning around, he saw the door to the room from which he'd entered the floor was still open. He dove through, fully expecting the rip-roar of the shotgun to escort him through. Silence, instead, and the redhaired occupant still in the room watching him return. "Please call 911, senorita," the Nightcrawler asked. She nodded and reached for the phone.

Carl heard his name being called from outside. He went to his entry window after grabbing a throw pillow, and saw Sound outside...

(Just before Nightcrawler appears at the window.)

Sound can't tell if it's his vision is obfuscated by the persistent playback on his pupils of his airborne embrace of Amanda or if it's the wash of high-animosity Book said they would feel in the presence of a corrupt powered but Lydia just doesn't impress him. 'Course if he wasn't keeping her silenced that all might change. Unfortunately, the few things he has heard her say _are_ influencing him...

ooO_"Hey, fine. You've got nothing on me, anyway. But you're too late. He was taken to the Georgetown Road quarry some time ago. He did his work just fine for us. Not that you'll ever prove it."_Ooo

Damn it she was right - what could they pin on her? Conspiracy? Murder? but with what evidence? Sound sighed knowing that she had manipulated Jason into committing the grizzly murders! With as little as seductive words rolling of her full lips she all but murdered two people and ruined Jason's life at the very least...assuming they can find him.

Carl finally appeared at the window, but without his layer of slime. The Purple Mask must still be up there, somewhere. He motioned to Carl to wait, and turned back to Lydia who he still held firmly by the wrist. "I might not have anything on you right now but I'm patient" and with that he claps his hands producing a coherent bolt of sound aimed for Lydia's delicate head. He catches her as she falls to the ground unconscious and stuffs her in the Volvo's trunk.

"Get up here! Reflector's hurt, an' the Mask is runnin' around with a shotgun."

Sound nodded and set off at a run for the lobby. He quickly found the nearest staircase and raced up the five flights of stairs; almost as an afterthought, he realized he wasn't even breathing hard.

In the corridor, he saw Reflector and another man laying on the carpet. The other man, obviously a hotel employee, had a celphone in his hand. Outside the open room, Sound could see the Nightcrawler stalking toward him, a towel now substituting for the pillow. As he approached, the Nightcrawler's trademark slime began flowing over his skin again.

"He's gettin' away! C'mon." Nightcrawler ran into the hallway again, Sound following him. The hotel security man on the floor pointed into the Mask's room.

"In there...hack coff...ran in there," the man pointed. Nightcrawler and Sound carefully approached the door. Then, with a nod, the Nightcrawler flowed fast into the room as Sound fired a bolt of energy past him as a covering shot. There was no blast of gunfire in reply.

"Damn, he went out the window, look!" Sound ran to the open window as the Nightcrawler began dismantling possible hiding places.

"Cops're comin'." Nightcrawler replied as he heard the sirens getting closer. "We gotta go now."

"Damn it! Ok, let's get Reflector and move."

"No."

"What?"

"He's got to go to th' hospital. I think he's got a concussion. We move him, we might kill him."

Sound pounded the windowsill, looking out into the dark February night. "We can't just leave without knowing where he's going."

"Ain't plannin' to leave. I just had an idea..."

Ten minutes later, the hallway filled with police, paramedics, and a couple of SORTies. One officer was questioning the redhead whose room was next to the fracas, but between her Scandinavian accent and the young patrolman's confusion, she wasn't very helpful. Thanking her, the young cop turned to one of the paramedics as the first man was being moved onto a stretcher and out of the hotel.

"Hey, Jennifer, they gonna make it?"

Jennifer Mulligan nodded at the officer. "The one guy took a small caliber bullet in the torso, but I think it missed the kidneys. The other guy's got a bad concussion; his pupils don't look too good. We'll get them over to Saint Joe's eight now."

"You're getting all the action tonight."

"What I live for, Blue." Grabbing the second stretcher, the paramedic so recently involved with the police shooting hustled to the elevator and turned the express key.

At the room where the young lady with the newly expanded window was staying, the redhead opened the door to the bathroom and pulled the shower curtain. Her voice tinged with the rolling diction of the Scandinavian states, she said "the police are going now."

Sound and the Nightcrawler emerged, the latter from under the water in the large whirlpool tub. Sound thanked the woman for her help.

"My name is Isolde. I am from Finland," she said.

"Nice to meet ya. Um, I'm Sound, and the wet mass is the Nightcrawler."

She walked over to the edge of the tub as the Nightcrawler shook off some water. "Isolde, right?"

"Yes, that is right. Tell me, are all American men so...what is the word...freakish as you?"

"Just the lucky ones," the Nightcrawler growled lightly.

"Oh, so it is very rare?"

"I dunno. Don't know anyone else whose power is turning into Jell-O."

"You are funny. Can you stay and help me with the...Jacuzzi?"

Now, the Nightcrawler wasn't one to be left speechless, having mastered trash talk at an early age and honed it on several levels of professional hockey. But all he could reply to the very attractive Isolde was a flustered um noise before

Sound dragged him out to the window.

"Come on, help me down. Phoenix will be here soon, and she's got a lead on...the shooter."

"Yeah, yeah, ok." He looked back at Isolde, as she approached them while Sound stepped out onto the ledge.

"I figure you out. You are Mr Fantastic, like him?"

"Yeah...yes. Mr Fantastic. That's me."

"I have to leave in the morning. I come back soon. Goodnight Mr Fantastic."

From outside the window, Sound mimicked "goodbye Mr Fantastic." The Nightcrawler said his flustered goodbyes, and grabbing Sound with a little extra strength around the waist, lowered them to the ground.

"Kinda hard to breath, Crawler."

"Uh huh. You keep complainin' an' I'll forget that truce we called. Madre de Dios my luck stinks out loud."

Phoenix arrived a few minutes later, followed by Magna-Flux and Dominique. With introductions quickly made, the group quickly decided to adjourn back to the empty Commonwealth Stadium to discuss the night's events, with a fast detour to check on Reflector. While they waited outside the hospital, Sound's cellphone beeped. It was Jake, calling on the road.

"Jake, get here fast," Sound said. "It's been a heck of a night."

[Back to the turns page.](#)

Turn 24

[At a rest stop just north of Atlanta.]

Jake feels a bit bewildered as he puts away his cellphone. He quickly starts his bike up and gets back on the interstate. Knowing he still has at least a five-hour drive ahead of him Jake pours on the throttle. As he splits the wind at 80 mph he can't help but to think back to his brief conversation with Josh.

Josh didn't elaborate much on what was going on back home. He just said to hurry back home and that they had had some action last night. Something about Jason being set up and an attempt on his life. Bewildered doesn't really cover it, more like a cross between appalled and astonished. No matter the trouble that had transpired between Jason and Jake he knew that Jason wasn't capable of the crimes he was accused of.

The one thing that Jason and Jake did see eye-to-eye on was law enforcement. That was probably another thing that drove the feud between the two of them. With both going to UK taking the same classes. Jake was always a better student than Jason was and he was sure Uncle Jim never let Jason forget it. That was just his style.

After Jake left school, Jason went on to get his degree and then attended the Police Academy. Jake never really followed his career too much after that. He pained him too much to see Jason succeed at what Jake had always wanted to do. It was a good thing that Jason didn't come around after Jake dropped out. Jason must have figured he had won and didn't bother Jake after that. Jake still can't get over the fact that Jason made it as a SORTie. To a policeman that's like getting into the Green Berets.

To top that off he had heard the other day Mike Albert made detective after being a patrolman just two years. Mike and Jake went to school together, they had been friends since grade school and went to UK together. Mike was good but Jake was better. Actually Jake's instructors said he had more natural talent than any student they had seen before. Jake couldn't help but dwell on those facts and wonder what could have been. It just wasn't right and Jake was going to do something about it when he got back to Lexington. Things were going to change in a big way.

Jake was tired of other people dictating his life. He loves his brother and at times Josh still needs someone looking out for him. But maybe it was time Jake got to do what he wanted to do for a change. He was going to start doing what was right for Jake for once.

[Road side diner 10 miles north of the Kentucky state line.]

Jake heads back to his bike after a filling but not necessarily satisfying meal. As his stomach rumbles and turns Jake chides himself for stopping at another greasy spoon diner. As many times as he's done it you would have thought he would have learned by now. He just shakes his head at his amusement.

He is suddenly reminded of his dad and his cast iron stomach.

Jake recalls how he could eat anything and it wouldn't faze him one bit. Jake remembered when he was old enough his dad let him sit in with the guys on poker night. That was the time he let him smoke a cigar. Jake had never been that sick before and has been since.

He just laughed, "Don't worry you'll get the hang of it son." Jake never tried another one. But they never seemed to bother Dad a bit though. It seems ironic that it was black lung that finally took him down. He always seemed so strong to Jake. Like nothing could stop him. Nothing could bring him down. He always bounced back except this time.

Jake reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his cellphone. Dials up a number and waits as it rings.

"Hello"

Jake hears his mother voice on the other end and he just feels a little bit better. "Hi Mom."

"Jake are you back in town already?"

"No, only about two hours away though. I just wanted to call and see how dad was doing."

"No change since you were here last. The doctor has been in a couple of times but he didn't give any indication that there was anything different to report."

"Have you heard from Josh any?"

"Haven't heard from him since he got out of the hospital. Why?"

"Just wondering. Mom..." Jake pauses a moment.

"Jake, what is it?"

"I've just been doing a lot of thinking since I've been gone. I need to talk to you when I get back. But I need to get with Josh first."

"Jake what's wrong?"

"Nothings wrong Mom. I've just come to some realizations and there's going to be some changes in my life. I'll talk to you this evening. Give dad my love. Bye."

Jake put the cellphone back in his pocket and pulled on his helmet. In minutes he was back on the road home again.

"Well, here we are again." Phoenix's tone is a little bleak. "Who wants to go first?" She glances around the somewhat dispirited group. Not exactly a night of triumph, to say the least, and she doesn't feel like her report is going to help that much. "These two," she nods to Magna-Flux and Dominique, "managed to get there before they could shoot Jason, but we haven't been able to find him. All we know is that he went into the water at some point, no trace after that. I think maybe we could all take another look around there and see if we can find

anything. If not," she takes a breath, "it might be time for an anonymous call to the police. Maybe they can track him down -- if we want them to find him," she adds, "since it seems like what happened might not have been his idea. On the other hand," her glance flicks toward Sound, then down, "there's a chance he... didn't get out." She doesn't want to say it, but the possibility has to be faced.

Mask rolled up to the nose and cigarette in place, Sound says "Jake is quite the detective in his own right. He might be able to find him once he gets back from handling Dodge in Georgia. I'd like him to have a shot before we turn to the blue bells." Sound glances quickly at the Nightcrawler half expecting his jaw to drop to the floor like some Warner Brother cartoon.

Sound continued, "Besides they don't know about the hit on his life so they should still be looking for him." Knowing that Jason always turns up like a bad penny, not believing he could be dead.

Trying not to acknowledge that grim possibility Sound turns to Phoenix. "We should all go the quarry and see what our combined efforts can turn up." "Our heightened senses should work under the water as well -- you feel up to some night-swimming? Implying with his rakish smile that it would be more intriguing under better circumstances in the hopes to brighten her mood.

"What happened with the creepy guy and Lydia at the hotel?"

"Long story short -- 'Crawler and I lost him back at the hotel...but I've got Lydia in the trunk. She might be able to give us some more leads...if we can find a way around her powers..."

The fact that she's been awake for going on 30 rather stressful hours puts a little lag into her reaction time. And her mood right now is impervious to brightening. Failure of the night's primary objective, the Mask's escape, and a second member of the team in the hospital in as many days. Now this.

"You have her... *in the trunk*?? Um, I'm sure you know that kidnapping is a *felony*!?" Her tone is simply astonished.

"I know...but what else could we do? Let her escape? -- she pulled a month long vanishing act on her company that went unnoticed according to Reflector. It was a total fluke that we found her at all tonight. If she went to ground we wouldn't be able to find her again. She was right when she should we can't pin anything on her but maybe if we find Jason we can get some evidence to lock her up."

Nightcrawler crossed his arms, vaguely amused that someone else was on the hot spot for a change. He came to Sound's aid almost as an afterthought. "No worse'n dumpin' Agent Orange, I'm bettin'. Not to mention clockin' ...Reflector like that. Hey we ok talkin' free?" he added, referring to Magna-Flux and his companion, who Nightcrawler suddenly realized was definitely not a kid. "No offense."

"Within reason," Phoenix replies to the Nightcrawler's query. "Though I'd be interested to know how the two of you ended up in the middle of all of this..." Turning her attention back to the matter at hand, she shakes her head with a gesture indicative of giving up, her tone still somewhat exasperated. "You guys are insane, I hope you know that."

With a sticky chuckle and inside glance at Sound, Nightcrawler responded, "It's

what makes us so popular overseas. Since Lydia ain't goin' nowhere, maybe we could try pushin' the pieces together. We know the Mask can kill our powers. We know he was hangin' out in Lydia's room, mixin' napalm ta kill the hours. We know he hadda Teutonic butler, who ain't too shy about cappin' bellboys. I managed ta snag his lighter he left behind. An' we know he c'n escape out fifth floor windows, flyin' or otherwise. 'Sides the chica in the trunk," with a hasty glance at the other two young powereds, "we got any other leads ta look at?"

Magna-Flux, getting tired of being treated like a kid, and still a little freaked by the multiple weirdness of the night, said "Look, I wouldn't even be involved, but this weird little guy was in my house, cooking me dinner, acting like he knew me, he even called me Magna-Flux before I had thought of it as a good idea. He called himself Book. He said she," motioning to Dominique, "would come to me and needed my help to save a man's life. I had no idea he'd killed cops though. Her story, well that's a little more complicated and I'm still ultra-lost in those details." Sitting down cross-legged on his hovering skateboard, he maneuvers himself away from Sound's drift of smoke.

"I'm not personally involved or anything, but I want to help. And it's not like I'm undercompetent. And if anyone knows anyone who can run prints, I do have this..." Chase holds out the gun that he magnetically stole from the German. "This belongs to the guy who was going to kill Jason. If they haven't finished the job, chances are they keep after him until the job is done. If we can track him down, maybe we can get some more info."

"I can find out about the prints, but it'll mean going to the cops" Josh says as he looks to Nightcrawler. It's very visible from his posture and hand on his chin that he's trying to find other options that might appeal to his paranoid companion.

"Maybe Glassjack can get information from the prints faster and with less noise with his connections tho'." Nightcrawler replied.

"So we have the gun of one of the hitmen, a possible search site for Jason, and ... Lydia to interrogate. If Jason is dead at the bottom of the quarry I want to know...Phoenix and I should head over there to make sure. 'Crawler can you fill Magna-Flux in on what's going on while we're gone?--he's already helped us a lot and he deserves to know what he's in for. Maybe you can get King George or his batman to come out for the gun?

He looks around hopefully for agreement...

"I suppose there's a certain logic there," Phoenix agrees reluctantly. "Make sure she's okay in there, though? You're probably the only one who can be around her safely. If GlassJack can't make it out I can always run it over to his place later this morning, that won't take long."

Referring to Sound's trunk, the Nightcrawler said, "I don't think she's seen me yet. She goes Miranda on us, maybe we c'n see if my ugly mug can clear her conscience. Nightcrawler added, "...uh, I may need ta borrow a phone to ring up Jeeves."

Sound tosses Nightcrawler his cell phone jokingly saying "You left this outside the hotel. Giving yourself an excuse to go back?" He tunes his hearing to the trunk to make sure that Lydia is breathing well. That being the case he deadens the sound around the trunk again making Lydia effectively mute and deaf.

"She's fine but most likely conscious. I should take her out...I think I have some rope or bungies and old blankets in the trunk as well. Since I'm not going to be around we'll need to gag her and tie her...unless you want to do the honors of keeping her in place?" he says to 'Crawler recalling some of the hampering effects his goo can have. "We need to figure out how to question her without her manipulating us...any suggestions?"

"Anyone have a pad of paper and a pen?" Phoenix inquires. _This is pointless,_ she thinks privately. _She has no reason to answer our questions, there's nothing we can do to her._ She too well remembers the woman's mocking smile in the parking lot, knowing her own invulnerability. It made her mad all over again.

"I should have some pens and paper in the glove compartment," says Sound, business-like.

Referring to Sound's trunk, the Nightcrawler said, "Let's keep her under wraps a little longer. I don't think she's seen me yet. She goes Miranda on us, we c'n see if my ugly mug can clear her conscience." Carl started with a sudden thought. "Hey, she comes around while yer gone...I c'n goo her up, but you sure you don't wanna babysit instead?"

Sound gives 'Crawler the keys as he says "I have to find out about Jason." The Nightcrawler nods in silent understanding.

"Right. I suppose we can figure out what to do with Lydia when we get back," she sighs, retracting her wings as she heads for the car, and keeping her misgivings to herself.

As they drive to the quarry Josh can't help but remember when they were in the car together earlier...recalling the quick caress of her hand on his he shifts into a higher gear, respecting her silence for the time being as she quietly rests her eyes. 'Sketches of Spain' rests half ejected out of the tape deck.

Slouched down in the seat with her knees braced against the dashboard, Phoenix is suffering from a bit of that same deja vu, wishing she wasn't so tired.

"So, what do you think is going on?" she asks eventually, opening her eyes. "Sorry if I snapped, earlier."

"Between us?" he asks himself but trying to keep his focus as best he can to the matter at hand he answers after a lengthy pause during which he starts to assimilate the night's events, "Book said that the 'evil' powereds were going to begin banding together, right? It looks like it's already happened. They've got a decided advantage on us 'angels' since they had Jason in their thrall...who knows what they found out about the SORTies? Their tactics? Weaknesses? Names? Addresses? What's worse is they seemed prepared for US -- why else would the Purple Mask be waiting near the windows with NAPALM?

"I know... that really worries me. I can't fathom what his little rampage was supposed to accomplish, though. And why kill him? Seems like he could be pretty useful on the inside. I don't know, though. Maybe if we could just find him and talk to him it would all make sense, but...." She slouches down further, out of sight, as another car passes on the road. Not good to get spotted in her 'work' clothes like this. "I don't know," she

repeats.

"Maybe her control has some limits?" he thinks aloud momentarily focusing on maintaining the field of silence around the trunk. He concurs with her reasoning about Jason, "Once we find him it'll all be better -- It has to be." The weight of binding family ties deepens his baritone voice. He's blaming himself for Jason's actions. "And you had every right to be snappish. I probably would've given 'Crawler hell if he had done the same thing," he says, beginning to second guess himself, adding an air of self-doubt to the troubling tones in his voice. "I just didn't see any other options...she can't go free not after what she's done...it's just not fair. Jason might be trouble but he doesn't deserve what they did to his life."

"At the very least, he deserves a chance to tell his side. Which he won't get if SORT finds him, I don't think. As for Lydia...." She sighs. Wonders what's going through the woman's mind, there in the dark behind them. "I can certainly see why it seemed like the only thing to do. I just don't know what we're going to do with her now. Maybe she can be bribed? If there was some way to prove her involvement in the shooting... but I don't think a judge is going to buy 'She told me to and I had to do it.' Even if there was proof that she *could* do it, how to prove that she *did*?" she wonders out loud.

"Maybe we could let her go and follow her, see what she does? And speaking of, did you and our Nightcrawler get things sorted out?" The previous level of tension certainly seemed to have disappeared.

"We had...a talk. The "kidnapping" may have even helped matters even" he ALMOST laughs. "I was thinking he could tail her too...hopefully she'll lead us to the Mask."

"There's a chance. Next time at least we'll know more about what we're up against... oh, and thanks -- at the hotel. I guess we're even now." She smiles a little.

"Don't mention it, really." the thought of losing Amanda before they've begun chills him to the bone. "It's good to see you smile again." The thoughts of mortality running through his head causes Josh to recall that he'll be one year closer to the grave on Tuesday. "If you give me one of those on Tuesday you'll be off the hook as far as Birthday presents are concerned."

"Done," is her prompt reply. "Although I *was* rather hoping we could have dinner," she continues with mock gravity. Despite the day's extended insanity, she finds that her downcast mood can't entirely withstand prolonged exposure.

"Since besides it being your birthday, if it wasn't for you I'd be mooching off my parents right now while I looked for a job," she explains with a real grin this time. "And... I thought it might be nice to talk without anything in the neighborhood exploding."

"Amen to that! and you're on...your place or mine?" he says with a light chuckle. Her lighter mood is immediately infectious just seconds ago the world was falling apart but now...Josh can hear his lips purse into a grin as he thinks to himself in amused tones _Damn! If I had known she would be so accommodating I would have asked for an even better present._

"Well, I hadn't actually thought that far ahead," she admits, pleased by the reaction. "But it would hardly be fair to make you work on your birthday, and in

either case, unless you've got a secret talent for cooking, 'out' might be the best option. I don't think I have two matching plates." Not to mention the fact that the kitchen table is three inches deep in scribbled-on staff paper at the moment, of course.

The trees they're passing look familiar; the quarry looms ahead.

"Fair enough. My palate can enjoy pretty much anything. You name the place." His tones are cheerful but beginning to become matter-of-fact in inflection as he pulls the car to a stop at the quarry.

The two step out of the car and stare toward the proverbial abyss that Jason may be in...Phoenix stretches her wings wide before flying above the quarry. Based on the panorama etched into his memory Sound can only fathom that it must be hell for her to have to conceal them. She looks so beautiful ...hanging like a jewel in the night sky like that...he swears he can hear the music of the sphere when he sees her like that.

He carefully slides down the side the hill and takes up position near the water's edge.

A construction site, rebuilding a convenience store/gas station, Georgetown Road.

Snapping shut a cellphone, Vinnie goes to the trunk and pops it open. "The man says it's worth five more notes, do it his way. Not like we haven't done this before."

Julian stood leaning against the front of the car. Safely behind the construction of the convenience store, he stared into the field behind, eyes glaring and fixed on a point in the horizon.

"Way I see it," Vinnie continued, the big Indian's arms laden with deadly gear, "we win no matter what happens. Been paid already for dropping that guy in the quarry. This works out, it's a bonus."

There was a sound, a high whine, approaching motorcycle engine from the pitch. Julian didn't look, but Vinnie did, watching the single eye of halogen grow wider as it came closer.

"Little insurance policy, from the man. In case that flake on the skateboard comes back," Vinnie looked at Julian, then walked over to the bike as its light faded. His hand inside his long Spectra-lined coat, on the pistol grip of a Mossberg 500 Cruiser. "You from the insurance company?" he called.

"Yeah, you're in good hands," the rider replied. "We done with the James Bond bull now?"

"What's your handle?"

"Just call me Shock."

Julian turned from his glaring at the horizon to look at the new arrival. "Keys."

"I don't think so."

"Part of the deal," Vinnie said. "You work with us, you do what we say. We get you paid. Give up the keys."

Shock tossed the keys to Julian, who reached out without looking at them and snagged them from midair. Without a word, he took a couple of weapons from Vinnie and mounted the bike. He checked a small display unit on his right forearm, a Xybernaut MAIV screen, saw what he wanted to see. Fired the engine and raced down the road. Vinnie and Shock hustled into the car and followed after him.

"Your partner always so chatty?"

"He's just in a bad mood right now. Do what you're supposed to do if any powereds show up, you and him will get along."

"Fine by me. Got any smokes?"

"No."

At the surface of the freezing water in the quarry pit, Sound and Phoenix do their best to try and find Jason Faulkner, wanted cop killer and lately subject of a botched murder-for-hire by a pair of gunmen in the employ of the Purple Mask.

Subvocalizing, Sound says "I don't hear anything...That could mean he's not here or he's dead" he shakes his head and bows it slightly. Can you see anything?"

Using her combined telescopic and night vision she finds no traces of Jason "Good news...I don't see him down there either."

"I hate to interrupt Nightcrawler's adventures in babysitting but I guess we should get back to the group," Josh says thanking the powers that be for Jason's continued survival. He scrambles up the hill as fast as his bruised ribs will carry him.

Back at the car he sees Amanda leaning against the passenger side door tapping her foot as she quips "What took you so long, slowpoke?"

"Which you believe the 2/3 broke down again?" he retorts recalling the horrendous subway service of the Big Apple.

As Phoenix and Sound set off, the Nightcrawler turned to the newcomers. "Alright then, ki...guys. Looks like you're with me." In the meager lighting inside Commonwealth Stadium, Dominique and Magna-Flux were decidedly ambivalent about the prospect of being left alone with a gurgling heap straight from their nightmares, but cued their courage from Sound and Phoenix' casual acceptance. "I ain't tryin' ta go parental on you, but it is late. Either you got family needs ta know you're ok?"

"No, Papa Snarf, my old man could care less, he's probably sleeping off another drunken binge..." Magna-Flux digs at Nightcrawler and straightens his goggles on his face. He smiles sarcastically. "Did anyone think to search the lady in the trunk, assuming she had pockets?"

The Nightcrawler settled back into a seat with a weary sigh. Yet another kid screwed over 'cause he couldn't choose his parents. He welcomed the change in subject before he could do the mental comparison to his own daughters. "Nah, let 'er stew. Th' more off balance she is the more we c'n get outta her. Sounds like a hard case -- the terderizin'll do her good. She'll keep 'till they get back." To Dominique, "What about you chica? Anyone need to know you're safe?"

"No," Dominique replies. "I'm fine, really." She smiles back at the gruesome good guy.

"So you guys know Book? What'd he say to ya? Anythin' about us?"

"Nothing specific, just this whole pre-destination thing. I've haven't figured out why this is supposed to be important to me yet. But I trust him, more than I understand. From what D. has told me, I'm suppose to help her with her powers? Weird considering I'm ultra-confused by the entire ride I'm on. I guess I'm smarter than I give myself credit for, ha," Magna-Flux answered.

"Mr Book didn't mention anyone other than Magna-Flux, here. He did say he was worried about someone called Helios Hope, in Cuba. But I don't know who that is. He wanted me to learn from Magna-Flux, and I think he's going to come back for me sometime," Dominique said.

"Hn. Book did his damndest ta help us out at New Year's. That makes us simpatico. What're your schticks?" At the blank looks, Nightcrawler elaborated. "I got this lovely icing, stretchin' and camouflage outta the deal. Phoenix you seen -- wings, speed and fire. Sound got, well, sound. How 'bout you two?"

Magna-Flux, still sitting on his floating skateboard, spins twice and places his hand in the middle of the board. He lifts his lower body off of the deck in a graceful one hand stand, giving Dominique a grin and a wink, hoping for a smile. "Well, I got mad dexterity, mega-enhancing my only sport-like talent; hence the board." He drops to his feet with the board sticking to his hand, holding it out in front of him. "I can also manipulate and sense E/M fields, control metals, adhere to any surface I touch... You know, the usual stuff us 'kids' go through."

"Yeah we might'z well get this pistola movin'. Here's hopin' Jeeves is an early riser." The Nightcrawler dialed up Dame Vera, intending to tap the ex-spy for some more forensic work.

While the thing that lurks in the dark places nightmares are made of makes his call, Chase turns his attention back to Dominique. _ She is so amazing! Man, I wonder if she'd... no. When she gets her memory back she'll probably just inform me that she was already involved or married even..._

"How are you holding up? I know that exercise in searching for Jason wore you out. You feeling any better?"

"Yes, I'm fine now. Just needed a few minutes." Dominique looked at Nightcrawler, or at least, in his direction. "This man, the one who fell into the pit, he shot policemen? Could you tell me what he did...OH NO! They're coming back, they're coming for the woman!"

Something in her tone snapped the Nightcrawler into action. He killed the stil-ringing connection to Dame Vera. "What are you talking about? What woman?"

Lydia? Sound 'n Phoenix?"

Dominique turns to Chase, grabbing his hand. "The two killers, they're following the other car, the one with that Lydia person. My God..." She squeezes Chase's hand tightly, with a panicked strength. "These men...they have no morals at all. They're both sociopaths."

Chase pulls her along with him and starts heading in the direction of the Aerostar, "Come on, 'Crawler, call ahead on our way!" Cueing from the dead seriousness Magna-Flux treats Dominique's pronouncement, Nightcrawler shoots to his feet. "Screw the car, you tow us on that board?"

Magna-Flux fires back quickly, "I'm not that fast and the added weight will only slow us down worse..." Chase lets Dominique go as they approach the mini-van and unlocks the doors magnetically.

Nightcrawler growls a curt, frustrated acknowledgement and dials as he arcs over the two young adventurers and splotches on the mini-van's roof. Before Sound can even greet on the other end, he cries, "Sound! You got incomin' -- they're after Lydia. We're on the way, but watcher back!"

As Magna-Flux and Dominique pile in, he burbles, "Hit the quarry, don't stop for nothin'. We get cops on our tail, I'll clue 'em in." As an afterthought, the Nightcrawler splats an obscuring grey slime-blob over Magna-Flux's license plate.

The engine's barely turned over when they receive Nightcrawler's urgent call.

[Phase 56 - Phoenix]

"Go," Phoenix tells Sound instantly, and dives out the door in a barely-visible blur. Wings expanding again, surrounded by fire, she takes off and scans the dark landscape for any movement. Save for later any urge to wonder why they would want to kill someone as useful as Lydia.

She sees the motorcycle, coming fast in their direction. Not far behind, a large car speeds behind them. "Let's see if I can slow them down," Phoenix thinks as she swoops down, but not too far, and fire a blast at the road in front of the motorcycle. In an amazing display of agility and reflexes (Julian rolls a 1 for his AGL save), the rider seems to bounce down onto his ride, then pull up. The bike leaves the road as it hurtles through the flames, completely unhindered by the attack.

[Phase 41 - Phoenix]

Now that was impressive riding, Phoenix thought as she realized that no normal person could have evaded that. _Still he should have interpreted that as the sign to give up. Her next blast hit him dead on, despite an impressive swerve to try to avoid the enveloping blast. The bike laid down and skidded, leaving the rider to tumble hard on the cold pavement. Quickly, she moved to where Sound could here her. "I got one, but there's another coming in a car!"

[Phase 26 - Phoenix]

Zooming past the wreckage of the bike and the driver laying on the road, Phoenix cruised over the car and fired at its hood. But she misjudged its speed in

relation to her, and her blast hit harmlessly behind the car instead of in front of it.

[Phase 26 - Sound]

Pausing for a moment before peeling out Sound regrets leaving a fairly safe battleground. "We'll meet you half-way there, 'Crawler" he says into the phone. Muttering, "You better appreciate this, Lydia." He concentrates vividly on the thrust of the engine's pistons, the squeal of the tires, and the muffler that he should really repair sometime soon and tries something he's never done before...he creates a force field around the car as it's moving.

He sees the motorcycle driver getting to his feet as he arrives on the scene. "Heh, rock and roll ain't noise pollution...but this is!" Sound hammers the horn, amplifying the sound with his powers. (Giving you a three point bonus for the horn's loudness, hitting and doing max damage) Julian goes flying off the road a good thirty-five feet, rolling hard on the frozen ground.

[Phase 25 - Vinnie]

Screeching hard to a stop, Vinnie forces the car to the shoulder and leaps out using the door for cover. He quickly brings a small rifle to bear, aiming carefully at the approaching Volvo. A pinpoint of laser light touches the Volvo's windshield, and Sound's forehead behind that. (Yes Vinnie is that good.)

Phoenix hears the hard crack of the rifle, and sees a puff of smoke from the windshield of the Volvo. But the car keeps coming, and Phoenix can only hope that the shot somehow missed.

[Phase 22 - Julian]

Left somewhat behind by the combat, Julian gets up and begins running hard after the Volvo. His two Berettas out, he begins firing, brass flying up into the sky. One bullet strikes its target, the rear left tire of the Volvo; it disintegrates from the wheel of the car almost instantly.

[Phase 20 - Shock]

Jumping out of the passenger side of Vinnie's car, Shock looks up at Phoenix, who notices him.

Oh my god! she realizes. _That's the guy who attacked Dad and I on New Year's Eve at the Singletary Center!_

"Hey babe, nothing personal...but drop dead," he sneers, as he clenches his fist and slams it into his open palm. A bolt of lightning blazes through the night, but Phoenix easily avoids the attack.

[Phase 11 - Phoenix]

"YOU!" Phoenix shrieks at Shock. Without another word, she arches back and lashes out, a corona of wing-like flames surrounding her as a fireball billows around her and streaks toward the wide-eyed Shock. Discretion being the better part of valor, he dives away from the car as the flames strike; the car door is barely a skeleton of metal, and Shock realizes that he too could be a living x-ray had he not evaded at the last second.

[Phase 11 - Sound]

Blood streaming into his eyes, Sound thanked a whole pantheon of gods for his good fortune. He'd barely noticed the red dot of laser light on the windshield, and had just started to duck his head aside when the windshield cracked and the bullet tore a hot crease across the side of his head. The car was fighting him now, from what had to be a flat tire on the back. But he had to get away as best he could; Lydia was the key to finding out what had really happened to Jason. He hit the gas, with metal from the back wheel sending sparks everywhere, and tried to aim another horn blast at the rifleman. The rifleman dropped out of sight as the door flew backwards into him. (Knocked Vinnie down, but only one point of damage to him.)

[Phase 10 - Vinnie]

Kicking the door away from him, Vinnie fired carefully at the Volvo as it passed. But his attempt at stopping it seemed to fail, for the shot did not have any effect at slowing Sound down.

[Phase 7 - Julian]

With a strength borne out of extreme anger, Julian came running down the road, firing deliberately with his Berettas and trying to stop Sound. The other rear tire exploded violently, and Sound could not keep the car on the road. Metal sheared and screamed as the Volvo careened sideways through the shoulder and onto the hard field beyond the roadway.

[Phase 5 - Shock]

"Thanks for the light show, you make a better target now," Shock defiantly called, but his narrow escape from Phoenix's last attack had left him unable to counterattack. (That's what happens when you abort to evade.)

[Phase 5 - the Nightcrawler]

Moving as fast as an Aerostar can, Magna-Flux brought them onto the scene. AS the van slowed, the Nightcrawler slung himself from the minivan past the Volvo screeching off the road toward Vinnie, who was blazing away with an AR-15 at Sound's car.

"Suck slime," the Nightcrawler roared as he lashed out with a huge glob of plasma. The oncoming gunfire caused him to pull up slightly, and the glob sailed over the car harmlessly out of the way. "Damn!"

[Phase 5 - Magna-Flux]

"This'll keep the bad guys from getting away," said Magna-Flux to Dominique. "But I've got to get closer. Oh man." He leaped onto his deck and blurred quickly toward the car, keeping low to the ground. Then, he fired a pulse of energy, and was rewarded with a cascade of energy running around the vehicle, Star Trek The Motion Picture style.

[Back to the turns page.](#)

[Turn 25 continues - will the Millennium survive?]

[Phase 54 - Phoenix]

All but deafened by gunfire, from the corner of her eye Phoenix sees the Volvo going off the road, shedding sparks from the naked rims -- _Please, be okay,_ she spares an instant to think, hoping that Sound'll have enough sense (for once) to keep down -- Lydia's not worth his life.

"Easy target, eh?" she mutters, circling to cut off her opponent. "I don't know where you came from, but getting involved with these guys has just become the biggest mistake of your life!" She levels another blast at Shock in hopes of driving home her point , then wheels around briefly in mid-air to check on the others. But in her haste to keep tabs with the rest of the battle, Phoenix pulls up a bit as she fires at the frantically moving Shock, and the fireball scores the frozen ground nearby him.

[Phase 39 - Phoenix]

However, her concern for Sound has distracted her for the moment from Shock. Seeing that the two gunmen are in position to set up a deadly crossfire around the now-immobile Volvo, and that the Nightcrawler is already taking on one of the men, Phoenix goes after the German with a blazing attack from behind, keeping in mind the way he dodged her before. His angry eyes follow her, and well-honed combat reflexes get him moving to keep her from gaining too much of an advantage (ie, paid power to change facing). The ferocity of his features gives her pause, and again Phoenix finds her targeting well off the mark.

All the sudden we have powered yahoos coming out of the woodwork -- and it looks like this bunch owns an armory. Lucky us. Is this night ever going to end?

[Phase 31 - Magna-Flux]

Hearing no more sound from the gunmen's car's engine, Magna-Flux feels certain his previous EMP attack has shut the vehicle down. The effect of being in such a pitched battle has had an effect on the normally chatty Magna-Flux; he's downright quiet. With a careful slide sideways, using the car as partial cover, Magna-Flux blasts the door where the Indian has taken cover as he fires his carbine. A sweep of his hand, and the door crashes shut, taking Vinnie with it and propelling him across the driver compartment and out the other side, where Shock has recently vacated.

[Phase 26 - Vinnie]

Astounded by the attack that has sent him clear through the car's interior, but professional enough to keep fighting, Vinnie quickly reclaims his bearings. He can't see who attacked him and sent him flying, but no matter. Glancing at his wrist, a light blue glow illuminates his high cheekbones and craggy jawline. Then, with that same disheartening acrobatic flair Magna-Flux noted earlier, Vinnie grabs the roof of the car, flips himself in a somersault completely over the car, and runs past Nightcrawler to the Volvo across the road, to its trunk.

He draws a heavy screwdriver from a pocket and jams it into the keyhole of the trunk, giving it a solid twist. The metal screeches and gives, and the trunk lid pops open. Vinnie looks over his shoulder in Julian's direction and shouts "Acquired!"

[Phase 24 - the Nightcrawler]

"Acquire this," roars the inhuman form of the Nightcrawler, as he looms toward Vinnie. Too late, the Indian notes the Nightcrawler's threat; he's immediately encased head to toe in a thick layer of glop.

[Phase 24 - Julian]

Spinning away from the burning remnants of Phoenix's off-center attacks, Julian once again begins sprinting fast toward the Volvo. He turns his upper body toward the Nightcrawler as he dives toward the road-shoulder side of the Volvo, and seems to defy gravity for a moment, twin Berettas spewing empty brass into the air as he opens up with both barrels on the monstrous Nightcrawler. Julian crashes to the ground behind cover, not realizing that his shots have had no effect on the Nightcrawler whatsoever. (Nightcrawler was able to roll all four hits to power!)

[Phase 24 - Phoenix]

Amazed at her horrid marksmanship, Phoenix quickly pursues Julian, and opens fire on him. This time she finds her target, and Julian's agility isn't enough to save him from all of Phoenix's attack. Still, he avoids the worst of the blast, though much of the long jacket he wears has been destroyed.

[Phase 23 - Shock]

"Hey, hot stuff, I'm not through with you yet!" Shock yells up at Phoenix. Again he slams his hands together, and a lightning bolt arcs up and catches Phoenix, driving her another twenty feet into the air. She feels every nerve in her body fire in agony.

[Phase 21 - Sound]

Shaking off the wound he'd recently received from Vinnie's carbine, Sound happens to glance in his rearview mirror. To his amazement, he sees a black cloaked figure holding an opaque hourglass. The figure extends one skeletal hand and smacks the side of the hourglass.

SORRY. THOUGHT IT WAS ABOUT EMPTY. JUST STUCK, THOUGH.

The voice blew through the compartment like a breath of stale air from a newly opened crypt. But when Sound spun to look in the back seat, no one was there. Instead, just outside his window, slightly on fire, stood Julian.

Climbing out of the side window and standing atop the driver's side of the now disabled Volvo, Sound makes his stand. He focuses his attention on Julian. Staring at the German hitman down as he continues to whirl for position, Sound baits the big man saying "I must break you" in a voice reminiscent of Dolph Lundgren a la Rocky IV. Then, Sound reaches back in the Volvo and lays on the horn. His power amplifies the sound, and crashes around the big German.

Unfortunately, none of the compressed sound actually hits Julian.

[Phase 16 - Magna-Flux]

Seeing that he still hasn't been actively noticed yet, Magna-Flux silently sends his deck low to the ground in an arc around and behind Shock, then brings it in fast. Amazingly, Shock actually picks up on its approach, as if he can sense it coming. Just as amazingly, Shock uses this information not to dive out of the way, but instead turns face first toward the incoming deck.

"Ouch, that man is going to need a lot of expensive dental work," Magna-Flux observes as his deck returns, Shock laid out comfortably on the frozen ground, his mouth a collection of broken molars.

[Phase 9 - the Nightcrawler]

"Time t'finish this," he murmurs as he coalesces in the space next to Julian. "Ya mind holding a few dozen gallons o' goop?" Evidently it was a moot question.

Phoenix glides gently to the ground, near to Julian, as the others begin to close in. Sound notices Phoenix is trembling, her body playing sparks back and forth as she clenches and unclenches her fists.

"Hey, Phoenix. You ok?" Sound asks.

"Yeah, chica, relax, good guys 1, bad guys 0, we win," Nightcrawler emphasizes as Magna-Flux approaches.

"Something...can't...ohmigod...EVERYBODY DOWN!" Phoenix shrieks as she suddenly arcs skyward while the three heroes watch. Before they can react, they realize the gravity of her warning. Her flames grow ten times greater than they have ever seen before, and the effect of a double-helix seems to form in the space where her body should be. A violent boom sounds as the double-helix blasts outward in all directions, the fringe of the effect crackling with blue flame; the blast easily covers a hundred yards radius.

Then, darkness for all.

[Turn 25 - will the Millennium survive? Part deux]

"So what do you think, sir?" Chase said to his father, though as always he pronounced the last word _cur_.

"Four As and a B. So what's so hard about American History that you can only get a B?" Chase's dad replied.

"Mr Felchecchia didn't care for my Vietnam War essay."

"What part didn't he care for, Chase?"

"The part where I described the military leadership as incompetent. With footnotes."

Chase's father nodded, one time. "You can remain in your room the rest of the evening, for that."

"Yes, sir," Chase replied. He gave a thought to flipping one of his ultra-annoying salute parodies at The Great Man, but decided he wasn't in the mood for a fight. Not a physical one, anyway.

Chase went to his room, closed the door. Heard a female voice call to him from across the room. "Chase, is that you?"

"Heidi?"

She walked over to him. "I've missed you sooooo much, Chase." Grabs him by the back of his head and plants a Richter-scale level kiss on him.

"Mgmpfh?" Chase replies. Then, Heidi steps back, and very solidly hits Chase in the chest. He finds himself staggered as she hits him again, then again.

"Stop!" he shouts, grabbing her hands. His vision fogs for a moment. His hands are holding Dominique's wrists. She sits atop him, in the cold early morning darkness. Suddenly he realizes where he is. Getting CPR on the road.

"Whoa. What happened?" he asks. Dominique pulls her hands free and stands up.

"Something happened to the Phoenix woman. There was a huge...I don't know, it wasn't an explosion. Just this weird release of energy."

Chase pulls himself to his feet. Sees what's left of the Volvo, and the hitmen's car across the road. The damage looks like a tornado picked up a mini-mart and slapped the car with it. Several times. Chase winced, and slowly turned his head to look at the minivan...

"Hey, you kids ok?" The harsh gurgle of the Nightcrawler, rising from the roadway. "That truck have a 'How's M'Driving' sticker on it when it hit me?"

"Wasn't no truck," Chase replied. "Phoenix went supernova on us."

Nightcrawler nodded, or seemed to, and moved across the wreckage of the Volvo. He glanced in the trunk, and touched the bound form of Lydia Morry. "Still breathin', th' witch." He satisfied himself that both of the Golden Killers were still properly bound, and assured their continued unconsciousness by putting the boot in a couple of times.

Sound pulled himself to his feet, and glanced in the backseat of the car. Then he ran into the field, looking for Phoenix.

"Oh, no," the Nightcrawler whispered, then followed him to the field.

They found Phoenix about two hundred yards from the roadway, surrounded by an outward radiating pattern of scorched earth. Sound was nearly screaming when he got to her, and barely stopped when he realized she was all right. The two Millennium men helped her to her feet as she nodded and moaned that she could move. Together, they returned to the road.

"Where...the lightning guy...where..." she tried to ask.

"Shh. Don't worry about him," Sound replied.

"Still gotta check," Nightcrawler said, and when they returned to the Volvo, the Nightcrawler retrieved Shock from where he lay with a surprised yet unconscious

expression. His skin was the color of hot dogs left too long on the grill.

"Memo to staff: don't tick off Phoenix. Ever." The Nightcrawler folded his arms after binding Shock securely and telling him this.

"Let's get Lydia and get out of here. Um, Magna-Flux, can you drive us, or is your minivan..." Sound began.

"Take a look for yourself," Chase replied.

Chase and Dominique sat at his kitchen table. Over an hour had passed since they departed the fight scene. They had left Shock and the Golden Killers behind, and after Sound had returned with a borrowed police tow truck to retrieve his Volvo paperweight, they let the police know where the criminals could be found, anonymously.

The chat with Lydia, as hosted by Nightcrawler, Master of Horror, gave them little. Yes, she worked for the Purple Mask. No, she didn't know where he was. No, he didn't tell her where to meet her, only that she would be contacted. How would she be contacted? Couldn't say; he used different methods each time, sometimes by sending someone for her, sometimes by getting a message to her.

Why Jason, Sound had asked. Nothing personal, Lydia said. He happened to be the first SORTie she met out of the office. The Purple Mask told her it was either Jason doing what he instructed, or her searching for a way to get along without her head attached to her neck. Seems the Purple Mask wants dissension and chaos spread among those who could threaten him.

It was nothing personal.

They had to remove Sound at that point, Phoenix taking him into the corridors of the stadium where they returned to after the fight. Telling him to stay focused and not lose it. Ultimately, there was no information to get from Lydia, and the argument over what to do with her raged on for a full five minutes. It was Dominique who solved the dilemma, though. At her suggestion, Sound and Phoenix dropped Lydia off with the Army soldiers guarding the CDC/FEMA powered person examination section of the Lexington Veterans Hospital grounds. Lydia was quickly sedated due to her 'instabilities' as reported by her 'cousins'.

From there, the group had parted ways. Sound gave Chase the phone normally carried by Reflector. He had picked it up in the hotel, and nearly forgotten he had it. "In case you need it," Sound had said, "Or, in case we need you to save us." He smiled, and the two shook hands.

Back at the house, Chase learned that Dominique had a small purse, and she was methodically going through the contents.

"Dominique, I've got to know. About the minivan..."

She looked up at him, eyes honest and clear. "I don't know, Chase. I was in the path of the energy, in the minivan, but it just seemed to go around it. Maybe it was some sort of residual effect from your powers, like a static charge or something, that kept it from getting damaged."

"I mean, that Volvo is a Chevette now, but the minivan was unscratched!"

"I know, isn't that great?"

They heard footsteps from outside the kitchen. Chase suddenly realized the time; the Colonel was awake!

"Chase," he snapped, then stopped. "Who are you?" he asked.

Dominique stood up and walked right to him. "My name is Dominique. I'm filling in for Rita while she is with her sick mother. Whenever you're ready, sir, I'll make breakfast. Two eggs over easy, toast, coffee black with two sugars, sir?"

Chase's dad blinked at her. "Yes, that's right miss."

"Very good sir. Chase was kind enough to help me take your minivan to the gas station. It's been refueled and through the car wash as well. There was a lot of road salt on it."

So that's why she told me to stop at Shell on the way back. Chase's admiration of Dominique went up several notches.

"Um, yes..." Chase almost wanted to laugh at the high and mighty Colonel, thrown completely off balance by a woman half his age and a third of his size. "Thank you, Miss."

"You're very welcome, sir. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

Daybreak. Sir William meets with Alan Bloomfield for breakfast, at the Idle Hour Country Club.

"Alan, I am appalled at the actions of the Attorney General's office. This smacks of corruption at the highest level," Sir William, the pinnacle of manners and coolness under pressure, spoke barely above his normal conversational tone. But his anger was very evident.

"William, I understand. But what can I do about it?"

"I don't know. I trusted them with evidence, Alan, evidence that should have the very halls of power shattering in this city over the laundering of drug money. Evidence that would have virtually ended the drug trade in Lexington."

Alan Bloomfield, business magnate and first benefactor of the Millennium's heroism, swirled his water glass and watched the water go around and around. "I know the cops much better than I know the attorney general's office. But I do have my contacts. I'll see what I can find out. Maybe it'll turn out for the best."

"Thank you."

After breakfast, Sir William departed to his waiting Bentley. His driver, Tehsin Said, opened and closed the door as he entered the car, then went to the driver's compartment.

"Not a whit of help, was Alan."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"I can't blame him for this. He didn't even know about it until today. I'm just letting myself be affected adversely by this turn of events."

"You don't feel the loss of the documents was a mistake?"

"I do not. Two of the main launderers leave the city the same day I return to meet with the AG's office? Every piece of paper, completely lost? I do not believe in coincidence or luck, Tehsin."

"Which is why you made copies of everything."

"No point in not being prudent, after all. Best take us to the airport, Tehsin. I'll want to retrieve these copies personally."

"I've already made the arrangements, sir. Hyde Park is sending someone to meet us at Heathrow."

"Excellent." Sir William steepled his fingers, stared past them to the road ahead. "What I get for not taking a more active hand in this. Whoever's responsible will be decidedly sorry they tried to make a fool of me."

Later that day. Jake Faulkner finally comes home.

Jake pulls his bike into his parking space. "Finally home!" Jake, weary from his long trip, heads straight to his bedroom to get ready for a quick shower. "Better check in with Josh first. Jake first tries Josh's place, no answer. Then he tries the office to no avail. As a last resort Jake tries the cellphone but still no response. "What could big brother be into? I'll just try again later." Jake showers and changes clothes. Grabs his coat and heads back out. "I'll go by and see Mom and Dad. At least I know where they are."

[Later at the hospital]

As Jake turns the corner near his father's room he sees Dr. Beacon come out of his father's room. Jake catches up to him at the nurses' station. "Hello Dr. Beacon."

"Oh, hello Mr. Faulkner."

"Please call me Jake."

"Ok, Jake"

"How is my father doing, any change?"

"I'm afraid there doesn't appear to be change either way. He certainly is a fighter."

"Yes, he's definitely that. Thank you, Doc."

"It's no problem, if you ever have any questions just call."

"Thanks I will."

Jake turns and heads back to his dad's room. As usual his mother is sitting there ever vigil. He just stands there looking at his dad lay there so helpless. He looks so frail. Yet he has this overwhelming feeling of determination and strength. His mother looks up at him. Not saying a word she reaches out and takes Jake's hand into hers. They remain this way for several minutes. No words are needed to communicate their feelings at this moment. Finally Jake breaks the silence. "Do you want to go down and get a coffee."

"Sure, I need to stretch my legs a bit anyway."

They take the elevator down to the cafeteria.

"So how was your trip. Get your man?"

"Of course."

"Like I had to ask. Have much trouble?"

"No, it was a pretty basic job."

"I know you're very good at it but every time you go after a bounty I can't help but worry."

Jake puts his arm around his mothers' shoulders and gives her a gentle squeeze. "Now how many times have I told you 'Don't worry about me, worry for the other guy.' I'll be Ok."

As the doors open on the first floor. "Now I'm your mother. It's my job to worry."

As they enter the cafeteria Jake motions to a table by the window. "Grab a table; I'll get our coffees."

Jake returns to the table with two coffees and a container of creamer. He always drank his black but mother had to have cream and sugar. "Here you go." Jake slides the second coffee across the table. Jocelyn adds the little container of creamer to her coffee as Jake reaches for two packets of sugar from the rack on the table and hands them to her. "You really should cut back on this stuff you know."

She smiles, "What, so you're going to mother me now?"

"You know what I mean."

She nods. "So have you heard from you brother?"

"I talked to him just for a second this morning but he didn't have time to talk. Has he been by today?"

"No I haven't seen him since he was in here on Friday. I didn't even know that the doctors had released him. I went down to see him yesterday and he had been discharged"

"I can't believe he didn't stop by. But he's got some stuff going that's keeping him busy."

"Yeah, I met her the other day."

"Oh, Amanda. Well I think that my be part of it too."

"So, when you called me earlier you said something about a revelation."

"All the time I spent on the road gave me time to do some thinking. All that's been happening lately and Dad's condition worsening. It just made me take stock of my life and what I want to do with it. Things that I wanted to do. I dropped everything to help dad with the business. I want to go back to school full time again. Get my degree finally."

"But what about Josh and the business? You just can't drop everything and leave him holding the bag."

"I want be abandoning it. I'll still run bounties down and all that. But I don't think I belong in the day to day running of it. Josh can handle that. It's just that I want to finish what I started and see what I can make of it. If I don't try I'll regret it. I don't want to live the rest of my life wondering what if."

"I understand what you mean. If that's what you feel you have to do, I'll back you up. I take it you haven't talked to Josh yet."

"No. I don't know how he is going to react. I think there is going to be even more that he is not going to agree with. But there are going to be some changes. I don't like what's be going on lately. I can't go on not having any control of my life. I'll be letting some people down but they'll get by without me." With that they just set there quietly drinking their coffee. Jake just looks out the window wondering just what Josh's reaction will be. He has always been supportive. But Josh really believes in the Millennium group. Jake doesn't think he will take it well that his brother is quitting just as they are getting started.

At the home of the Red Sky Diary. Amanda gets back to work.

The first thing she notices are the two tractor trailers, with the MTV logos and the massive satellite dishes on top of them. _Sheesh, they're almost a week early._ Amanda thought as she pulled the blue Beetle into the driveway. The car was what Shelley came up with on short notice, a brand new 2000 VW Turbo Beetle, in the deepest blue she'd ever seen on a car.

There were more men around the grounds, wearing the uniform of some security company. One of them had a German Shepherd on a leash, walking it around the perimeter of the place.

Shelley and Amanda's agent, Lindsey Drake Hall (from the Kennebunkport Halls, as she would announce to people), were waiting inside for her.

"Amanda, my dear girl," Lindsey said with the tone of haughty concern that was her hallmark. Heh. Hallmark, Amanda thought. "This young lady showed up in my office with a stack of paper, you simply could hear the old growth forests screaming with sympathetic pain. And you've got to sign nearly every page of it." Lindsey leaned closer to Amanda as the three of them walked toward the staircase, and whispered to her, "You're going to be rich, my dear. Isn't that dreadful?"

"Right, just awful," Amanda agreed. The guys weren't around, at least not that she could tell. This was her first time going past the first floor, she realized. The second floor had been converted to a series of offices and storage space. Jonas had one room as his guitar hall of fame, with a slew of retired pedals and instruments; she'd promised to tour it at some point.

They entered one office, and Amanda was surprised to see Alex there, seated near one side of a desk. He wore a grey Armani suit, and a platinum IWC Grande Complication on his wrist; it was worth almost a quarter of a million dollars. The rough musician transformed into something all the band members were: media powerhouses. But past the wristwatch, Amanda could see the heavy bandage and brace on his arm. He'd paid for his place, without a doubt. She felt a bit panicked for a moment; what had she done to deserve a spot among them?

"Amanda, can I get you some juice? Maybe some V-8?" Shelley had circled the room, given Alex a quick kiss on the cheek, and returned to Amanda's side. She touched Amanda's forearm lightly as she asked her question; Lindsey paid no notice, as she drew out the stack of papers and set them out in neat piles across from Alex on the desk.

"Yes, please, Shelley. V-8 is fine."

Shelley smiled and departed, returning a few minutes later with several pitchers and glasses. Amanda began the task of listening, questioning, and signing documents. Alex had offered her a fountain pen, but Amanda had never used one, and they had to get a new copy of page 31.

"Better stick to ballpoint," Amanda said, and they all laughed.

Forty minutes later, everything was signed, witnessed, and initialed. Amanda got up, and Alex joined her in leaving the room. Lindsey and Shelley had a few more details to wrap up, most importantly getting money from the Diary into Amanda's bank account.

Alex closed the door, and motioned to Amanda to walk with him back downstairs. "I feel like I'm giving my daughter away at her wedding," Alex said.

"I didn't know you, um..." Amanda began to panic again. Did Alex have children? His long-time aversion to marriage was well known, but he was a musician, and fairly handsome in a very strong, masculine sense.

"I mean the band. Sorry. You need to relax, Amanda. This is work, but it's fun too. You're going to have the means to do whatever you want, you know. I just had to be sure of something."

"Yes?"

"When you're out there, under the hot lights and the camera, and about a hundred invitees and a few million viewers in a couple of months, you have to feel every note, every rest. There's a lot to distract a person. That's why most bands fail, distractions."

"I've seen that first-hand, Alex."

"Yes? Then you know the hazards. As a band, we're pretty good. There's individual musicians who can blow us away one on one, but not as a group. That's because we never forgot the importance of the music. We worked hard for a long time, worked

and focused. Talent helps, you need a little bit of luck. But it always comes down to who is willing to outwork everyone else. That's staying power. Eleven years and counting."

"You've treated me great, Alex, you and everyone else. I'll work just as hard."

Alex nodded, watched the various people assembling new equipment and setting up seating around the rehearsal area. That would be her stage, Amanda realized.

"I know. Welcome to the band." Alex stepped close to her and gave her a friendly hug. The other three arrived at that point; Alain, Jonas, and Rob had all been nearby.

"'Bout time, Alex. You trying to drive her out by talking her head off?"

"Don't mind Alex, he's on a lot of medication."

"Yes, some of it's even what the doctor prescribed," Rob said as Alain and Jonas got in their digs.

"Oh, he's ok, guys," Amanda smiled. "So, we ready to rock?"

"Tonight we celebrate. Got a private room at Di Raimo's, so we hope you're in the mood for lots of wine and some really good antipasto," Jonas said.

"This is kind of a ritual, Amanda. Think of it as a pre-game dinner, although the 'game' isn't for a few days," Rob told her.

"We talk out the set list, drink some wine, argue about the set list, drink some more, you get the idea," Alain tossed a lighter up and down, finally dropping it into a pocket. "Mason's got a limo outside."

They began to depart, and Amanda looked back at Alex. _This wasn't easy on him_, she knew. _He's working hard at not showing it._ Then Amanda stopped, and walked back to him.

"If I'm going to work for you, manager, I need to get to know you better. Come on," she told Alex. He looked at her, then past her. They were looking back, considering this.

Alex slowly nodded. "All right. May as well be someone there besides you who isn't as old as dirt."

"Oh ha ha."

"I'm hating this 'manager' thing already."

"Cripes, whose idea was that anyway?"

"I think we voted."

"We voted while drinking, obviously."

And together, the five of them left for dinner.

Rupp Arena practice facilities; the Thoroughblades locker room and offices.

Carl worked his way through the two on two drills. His knee hadn't felt this good in ten years. What's more, the trainer couldn't believe Carl's condition. He'd done 45 minutes on the treadmill, his pulse never went over 80 one time. And his body fat was down around three percent. "Carl, eat a steak or three tonight, you're wasting away," the trainer told him.

"Ha. I am one cut, buff hombre," Carl answered.

From the back, a Russian voice sounded out. "You are one Ricky Martin Swavay, yes?"

But before Carl could answer, one of the assistant coaches tapped Carl on the shoulder. "Coach Sommer wants you."

Carl headed for the coach's office, at the end of the locker area.

"Have a seat, Carl," Coach Sommer said, as he closed the door behind Carl and returned to sit at the corner of the desk.

"What's up?"

"Your contract, in a few months."

Carl sucked in a deep breath. This wasn't going to be good.

Coach Sommer continued. "We're part of the Islanders organization now, Carl. With that comes a memo from Long Island, saying they aren't interested in re-signing anyone over the age of 23 at this level."

He looked at Carl, who nodded. "Am I being cut?"

"No, you'll play the rest of the year here, but you have a couple of options I need you to consider. Maybe talk over with your agent."

"Yes?"

"One, I can try to get you traded somewhere. You're playing well, and there's no reason you can't catch on with Louisville. The Panthers are in our division to stay, and you'll still be in state for your children."

"Ok."

"Two, you finish out the season and join my staff as a player-coach. You teach these kids how to defend when they're a man or two down. The upside is that you have a more stable position of employment. I've been where you are, Carl, and I know that the courts consider that sort of thing. The other side is you don't have the potential to move on into the big time, unless there's a catastrophic series of injuries at the big club."

"Man. I got to decide right now?"

"No, you've got until after the playoffs to decide. That gives you plenty of time. But you have to understand, Carl. Your days as just a player for this franchise are numbered. It's either coaching or moving on. You take your time and think about it."

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[Turn 26]

February 5.

From USA Today: Atlanta (Reuters) - The Center for Disease Control, with the aid of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, has established temporary facilities in 12 cities for the purpose of learning more about the presence of powered people in society.

Centers in New York City, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Denver, Miami, Atlanta, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Omaha, and Lexington began working with concerned citizens over the weekend. Doctor Leslie Walsh, project leader, said the public should not consider this course of action threatening in any way.

"A lot of people have questions. We want to help them find answers. Speculation that our work is a precursor to extreme government intervention is complete nonsense," Dr Walsh said to reporters as she returned to Lexington from Atlanta Friday night.

Dr Walsh also again stated that there was no evidence of a continuing outbreak. "The event that triggered these...changes...is not an ongoing event. We have had zero reports of anything to the contrary here or abroad."

Anyone who exhibits powered person characteristics should call 1-877-769-3771, a special number for the CDC. Transportation to a testing facility will be arranged by FEMA at no cost for anyone demonstrating powered abilities.

After dropping off Lydia to the tender mercies of the CDC and FEMA.

The Nightcrawler sends one looping tentacle out, snagging a White Castle cheeseburger from the stack in the minivan. Magna-Flux had driven them behind PLD High, where no one else would be around that time of night. One quick stop for sliders, and Magna-Flux, Dominique, Phoenix, a still enraged Sound, and the Nightcrawler himself.

"Way I see it, chi...Phoenix, you a powder keg waitin' for a match."

Sound growled at this. "She didn't have any control over what happened."

Phoenix interrupted him, her hand touching his arm. "Stop it. Please." Turning to the Nightcrawler, she says "He's right. I didn't have any control over what happened. I didn't even know I could do that."

"Look, I ain't the brightest light in the arena. But seems to me you took a nice hit from Shock, and you lashed out."

"Big time," added Magna-Flux.

"I'm so sorry," Phoenix said to Magna-Flux. "I feel terrible about endangering

you."

"Good thing Dominique remembered her Girl Scout training," he replied.

"How did you know I was a Girl Scout?" Dominique asked.

"You were?"

"Troop 797. East Orange, New Jersey."

In spite of his anger at Lydia Morry, Sound began to relax. That empathic effect, the one Book described when one was around like-minded powereds, was settling him down. Like-minded powereds...

"Say!" Sound exclaimed. "Do you suppose the bad guys get this vibe too? This...I don't know, sympatico feeling we have."

"I bet you're right. That's going to make things tougher on us." Phoenix said.

"How so?" Nightcrawler asked.

"No divide and conquer. They'll start banding together, if only for the positive vibe. Book hinted at that. Dammit!"

"Let's give the sociology a break," Nightcrawler said. "I still want to know about Phoenix and her new power."

"I felt threatened," Phoenix begins. "That blast from Shock, it hurt really bad. I thought I was going to die. Like I wasn't going to survive unless I did something. You ever been really sick to your stomach, like you can't keep it down a second longer?"

"Ultra-gross," said Magna-Flux.

"Gross or no, that's what it felt like. I had to let it out."

"Ok. That being said, any chance you c'n give more than one second warning next time?" Nightcrawler asked. Phoenix nodded in reply.

"What did it look like to you, Dominique? You were the farthest away," asked Phoenix.

"Yeah, all I saw was a big swirl," said Magna-Flux.

Dominique looked at her hands. "I think it looked like a DNA model."

Everyone was quiet for a second. That's what it had looked like, exactly.

"Could that mean something?" Sound asked.

"Mebbe. Anyone want the last onion ring? No? Gracias." The last o-ring vanished in a snap of plasma.

As they went their separate ways, Phoenix by air, Sound by cab, the Nightcrawler hit the pavement and stopped to check with Magna-Flux. "Look, you need somethin', you use the phone. There's some heavy hitters out here, one almost put Sound six feet under. Don't be no fool. All right?"

"Yeah, ok. See ya around," Magna-Flux replied. With a snap, the Nightcrawler sped down the street, toward downtown.

"Chase, can we stop at the gas station over there?" Dominique asked.

"Hey, you saved my life, least I can do is buy you a Slushie."

"Thank you. I prefer the blue ones. You know, we should run the van through the car wash, and put a little gas in it, don't you think?"

"Yeah, sure..." But Chase wasn't thinking too clearly. After all, he was 17, and Dominique was beautiful and had *pressed her lips to his* who knows how many times in reviving him. The rest of the way back, he was in a blissful fog.

Back at Chase's house, continued from last turn:

As the Colonel leaves the room with a confused grumble, Chase turns to Dominique smiling broadly. "Oh you just made my morning!" he laughs. "Ok, it's cool that you know all this, seem to have the right things to say, but is this from just remembering this happening or are you actually reading his mind too?" With that thought, Chase turns his head and blushes. _ Oh no, if she CAN read minds, then she's heard everything I've thought about her!!!!...wait, calm down if she could do that, that interrogation might've been easier... no worries, keep cool_

"It was written down on this calendar on the fridge," she ventures.

"Ah, of course," Chase exhales. "I am wiped. I have got to get some sleep. Can I help you with anything?"

"No, thank you, Chase. Sleep well."

And sleep he did, until he finally woke up in the late afternoon. Chase went back to the kitchen, and saw the refrigerator door was open. He cheerfully leaned around and said "Hi there!"

Rita, their housekeeper, looked back at him. "Hello, Chase. I'm just starting dinner."

"B..bb..bb...but where's Dominique?"

"Who?"

"She was here..." he looked at the stove clock, "a few hours ago."

"There was a note for you, under the door. It's by the napkins."

Chase snatched at the paper. Written in an elegant, calligraphic script, was a message from Dominique.

Dear Chase,

Thank you for your hospitality. Your father was kind enough to give me a ride to the Hyatt downtown. It turns out my credit cards are still good! He seems like a very nice man, and has asked me to dinner Saturday while you are at your concert. Have a great time. I hope I see you to say hello on Saturday before you leave.

Dominique.

Rita recovered very nicely, and didn't drop any of the pork chops when Chase started screaming.

Morning, February 6th. Sunday.

From the Lexington Herald-Leader
Lexington - Two officers dead; manhunt continues.

Officers Kara May, 26, and Randall Azim, 30, have both died from wounds received in a gun battle at Lexington Police headquarters on Saturday night. Chief Larry Walsh, also wounded in the shooting, has been upgraded to satisfactory condition and is expected to leave UK hospital today.

The police information section has offered a \$5000 reward for information leading to the arrest of Jason Faulkner. Mr Faulkner, a member of Lexington's Special Operation Response Team along with the two slain officers, has been identified as the shooter by Chief Walsh. Mr Faulkner is considered armed and highly dangerous, and should not be approached.

Currently, officers have refused to discuss the ongoing investigation, referring all requests to the public information department. A press conference with Chief Walsh has been scheduled for 6 p.m. Sunday evening.

Morning, February 6th. A parking garage downtown.

Seated against a concrete pillar, hidden by the early morning gloom, the Snowman listens to the sounds of the street. Here a siren. There a door closing. Sometimes a car passing down Main Street. Many people have been busy Saturday night. As has he.

Journal entry, 2/6/00 - Positive identification of the two rival gangs in the city. East Side, the Double Cs. Color: blue. Signs: left shoe untied, sometimes with a blue lace instead of white; ball caps worn with bill to the left; double C hand signal made with the left hand.

West Side, the Sons of Chicago. Color: camouflage. Signs: camo bandanna worn around the head or right bicep; right pocket turned inside out.

Rupp Arena parking lot is considered neutral territory. Observation of area should yield plenty of targets in event of a gang meeting. Must take steps to make this happen, as higher level bangers may attend.

Results of recon patrol at Lexington Veterans Hospital grounds proved interesting. FEMA and CDC have moved onto the grounds. Perimeter security was not fully in place. Future entries will likely require greater care.

Found one hangar-like building has been turned into a MASH unit. Twenty beds, all empty except for one. Had to subdue a guard and one nurse to interrogate the patient.

Patient turned out to be powered responsible for destroying a Super America chain store, code named Element. Patient was hooked to a standard IV of lactated ringers, but exhibited signs of insinuated muscle relaxors. Patient could not respond to basic questions. Total time with Element: 8 minutes.

Note: must contact Craftsman about subcutaneous autopepper.

The Snowman looked up at the bound man hanging from the garage roof. Another ATM bandit, this one a member of the Sons of Chicago, unlike previous bandits. With a

fluid motion, the Snowman rose to his feet, then gently floated to level with the ganger. He flicked his wrist, and a monomolecular blade of ice sent his gag drifting to the ground.

"Please, Mister Ice Man, don't leave me up here," the ganger said.

"I promise to cut the gang member down. Tell me about the Sons of Chicago."

"No, not that...AIIIIIEE!"

The Snowman didn't even glance as one of the ganger's toes dropped to the concrete below. "When I said I'd cut the gang member down, I left it open as to how many pieces. Tell me who leads the Sons of Chicago in Lexington. Or the gang member loses another toe."

Evening, Sunday, February 6th.

The Nightcrawler found the body first, where it had jackhammered into the pavement from probably the top level of the parking garage. On a weekday, someone would have found him right away.

"Definitely a banger," the Nightcrawler thought, seeing the strip of camouflaged bandanna soaked with blood laying nearby. "West Side, what was he doin' here?"

A glint caught his eye. The Nightcrawler idly stretched in its direction. And wasn't at all pleased when a glassy snowman stuck to his fingers.

"You 'n me, I jus' want a rematch."

A car entered the small side street running behind the parking garage, where Nightcrawler and the body were located. He immediately recognized the car, and with a snap was at the driver's window, leering inside.

The two Double Cs, for that's who they were, recoiled in horror as if on cue. In the back, Rojo was not as impressed, at least he was doing a better job of not showing fear. He opened the back door and stood, palms outward.

"Yo, Slick, we mean no harm to you," Rojo said.

"And how can you be sure *I* feel the same way?"

"I can't. I'm takin' a chance, just like you." Rojo was easily 6'6" and built like a linebacker. He wore a Yankees cap, brim turned to the side, and gold on each finger. The Nightcrawler could see a cellphone clipped to his jacket, and three pagers. "You cap the Son?"

"No. Dead when I found him."

"End result is all that matters," Rojo replied, walking around the body. "J-Money. World ain't gonna miss you."

"I want the guy who did him."

"Me too. I want to give him a Hefty bag full of presidents."

Wrong thing to say. The Nightcrawler snared Rojo, python fashion, with a tentacle-like pod. "I don't want to see gangers getting iced by the Snowman. In case you ain't figgered it yet, Rojo, Snowman, he don't give a flyin' what colors are flying. You just a target to him. Now what d'you know about the Snowman?"

"I don't. News to me."

"Liar. You know he's been cappin' bangers."

"That don't me he's in my Dex, neither. C'mon man."

The Nightcrawler let him drop, unceremoniously, to the ground. Rojo did not try to get up, but held a hand to his crew in the car.

"You see him, anyone sees him, you leave me a tag. Otherwise I move into your crib like a nasty spider. 'Stand?" Nightcrawler grinned.

"So, you sayin' we give you the 411 if he shows, and you leave us alone?"

"Right now, you ain't worth m' time. You worth the Snowman's, though. All the time you got, the rest o' your life," the Nightcrawler thumbed back at J-Money's body.

Evening, Sunday. Family Matters.

Jake leaves the hospital parking lot and heads home. "I didn't think mom would be so understanding. Sometime she amazes me just how adaptable she can be. I could only wish that Josh would react as well." As brothers they had always gotten along well. They didn't always see eye-to-eye on everything. But Josh was always supportive. This time may not be the case. Jake arrives at home and grabs a Guinness from the fridge and drops into his and turns on the local news as it is just past six o'clock. No mention of Jason, Jake doesn't know if it is good or bad. "Wonder if Josh has made it home yet?" Jake reaches for his phone and punches the speed dial for Josh. There are several rings before there is an answer at the other end.

Damn acute hearing - how many times did the fsckin' phone ring? Josh curses as he finally gets up around 7:00 PM on Sunday. "Hello"

"Hey Josh, you OK? You sound terrible."

"Oh, it you Jake. I'm beat. We were up all night trying to find Jason and fighting the ones responsible for all the trouble."

"Are you all right?"

Yeah, Mark is in the hospital though. But he's going to be all right."

"What happened?"

Josh gives his brother a brief explanation of the events of the previous night. Very brief.

"Wow, that was definitely a night of adventure."

"Look I hate to cut it short. I've got to get some more sleep. My head is killing me. Oh, how did it go in Georgia?"

"Well it was nothing compared to your escapades. Dodge was nothing as usual, glass jaw. Easy take down. You get some rest. I'll see you at the office tomorrow."

They talked business for a few minutes, then Jake ended the call.

Pursuing Jason with the group 'til all hours of the morning had totally worn Josh out. "I'm definitely not 21 anymore - the old bod can't take this shit." He's always a bit foul tempered in the "morning" until that first pot of coffee. Jake has said something about how Jack Fahey needing their renewal license paperwork and payment ASAP - First thing Monday morning. Josh could only surmise that the notice must have gotten lost in the hub-bub of Dodge's attack on New Year's and the resulting clean up operation and never got inputted into the accounts system at the office. He hit himself on the forehead with his palm as he poured the coffee into a large thermos. He should've remembered anyway. That was the deal: Jake did the hunting and Josh did the paperwork. Fahey was a decent man tho' and would see them through OK. Fahey and Dad were old friend's and he'd known the boys since they were "knee-high to a grass hopper".

Josh sat at his "dining room table" and stared at the three distinct piles of paper on the flat surface. On the "office" pile he noted the meeting for tomorrow. He then tapped his pencil for a moment as he debated about what to turn to next - it didn't take long to decide: He felt guilty for not working on the unfinished songs but there was too much going on with the Millennium for him to spend time on himself.

The first thing he did was check in on Mark's status. No news there. It looked like he would be laid out for a while. His teammate was out cold but he left a message with the nurse on duty that he had called and wished him a quick recovery. Josh would make a pit stop at the hospital tomorrow after work to see how he was doing personally. Maybe he'd be able to find a present or something to lift up his spirits...a recording of the Canadian National Anthem? He at least knew Mark could relate to the song after the guys used it in part to defeat Le Plante near Dame Vera a month or so ago.

He then startled scrawling a list of the group's "rogues gallery" thus far next to some of the sketches he had down earlier of potential group tactics. The list was in three columns - name, demonstrated abilities, and current status. It looked something like this as he finished and hid the document and its cousins in the liner notes to Iron Butterfly's "InnaGaddaDaVida" LP on his bookshelf:

Adversary:	Abilities:	Status:
Dodge	morph limbs into razors, possibly faster, more agile than before?	Arrested
Lydia	mental domination presumably via her voice formerly in league with the Purple Mask.	Detained by CDC/FEMA
Shock	emit bursts of electricty, other potential uses? in league with the Purple Mask.	Presumably Arrested (follow up on this discreetly)
Luminaries	normal terrorists with Hi-Tech weapons and armor - where did they get that stuff?	Members Arrested
Element	move the earth itself, erupt fiery attacks from below the ground, alleged control over gravity itself.	Arrested (I hope he's somebody's bitch in the big house already)
Golden Killers	as fast and accurate as they are with that artillery I didn't get "that vibe". Anything John Woo can do they can do better. Hired by the Purple Mask.	Presumably Arrested (follow up on this discreetly)
Le Plante	plant related powers: can animate and manipulate plant life to do his bidding, seemingly creates new plant life forms	? (he's a weird one)
Double Cs	normal gang bangers: young, maybe misguided but heavy drug trafficking is the least of what they do...	Active (wonder how close we are to cracking that data?)
Snowman	create ice formations including blades like Dodge, become icy mist, as well as freezing people helplessly - is this a hypnotic thing like Lydia?	Active (no evil vibe...but I still don't like him)
Purple Mask	dampen our powers, mysteriously disappears, loves napalm,...how did he know we were coming??? Somehow managed to get other adversaries to work for him...	Active (this fscker got the best of us)

Monday Feb. 7: The Search for Jason -

Jake gets to the office fairly early for him, even with his morning work out done. But to his surprise Josh is already there, and looking pretty chipper. "I didn't expect to see you in this bright of spirits."

"You know a couple of bad guys can't keep a Faulkner down."

"You bet you." Jake strolls over to the coffee pot to get his morning pick me up when he notices the gauze bandage taped to the side of Josh's cranium. "What's up with that, cut yourself shaving?"

"That a reminder of Sunday morning's fracas. It's nothing. Just a flesh wound."

"Just a flesh wound?" As Jake walks back to his desk. "I think you need to give me some more details on the events of the other night."

Josh gives Jake the full story. When Josh is finished Jake just sits there dumbfounded. "I can't believe you guys did all of that. How did you get to work?"

"The bus, it's not so bad. But I don't know what I'm going to do about a car."

"I don't think insurance will pay for that."

After lunch, Jake headed to the rock quarry on Georgetwon Road.

Jake had made a couple of calls to some street contacts. Still nothing on Jason. Josh didn't want him to contact any of his police assocaites. Said 'the group thought it best to leave the police out of it for now.' Jake can't help but wonder what the hell the groups got to do with it. Jason is family, it's got nothing to do with the 'group'. Jake doesn't like the influence the group is having on Josh. But anyway here he is at the quarry. Over there is the pond that Josh had described. Jake can't make out whose footprints are whose. "They sure know how to preserve a crime scene." Jake just shakes his head and climbs the embankment back to his bike. Then, he stops.

His gaze catches something in the water, near the bank of the quarry. Jake is running now, running down the side of the quarry, slipping, trying to keep his balance. At the bank, he wades into the frigid water, Jake's lungs making him painfully aware of the temperature. But he can't stop now. He grabs a hold, and drags the water-laden parcel to shore. A long time passes before he can pull out his cellphone and call Josh. To tell him he'd found Jason's uniform and gear.

Monday, February 7, early morning

Chase looks at the time, "Ah jeez! I'm gonna be ultra-late unless I get moving!" He takes off to his room, and after a rushed shower, dressing and grabbing his things, he heads back to the kitchen just after the household head honcho finishes his breakfast and disappears to go to work.

Skating to his bus stop, he just makes it before the bus starts to leave. "Hurry up, kid! Can't wait all day..." gripes the smelly bus driver who seems to have grown another mole from his balding head.

Chase sees Jill near the middle of the bus, in their socially accepted seating arrangement and slides in beside her. He looks at her, checking for that feeling

of empathy he picked up from all the powerededs he encountered over the past few days. Relieved to find it absent in her_ ...at least I don't have to worry about her getting involved in this stuff..._ "Hey, what's up?"

"You. When did you go jock on me?" Jill asks, squeezing Chase's arm. "Someone tell you girls like big biceps?"

"Me? In a gym? Around lifters? You have got to be kidding." Chase realizes Jill is right. He's definitely noticed some subtle physical changes in himself.

"And you lost the baby fat around your chin."

"I did not have baby fat."

"Did so. So who're you trying to impress?"

"I had a pretty weird weekend...um, I met someone. She's not what you'd expect. She's a little older. I don't know what to do about her yet but I feel like a mega-spaz around her. I'm not even sure what she thinks of me but you can imagine what I WANT her to think of me, HA," Chase laughs. "Do you think I should do something for her for Valentine's? I mean we only just met."

"Whoa, stop, hold on. How much older?"

"Um, maybe 5 or 6 years?"

"She'll break your heart into a thousand little pieces. Best you get it over with, though. Send her a card and ask her to dinner. After she leaves you a broken shell of a person, you can get on with your life."

"You are so negative. So when is this Red Sky Diaries show? We're still going, right?"

"You mean you'd pass up a chance with Miss Twenty-something to go with me to see a band you hate?"

Chase leans over, mock Clark Gable fashion. "Frankly my dear, I would."

"Ooh. I'll pick you up at 5 on Saturday."

"That's kind of early."

"PM, smart ass."

And at the back of the bus, Bradley Lind watches Chase chatting with Jill. He opens a cellphone and dials a number only known to him.

"Yeah, Coach, he's on the bus. When do you...wait? What for? Fine." He closes the phone and sits back, disappointed, and stares at the houses as the bus drives on.

Tuesday Feb. 8: The Enchanting Ms. McBell -

Jake spends most of his morning following up leads and checking old haunts over again. Still nothing on Jason. It's like he just up and vanished. Jake decides to run by the Commonwealth's Attorney office to make sure Dodge got back OK and

that all the paper work was in order. Jack Fahey was in when Jake stopped by. "Hey Jake, great work on getting Dodge. He arrived this morning. By the way he is not real happy with you right now. You broke his jaw, they had to wire it shut."

"Don't worry it was a pleasure taking him down. That's the part of my job I love. Knowing I can get scum like that off the street. Oh and Jack thanks for helping to get the business with the license fixed."

"No problem. You guys are doing us a big favor with the excellent work that you do. Keep it up. Is there anything else I do for you?"

"I was just wondering if the lovely Ms. McBell was around."

"No, she had to run over to the courthouse this morning and hasn't returned yet. So there's another one smitten by her beauty." Jack can't help but laugh. It's a regular thing in the office and Emma takes a great deal of ribbing because of it. "I'll be sure to tell her you were looking for her."

"Thanks" Jake says with a smile. As Jake is heading down the front stairs, down to his bike parked by the curb, he hears someone call to him. He turns to see his summoner. Emma McBell.

"Mr. Faulkner, how are you today?"

"Fine, Just fine. And you?"

"Fine. I just wanted to thank you on retrieving Mr. Dodge. It was great work. None of our men could find his whereabouts."

"It was nothing, really. I just knew the right places to look. You've got to look in the right places to dip them up." A pause, as they look at each other. "Um, look I was wondering if you weren't busy, maybe we could have dinner tonight?"

"I'm sorry, I have plans. But thank you anyway. I've got to get back to work. Maybe I'll see you later. Bye"

"Bye"

That hadn't gone as well as he had hoped. 'Damn boy, your luck has all run out.'

Tuesday Feb 8, 10 a.m.:

The sun seems excessively bright. _Ooof. Maybe not **quite** so much wine next time._

It had been such a wonderful night, though; Rob hadn't been exaggerating on the quality. _I could really start getting used to this,_ she has to admit to herself; she's gotten a good, long, look at how the other half live, and if Lindsey crossed all her t's and dotted her i's correctly, she's going to be joining them.

Either I sold my soul to the devil and just don't remember it, or it's a kind of Zen thing -- just when I make up my mind to stop worrying about material success and come back here to concentrate on other things, here it is. She knows that she's going to have to do a lot of thinking some time soon, but for the moment

she's content to let the reality sink in slowly, and enjoy the process.

The sheer normalness of the evening, of food and drink and the endless ribbing that went on between all the guys, had gone a long way toward making her feel more grounded than she has in a while. _And I'm glad Alex decided to come._ Watching their interactions as an outsider, still, there was very little hint of how strange and painful a transition she imagined it was for them all, after so many years. But under all the teasing is something she can only name love, rock-solid and somewhat humbling to see. _They really do care; somehow they've managed not to lose track of the important things. Not many people can do that._

She pries herself out of bed and heads for the kitchen in search of orange juice and some aspirin. _Ugh. On the other hand, they'd laugh themselves sick if they saw me like this. Have to work on that tolerance if I'm going to be hanging out with them much. As long as I'm feeling better by tonight._ But that was where she felt strange. As she thought about it, Amanda realized she wasn't hungover. No dry mouth, no headache, no dehydration.

In the span of the walk, she had went from painfully buzzed to completely sober.

As it was, she'd spent pretty much all day Sunday in bed, begged off dinner with her mother and claimed to be sick, which wasn't all that far from the truth. The weekend's events had left her feeling completely worn out, body and spirit, but after her day of rest and night of camaraderie she was feeling more like her old self. _Which is good, because I'd hate to have to postpone this date._

She's looking forward to it with a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty. _I guess no matter how old we are, how experienced we think we are, some things don't change. First steps are always a little awkward._ Maybe a little more so because that initial 0-60, elapsed time none, hadn't really been like her, and she still isn't sure what happened. That strange sympathy effect between powered persons, a thrill of risk at being out in the open like that, the previous night's close brush with mortality, her own delighted surprise that somehow he had known to ask for something she longed to share?

Or all of the above at once. I'm not hearing any warning bells, anyway. We'll see what happens.

Tuesday, Feb 8: Josh's Birthday Party -

Well, here goes. Amanda checks herself critically in the mirror one last time. The black knit dress is modestly flattering -- slightly clinging, but not tight -- and she's left her hair down for a change. She grabs her bag and car keys and heads out. _Just as well I didn't get a dog,_ she thinks with a rueful glance around the place. _This place is more like a storage area than living space right now...._

Not too much later, she's knocking at the door to Josh's apartment in Park Place, and even before he opens the door she can hear the stereo blaring a track from "Living with the Law" by Chris Whitley.

"Hi," she flashes that slightly shy smile, feels a little silly for being at all nervous, but at the same time it's kind of pleasant, in an odd way. "Happy birthday."

"Oh crap is it 8:00 already?" Josh says as he opens the door only half dressed in black leather boots and dark pants towel drying his hair with one hand. He drapes the towel over his shoulder and returns her smile with one of his own. He grabs her by the hand, giving her a peck on the cheek as he closes the door behind her. He uses his powers to lower the volume a bit so the two can talk. "Did I ever tell you I'm notoriously late for everything?" he says laughing. "Make yourself at home while I finish up." and with that he tramps off to another room with the light on and door open.

Back in the bathroom, Josh looks in the mirror again. "Damn, I look good. Like I'm losing body fat and filling in with muscle. Got to battle bad guys more often."

As Amanda glances about his home one of the first things she notices in addition to being sparse is that everything can transform -- a sofa that clearly doubles as a bed, a folding card table for the kitchen, and the like. She remembers a line from a poem she read on the subway once something about the "alchemy of small spaces" and finds herself smiling again to discover another thing they seem to have in common -- though at least in her case the result is less due to personal inclination than to spending years in tiny apartments with roommates. She also notes that it's a lot neater than her place.

Alongside the walls are metal shelves that hold his vast music collection, stereo, TV, VCR, and a pretty complete Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler series of pulp novels. The detective fiction is sprinkled with a light dusting of Latin American writers like Marquez and Allende. All of them are paperbacks. On the walls themselves are old, framed black and white photos of Manhattan at the turn of the last century and through the 50s.

"Never fear, I'm actually a little early." Upon hearing that Josh audibly "shewws" in the other room as Amanda gravitates more or less automatically toward the music collection; it's generally the first thing she looks at wherever she goes. "A diehard vinyl lover, I see?" she grins, glancing over her shoulder to where she saw him disappear. "Nice collection."

"Thanks." He says as she catches a glimpse of him rummaging through a closet looking for a clean white oxford shirt. "Despite all the compilations that are out on CD now there are still a lot of old jazz albums you can only get on vinyl. And forget about the blues -- it just sounds better in lo-fi formats. The pops and crackles of the recording fit. I always feel like a hypocrite when I hear Robert Johnson on a CD."

"They will pry my turntable from my cold, dead fingers," she agrees. "Most of my stuff's on CD, but there are a few that just don't sound right that way. And some I'm just sentimentally attached to. Though every time I move I get an earful from the people helping about why I have to have so much stuff that's both fragile and heavy. They should be glad I don't have a piano, I tell them." She turns from the shelf to survey the rest of the room, feeling a bit more at ease now, and walks slowly along the line of photographs. "This is really nice," she says sincerely.

"I keep most of the CDs and cassettes down at the office for when I'm working late nights." Hearing her steps Josh gathers that she must be talking about one of the antique pictures. "Most of them are of the neighborhood I used to live in back in the city. You'd be surprised how little it's changed over the last 40 years or so." His voice begins to trail off as he enters what must be the adjoining bathroom of his bedroom in this tiny railroad apartment.

"Yeah, it's got a lot more to it than people realize who don't live there." Talking to Marie last night had reminded her that she hasn't really had time to miss the place since she moved.

Suppressing a slight urge to snoop while she's got the chance, Amanda conscientiously folds her hands behind her back and wanders over to the window. "How are things going, with the business? Everything OK with the guy Jake went after?"

Returning back to the bedroom from shoving his hair back with copious amounts of gel he answers her question "Jake always gets his man." Josh leaves it at that -- he sees no need to stain their night alone with talk of blademorphs or any other powered nemeses. He mutters after sliding into his jacket _where the hell is that tie?_

"Glad to hear it -- good heavens, a *tie?*" she teases a little. Standing near the doorway she pauses for an appreciative survey. "You look fine. I didn't intend an evening of torture, you know, it's supposed to be a celebration?"

Reaching into the inside breast pocket he says "A-Ha found it." Looking at Amanda he says "Give me some credit -- it's no "suit" tie". Quickly putting on his bolo tie he adds with a smirk "Now I look fine". It's as cleaned up as he can possibly get and still keep to the roots of his look. Sure Pollack started it and James Dean and Marlon Brando perfected it but it was made for Josh.

Pausing for the first time since her arrival he finally looks Amanda up and down. "But forget about me you look gorgeous." It was the first time he had seen her hair down in civilian clothing and he caresses it as he adds "Now I believe you said something about a celebration?"

"Thanks. And indeed I did, so where to, birthday boy? And y'know, you haven't admitted how old you are," she adds with a slightly mischievous glance from under her bangs. Up close she's startled again by how much taller than her he is. Saturday morning seems an eternity ago.

"29" He says raising her chin up so that their eyes make direct contact "and there's that birthday present smile" he says recalling his jest from that eventful morning.

"Any time," she promises.

Stepping back a pace as he smooths his hand down her arm into her palm he says "I'd kill for good Indian but since that's not gonna happen - d'ya feel up to Mexican? maybe some Italian?"

"After last night, if I have Italian again I might explode," is her wry response. "Or at least have to buy a lot of new clothes. Mexican sounds good, though." She closes her hand around his with a little caressing motion.

"Shall we, then?"

"Yeah." The music dies on the lyrics "I mean skin and all" as Josh turns off the stereo in the middle of "I Forget You Every Day". He opens the door for Amanda and turns the lights off. Pulling the door closed he takes his keys out of his pockets and locks up the apartment.

The couple makes their way to Amanda's VW. Before he misses the chance he mock

punches her in the shoulder shouting "Punch Buggy Blue. No punch back."

"Hey!" she laughs with an unsuccessful attempt to duck. "You know full well the Official Punch Buggy Rules say that only applies to the old ones! There's too many of the new ones around." She disarms the alarm, gets in and reaches across to and open the door for him. It still smells intensely new and hasn't acquired the usual layer of car clutter -- a state that will probably last about a week. There's a blue carnation in the bud vase and a Yo-Yo Ma tape in the deck, _Soul of the Tango_. When she looks around the interior, there's a certain kid-at-Christmas light in her eyes; the novelty has definitely not worn off yet.

"Jalapeno's, here we come, then -- though I might need to ask you to forgive my driving," she adds. "I'm still a bit out of practice." That fact is mainly evident from the careful attention she gives the process, though it's not a long drive. She's very aware of how happy she feels, in the meantime; try though she does not to overanalyze, she notes that there's a certain comfort level to being around him, one that lends itself well to speech or silence but forces neither.

As they pull into the parking lot Josh breaks the silence with "Any landing you can walk away from is a good one. Your driving's fine." As he exits the car he steps into a puddle of melted snow rippling the reflection of Jalepeno's neon sign. "Brrr. It's cold out" He raises his collar and stuffs his hands into his pockets as the two race into the building.

"Is it? I didn't notice," she replies with an innocent look.

Evidently Tuesday isn't a big night for this place; there's no wait for a table for two in the smoking section, and a cheerful young waitress appears out of nowhere to attend to them. "Would you like to order drinks?" she inquires; she doesn't look old enough to consume them.

"I'll stick to sparkling water tonight, thanks," Amanda tells her with a rueful smile. _Besides, I'm driving._

When the waitress has gone, she inquires, "So should I find out if the waiters here will sing for you?"

"I thought you said you weren't going to torture me? he quips. "You know it's funny that you mention it tho' when I was in high school some guys in a marachi band that used to play here lived down the street from me. I didn't know until I was walking around late one night and I saw one guy decked out in full costume with a guitar slung around his back."

"Well, I *could* have just told her...." Amanda points out wickedly, "but I promise I'll be nice. Another case of 'just missed?' I guess I was probably a sophomore when you were a senior, then." She studies him for a moment, not at all hindered by the restaurant's dim light. "I can't quite picture how you might have looked then."

"You didn't miss much with that one -- they weren't as good as they looked." He says wishing he had her eyesight. "Not that different actually...maybe more gangly if you can believe that! And the pompadour may have been a little weak. My mom would inundate you with baby pics if you ever asked her. I used to run around the front yard in my underwear when I was a kid pretending I was Tarzan...I think I managed to hide those from her but I wouldn't put it past her to have copies in a safety deposit box."

"That's a mother's job. Mine'll drag out the old home movies at the drop of a hat," Amanda smiles. She makes a mental note to do something about those before the MTV people can hunt them down. "And my grandparents are even worse, if you can believe it. I think they have a room in their house that's entirely full of family photo albums and slide boxes. And they'll all be labeled. It's scary. I don't think there's any of me pretending to be Tarzan, though," she adds, grinning at the entertaining mental picture of him at that age. "More pink dresses and piano recitals."

"I'm told I look good in yellow canary strapless numbers." Seeing a slightly shocked look on her face he adds "I went to a Halloween party once in drag...almost picked up this really drunk guy too..." he sips his water. "I think Mom has the photo framed somewhere in the house -- she always did want a daughter."

"Sophomore huh? I bet if I scrounged around in my parent's attic I could find a year book photo of you from back then..." he says almost threateningly

She sits back with her arms crossed in a challenging pose. "Go right ahead. I should be in that year..." she pauses to think, "three different places. No, two. Bet you wouldn't recognize me, either; my hair was shorter and I was a lot more shy. I always stood in the back. I think I'd gotten the braces off by then, though."

"We'll see about that." he leans in putting his head on both hands staring over the candle light at her trying to picture the younger her she described. He just can't imagine her without that fire in her eyes. "I can't count how many times I had to help friends dig through cafeteria garbage because they left their retainers on their lunch trays. I guess I'm lucky I never had to worry about any of that stuff. I almost had to get a cap after a fight at Hogs and Heifers but managed to get by"

"It was a pain, in more ways than one, but thank goodness it was a long time ago," Amanda avows. "My brother Joe needed 'em too. Somehow the others got away without them, I'm not sure how. And why am I somehow unsurprised by the idea of you getting into a fight at Hogs n' Heifers?" she says with a raised eyebrow. "You seem to have a downright alarming penchant for getting into trouble." She mirrors his pose, subliminally aware that the waitress is certainly taking her sweet time and not minding in the least.

After a long moment of contemplation she reaches across the table to touch the back of his hand, takes it gently in her own. "You know, I've really been looking forward to this. What happened the other day was...well, not something I would normally do, to be totally honest, I'm usually kind of slow about this kind of thing, but it seemed... right, somehow. Might have been a historic first, too," she adds with a quick grin, but returns to a more serious tone. "Anyway, I just want you to know that... thank you," she ends simply, unable to find any better words.

"Me too," he says as he kisses her hand. "So slow I miss the opportunity some times...I couldn't let that happen again. Not this time, Not you." The candle light wavers as a waiter passes by with the light reflecting off her lips. He kisses her tenderly and if it this were a movie instead of their lives the camera when fade slowly to black.

Wednesday Feb. 9: Jake's Bombshell -

Josh had been up late last night working on the gift he planned to give Amanda and he was tired but the combination of sleeplessness and excitement didn't stop him from wondering what was eating his brother. Jake had been unusually quiet all morning. He could tell Jake's mood hadn't improved the whole time he was downtown during his lunch hour at Jalepeno's trying to track down that band. He had managed to score a lead or two that might pan out. "She'd get a kick out that" he thinks as he shrugs off his wool cap, scarf, and p-coat onto the coat rack in almost one motion. He'd had a lot of practice over the last two years. It was little challenges like that that kept him from going batty at work.

Making his way over to his desk he cranks on the space heater he keeps under his desk. After making the proper notation in the ledgers and reflecting on the costs of repairing the damages to the office from Dodge's attack and the cash he just shelled out to Fahey on Monday he was glad they had the check clearing soon from McBell.

The wait for Jake to say something begins to drive him slowly crazy and he begins tapping furiously and quiet sub-consciously with his pen on his in-tray bin while he reviews the accounts payable report on his old monitor.

Jake has been waiting for the right moment to talk to Josh. More like the courage to confront him, he doesn't think it will go well. He had wanted to wait till after Josh's birthday. He didn't want to bring this on him and ruin the evening. The office party last night with Mom and Margaret was a blast even if Josh left earlier then he would've expected -- they all knew what must be up but didn't ride him too much.

He figures this is the best chance he is going to get. Do it before Margaret gets back from her lunch break. Wouldn't want to air things out too much with her here. Jake turns to Josh. "We need to talk. Talk about the way things are going."

"Sure bro, What's on your mind?" He can hear how tense Jake is and Josh sees no reason to make whatever's getting to him more difficult by not giving him his full attention; he sets the pen aside and turns away from the monitor to view his brother. "Is this about Dad and the living will? He's still toughing it out so far. I don't think his lawyer would try anything yet."

"No it's not about Dad. I don't think there is any problem with the living will yet. I spoke with Dr. Beacon Sunday and Dad is still holding his own. But that's not what I wanted to talk about. It has something to do with it but it's more than just that." Jake pauses and takes a deep breath then continues. "I've been thinking a lot lately about the direction that my life has been headed. I'm not happy with the way things are going. I've got to make a change." Jake pauses to read Josh's reaction so far, nothing there but a somewhat puzzled expression. So far so good. "Josh, I want to go back to school. Full time. I need to finish my degree and see where that takes me."

"Man, I couldn't be happier for you. We'll work on whatever paperwork you need here and get you set up for the Fall...hell, we could probably even squeeze you into some summer classes before then. The place'll be boring around here but if you want we can bring on someone else." The business was Josh's responsibility and he hated that Jake got wrangled into it in the first place.

Jake is taken back a bit. He hadn't expected Josh to be so quick to agree.

"Nah...I'll still hunt for the company...but there's also more than that. I don't

think that working with the Millennium group is the best thing for me. It just not right for me. When it finally hit me about Dad's condition worsening I kind of went into shock. Everything blurred and I couldn't tell which way was up. My trip down to Georgia and back gave me lots of time to think things through and get it all clear. I know now that I need to get on with my life. To accomplish the goals I set out to do."

Jake continues even as he sees his brother totally shocked -- he'd never seen that expression before on Josh's pointy face.

"I just don't see the Millennium group being in those plans. Life is too short to take the risks that you guys are taking. I can see that you're happy with the group. The happiest that I've seen you since you moved back here. But it's not right for me. I'm not happy with you being with the team. In the matter of a couple of days two of you were put in the hospital and then there is that near miss on your thick skull. I just don't want to see you get yourself killed. I couldn't take losing you and Dad. And I know Mom couldn't take it either."

It's sometime before Josh responds to his brother's bombshell...and if Jake had not zinged in the bit about how he shouldn't be in the group either his reaction would be different. His face contorts with a rising temper as he blurts, "Jake you wanna be a fscking cop for crying out loud -- you're taking just as much a risk as the group is, maybe even more." He throws his arms up in the air as he punctuates the sentiment. "I know exactly why you want to be a cop...We've got the chance to make a big difference out there even take some of the heat off the bluebells. I'm not asking you to give that up so don't ask me. I couldn't give that up for you or for Mom or anyone else, damn it!"

That was the response that Jake was expecting. Josh is normally pretty cool but when he gets rattled he can blow his stack just as much as Jake. It just takes a lot more. "Josh I'm not asking you to quit Millennium, I knew you wouldn't. All I'm saying is I'm not comfortable with the situation. Don't even go there about how dangerous a cop's life is. The force is a whole different situation. You know that. You're working with guys that you can trust. The risks are inherent but there a lot lower than going up against guys who make up napalm in their bath tub."

"The only difference I see is that we're still alive after that - Tuck wouldn't be so lucky...and if the Millennium wasn't around you'd better believe that the Mask would have this town in his god damn pocket right now. Jason would be dead instead of on the run. And I don't know what's going on in your head but I know I can trust Carl and Amanda..."

The "debate" is halted as Sound hears Margaret about 5 feet away from the door. As she comes in Josh grabs his coat and exits out of the office before the door even closes muttering "I can't be here right now."

Jake watches stunned as Josh storms out. Margaret shots him a questioning look. Jake just shrugs his shoulders. "And he calls me hot headed." Jake sits down at his desk and continues his paper work. But he can't take it for long and leaves early.

Thursday morning, Feb. 10 Breakfast with Amanda's mom:

Amanda all but bounces into the restaurant, humming to herself, and sees her

mother wave from a booth across the room. No sign of Robert; she feels a brief, somewhat guilty wave of relief and makes her way over to where Rose is sitting.

"Hi! I hope you weren't waiting long, I kind of overslept."

"I was just seated a moment ago," Rose assures her.

"Oh good." She slides in across from her mom and smooths her skirt carefully; a Laura Ashley print with a matching vest that she hasn't worn in at least two years. But she can't exactly show up for brunch in the ratty jeans and Hole T-shirt she wore to the last rehearsal, so.... "Uh, where's Dad?" Thinking that it would be weird if she didn't ask, wondering if her voice sounds as unnatural as she feels it does.

"Duty calls, or so I'm told -- some emergency at the office. You seem very happy this morning?"

"I am," is Amanda's unhesitating reply.

"Mr. Mystery?" she guesses with unerring instinct, opening her menu.

"Mostly. Things in general are just going really well right now, though."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Do I get to hear anything about him yet, or would you rather rapturize silently?" she teases. "I don't remember one getting this kind of reaction in quite a while."

Amanda points a stern fork. "If you even mention grandchildren, I'm out of here," she warns with a grin. "We went on **one** date, and things went pretty well, and I hope they will again. We have a lot in common," (more than you'll ever know, she adds privately), "he's very nice, very attractive, and doesn't take himself too seriously. And that's all I'm going to say about the matter."

"I see." Rose raises an amused eyebrow. "I'll just wish you well, then, shall I? What else have you been keeping yourself busy with these days, since I notice you're almost never home? It's worse than when you were in New York, at least then Marie answered the phone once in a while and I could find out from her what you were up to."

"Oh, I haven't been doing much," Amanda replies -- a little too blithely, she realizes immediately, and adds, "we've been real busy at the studio with this MTV thing. I swear, Alain was a slave driver in his last incarnation. I think he's worried I might flake out on them at the last minute, or something."

Over a light and pleasantly drawn-out meal, they chat about the changes that have taken place in town since Amanda went away, almost eight years ago now; and about things she and Robert are thinking of doing to the house, now that Joe is almost done with school and a truly empty nest looms ahead. Rose mentions that she is volunteering part-time at one of the local nursery schools, adding quite innocently that she misses being around children. She has a couple of dog-eared plant catalogs in her purse, and shows Amanda some of the new varieties she's thinking of for the garden this year. And they talk about music, of course; Rose is still a regular at LPO performances, and she ran into Amanda's old piano instructor a few weeks back, which provides quite a bit of conversational fodder.

Bidding farewell after a brief debate over who should get the check,

Amanda's pleasure in the morning is sharply outlined by her awareness that it can't last. Sooner or later she'll have to deal with her father, for one thing, and God only knows what might happen then. _I should talk to the others and see if they have any ideas. I mean, we don't *know* that he's doing anything, or if he is we don't know *what* he's doing, and I'm not sure how to find out either way._ It's strange and still painful to think about it. _I wish Book would show up again. I'd like to talk to him about this._ And even without that looming issue, she is unhappy about the deceit she must engage in, the wall she's going to have to construct between the parts of her life; honesty is a part of how she defines herself, and she's not comfortable with shading the truth. But for the moment, she's still determined not to worry about these things until she has to.

Friday, Februry 12. Rupp Arena

Carl shooshed through the skaters like they were standing still. His stick skimmed above the ice as he weaved in and out, never quite touching, but occasionally spurting aside a stray ice chip that unwisely poked above the surface. The pass was behind him, but he easily spun around, retaining his forward momentum. Extending the stick, he touched it to him, then slapped it clean between his legs. "He shoots he scores!"

Allie squealed in delight, and held her pint-sized stick above her head. Rae whined, "I wanna play too, Daddy," then lost her balance, and fell on her training-pants-padded bottom. Carl slowed way down, returning some level of comfort to the mothers and children he'd been weaving through, and glided up to his fallen daughter. He easily scooped her up with one hand, and restored her to her feet.

"Too fast, too fast Daddy!" panicked Rae, clutching at his arm as the ice sped by beneath her blades. He maintained balance for both of them, laughing happily as he slowed down until she regained control.

"I can go fast, Daddy, I'm not afraid!" boasted Allie. "Watch me, watch me!" The little girl awkwardly built up speed, pumping her stick as she narrowed on the puck.

"Take it easy, chica, control is more important than speed. See if you can..." but she'd already missed the stationary puck with her extended stick.

"By meself," protested Rae as she tried to get free of Carl's grip. Allie started bearing down on them with a gleeful look, Carl spun at her approach, carefully launching Rae behind him.

"Check into the boards, Daddy, I'm gonna get you..."

"Stick down, Allie, no penalties, stick dow..ooOOOFFF!" Carl easily absorbed the little girl's hit, but he pantomimed a much larger impact. With one hand he grabbed her to him, comically windmilling his stick with the other. He staggered on the ice, then caved backwards, piling Rae on top of him for good measure. He wrapped his lips over his teeth, then smacked his jaws. "My teef! You mocked my teef out! Now we fight!" Carl and his daughters fell to giggling incoherence as he traded tickling for their ineffectual play-fight blows.

Several mothers and kids skated wide around them, with reactions varying between suspicion at the large man cavorting with little girls to wide smiles at the open warmth. Guiltily noticing their passage, Carl corralled his daughters to the boards, shifting their sticks out of the path of other skaters. "Who's ready for

pizza?"

"ME!"

"Me Daddy, me!"

"Get your sticks, c'mon, let's see who can make it to the steps without falling."

"Allie's too good," complained Rae.

"Allie, you go backwards."

"I can do it Daddy!" she said defiantly before falling on her can. "Start over, start over!"

As Carl bent to help her up, his eyes happened to fall into the stands that surrounded the rink, now mostly empty. In the shadows, in the upper seats, he noticed with an unpleasant shock a figure he recognized. When he was sure Carl saw him, the figure rose and worked around to the exit. His agent, Chuck Marston, left without a word to him.

* * *

Carl sat next to Rae, and across from Allie in the plastic picnic-bench-like seats that were arrayed beyond the ice inside the warehouse-like rink. An open pizza box revealed a gutted pie, with cheese entrails splayed over his daughters' plates. He begrudgingly nodded to his ex-wife Roxanne that she allowed him an extra day during his monthly visits when his hockey schedule allowed. Though he chalked it up to getting rid of the girls for a Friday night of clubbing, the slap was more mechanical than malicious.

Whatever the reason, he treasured the time. All around, sweat-shirted mothers and bundled children slid past to and from the rink. For a vaguely undefinable reason, Carl was amused that on a Friday afternoon he seemed to be the only adult male in the place. With a start, he realized that his eyes had been caught by an attractive young mother, towing an eight-year-old boy. He quickly looked away, angry with himself for scoping the room with his daughters right there. "What do you want to do this afternoon, chicas?" he hurriedly asked.

"I dunno, go to the zoo!" blurted out Rae. Allison, a little older, scowled at her father. Carl was taken aback until he realized the woman had approached him with her son. Allison peevishly slapped her hands onto her pants as the woman spoke.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt." She nervously pushed back her auburn hair and gave Carl a winning smile. Carl caught the flash of diamond before it buried itself in her tresses. "My son Gibson noticed you -- you play hockey don't you?"

"Guilty." Allison's mood kept him from shifting outright into flirtation mode, though he did manage a good-humored smirk.

"Would you mind signing his stick for him...?" The boy shifted uncomfortably.

"You play for the Thoroughblades, right? You're the 'Tequila' guy, right?" Carl grimaced with exaggerated pain. Some bright organist got the idea to break into 'Tequila' after particularly nice hits -- which was better than the Canadian leagues where he got 'La Cucaracha.' The boy's mother hissed in panic.

"That's alright," laughed Carl easily, brushing her forearm. She rewarded him with a guilty blush. "Let's see the stick, hombre. What position you play? You look tough enough for defense. Defense, like me?" Not likely. For his age, he'd get rolled over. The stick looked brand new, not a scuff on it.

"I play forward, but I could play defense."

Carl hastily scrawled 'Viva Thoroughblades', then C-d-l-C in the quadrants around a cross -- his professional signature since sixteen. "You c'n play anything you put yer mind to, hombre, and don't let no one tell you diff'rent. We'll look for you in the league in a few." His broad wink to the boy was not lost on the mother.

There was an awkward pause when the woman searched for something to keep the conversation going. "You're so wonderful with your daughters...are these your daughters?" Carl caught the glance at his hand, the search for the ring. Allie made a rude harrumph.

"Yes, I'm sorry, I only get to see them once a month..."

"Oh! I didn't mean to intrude!" she backed off, taken aback by his sudden change in vibe. "Maybe we'll see you here some other time..." she waved and hurried her son away. Carl clenched his teeth in the face of Allison's now-black mood. She was old enough to sense her father's moves and resent them without even understanding them. Mierde! Would it kill him to play it down when they're here? It could turn ugly, come teen years.

He smiled nervously at Rae, still thankfully ignorant. She was trying to do her initials in tomato sauce, around a cross like her daddy had just done. "I sign autographs too, Daddy!

Marston was actually waiting for him at his apartment. The first time since Carl moved to the 'wrong' side of town he'd done that. Chuck smiled wide, his closing-the-deal smile. "Chicas!" he bellowed, spreading his arms.

"Uncle Chaz!" They laughed and ran to him, giving him a hug.

"Hey, Carlos, got a minute?" Chuck's eyes were hard, but he was too much the consummate huckster for a hint of it to echo into his voice.

"Sure. C'mon in." Carl led upstairs and unlocked his door. "Chicas, you put on the TV in Daddy's room, ok? Uncle Chaz and I need to talk." They broke into a babbling sprint for the coveted remote control.

"S'up, Chuck?"

"Carl, you got a problem with the way I'm running things?"

"Huh? What're you...?"

"You're not injured. A blind man could see that this afternoon. You never struck me as a slacker."

Carl reddened, and leaned slightly into Chuck. The agent was too savvy after years of experience around the leagues to be intimidated even slightly. "That ain't me."

"Yeah, I know. But I can't figure how this helps you. You got complexion most of the league doesn't. It gets you noticed. A breakout year lands you right in the show, and this is as close as we've ever been. So I'll be damned if I can figure..."

Carl eyed his agent but for all his mind's spinning came up with nothing to say.

"Carl, I looked around. There isn't any 'Millennium Investments.' You're not thinking of jumping on me, are you? You can't tell me any other agent could get you what I have, what I can."

Carl jumped visibly. "Whaat? That ain't it..."

"Then what? You know it happens in this league -- agents taking promising kids to the bigs, then getting dumped..." 'before the big payoff' is what Chuck had the wisdom not to finish with, though the sentiment was plain.

Carl cast about for something to satisfy Marston's suspicion, anything to get him away from the 'Millennium' line. "They ain't renewin' my contract."

"Huh?"

"The 'Blades. Islanders don't want no geezers on the squad..."

"_Dammit_," swore Chuck with fervor. "I'm still your man right? Let me get on the phone..."

"They want me ta coach."

The sound of smashing cash registers was almost audible in the room. Marston got nothing from coaching gigs. He was too smooth to show the devastation, but his eyes were decidedly hooded. "What have you told them?"

"Nothin'. Look, I know yer kickin' ass for me. I know when you signed me, the bigs was all I dreamed about. There been some changes since then." When Marston's eyes darted to the back room, where the girls were, Carl was inwardly relieved that the bait was taken.

"You know you go to coaching now, you're done. You'll never give them any more than this..." Chuck gestured to the rundown apartment.

Carl reddened and his voice tightened. "I don't think that's as big a' argument as you think it is. This ain't the time for this. Why don't you get goin'?"

Chuck covered his gaffe with a who-was-the-clod-that-said-that smile. "Yeah, no problem Carlos. Look, don't make any decision until we talk, and I mean _really_ talk. Give me a few days to line some things up. Can you do that for me?"

"Sure Chuck. In a few." Chuck's warmth bravely fought a chill departure. Carl sighed, then turned to his bedroom. "Ok! Who wants popcorn!" His mood brightened with every step.

Friday, February 12th, Washington DC. The Grand Hyatt downtown.

Robert Halle had listened to the kingmakers for weeks now, and finally committed himself to what they recommended. They wanted him to position himself for a

gubernatorial run in Kentucky. He wasn't an experienced politician, but the incumbent was weak; a combination of tax breaks and tobacco relief would sweep him into Frankfort.

Now, alone in his hotel room, he stood before the mirror in the bathroom adjusting his tie. The limo would arrive soon to take him to the Kennedy Center, a guest of the Senator himself. But Robert wasn't alone, hadn't been since New Year's Eve. There was something else, whispering to him in the late hours well after Rose had fallen asleep. Like a trainer, the voice had coached him, made him more focused than he had been in years. His business interests had never been more profitable. Still, the voice urged him onward. More. Better.

You can make a difference. Clean up the world.

Robert heard the voice grow louder, week by week. And he slowly bought in to the message. Only he could make a difference in the growing dark times.

Everything you've always wanted. You can accomplish. I can help.

Maybe it was the last few belts from the mini-bar. Maybe it was seeing his once formidable physical condition fade for years, but now inexplicably returning to form at his advanced age. Maybe it was something to do with astrology.

Give yourself over to my counsel.

Whatever the cause, the last vestiges of Robert Halle, those parts that appreciated westerns and built a family and treasured the all too rare fishing trips to the Florida Panhandle, blew away, leaving something behind that resembled Robert Halle. But it wasn't him. Not anymore. And that was a good thing, because maybe if anyone ever learned the truth they may feel some sadness on his behalf.

He faced the mirror, a brightness in his eyes of pure cunning and disdain for all, but especially those powereds who opposed him. With a clear voice he spoke, nodding at the reflection, and at the place he would make for himself in the nation.

"I am the anthem sung by true Americans. I am freedom, and justice, and liberty."

"I am America."

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