

[Turn 27]

Monday, February 7th, precisely 10:25 p.m. London time, Heathrow Airport.

The Concorde touched down at Heathrow, a flawlessly routine landing. Sir William Eric Paine, and his loyal manservant Tehsin Said, were home. They and the rest of Concorde's one hundred passengers deplaned and entered the terminal.

He was waiting for them to arrive, as was his job. Certain arrivals were to always have an official greeter waiting, to smooth over the transition from international passenger to welcome guest of the British Empire. Standing in line for customs simply wasn't an acceptable way to make some guests spend the beginning of their journey. The greeter's name was Fitzsimons with just the one 'M' as he had to tell people sometimes. He had spent much of his youth with the British military, moving into the elite Special Boat Squadron and training with special squadrons of US Navy Seals and German Kampfschwimmers, until the day the polite man from Hyde Park had come to SBS headquarters and informed him of a new assignment.

Oh, there was no doubting the importance of escorting assets safely from and to their destinations. Indeed, it had taken only three trips before Fitzsimons discovered just how important and dangerous the job could be. The rpg had put a fragment into the back of his left hand, and on nights when the wind was blowing in from the Thames, Fitzsimons was reminded of the grim Bulgarians who had put it there and nearly put him in a box.

Sir William was no fool, even at his advanced age. Fitzsimons noted how Sir William had picked him out immediately, let him know he'd been noted, and done so in such a discreet manner...Fitzsimons was almost ashamed for a moment. \_That's how the professionals become old professionals,\_ Fitzsimons thought quietly.

Sir William headed for the proper exit gate, Fitzsimons carefully following and watching even as Tehsin Said did the same thing. A car rumbled patiently in the misty British night, as the driver opened the door for the new arrivals. Sir William entered the back, Tehsin the front, and Fitzsimons the back as well. The driver closed the doors and reentered the compartment. A moment later, the car was rushing through the night, toward the heart of London; inside, Sir William was very surprised to see who was waiting for him.

"George? By Harry, it's been, what 30 years?" Sir William said to the bespectacled man with the apologetic face. "I thought you'd retired long ago."

"Some had thought the same of you, William," George replied as he cleaned a bit of moisture from his glasses. "Welcome to London."

"Thank you." A glass of brandy was waiting for William, and he took it, raising it to George. "To your Anne."

"And to your Vera. Our angels in life; may they watch us from Heaven now."

They drank, the quiet toast to the other's departed mate uninterrupted by the drive or the weather outside.

"George, you're not here just as an old friend, are you?"

"No, William. Official Secrets Act. I've been involuntarily recalled. Eight weeks ago I was just another civilian, albeit one who still expected some grudge-bearing Cold War adversary to come out of the cold and collect his due. After the New Year, young Fitzsimons there showed up on my doorstep with his hat in hand and a letter in his pocket from, well, you can guess that I'm sure."

"Something to do with the powered people in the world," William said without bothering to ask for clarification. George nodded.

"Something like that."

William settled back. "I take it I'm going to be 'invited' back to the Circus as well?"

"We're not going to Hyde Park, William. Your destination is a bit more royal."

"The Palace?"

"Correct. I should finish that brandy, if I were you."

The sedan drove on through the London night, and was soon admitted to an underground car park not far from Buckingham Palace. Sir William, George, Fitzsimons, and Tehsin boarded a small rail car and traveled a short distance. From there, an elevator took the group to a secure room, where heavily armed SAS troopers allowed Sir William and George to depart through another door. Fitzsimons and Tehsin took seats in the antechamber to wait with the guards.

Now they were inside the Palace proper, and an aide in suit and tie escorted them into a drawing room. Three men and one woman waited by a window, conversing quietly. George led Sir William to the group.

"Your Royal Highness, may I present Sir William Eric Paine?" George said. Sir William bowed gracefully as the Prince of Wales, dressed in a well-tailored navy suit, approached.

"Sir William, thank you for coming. I apologize for the change in your anticipated schedule," said the heir apparent to the throne.

"Your Highness, it is my privilege to serve."

"My late Uncle Louis spoke of you several times during my childhood. He was impressed with your bravery, dedication, and resourcefulness."

"He exceeded me in all those categories, Your Highness."

The heir nodded, in thanks. "I have a request to make of you, Sir William. I wish for you to accept a position with the Parliament Office of Science and Technology, a position that will be formally offered to you tomorrow morning."

"In what capacity, Your Highness?"

The Prince motioned for Sir William to follow him across the drawing room. "Your personal experience and knowledge of the powered person phenomenon, in addition to your exemplary history of service to the Crown in capacities official and unofficial,

makes you the most qualified individual to lead a new section of the Office."

\_Personal experience\_ thought Sir William. \_Safe to bet he knows I am one.\_ "This section...what would my duties entail?"

"You will oversee a staff of five researchers, initially. Much of their work will be analysis. You will be expected to evaluate this research, to educate Parliament on this phenomenon. I want a voice of reason to keep the Houses from making reactionary decisions, your voice, Sir William."

"Your Highness, are you saying that my work will affect how persons...powered persons...will be treated on a legislative basis?"

"That will likely be the case. We know very little of how or why this phenomenon has happened, and we want to understand. Today, isolated parts of society, affected directly by this, battle amongst themselves. In Cuba, a man called Helios Hope has assumed leadership of the island. We are certain this Helios Hope is a powered person." The heir exhaled quietly, spoke softly now. "There's going to be more, in positions of authority throughout the world. Our relevancy as a nation may suffer, in less than a generation, if we don't take steps now to learn all we can. Sir William, every research facility at every university and military installation has been working constantly for over a month. They know nothing. They don't have your qualifications."

He stepped back from Sir William, nodded again. "May I expect your answer by tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Sooner. I will gladly accept the position, provided the Houses give me time to analyze what we learn."

"You will have that time, Sir William. Thank you." And with that, the heir motioned to George, to escort Sir William out of the room. George looked more apologetic than he had at the airport.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you, George," Sir William replied as Fitzsimons and Tehsin fell into step with them as they entered the secure room and walked in the direction of the rail car.

"But, George, I came here to retrieve copies of evidence, which I'd hoped to use in America, to thwart a growing criminal concern. I can't just leave my comrades in the lurch like this."

"So we'll send a replacement on your behalf."

"I don't know who I'd trust to carry out this investigation."

"I do. Your grandson."

"Colin?"

"He is one of our top agents. And, he's at your hotel. I've already secured the authorization for him to travel to America, resolve this problem, and return."

"Looks like I've been skillfully maneuvered into this, George."

"It's what I do, William. Sorry."

Saturday, February 13th. The WT Young Library, UK campus.

Jake quietly enjoyed breathing in the cool of the library, the books giving the circulating air a feeling of academia. He liked being a student again. Just part of a crowd of students, walking around campus. He liked it so much, Jake's first stop after working out on a Saturday morning was to drive down to the library and study.

Inside, a little voice was trying to tell him he was running away, from himself, his destiny. His family. Jake closed off the little voice, and pretended he hadn't heard it. He wasn't running from anything. Just because he'd chosen a study room on the third floor, perfectly isolated from the outside world, that didn't mean anything.

He was taking advantage of the opportunity to ease back into classroom life. Dr Popki had organized a few of the electives Jake studiously avoided his last time on campus. History 105 being one of them, mid-17th Century Europe to be exact. The Ottoman Empire, to be even more painfully precise.

That was when he felt a pain begin to form in his midsection. Jake reached for a Nutrigrain bar, suddenly realized he wasn't hungry. Something outside the room...

Jake looked out the small window of the study room, at the third floor. He didn't see anyone at first, then noted some movement. There were two of them, talking between two shelves of books. One came walking right toward him, then. But he wasn't coming to the room, Jake realized, but going to the stairs nearby. He took a good look at the guy, while his emotions began to fire into anger. The guy was skinny, with close cropped red hair and a pierced nose. He wore a black denim jacket and jeans, and high boots. His face turned in a perpetual sneer. Jake saw him wince as he walked by the study room, and for a moment he felt the guy was going to burst right in the room and start a fight. "Bring it..." Jake waited in anticipation.

But he moved on, down the stairs, whooping a little too loud for the library. And Jake knew, somehow, this guy was going to drag him back into what he wanted most to avoid.

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Saturday morning. On the road with Carl and the Thoroughblades. Destination, Philadelphia.

"Ah, Amedika, is beautiful at 4 a.m., yes?" Carl felt a nudge in his ribs as he tried to catch up on a little more sleep.

"Yeah, jus' gorgeous. You know, we do have extra letters in the alphabet, like the R you keep leaving out of America," Carl replied.

Fyodr shrugged. "Am pleased to be in Amedika, no matter what it is spelled. Is being too early for Egg McMuffin?"

"'Fraid so. Give it about three more hours."

"So tell me," Fyodr leaned over a bit. "Is true club is not resigning older players?"

"So I hear. At least, they ain't resignin' me?"

"No! You good playink now. Fast, even sometimes."

"Guess my birthday's a little too fast."

"You are movink on, then?"

"I don't know, Fyodr. I have a chance to stay here, just not as a player."

"Am sayink screw that. Everyone is knowink lack of quality back line in NHL."

"You think I should move on?"

"Yes. You are movink on. There is needs. Even for ugly, what is word, chicas like you."

"Chicas? That's girls, Fyodr. Stick to english, com-raid."

"Have overheard trainers, Chica Carl. Say you have 3% body fat. Say you have no trace of injury. You give up while the body still works to play? Ha. Who is Crazy Ivan now?"

"It ain't jus' me, anymore," Carl said, as he looked out the window at the darkness o Eastern Kentucky. The mist on the distant mountains, where some places still make moonshine and mine coal, like they did a century before. Light as air, the mist still hung on the mountains like a great secret weight those on the mountain never knew existed. Carl thought he could identify with that.

"Ah, is daughters almost as beautiful as Fyodr's little Nathalie. Carl is afraid of NHL carousel."

"I ain't afraid o'nothing." Carl said, unconvincingly.

"Nyet. Is ok. Carl is not wanting to go from Vancouver to Chicago to Nashville."

"No, the money would help."

"Money helping? Ah, you are tellink judge how payink for nanny will make up for six months of road trips and training camp, and not seeing little babies for weeks at a time. Judge is not buyink that over mother, not unless Carl is traded to Rangers to make 80 million Amedikan dollars."

"Bastard."

"Is true. Fyodr is bastard. But not Fyodr's fault. Am certain father would have married mother had KGB not executed him."

"Cripes. I didn't mean it that way."

"Is ok. Am indulging in self-pity because am not having Egg McMuffin for three hours. And with that, Fyodr leaned over to the window, and fell asleep.

In the darkness of the morning, while the mist hung on the mountains like a great secret weight, Carl felt some sympathy. His shoulders bore the weight of a decision t make. And he had no idea what he was going to do.

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Ten minutes to 5 p.m., Saturday evening. Chase's house.

He had the whole week to be angry, and Chase and his father had a couple of memorable blow-ups. Especially Wednesday night. Now, 'she' was here, and in a few minutes would leave with her father. On a 'shudder' date.

"Chase," Dominique said. "How are you?"

Chase just exhaled pointedly. He'd had one of those weeks, one that had set a new world's record for plain suckiness. His efforts at tracking down Coach Screwball or Eightball, or whatever he called himself now, had gotten nowhere. He knew he'd cracked the right systems, there just wasn't any data to find on the former coach turned powered nutboy. The Nightcrawler had helped, as he had promised, but had no luck either. The coach had moved away, no forwarding address, and had left no impression on the neighbors, despite the Nightcrawler's efforts to ask with only a mild threat hinted at in his voice.

"Sorry, man. I get back Sunday night, we smoke him out," the Nightcrawler promised.

Chase sighed again. "Bad week."

Dominique nodded, and stood away from the table as the Colonel emerged from the stairway. Chase contemplated the butcher's block of knives nearby, and spent a few cheering seconds calculating how much damage he could do to the happy couple. Then, Jill arrived at the door.

"There's your friend, son. Have a good time," the Colonel said. Chase just frowned, and the Colonel simply wasn't going to get into it. Not tonight.

"Goodnight, Chase," Dominique said. He barely nodded to her. She said a polite hello to Jill as she entered.

"Hey," Jill replied, and watched the two leave. Then looked to Chase at the table. Heard the Hank Williams playing from the upstairs bedroom. Put it together pretty quick.

"So that's her."

"Yup."

"Pretty girl."

"Uh huh."

"Absolutely horrible taste in men."

"Look, can we just go? I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine by me," Jill replied. "You like the dress?"

Chase looked at Jill as she turned around. She wore a nice green dress, and a string of pearls. The dress matched her eyes.

"This why you made me wear khakis and a collared shirt?"

"That's right."

"So, you never have told me the whole deal about this concert."

"Simple. I like Red Sky Diary. Z had a contest to watch them shoot an MTV special. I called, I won. There's a limo outside with a fridge full of snacks, and a whole bunch of band stuff. I even won one of those roadie jackets that people on eBay try to sell

for like a thousand dollars."

"Congrats. Hey, I am glad you won. Really."

"Good. Now come on. Besides, you can stop moping about that girl. Once you get to the show, you'll forget all about her."

"You think so?" Chase asked.

"Uh huh. You know what type of women show up for these kind of gigs?" Jill asked in return.

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\_Supermodels. Ugh.\_ Amanda groaned as she surveyed the scene.

It was the night of the MTV Unplugged shoot, and the large first floor was filled with at least a hundred guests. There were the recording label guys, with their tiny phone glued to their ears, chatting at warp speed. There were friends of friends, people who had wrangled their way in due to connections with the producers from MTV. And there were the women. All of them were stunning.

\_Poor Josh,\_ Amanda thought as she saw him trying desperately not to stare too long in any one direction. \_He's sweet.\_

She saw Alex walking the floor, Shelley at his side with her ever-present Pilot pad. A non-stop parade of well-wishers lined up to see him. Alex had mentioned that their distribution deal ended with the release of the Unplugged CD, and the band's label would be looking for a new deal. Said deal would be incredibly profitable for both the band and whoever the lucky distributor was. Each supplicant gave Alex a get-well gift: new watches, jewelry, electronic stuff, all hideously expensive. He accepted each in turn with charm and grace. A large man in a yellow Bill Graham Security jacket would take the gifts away after each visitor departed.

Jonas was on the floor, eating canapes and chatting with a small group of military-looking young men and women. He'd sent some tickets along to Fort Campbell. The rest of the band, like Amanda, were still upstairs. She found out today that she wasn't the only one with a tech. Mason worked for her, tuning her basses and other equipment. Rob had a drum tech, a smallish, wiry Japanese man with a deep tan and a penchant for chain-smoking Camels; his name was Mr Lett. And Alain's tech, Barber, looked like a classic Unix geek. He wore a grey beard, and suspenders instead of a belt. Barber could make a passable Santa Claus, Amanda thought. But the geek part was right. All the techs were highly skilled engineers, and Barber had the toughest assignment in ensuring Alain's billion dollar vocals sounded flawless.

Suddenly, she was aware of someone standing at her shoulder. Rob was there, resplendent in classic black t-shirt and jeans, and what looked like alligator boots. He lightly twirled a pair of drumsticks.

"Smallest crowd we've played in front of in a decade. Also the biggest." He pointed to the jungle gym of lights and cameras surrounding the stage; everything was robotically controlled.

"Rob, whose idea was it for the carts?"

"Alex. He said he wanted a good hot dog, so there you go." All of the h'ors d'oeuvres servers were using white carts with red and white umbrellas, stationed throughout the

floor. One of the carts, however, was an honest to goodness, New York Sabrett hot dog cart, complete with honest to goodness New York hot dog vendor. He was doing a brisk trade, too. Alex swore by onion sauce and relish.

"You self-indulgent rock stars," Amanda said.

"Join the club. You feel all right?"

"I just want to get started. I feel like I'm going to..." She thought about it for a split second. Maybe 'explode' wasn't the right word she should use. "Burst. That's it."

"You'll be fine. Put your shoulders back and breathe, in through the nose, out through the mouth." Rob left, as a makeup person dragged him off for some touch-up work.

"Sheesh. I thought the limit would be sixty people," said a new voice behind Amanda.

"Guess not, Alain."

"I don't mind the fans, don't get me wrong. It's all the industry people here for a free meal, just to 'be seen'. Bastardes."

"Necessary evil?"

"Right on both counts m'amie. You ready?"

"Yup. Mason got my monitor today, and we got it tuned in about an hour ago. I'm surprised how comfortable it is in the ear."

"Saves your hearing, too. Wish we had them ten years ago. Ok." Alain patted her shoulder and left.

About then, Jonas came bounding up the stairs, and threw a solid arm around Amanda, and grinned at Josh down below. For a normal guy, Jonas had arms like steel pipes. "Been chatting with your companion. He's a good guy."

"I know. Thank you."

"Told him if he ever treats you wrong, I'd tie him in a knot. Heh."

"Jonas!"

"Oh, it's ok," he grinned his most disarming grin. "He's almost certain I'm kidding. You doing ok?"

"Yes, everyone keeps asking me that, you know?"

"No."

"Oh."

"Look, we appreciate how hard you've worked. You're a real pro, Amanda, and you are going to make this a memorable show. We've been out of circulation pretty much for the past three years. Tonight, we return, triumphant. As it should be." The two of them watched a young couple, her in a green dress, him in khakis and an Oxford, arrive with someone Amanda recognized as a local DJ. "It looks chaotic right now, but when you lock in and start playing, it's like there's no one else around. Like we're up on



Olympus, being rock godly. It's like nothing you've ever felt, performing." Then with another squeeze, Jonas was gone. Amanda was wondering who would come up next, and it turned out to be the makeup people.

Forty-five minutes passed, then the house lights dimmed. People found their seats. Chase was enjoying himself, picking up on Jill's vibe. He felt good about being there without being certain why. He wasn't a fan, not by any stretch of the imagination.

The stage went dark, then lit up. The band were in place. Alain looked out from over his Takamine 12 string. "Good evening. Tonight, we present an evening of rock and rol musicianship. Lip-synching teenage frauds need not apply."

As Alain touched the first strings of "Roswell", a noise from the back of the crowd got everyone's attention, and a spotlight turned in that direction. Three men and one woman stood in the glow of the light, waiting.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't aware we had an opening act tonight," Alain growled.

"You don't. We're the closing act. You can call us the Sigil. I'm War. My comrades, Hunger, Entropy, and Fate. And we'll start by everyone forming two neat lines and handing over their valuables before they leave. The last two people to get in line will be killed. Now let's move."

With those words, War flung his arm upward, as if to hurl something at the ceiling. A lance of red energy did indeed hit the high ceiling, and exploded forcefully.

"I said move, and I mean NOW!"

[Phase 52 - Phoenix]

For a long moment Amanda doesn't move, doesn't breathe, all her pent-up adrenaline suddenly diverted to a new potential target, her unblinking gaze directed at the four intruders, looking for any clues to their identities and abilities.

Her keen eye for observation, her enhanced speed, and her enhanced intellect serve her well. She picks out the members of the Sigil, feels the bile creep into her throat. The antipathy effect starting; thank you Mr Book. War is obvious, a good 6 inches over 6 feet tall, dressed in a dark suit with a deep red tie and cummerbund. On both forearms, seemingly grown out of the suit jacket, are two deep amber gauntlets, appearing to be made of some rich metal. The gauntlets are elaborately engraved, the sort of work one might see on a custom Peacemaker.

Hunger must be the smaller man, about 6'0" and gaunt, with dark hair and dark eyes. No, the eyes aren't dark. They're alive, almost to spite their bearer, and glowing with a crystal blue energy. Amanda remembered a guy in one orchestra, he had a thing for crime scenes and true crime stories. He'd showed her a book on serial killers. Their eyes looked the same, in the photos. Alive to spite the living.

Entropy would be the girl. Gorgeous in a Euro-Asian way, dressed in a simple black dress, her skin the palest of pearl. In her left hand, a silver scythe about a foot long morphed into a flawless ankh. Amanda recalled the end of Star Trek: Next Generation's run: All Good Things...must come to an end. Entropic nature of the univers being inescapable and all that.

That left Fate. He was taller than Hunger by a couple of inches, and stouter where Hunger was gaunt. Amanda noted a watch-chain ran across his vest, in the style of the old-time riverboat gamblers. He wore a smirk under a thin, dark mustache, and his

lively eyes begged for someone to make the first move.

[Phase 37 - Magna-Flux]

\_ This is so ultra-wrong! Not only suffering this band and these clothes, now the "four walking horsemen of a-pecker-lips" have to show! AND WHO ROBS A CONCERT?!?!?!\_ Chase thinks as he tries to figure out his next move. He looks to Jill and sees the fear in her eyes. (delaying)

[Phase 25 - Sound]

Barely giving a second thought to the fact he doesn't have his uniform here (or one a all right now for that matter) or that they'd be outnumbered two-to-one Josh stares dead-on at Amanda and sub-vocalizes to her "We can't risk a stand here with so many potential hostages around." The last thing the media needs to see is some powered lunatics waxing Claudia Schiffer.

As he moves into the quickly forming lines he hopes that the already delicate situation won't be exacerbated by the "vibe". "If it is I'll be prepared to shield as many people as need be behind a wall of sound," he tells Phoenix. "I'm going to try to call for help."

He's not shocked to see the A+R reps still on their cell phones...he hopes one of the actually bothered to call 911. Josh quickly relates the scene to each Millennium member's voice mail and is shocked to hear MagnaFlux's phone ring through here in the building. Craning his neck for a moment to locate him he is surprised for a moment to see him in his civilian garb...and on what looks like a date no less.

"Jill, it's ok, we...huh?" Chase interrupted by the sound of his cell-phone ringing...and answers it.

Through the phone he says "This is Sound. I'm at 2:00 o'clock from your current position. Unless they start directly threatening people I plan to let it ride until we can get Sigil out in the open" Once Chase locates him he signals to hang up the phone. With that Josh concentrates for a moment and says under his breath "Watson I need you and broadcasts it to both Amanda and MagnaFlux quickly adding "I've been working on a stunt where we can keep in vocal contact with each other without the phone for situations just like this..."

[Phase 25 from 37 - Magna-Flux]

Relieved to know another member of the Big M. is present, Chase turns back to Jill who is looking quizzically at him. "OK, I have some explaining to do but I can't now, just be ready to run for cover, this could get ugly!" He turns his attention back to Sigil and begins to scan them and the area for possible metal in their outfits that he can use against them. He pushes his way to the line, suddenly thankful for the clothes he's wearing tonight, who could EVER recognize me in THIS!\_

His concentration is rewarded; War, Fate, and Entropy all seem to have some quantity of metal about them.

[Phase 25 from 37 - Phoenix]

Then she nods slowly, to let Josh know she heard him.

"Race you to the end of the line?" she suggests with a ghost smile, her lips barely moving. She unslings her bass and leans it gently against the nearest amp. Getting

used to ignoring the little voice in her head that insists this should not be happening, that wants to join the erupting panic in the small crowd, she glances around the little stage, hoping against hope that the guys will be sensible about this. But she's moving so fast they haven't registered her actions yet.

Security will likely assume a protective phalanx position; that might turn out to be problem, especially if she wants to stay while they want her to leave. She wonders what happened to the guards outside the building, and hopes that no one is thinking of trying anything foolish. \_No one other than us, anyway. The Sigil, they're all dressed like they belong here, wonder who got them tickets...\_

In response to Sound, Phoenix says "This is going to be tricky," she murmurs, head down. "I think the best we can hope for is to get \_most\_ of the people out of here first." No one seems inclined to dawdle on their way toward the door. Someone's going to have to be last. "They might have been bluffing about killing people, but I don't think we should chance it." She herself remains still, ignoring the hand on her arm for the moment.

[Phase 25 - A Well-Groomed Man]

Next to War, as the people strife not too gently to avoid being the last in line, a gentleman in a rich Brioni tuxedo suddenly stands up, makes a movement toward the forming lines, then suddenly spins on his heel. Holding his right forearm vertical, his left hand grips the crown of his watch. Two darts blast out from the watch's face trailing thin wires behind, and connect solidly with War. War suddenly drops to the floor in an awkward sitting position.

[Phase 24 - Entropy]

With a start, Entropy turns her head toward War, and spots the Well-Groomed Man as he finishes his attack. She raises her ankh and points it at him, a beam of pale white light striking the watch. It glows for a split second before disintegrating away to nothingness. "Fate, a little help, please," she asks, no more plussed than if she were requesting a refill of Perrier.

[Phase 24 - Fate]

"Damned plainclothes guards, we were told they'd all be in yellow," Fate snarls, his gambler's smirk replaced with a look of anger. He eyes the Well-Groomed Man, and the latter glows with a green light. "Nothing but a normal, Entropy, he's mine." With a deft grace, Fate vaults over a couple of chairs and lands in front of the Well-Groomed Man; a flick of the wrist, and a double-barreled Derringer points at the Well-Groomed Man. "Any last words, fellow?"

"Yes," replies the Well-Groomed Man in a hard British accent, his gaze not wavering for a moment. "Look behind you."

Fate laughs and pulls the trigger, a sharp crack and the Well-Groomed Man's downward progress rewarding him.

[Phase 22 - Magna-Flux]

\_Guns. My life is a nightmare.\_ Magna-Flux gives Jill a push toward a side exit, and works his power. Fate's gun suddenly leaves his grip, and points back at him! "Give it up, or you get a new belly button!"

[Phase 22 - Phoenix]

She starts to move forward, but the hand is a grip now, Jonas' grip. "This is what we pay Security to handle." In answer to that, the yellow-raincoated security men begin forming a semi-circle around the stage. They begin moving in tandem, a pair of guards for each musician. The first guards make their chosen musician crouch low to the ground, and follow them closely; by their position, the guards are physically shielding the Diary from any direct shot with their bodies. A second guard follows each first guard, facing the melee, a Glock 18 in hand, its extended 33 round-clip testimony to the sort of greeting an attacker will get on approach. Willie, the guard from the hospital, takes Amanda's arm as Jonas leaves. "C'mon miss, they'll have to shoot through me and Lorenzo to get to you. You'll be fine."

And Amanda has to make a decision. (currently delayed)

[Phase 20 - Hunger]

He's already seen what he wants. From the moment they came inside, there was only her. His glowing eyes like searchlights, Hunger picks out Amanda on the stage. And choosing to conveniently 'forget' his instructions, Hunger roars through the crowd, on a beeline straight for Amanda. He muscles his way past the two guards, each one twice his size, and seizes her by the arms. Hunger stares deep into her eyes, and she screams at the gnawing pathological monster she sees within. (Down 21 power, absorbed by Hunger)

[Phase 20 - Phoenix (from 22)]

There is no plan, just a reaction. Flames explode into Hunger, and he flies back, slamming into the front row of chairs. His glazed eyes cool, and the evil light therein fades. (Yup, knocked his punk ass out, one shot.) She recovers marvelously; "Migosh, did you see that? He burst into flames!"

[Phase 10 - Sound]

Spotting the growing battle in the middle of the crowd, Sound sees Fate confronted by his own gun, and the girl, Entropy, leveling her ankh for a coup de grace shot at the Well-Groomed Man on the floor.

"Magna-Flux has things in hand, best not let the nice gentleman lose his tux rental deposit." Sound amplifies the exiting crowd noise and attacks Entropy by surprise. Though she reels from the cacophony slamming into her skull and drops her ankh, Entropy manages to keep herself steady and upright.

[Phase 10 - the Well-Groomed Man]

As he moves toward Fate, the Well-Groomed Man spots War beginning to move. He quickly leaps at War and hits him with a knife-hand strike at the side of the neck. War goes back to sleep.

[Phase 9 - Entropy]

To Sound's dismay, the ankh on the floor fades into nothingness, only to reappear in her hand. She looks around the room, and spots Sound. "See you around pretty-boy," she says, as the ankh raises and fires at Sound, who suddenly realizes that he isn't standing now, but crashing hard to the ground and off a couple of chairs. Someone tackled him out of the way...

"Alex! No, I can handle this! Damn you..." Sound sees most of the Alex's jacket on the

right side is gone, and a foot-long swath of his torso is a horribly botched purple color. He's gritting his teeth hard not to scream.

[Phase 9 - Fate]

"I can see victory tonight isn't in the cards, but I'm willing to bet you won't shoot a fleeing man in the back, whoever you are," Fate says as he looks around for the source of his gun's theatrics. "Come, my dear, let's be on our way," he says to Entropy as he grabs her and moves with swiftness into the crowd.

[Phase 7 - Magna-Flux]

As Fate took advantage of a split second of time, Magna-Flux returned his attention to his friend. Jill was standing in the middle of the crowd, too afraid to move. He cleared three rows of chairs to get to her, and hustled her outdoors. "You take me to the coolest parties," he cracks.

[Phase 7 - Phoenix]

Thoughts of chasing down the bad guys fade quickly, as Phoenix registers what has happened to Alex and Sound. Two guards at the end of a row, with Alex's assistant Shelley, were far too slow to stop Alex from plunging back toward Sound; he was an accomplished runner, after all. She was off the stage and next to him in a moment, checking quickly with Sound to see he was unhurt.

"Hey, boss, hey, talk to me Alex," she said, as yellow-clad guards began closing in on Hunger and War. The rest of the band returned, and clustered around them.

"What happened?"

"He gonna be all right?"

"Jeeze, Alex, what kind of stupid stunt was that?" This from Shelley, who had just completed the world's fastest 911 call.

"Had to...man that hurts...Shelley?"

"Yes, Alex?"

"Call my broker, I'm about to make Bactine rich." He looked at Amanda. "Hey, you ok?"

"Yes, I'm fine. You shouldn't be standing up."

"It looks worse than it feels. Ouch. Ok, maybe I will sit down. Man, I find out who's responsible for this..."

"Alex, this doesn't make any sense," Josh said, and relayed it to Chase who was just outside a doorway with Jill. "Who would pull a robbery in a set up like this, with all your security."

"Unless it wasn't a robbery attempt," Rob said, picking up on Alex's train of thought

"Then what was it?" Amanda asked.

"An assassination attempt," said a British accent from behind the group. Everyone turned to see the speaker. He was the Well-Groomed Man, in his mid-30s, and movie-star handsome. His eyes met Amanda's, and she felt she saw something familiar.

"My name is Blake, Colin Blake," he said.

"You're related to Sir William, aren't you?" Amanda asked.

"Yes. Grandfather on my mother's side." He looked to the doorway as the security men calmed the crowd. The ones who had retrieved the two wanna-be villains were energetically and not at all gently fitting War and Hunger with cuffs, leg irons, and hobble restraints. The two villains resembled hog-tied animals. "Let me tell you what I know." Blake continued.

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[Turn 28]

"Cripes. This is all I need, two men in my life without an ounce of sense between them," Amanda mutters, relaxing a tad now that it seems no one's hurt, though Alex's wound looks unpleasant. \_Idiot. This isn't a bar brawl, for pity's sake.\_

"You're gonna be all right man -- you need help with the ointments and I'm there." he quips to Alex. Josh can't help but wonder if Alex's gesture was totally altruistic or if he's having more trouble making the transition from playing with the band to "management" than everyone thinks...

"Man, I find that witch, I'm gonna take that ankh..." Whatever detail Alex was going to share is interrupted by Shelley clamping a hand on his mouth, while briskly talking into a cel-phone. She clicks from calling the paramedics, who happened to be standing by near the house due to the number of people attending at the band's request and payment, to the security staff. Shelley must have a near photographic memory, as she describes Fate and Entropy over the connection.

Josh can't think about Alex now as he grips Amanda's hand and instinctively assumes a protective manner interjecting his body slightly between her and everyone else. "Assassination attempt...that nutjob bolted straight for Amanda...what the hell is going on?"

He waits for Colin's reply even as his mind starts racing for possible answers -- the Mask knew we were coming and how maybe he knows more about us than our powers and "tactics" like our identities but how? and why target her?...maybe not even the Mask--what about her father? his heart sank into his stomach...

Colin Blake brushed the front of his Brioni jacket. Two holes in the right side, just under the sternum, could be noticed. Either Mr Blake was bulletproof, or his Saville Row tailor owned a bit of Spectra-cloth maker Allied-Signal. He spoke clearly, in full command of the situation as if near death and mayhem were a daily occurrence. "They weren't only attacking Miss Halle, they would have attacked the rest of the band. It was all the performers they were after."

Rob, Alain, and Jonas had reappeared around the group, checking on Alex and listening in on Mr Blake's narrative. "Political? We've played in a few war zones, but so have lot of other bands," Jonas says. "No one's ever drawn this kind of reprisal for telling a bunch of people that their leaders are dirtbags and should be replaced."

"Times change," Rob said.

"No one mentioned this particular perk of stardom," she says with a wry glance at Rob before returning her attention to Mr. Blake. In truth she's feeling a little shaken, still, by the abrupt near-collision of the two halves of her life, by what she'd seen in Hunger's eyes. She finds herself glancing around nervously in case some new threat appears.

"Not political..." Blake continued.

"You're not going to tell us these guys are deranged fans, are you?" The 'assassinate

is associated mainly with history classes for her, but given the level of planning and the somewhat bizarre choice of targets for a robbery....

"I don't know what their musical tastes might be, but their presence has more to do with the band's financial future."

"Distribution," Alex said from a nearby chair.

"A new deal, because our old distribution contract ends with this recording," Alain added.

"Worth nine figures, according to some circles," Blake finishes.

"That's right," Alain says, looking at Amanda. "Are you ok? The guards said there were flames..."

"NoreallyI'mfinethanks. Are the police on their way? I got a pretty good look at the two that got away." It's hard to remember how someone normal might act in a situation like this, how she would have reacted a few months ago.

"They're heeeeeeeeerrrrrrre," Josh hears Chase mutter over the vocal switchboard. The 'they' in question are SORTies, and not a bad response time, maybe six minutes. They quickly approach the bound forms of War and Hunger, and slap additional restraints on them. Within 15 seconds, the whole group and both villains have departed.

"Tax dollars at work," Chase continues from across the room, where he is offering his date some punch. The guests are beginning to filter back in, after being rechecked again by the security staff. The security men are not at all pleased with what happened, they can be heard to mutter the word 'lawsuit' several times in reference to the activities.

"Wow, that was something. Wonder how they planned all that?" Jill asked.

"Say what?" Chase replied.

"Oh, come on, you don't think that was a real attack, do you? Chase, performers have been breaking the fourth wall for centuries, ever since Shakespeare. That had to be an act."

Chase whispers to Josh, "You think this was a fakeout?"

"Not a chance," he replied. "Tell you ASAP."

"C'mon, let's get our seats back," she says. Chase follows her back, as the crowd filters in, all chatting about the same idea, whether this was part of the show.

At the front, Blake continued. "Your current distributor is Capital. From what I've heard, they aren't in the running for the next contract."

"Pretty much a given," Shelley said.

"That leaves four companies. Take away Sun, that leaves three."

"How did you know about Sun?" Shelley demanded.

"It's ok, Shelley. Some of their people probably blabbed," Alex said. "We're likely to sign with Sun in the next two weeks."



"Leaving Sony, Polygram, and Time-Warner."

"Look, Mister Blake, we all know the industry is pretty cutthroat. But this would be unprecedented," Shelley answered.

"Sony," said Rob and Alex together.

"What?" asked Amanda.

"Time and Polygram both have bought into the teen group thing. So has Capital. Rule out all three because while they're interested in us, they weren't willing to pay Sun's money. Sony was, but we were pretty cool at rejecting them. Put it this way, when Faust signed his bargain, it was a Sony A&R guy who wrote the thing," Alex says. "Bastards. Forget that Entropy kid. We're getting a Concorde to Tokyo and kick some..."

"Alex, the only thing you're going to be 'kicking' is 'back'. Now come on, the paramedics are here for you."

"Ok. Hey, guys, come here," he motions to the band. He puts an arm around Amanda and Rob. "Show must go on."

"Damn right," says Jonas.

"On for you," says Alain.

"Epic, man. People leave here tonight, they're not going to forget," Rob said, and looked at Amanda.

"We'll bring the tape later, see if your heart monitor can take it," Amanda said.

"Oh that's harsh on the man."

"That's why she fits in."

"Later, Alex."

And the show does go on. Most of the crowd is already accepting the idea that the attack was an act. Even though they didn't need the extra motivation, the band is even more focused, and white-hot. Amanda finds herself lost in the music, losing track of time and space, living for nothing but the next note, the next rest. And she wonders what to do, because as Alex was being wheeled off, she saw him very firmly tell Shelley to stay behind and make sure everything went as it should. In the dark near the back, Amanda saw Shelley's composure break for a few seconds, as she was actually in tears at seeing him go. \_Think the boss and I need to have a heart to heart after this.\_ Amanda thought, just as they took a brief breather for applause and then into the next item on the set list.

Chase manages to suffer through the evening, and grudgingly has to give the band some props. His taste or no, hearing really good musicians play is still a treat. Good vocals, tight rhythms, guitarist who definitely knows his stuff. And considering the gig was free, with food, well, it could have been worse.

"Check it out, Chase! Got pictures with them," Jill says, showing him a couple of Polaroids. One shows her and Alain, in a friendly hug. The other is Jill sitting on Jonas' bicep, with him holding her in midair on his arm.

"Sheesh. Probably gobbles roids like they're Skittles."

"Nah, he's like you, supposedly one of those clean-living types."

"Ouch."

"Come on, the limo is waiting."

Chase found himself a bit at sea. \_Jill hadn't mentioned anything about what happened before the gig started. Did she miss it in the confusion? Everything happened so fast maybe normal people don't see things like...well, like I do.\_

If Jill had noticed anything, she wasn't saying. Chase was ready to tell her all about his new abilities, but should he? He wrestled with the question in brooding silence, all the way home.

Meanwhile, back at the palatial home of the band, the chairs had been cleared away, and a DJ was busily dropping some serious dance tracks on the crowd. The agents and models and everyone else were enjoying the party. Upstairs, in the rarefied and heavily guarded second floor, the band mingled while keeping a line open to Alex back at the hospital.

"Weeeeeheeee, more drugs!" Alex sang. "Doctor says it's some sort of cellular disruption, like a freezer burn. I'm all taped up. How's the party?"

"Misses you headbutting drunk A&R guys," Rob said. "Hang on." Rob handed the phone to Josh, who was waiting next to him.

"Hey stupid, what were you trying to pull?" Josh said into the phone.

"Ha ha ha, stupid is right. I'd love to trade my ribs with you right now. Tell you what, I am never, ever, doing that again for you."

"Thanks, man."

"Yeah, thanks, bs. Look, I may be on...miss, how many ccs am I on of this blue stuff...that a lot?...anyway, I've been thinking."

"Yeah," Josh said, his heart rate rising. Alex was a lot of things, and 'smart bastard' was right up there. He's been to law school once; Rob swore he got Alex to take a Mensa test on a flight to Australia and he didn't miss a single question. \_He' figured something out...\_

"If that crew was there to attack the band, why did Little Miss Goth pick you out for a shot?"

"Hey, who knows, you know, these people, they aren't right, right?"

"Riiight. Say, I gotta go. The other nurse is here, and they're gonna scrub the wound. Go party."

"Ok Alex, take care." As Josh folded the phone up, he almost swore he heard Alex say 'How about that, I didn't know astroglide came in 2-liter bottles...'

He looked around, and it looked like so many after-gig green rooms he's seen in the Big Apple. Only, most of the ones Josh had seen sure as heck didn't have Heineken and Guinness and oysters for the postgig munchies. He spotted Amanda, who like the others

had a pair of very beefy guards shadowing her around the room. The security team was very eager not to allow a repeat of the earlier interruption. She was chatting with various high-powered media types, and getting the best of them. She had a half-dozen sets of eyes keeping track of her moving through the room. Alain was chatting in a corner with Trent Reznor, while Rob and Jonas were around the room doing interviews. He wondered if he really missed this sort of life, where the spotlight never got any cooler.

For some reason, that brought up a thought of Jake. The college student. How could he just turn his back on what he could do? Maybe if he'd been here tonight they could have caught all four of the Sigil. Maybe Alex wouldn't be dealing with another hospital visit, though he couldn't be sure Alex wasn't having a great time anyway. Josh was halfway to the cel-phone when a hand took his.

"How'd I do?" Amanda asked.

"Words escape me," Josh said, and it really was the best thing he could say.

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The rage within him, caused by his brief encounter earlier, has just about subsided. He was trying to get past all this "Powered Person" stuff. It just wouldn't leave him alone. Jake just can't get past the frustration. He has been sitting here for nearly hour starrng blankly at the pages in front of him. Trying to ignore the voices in hi head. The problem is the voice sounds too much like Josh. Responsibility. Duty. Destiny. It's his cross to bear. Well he doesn't want to bear it. He wants to leave that all behind him. This isn't the path he wants to take. Why can't Josh see it from his point of view?

Has he really been in the library all day on a Saturday? By the clock on the wall, he had. Good thing they didn't close while classes were in session. He'd be real embarrassed if he had to bust out of a brand new library. That would leave a big mark on the old semester bill.

Knowing he wasn't going to get anything more done tonight, he puts the books back int his backpack. A good Blades game was would help him. Why did the Thoroughblades have to be playing on the road? He can still get home and listen to the Phantoms game on the radio. Grabbing his jacket he heads out of the study room and down the stairs. He can't help but hear Josh's voice in his head. He finally decides he'll look around a little and see what he could find. He had to admit he was a little curious as to what that guy was up to. He sees a couple of guys seating on a bench outside the library. Jake checks with them but they didn't know the guy that I described. Jake walked around the commons occasionally asking a passerby if they knew the guy he described. He found nothing. "What am I doing wasting my time with this for? I'm going to miss the game if I don't get going." He goes out to his bike and heads for home. But he can't shake an uneasy feeling in his gut. It gets worse and worse, until finally Jake is shaken out of his thoughts by the vibe of his cel-phone.

\_This better not be Josh, I am not in the mood...\_ "Hello?"

"Hello, Jake."

"Mom?"

"It's over Jake. He's gone."

"Oh no. Dad."

"I'm going home now. Come by when you can."

Jake hung his head over his bike, not moving for ten minutes. When he recovered, he lifted the phone again, and wondered how Josh would take the news.

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South Street, Philadelphia. Fat Tuesday's.

Carl and a few of the guys made their way to the finest dining in the City of Brotherly Love. Namely, the almighty cheesesteak sandwich, just the thing for a hungry hockey player.

The weather was a bit damp, but not as cold as February can be on the Eastern Seaboard. They skated to a 1-1 tie with the Phantoms earlier, and they'd lock up again in twelve hours, at noon. He'd played 28 minutes, not bad with the coach's rotation system in place.

"Hey, Carl, come tell these Villanova girls it's true what they say about hockey players," he heard Doug Redden call from inside the bar. Carl started to turn away from the front window, facing the street. \_Why not...\_ he thought.

That was when he heard the crash. A packed South Street turned to look. Carl, being near the door, leaned out and over the crowd. Probably some stupid city driver...

Whoever it was, Carl suddenly fixated on the scene. A station wagon had run the red, and went halfway under a tanker truck crossing the intersection. He could smell the gas already; the wagon had hit a valve underneath the tanker. Then, he felt his skin go as cold as a Zamboni's axle. Two small, sleepy faces, peering out from the back window of the wagon, while gasoline sloshed and sprayed all over the scene.

"Carl, what's up," Doug called from the back. But Carl wasn't there to hear him.

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[Turn 29]

A place of privacy, where deeds can be discussed without fear of eavesdropping.

"I find your position on this matter unacceptable," speaks the rumbly gravel of Fate. "First, you failed to mention James Bond Junior would be sitting in the audience. Then, you also neglected to mention the possibility of powered guards in plainclothes. For you to request further service of the lady and I is as ludicrous as would be our accepting your request."

"Fate's right. Fifteen seconds and the whole plan was blown to pieces," Entropy idly mentions as she toys with a plate of spaghetti.

A third voice answered Entropy. "You weren't supposed to start shooting at civilians, or the manager. The instructions were very clear, as were the subjects. The musicians only."

"You weren't the one getting a sonic spanking," Entropy pouted, her finger on the ankh now hanging from her neck on a fine silver chain.

"Arguments notwithstanding, our continuance of this endeavor is at a close. We are at half-strength, and the target is much better guarded than you realized."

"Not exactly sticking to your advertisement, gambler man," answered the new voice.

"Just the opposite, my foolish friend. One must know when to hold and when to fold. There's always another game somewhere." He stands up and pushes the plate away from Entropy. "We have a flight to catch. Goodbye."

"Wait, you can't just walk away from this!"

"You are quite correct. We're taking a taxi." Fate looks at the speaker, then concentrates; he is rewarded by the appearance of a faint green silhouette around the other person. "I don't see much of a future in this for you, either. Take an old card sharp's advice, and get out of town while you still can. Adieu."

"You're going to leave the other two behind?"

"Now, I never said that. But as far as retrieving them at the moment, well, that's not in the cards."

The third person remained behind, watching the two remaining members of the Sigil depart into the cold February night. There wasn't anything left to do but sit back down, and order another drink. And contemplate the future.

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By the time Chase sees they've reached Jill place, he's made his decision.. \_I trust her more than anyone I know. She's been my best friend through everything.

And with 8-ball out there, I have to tell her something, at least about myself and him.\_

As she gets out of the car, Chase follows her out.

"Thanks for the ride, Alfred" he says to the driver.

"He can take you home you know.." Jill says to him, somewhat puzzled that he got out with her.

"I know, but I gotta talk to you about something."

He waits for the limo to drive off and sits down on the curb and motions for her to sit beside him.

"That thing that happened tonight, with the Horsemen knockoffs, that wasn't what you think is was. It was ULTRA real! There are a lot of them out there now. Powered types, I mean." He pauses to gather his thoughts and looks at her. She really does look pretty tonight. He wonder why he's never noticed that about her before.

"No it wasn't..."

"Yes, it was. Remember that thing that happened with the coach and his team of championship losers?"

"The drug scandal?"

"I was the one who found out about the steroid abuse that led to the coach getting fired. And he's got a raging mad-on against me now. The day we were at T.U. he tracked me down, and he was like those guys at the concert tonight. Calling himself 8-ball and launching billiard balls at me with velocity enough to crack my skull open if they'd hit. He's different. He was probably harmless until the change, but he's evil now, and MEGA dangerous!"

"Ok, Chase. Sake of argument, I'm buying this. I can't say I'm surprised, but my god, this is Kentucky, you're lucky he isn't the only one after you."

"I know. Look, I trust you more than anyone, and I need to let you know, because I think he might..."

Deep breath.

"I'm different too. I'm faster and more agile than I was before the New Year. I can sense certain things, like I know you have 58 cents in coins, a nail file, and a decent quality bootleg copy of the Grateful Dead on a cassette in your purse. I can stick to stuff too."

"Wait, wait, wait. You're one of those people I read about in USA Today?"

"Jill, I don't wanna lie to you about this stuff, and there's more to tell, but what happened tonight wasn't what it looked like. Someone was going to get killed by those twist-lets and it made me realize that the coach might try to get at me by getting to you! I need you to promise me that you'll call me the moment you even THINK you see him!" He emphasizes the point by pulling out his Millennium Phone and holding out his hand for hers. "Let me see your phone."

Taking his time to feel them both, he communicates the number of his phone to hers electro-magnetically.

"There. \*13 send. Try it," he says.

She does. Nothing happens. Chase frowns. "Try it again," he asks. She does, but there is no response.

"Chase!" she says, giving him a shove. "You had me going there. You must have looked in my purse. Good one. Look, thanks for coming with me; I'll get you back. Hey, I gotta get inside. I'll call you." Jill rises from the curb, as Chase stares at the phone, and she disappears inside.

He's aware of it now. A feeling that he hasn't been able to have for anyone because of numerous translocations from his dad's military career. A sense of closeness to someone. A dread that he could lose her. Jill is not just his best friend. She's the only friend he's had that's last longer than any have.

He opens the phone and tries to dial, and suddenly realizes why it didn't work. "Dead battery. I could read the memory, but not enough juice to take a call. Man, of all the..."

On the walk home, Chase starts to think about Dominique in a different way.. He's been really resentful about her relationship with General Smokestack and he is ULTRA unkeen to the idea of her in a potential "mommy" role. But he's also not getting anything done about why she's even around. If she's the key she said she is, it's time to bring that up before the rest of the group and start finding some serious answers.

When he gets in the door, Chase is surprised to see a very depressed looking Colonel Sir sitting glumly at the kitchen table. "What's wrong, Pop, she just wanna be friends?"

"That's how she put it. Right at the beginning of dinner," he frowned.

\_At least I'm not the only one having a bad night,\_ Chase thinks. "Only one cure for that Pop. Go into work tomorrow, get one of those canisters out, breathe deep til you forget about her." Chase is in the mood for a good father-son go-round, and suggesting he suck in some nerve gas should do the trick. It doesn't.

"Night, Chase." And he departs to the upstairs.

\_Great, can't even goad ol' Blood and Guts into a fight.\_ His thoughts return to the mysterious Dominique. The sooner they can find out who she really is, the sooner she might hit the road to get back to whatever her life was before. He pulls out his newly-recharged phone and calls Phoenix, and gets her voice mail. "Hey, it's M.F.. Hey I know things are ultra bizarre right now, but we all gotta talk about some things Dominique told me, that we should follow up on. Can we get the gang together?"

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JOSH AND AMANDA:

After a respectful if not awe-inspired pause at the pure skill Amanda possesses

Josh opens with "So...uh...any plans for Monday night?"

"Assuming I'm not in Tokyo, and no more disasters happen first... I might be able to free up a few moments." Her eyes sparkle. Thinking that she should be more serious about things, really, but more than willing to let all of the day's unhappy surprises take a back seat for a few moments.

Equally coy Josh adds "Yeah, I figure after I put down a 'cowardly and superstitious' criminal or two I should be able see you around 9:00." He says with his jacket raised to cover most of his face and his other hand behind his head giving himself two pointy ears. "Meet at your place this time?"

She has to laugh. "All right. 9:00 it is, Mr. Wayne."

Elsewhere, Jake shakes himself out of the daze before dialing up Josh. "I hope he's ready for this." Jake says to himself as he hears the phone begin to ring on the other side of the connection. Josh hadn't been around to the hospital much lately. He had been spending a lot of time with Amanda. Jake tries not to judge his brother to harshly. He remembers how love can be. It's been awhile but he remembers how it can sweep you away from reality. He has a feeling that it's not going to go well when Josh gets snapped back to real world. The hard way.

The two barely hear Josh's cell phone ring over their own laughter and crowd noise.

"Hello"

"Josh, it's Jake. You need to get over to Mom's as soon as you can."

"Why, what's wrong? Is mom OK?"

"It's Dad. He's... gone."

"What? When?"

"I don't know, Mom just called me. She said she was going home and to meet her there."

There is a long silence. "Josh, you still there? You ok?" Amanda can see Josh's left hand clinched so hard around the bottle of Guinness that she tell his emotions are clearly getting the best of him. The inaudible sound of his bones and muscles grinding around the bottle are beginning to generate his trademark almost invisible blue glow...

"Yeah... I'll... uh...I'm on my way."

"Josh?" Amanda says softly after a silent beat, a light touch on his arm reminding him of where they are. "What is it?" She thinks she can guess, from his expression. Oh, no....

His face begins to quake at the torrent of emotion he is reluctant to let out in the here and now. He glances at his hand as he begins to hear the slight resonant hum of the glass bottle as it begins the process of shattering. He reels in his power before he has more explaining to do.

"I have to go." He gently kisses her on the forehead. She'd have to be numb not to notice the quiver in his lips. "Don't stop at my account" he says as his



shaking hand leaves hers. "I'll call you tomorrow" he adds as he begins to tear away through the crowd...

"Wait!" She catches up easily, walking next to him, adroitly slowing their combined progress just enough to ensure they won't draw any undue attention. "I'm sorry... do you need a ride anywhere, or anything? I mean..." She trails off uncertainly; her expression concerned and sorrowful.

Unable to hold back from her as he had hoped (it just wasn't fair to make the day worse for her or to chance reminding her of her own parental worries) he says, "The hospital...my dad just died."

Amanda nods somberly. "Let me lose my watchdogs here," with a glance at the hovering security folk. "I'll be right out." Guessing that a few minutes to himself might be in order just now, she spots Jonas nearby and vanishes into the press of the crowd.

With a winning smile and a polite, "Excuse us a moment," she excises him from his current conversation to let him know why she's ditching such a splendid party so early in the evening. His response is a succinct, "What a f\*cking day."

"I assume we're going to have to talk about our friends overseas, I'll be back..." she makes a helpless gesture. "I don't know when, depends on... stuff."

"Indeed," is the faintly ominous reply. "Give our condolences?"

"I will. And thanks for understanding." She gives him a quick, one-armed hug and a sad half-smile, and heads for the door. In their usual eerily efficient fashion, one of the staffers is waiting there with her jacket and bag. She finds herself hesitating in the doorway, scanning the area for movement or threats, before stepping out -- a good habit to get into, no doubt, but there are other things on her mind right now.

Amanda leads Josh in a daze to her Volkswagen. It's crystal clear that he is going to lose it any minute now. Between speeding down the road and sideways glances at Josh she barely has the chance to utter any words of consolation. He spends the short trip to the hospital alternating between holding his head in his hands or covering his eyes with his right hand and his left arm stretched limply at his side. They arrive at the hospital \_yet\_ again.

Josh bolts into action as soon as the engine cuts off. Amanda quickly follows behind remotely locking the doors. Josh doesn't even break stride as he quickly asks and gets confirmation from the staff nurse on duty that his room has yet to be "vacated." He barks the attendants out of the room as they are making final preparations to move the body. They dart past Amanda who is still lingering at the doorway.

"Why God Damn it? Why now?" he screams as tears dam up in his eyes. He's staring straight through Jonathan's lifeless form as he leans his entire weight on the metal railing of the bed.

"Was it the chance to get back at me one last time? Is that why you finally gave up?" he yells as he grabs his father's hands in his own bringing one up to his cheek with more tenderness than you'd expect from the tone of his enraged words.

Hearing Amanda start to approach from behind he says to her "His hands...they're just like mine, Amanda...the calluses are all in the same places...the way the

skin would crack in the winter...just like mine...just like me." He collapses to his knees his hands spread open palmed on his thighs.

She bends down to comfort him as he reaches out for her. He throws his arms around her and buries his head in her golden tresses. She can feel the blue eyed dam break as hot tears break in waves on her neck as he whispers "I'm so sorry" over and over again.

After a silent trip to drop a slightly more composed Joshua off to be with his family, Amanda finds herself pulling the car to the side of the road to just sit there for a long, shaky moment of her own, forearms braced on the steering wheel, head bowed.

She is unavoidably reminded of her grandfather's death four years before; that had been a sudden thing, although given his lifestyle no one had been particularly surprised by the heart attack. She wonders what her father had felt at the time; whatever it was, it had been kept hidden from his children. She decides that she doesn't really want to keep going down that trail of thought.

"I know life isn't fair," she mutters angrily to no one in particular as she puts the car back into drive, "but why does it have to be \*mean\*?" She hopes Josh is going to be okay, that the family will be able to help each other with this. Wishes with all her heart that the world will just let them all be for a time, leave a little space for the wounded to start healing.

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JOSH AND JAKE:

Jake paces the floor and checks his watch. "How could he do this now?" He goes to the window thinking he hears a car approaching. Just Mr. Phillips getting home late from tying one on again. Not a bad idea Jake thinks to himself. But he can't. Mom's counting on him. He thinks angrily "Somebody's got to be here to console mother." He hears footsteps behind him and then a hand on his shoulder. He puts his hand on the fragile hand on his shoulder. He can feel the unsteadiness in her touch.

"Now Jake I don't want you getting yourself worked up. Josh will get here when he can. Quit your pacing and come in here and sit down."

"OK. But I just can't understand him anymore. He seems like a different person."

"I've noticed too but there's nothing we can do. He'll come around when he's ready. Just be there for him. Now come on we need to finish going over this list."

"We still have at least twenty more calls to make."

"Have you gotten back in touch with Martyn-Hurley Funeral Home?"

"Yes, I have an appointment with them tomorrow afternoon. I also called Ashland Florists to get some floral arrangements ready."

"Let me get us some more coffee."

"Don't you think it's a little late for you to drinking so much coffee?"

She snickers, "Don't think I'll be getting too much sleeping tonight, so I might as well get something done. But thank you anyway."

As she leaves the room Jake see the lights of car headlights pan across the ceiling and than go out. Glancing discreetly out the window he can see Amanda and Josh in a quick embrace. He sees Josh wave to her as she drives out of the driveway. As he closes the drape he can feel his rage grow.

Josh's keys jingle in a clearly frustrated manner as he finally pushes through the door. It is evident that he has been crying non-stop since he heard the news up to entering the house. He can hear Jocelyn Faulkner preparing what must be the sixth pot of coffee today judging by the familiar strained gurgle it's making.

"How is she?" he stares point blank at Jake as he throws his jacket on the back of the couch.

"She's holding up pretty good. Nice of you to ask," Jake replies with a thick accent of anger and sarcasm. "So what the hell took you so long."

"I stopped off at the hospital. I had to talk to dad."

"Don't you think it's a little late for that? Maybe you could have stopped by there sometime in the last couple of weeks... you know... while he was still alive."

"You're right there just wasn't enough time," he says trying to articulate some "Pax Avia" for his soul but he chokes on the words as they twist violently in his throat.

"There would have been if not for the group and Amanda."

"Let it be, Jake."

Jocelyn walks in carrying a tray of filled coffee cups. "Josh, I thought I heard you come in."

"Yeah, finally."

"Jake stop it." She commands him in a tone he hasn't heard in years.

Jake shoots a 'We'll talk later look' at Josh and grabs a cup of coffee off the tray. "Excuse me I've got some more calls to make." Jake says as he picks up a phone list off the table and leaves the room.

"I'll be right back." Josh says to Jocelyn as he starts to go after Jake.

"Let him go, Josh...please? The last thing I need right now is to have the two of you at odds with each other."

Clearing his head for the moment he sits on the couch next to his mother. "You're right--I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Well since Jake took the other list why don't you start on this one?" she says as she hands him a slip of paper, a short list of Jonathan's friends.

They were the few people whom stood by him through thick and thin. Come hell or

high water they would not let him fall as far he seemed hell bent to go. When he was thrown off the force for his alcoholism they stood by him. They helped support the family beyond the meager food stamps the government provided while he was scraping pennies to keep the business going after Jim pulled out the same names that countless times led him back home when he and Jocelyn were \_that\_ close to getting divorced. Josh could only hope to earn the same caliber of people to be at his funeral.

Jack Fahey's name was at the top of that list. Josh dialed quickly as it was getting late.

"Fahey Residence." A groggy but strong older voice answered on the other end.

"Jack, this is Josh Faulkner. We have some real bad news."

"Ol, "Iron" John's gone isn't he? Finally gotten some rest has he?"

"I hope so, Jack. I really do. He deserves it after everything..." he pauses as he silently finishes the thought with "I put him through".

"I really do think he would have wanted you to deliver the eulogy, you two have known each other so long, you're practically like a second father to me and Jake."

"I'm genuinely touched to hear you say both things, Josh but last I talked to John he wanted \_you\_ to do the deed."

Shocked at hearing this Josh's halted breathing is the only sound made over the lines for a moment.

"I have a box of things here that he told me to give you after he passed on. Come by Monday and we'll sort through everything, OK?" he says tenderly. "Try to get some rest yourself, would you?"

"I'll try but there are more people who need to know. Besides, there's no rest for the wicked. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

After several more calls Josh finally finishes the macabre task. Jocelyn had already fallen asleep on the couch crunching some numbers on how they could afford the services. She had a peaceful look on her sleeping face, one that Josh envied as he tucked her in with a quilt that Grandma Jane had made decades ago. He cleared the coffee table and headed to the kitchen with the tray and its load. Josh could hear Jake's heart beating in the silent darkness as he turned on the light to navigate to the sink.

"When you're done putting those dishes away, meet me in the woods out back." Anger and pain seeping out of every word.

Josh "silences" the small room's threshold before he responds in kind with "God Damn it Jake, what's it fuckin' gonna be? You gotta pound yer grief into me to get past this? Then fine, let's step outside."

"Oh, I'm past this. I came to terms with Dad's inevitable passing a few weeks ago. There was still a bit of shock that the time had finally come. But I'm fine. But if a good ass kicking is what it'll take to remind you where your priorities should be than I'll be more than happy to oblige." As Jake stands up he can just feel the rage build up in him.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's about you and your attitude of late. At a time when mom needs us the most you hardly even came around. It was like you didn't even care. I know you and Dad never did make up completely after you took off to New York with the Uncle Jim's help. But have a little common decency for Mom for Christ's sake."

"She's stronger than both of us and you're deluding yourself if you think otherwise." He punctuates that thought with an index finger thrust into Jake's chest. "You're just hiding behind her apron - it's not even about Mom. You made that perfectly clear earlier in the week. You got a problem with Millennium and me not backing out of it like you." He swings one arm in an arc away from his body saying, "Pardon me if I'm out there putting down wild dogs instead of being useless in the hospital."

"I know mom is strong, she had to be to deal with everything. But your not helping her any. How about a little respect. You think what you were doing was more important then being there for her. Well you're wrong bub." Jake accentuates his point with a rather forceful index finger into Josh's chest.

Stumbling back a half step Josh takes a half step too much to center himself as he bumps into the tray on the sink's edge spilling the ceramic coffee cups onto the floor with a crash. "Watch what you're doing you fuckin' ape! Get outside before you wreck the whole damn house." Josh bends down to pick up the clutter completely ignoring Jake until all the large chunks are in the trash.

Jake, not able to take anymore of this discussion, turns and leaves. In his anger and haste he halfway rips the screen door off it's hinges.

"I'm sick of this bullshit." Josh says as he steadily walks quickly out of the kitchen. Josh barely catches up to Jake as his younger brother reaches his bike, parked in the backyard near the edge of the woods. Shouting as he makes his way there "I'm tired of cleaning up after you. Your little temper tantrums may have been cute when you were younger but you're supposed to be a grown man now Jake. Stop trashing shit when things don't go yer way."

"Don't you worry about the door. I'll fix it tomorrow. Remember I'm the one who cares about what goes on around here. Why don't you run off with your friends like you always do."

"You're starting to play that same old record again, Jake? You sounded just like that when I wouldn't let you play with the band in high school. Times have changed man!"

"Josh get a grip. Remember it's me who walked out on your little group this time. I don't need it, don't want it so don't throw it up in my face. Just run off and play superhero with your little tramp." and with that Jake turns to leave. Josh had been hoping up until those words crossed Jake's lips that maybe he was getting so aggressive because maybe Jake was subconsciously lashing out with his powers...but now he could care less. Josh's hand grabs Jake's shoulder firmly. "Wait just one second, you think you can say something like that and just walk away."

Phase 29 (Fury): Jake whirls back around to face Josh batting his older brother's arm aside. "I've had about enough of this shit for tonight." Jake swings a right cross that nails Josh square in the jaw.

Phase 21 (Sound): Almost forced to one knee from the force of the blow Josh can taste blood and feel his teeth rattle in his head. He'll probably need to see the dentist about that filling Jake just knocked lose. He activates his force field using the low growl emanating from Jake. "Nice sucker punch -- that's the last one you get tonight, little dog."

Phase 14 (Fury): "We'll see about that, I'm just getting warmed up." Jake lets go with a left hook that could have gone through an engine block. It smashes hard into the wall of sound protecting Josh.

Phase 6 (Sound): "Not good enough Jake...Your luck sucks! I got a feeling that kid with the skateboard would have better odds of hitting me. Now SHUT THE HELL UP!" he focuses his own command down on Jake in a cascade of blue energy that serves to only enrage his brother further as his dense skin saves him from any real damage.

The two brothers pause for a brief second unclear on how to proceed...What the hell is going on here? They've never come to blows before. Unfortunately, neither lets up in their posturing and split seconds later they are at each other's throats again

Phase 30 (Fury): "You have got to be kidding me! You really think all your noise is gonna stop me? I'll break your damn legs if that's what it takes to make you stop running away from us. I'm sick of you ignoring your duty here. First it was school and now Millennium." He pounds two mighty blows onto the exterior of Josh's protective cube.

Phase 24 (Sound): Registering the tremendous power of the attacks Josh barely has the chance to fortify the field to weather further assaults. Half out of emotional outburst and half out of an attempt to distract his brother from noticing the slight but definite fluctuation Josh says, "Running away from my duty? What the hell do you think I'm doing back here in the first place? You're really trying to tell me that these powers don't saddle us with a greater responsibility? Who's really the one running away, Jake?"

Phase 15 (Fury): "Get the hell off the cross - I could use the wood to beat you. That's the point Josh when have you ever been truly responsible? I can see it in your eyes when she's around. She represents everything you left behind in New York. You're trying to live your dream through her. How attached to "doing good" would you be if Amanda wasn't involved?" An overhead ax-handle slams into Josh's forcefield as Jake awaits an answer.

Phase 9 (Sound): "LEAVE HER BE" Josh opens up a full scale aural offensive on Jake...two blasts originating from the sound of him cracking his knuckles and one from the yell itself. Jake is astonished as he ACTUALLY feels pain as he sails back a few dozen feet deeper into the forest they had been moving unconsciously into since the battle began. His momentum is halted by colliding with a birch tree that snaps back toppling backwards to the snow covered ground.

Phase 35 (Fury): Not even bothering with words anymore Jake NEEDS to share more than his anger with Josh...he needs to feel his pain. Hefting up the felled tree Jake swings it at Josh barely missing him but knocking a small clearing in the forest's center.

Phase 20 (Fury): Refusing to give his brother another opportunity to mock him he lurches the felled tree forward splintering much of it as he connects forcibly

into the now buckling wall of sound. "I won't let you waste what little love you have in your heart...we've all been waiting too long, Josh."

Phase 19 (Sound): Forced to the ground and against another tree's trunk Josh is all but totally depleted of power to maintain the shield. Josh tries to re-create it and the effort is rewarded with a nosebleed and a weak barrier at best. In large part to the physical gauntlet he's just been put through but also the raw emotions he's finally seeing with clarity for the first time. Raising an arm to stop Jake he starts to emit a humming sound reminiscent of the tune to "Motherless Child" that their mother would sing them to sleep with as boys. "I'm sorry Jake..." is all he can say but he does so with total sincerity. "You don't think I know what I did to this family by leaving - I practically killed Dad, Jake. It's my fault."

Phase 5 (Fury): Standing over his brother with the impromptu club over his head hesitating before he discards it and his anger. Dropping to the ground from sheer emotional exhaustion he leans against the tree beside his brother.

Jake just sits there against the tree, silent, looking down at his hands as a tear runs down his cheek followed by another. He reaches up and wipes the tears away to no avail. He looks at the moisture on his fingers and tries to think of the last time he cried. It takes him a moment but then he remembers, it was so many years ago, the night he found out his brother had run off to New York City. It finally became clearer to Jake; he leans toward his brother and whispers, "I'm sorry too."

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#### BACK AT THE BAND'S MANSION

The stars are painfully clear and gently indifferent as Amanda pulls back into the lot. She's been gone for what felt like an eternity at the time, the two of them kneeling on the hard floor while the hospital staff, sympathetic but impatient to get on with their jobs, kept passing by outside. The party is still going full steam. \*The night is young -- unfortunately.\* She's never been less in the mood for something like this; she wants to be flying, to be in a faraway and quiet place, to feel what she feels without having to maintain any facade.

However, it comes with the job, as she's been recently reminded. Sort of a modern form of \*noblesse oblige\*. She's made a commitment that has to be carried through. Amanda thinks she pulls the act off fairly well, though a tiny part of her almost hates the fact that she can do it. But then, she's had a lot of practice, over the years.

Things finally wind down, and the pressure to be at her social best evaporates with the guests. From that perspective at least, the day went well; the Diary's back, and no one present is going to forget this show, now that they have all reassured themselves and each other that it had undoubtedly been a very clever and convincing display. Things had happened so quickly, it seems that none of them saw enough to make it clear that it had been no joke.

None of the band breaks this illusion. In fact, they all seem almost disturbingly nonchalant; maybe they're just good actors themselves. As far as Amanda knows, it's entirely unprecedented for a major label to send assassins after a group that turned it down -- for one thing, it would leave very little chance for the band in question to change its mind. \*I'm willing to bet they were planning to make an example of this,\* she thinks. \*Welcome to the new

world. We won't send guys named Vinnie to break your legs, we'll send powereds to fry you. If they could get through this kind of security, they can get to just about anybody.\*

She can't remember who's head of Sony offhand. Tony probably knows something about their management structure, being high up in the competition and all. Who would be the one to decide to do this? What level management includes "authorize assassinations" in its job description? Is it a budget item on some secret document somewhere? \*I think I need another beer.\*

She's full of nervous energy, still wandering restlessly around the room as a quiet clean-up starts around the edges. Maybe it's the continued presence of the guards, alert and determined as they are to let nothing slip; she's starting to wonder what's going to happen at the end of the night. Maybe it's just that there are so many things on her mind right now, between worry for Josh and his family and the attack by the Sigil -- the knowledge that two of them are still out there, somewhere, gnaws at her constantly, and no doubt contributes heavily to her inability to relax. What will they do, with two of their members taken? How far will they go? There must be some way to find them, to stop them.

At the same time, she is thinking about the SORT team that had appeared, and about what happens now. \*What are they doing with these guys when they catch them? Once we turned over Element, and Lydia... where did they go? I haven't heard anything, and I think one of the others would have mentioned it if they had. Are those CDC people hanging onto them? Are they just locking them up somewhere? Forever, without a trial or anything? We have to find out more about this,\* she realizes belatedly. \*I mean, it's just wrong, for one thing, and practically speaking if anything comes up with one of us that looks bad to the cops, we'll have no idea what to expect. Maybe I should talk to Carl once he gets back tomorrow. He doesn't trust the authorities anyway. And that new kid, maybe -- grief, he's young, but he seems able to handle himself.\*

And then there's Alex to worry about. She doesn't want to assume, or presume, too much, but.... \*Maybe I should talk to him. Soon. Heck, at the rate we've been going, I should just put the hospital on my speed-dial. Have to check on Josh in the morning first... it has to be rough for all of them right now.\* She wonders how Jake is handling it, and their mother. You can never really predict, before it happens, how someone -- even yourself, as she knows -- will react. Another subject she deems it best not to think about too hard.

She's looking around for Shelley -- who will, she is certain, have the details on how Alex is faring -- when:

"Hey. You all right?" a voice breaks into her frowning distraction.

"That supposed to be a joke?" Amanda shakes her head without turning, then recovers herself and gives Rob a faintly exasperated look. "Sorry. \*I'm\* fine," she asserts. "Everybody else...."

"Jonas mentioned. I guess there's no such thing as a \*good\* time for news like that."

"Not really, no." She shrugs. "The peaks are great, but the valleys are turning into a real drag lately. What happens now?" she changes the subject. "And where did Mr. Blake disappear to?" she realizes all the sudden. "I mean, aside from flying out to Tokyo and kicking ass, as Alex so colorfully suggests, what are we going to do? This whole thing is so completely crazy." She says it with some



force. "And frankly, with two of those guys still out there...." She glances at the door. Not that she's all that worried on her own account -- if nothing else, she can almost certainly outrun them -- but there are other people who could end up in the line of fire. And after everything that happened today, she's not at all keen on going home to an empty apartment where she knows she'll be unable to sleep.

"This is new and different," he admits. "We'll pull through. Always do. Let everyone enjoy what's left of the night, and then we'll sort out what's what."

Amanda studies him for a long moment, trying to see if that air of calm confidence is a pose. It doesn't seem to be. She shakes her head again. "You're nuts," she tells him affectionately. "All of you."

"And the world loves us," he smiles. "Well, most of the world, anyway."

"I think I'd like to stay here at the house tonight."

"There's a room for you on the third floor. It's got your name on it," Rob replies. "I'm going to go to the hospital with some of the security guys, check up on Alex and leave him some babysitters." He looks around the floor for someone, a puzzled look on his face. "Well, I did want to bring Shelley along; I guess she's already left." Rob tells Amanda a quick anecdote about Shelley and her knack at spotting party-crashers, and how it's a shame it didn't work tonight of all nights. Then he's off, four large men and Mr Lett, the technician, all following him out.

Amanda finds 'her room' rather easily. The sign on it is crayon-drawn, and she recognizes jonas' handwriting because he writes all the set lists "'Manda's Room: No Boyz especially Josh.'" She pulls it off with a sigh, then sticks it on a closet door: \_Maybe it'll fool the Sigil if they come back. It doesn't look like anything is going to get resolved tonight, at least.\_ Amanda spends a restless night in the luxurious room, unable to appreciate that it's more like an apartment, with a private bath and to her surprise a well-stocked mini-fridge and microwave. She sleeps in snatches between bouts of worrying and wondering if that flicker of motion outside the window was a tree in the wind or something more sinister.

A FEW HUNDRED MILES FROM HOME, SATURDAY NIGHT

[Phase 24 - the Nightcrawler]

Carl was out the door and sliming on before he even thought twice about it. It wasn't until he arced himself at the accident that it struck him: KY-vigilante the Nightcrawler appears in Philly while the Thoroughblades are in town. Mierde. While sinking a pit in his stomach and fading him to virtual invisibility, it didn't delay his arrival a nanosecond. Then there was too much physical stress to worry further.

Willing himself as invisible as possible, Carl wondered just how brightly illuminated he would be if the tanker went nova just now. He glumly realized that he wouldn't be illuminated for long, because he'd be busily turning into ash. Double mierde. He turns his attention to the front of the car, intent on smothering any flames there. But the rush of gasoline from the shattered valve is atop the engine. If there were any flames, well, there'd be that illuminated followed by ash thing and he wouldn't have time to think about it.

Suddenly, he became aware of a low-frequency humming noise above him, and was shocked to see a small machine shaped like a white CBR with very wide body flaring hover to a stop above the scene. On the side of the machine, he could see a stylized Liberty Bell, painted in bronze. A man leaned over the side of the machine; he wore round metal rimmed glasses and a doctor's lab coat, and he had short frizzy white hair. He pulled a microphone to his mouth and began shouting into it.

[Phase 24 - Doc Liberty]

"Doc Liberty to Dispatch, we have 10-10 PI, corner of South and 3rd. Am attempting to contain hazmat spill, 10-100, repeat 10-100." Then, Doc Liberty reached out, his hand projecting a wide conical ray into the pouring gasoline. The Nightcrawler, up to his ankles in fuel now, noticed the harsh smell of the gasoline begin to fade.

[Phase 9 - the Nightcrawler]

\_Have to chat later,\_ thinks the Nightcrawler as he attends to his plan. With a snap, he opens the back of the wagon, and removes the two children from the vehicle. He continues his all-too-fluid motion and safely deposits the kids on the steps of a nearby store. As he returns to the wagon to attempt freeing any other passengers, he hears Doc Liberty exclaim from above, "Curie's bloomers, what the heck is that?"

"Um, I'm the Grey Ghost. Good Samaritan at large."

[Phase 9 - Doc Liberty]

"Well keep Samarating, Grey Ghost, there's two people up front, and I have to admit I may be sorely pressed to turn an entire tanker truck's contents into water." Doc Liberty snaps his shoulder back and concentrates, the conical energy beam still playing at the source of the gushing leak.

The Nightcrawler notices the odd feeling of camaraderie beginning to affect him. \_Seems Mr Book told true on that.\_ He pushes his way into the wagon, hearing Doc Liberty's amplified voice telling the crowd to back away from the scene. The two people up front are bloody from the collision, but both seem somewhat conscious. \_Jus' enough clearance to keep their heads on, damn fools.\_ Working the seat latches, the Nightcrawler eases both people into a laying position, goops them up firmly to keep them from injury as he moves them out of the wagon.

On the sidewalk, what few gawkers remain clear away quickly when the Nightcrawler deposits the two victims on the ground. As he withdraws the straps of gunk from the people, the two kids come over to them, crying.

The Nightcrawler hears the sirens in the distance, but hesitates. A lot of fuel is still coming from the truck, flowing into sewer drains, and seemingly rendered inert by the power of Doc Liberty. Nightcrawler strains to get a better look at the man. In the neon and the mercury vapor lights of the street, Doc Liberty looks clammy and drawn. But his arm is like iron and does not move. A minute passes. Then another. Flashing lights fill the street, and the beam of energy fades from Doc Liberty's arm. He slumps forward, exhausted, and his floating machine gently settles to ground level, away from the scene of the accident.

"Hate to save an' run, but I got ta go," the Nightcrawler says as he approaches

the Doc. "You gonna be OK with five-o rollin' in?"

"Yes. We're on...good terms. Thank you, Grey Ghost...couldn't have done it alone."

"Yeah, hey, I was nearby, right? Ok." The Nightcrawler renders himself invisible again, still somewhat concerned in spite of himself, and watches for a bit. What he sees is a bit difficult for him to handle, due to his lengthy and hard-earned wariness of police in general. But the first cops who arrive, immediately after the crash victims and the children are in the hands of the ambulance squad, come running over to the Doc.

"Hey, Doc, you ok?" First cop, lean runner, deep dark skin, and a slew of service stripes on his uniform. "Look up, look at me...how many fingers?...three, that's right. Second cop comes up, maybe 5'8" and every inch of it Philly Italian attitude. He's got a water bottle. "Thanks," says the first cop, and he helps the Doc sit up and drink a bit.

"He gonna be ok, Sarge?"

"Hope so, Corelli. Damn, Doc, you've got to stop overexerting yourself."

"No choice...Sergeant Miles," Doc Liberty replied, his voice a bit hoarse. "If I hadn't...happened by...might be five alarm nightmare right now."

"You're kiddin' right?" Corelli asked.

"Corelli, you smell gasoline anyplace? You see that river going down past Jim's Steaks? That's what the Doc does, he can change things," Miles answered for him. "Doc, let us push you to the ambulance, so they can give that ticker a listen."

"No..."

"I'm choosing not to hear that."

"Ok, Sergeant...thank you."

"Come on, Corelli, lean on the other side...see it's just like it's floating, don't weigh much."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Hold on Doc." And the two blues shove the bike toward the back of an open ambulance, where Nightcrawler hears the Doc being greeted by name.

\_Hmm. That's what it's like, bein' the public good guy.\_ Carl muses. A few minutes later, Carl is emerging from the bathroom of Fat Tuesday, courtesy of an unbarred window but no one needs to know that. "Hey, guys, what'd I miss?"

AMANDA, SUNDAY MORNING

At a decent hour the next morning (by her standards, anyway), she calls Josh to see how he's doing.

The stars must be aligned in a devious harmonic convergence that ensures Josh does not get to sleep in late on Sundays anymore...

"Coffee Faulkner" he mumbles into the receiver clearly misidentifying himself and his much needed early morning brew.

"Hi. S'just me. Thought I'd see how you guys were doing," she half questions delicately.

"Hey, you" he says with a groggy happiness before the weight of recent events comes swirling about him. He answers her with "I don't know...my head's still a little fuzzy. Let me make a pot of coffee and try to wake up."

She can hear him groan from sore muscles and poor rest and kvetch about the condition of his "aged bones" as he makes a mess in the kitchen. She can almost picture him in his boxers counting the seconds as the coffee maker percolates. "Tell me about your night? Did you guys get to the bottom of the Sony Horseman?"

"Not exactly," Amanda equivocates. "This whole thing is so messed up, I don't even know what to think, to be honest. It took forever to get people out of there last night, and nobody was in any shape for figuring stuff out by the time it got quiet. I'll let you know, though. Sorry I woke you up," she adds, kicking herself. "Just wanted to make sure you're okay. Is there anything I can do?" she asks a bit hesitantly.

Starting with one of the most vivid memories from the prior night as he smells the aroma coming from his mug "Jake started taking swings at me with a tree last night...I think there are a few splinters I can't reach."

'How's Jake taking it,' had been the next question on her lips. It takes her a moment to realize that he's not joking. "WHAT?" A few of the clean-up crew passing by look startled; she lowers her voice. "What happened?"

"We pushed each other to the breaking point last night and trashed part of the woods behind our house..." he states with some sense of shame that it had to come to that for the two to articulate their pain "but believe it or not some good came of it."

"Oh." She sits back, blinking. "I guess... that's good, then." \*Sort of. Men. Go figure.\* "Are you--both of you--all right?"

"Physically...yeah. We got a lot of bottled up hurt out in the open tho' and we're going to have to deal with that...some of it sooner rather than later..." The unusual pause predicating great discomfort in what he's about to say "Jake wants to leave the group."

"He... hang on a sec," she decides, gets up and closes the door firmly. She's already about as stunned as possible, this doesn't add much. "Okay. Did he say why?" Deeply puzzled. "I know he hasn't been around lately, I guess he's been thinking about it for a while, then?"

"Yeah...it gets complicated." Josh finishes two cups of coffee as he tries to articulate Jake's fears and desires to the only woman who had known his own.

AMANDA KEEPS DIALING

"You missed a lot," is Amanda's message on Carl's answering machine, subject of her second call. "There's been quite a bit of excitement. Give me a call when you get back, 'kay?" Vague enough not to be incriminating no matter who might accidentally overhear it, she hopes.

One more. As the phone rings on the other end of the line, she hears more people

moving about in the building and wonders what happens now. She's sort of been taking things with the band one day at a time, but now that they've passed this milestone it might be time to talk about the future.

"Hi, Mom... oh, you did? No, I didn't get it, sorry. I haven't been home, crashed at the studio for the night. It was kind of late...." She hesitates. "Okay, I don't want you to get too worried, or anything, but there was some trouble last night. I'm fine," she hastens to add. "Everybody's okay. But it looks like there's a couple of nut cases out there who don't like us very much. And until they find these guys, I'd be happier if you would be careful when you go out, and stuff, and if you see anybody hanging around, let somebody know. Take the phone with you if you go outside, that kind of thing. Is Dad still out of town? Uh-huh...." Well, that's one less thing to worry about, for the moment, though thought of Rose alone in that large house, isolated from the road is not reassuring. "I mean, I'm probaby just being paranoid, but these guys were pretty creepy." Possibly the understatement of the year to date. "And I'm probably not going to be home a lot for the next little while," she remembers to add. "Things are kind of insane, and Josh's dad just died, so... No, it wasn't, but still... Maybe we can go and have lunch again later this week, and get caught up? Oh, he did? I'll have to try to call him later, thanks." She scrawls a note on her palm: Call Joe. \*Maybe I should get one of those little computer things.\* Nice to know her favorite brother is thinking about her, even if he is probably going to ask if she can get him any bootleg tapes. "Okay, well -- like I said, be careful, and I'll let you know how things are going... I love you, too, Mom. Bye."

"Right," she sighs, putting the phone away. "I think that covers everything for the moment... I thought I'd come back home for some peace and quiet?" A glance heavenward. "You can quit laughing any time now, y'know."

#### SUNDAY PASSES

"So when is last time you are scorink goal?" Fyodr asked.

"May 1998, against St John's," Carl replied. He watched Fyodr add a ton of pepper to a small paper container of ketchup, then start dipping in french fries two at a time. "That is disgusting."

"Is flavor. Have a new joke for you, Mister Hat Trick."

"Oh joy, Russian humor."

Fyodr ignored him. "Father and son are in restaurant, and the father stands up and yells, Help Help, my son has swallowed a quarter! Another man comes over, reaches in boy's lap and squeezes. Out pops quarter. Father says thank you, you are beink doctor? Man says no, am with IRS."

Carl just stared at Fyodr, who looked back and shrugged. "Am findink it funny." Carl just shook his head, chuckling.

The bus ride took place virtually all night, and around 3 a.m. Carl made his weary way home. "And tomorrow, I help the kid...Magna-Flux, track down his crazy coach. Glad there's no practice tomorrow. Wonder how the gig went?" But his motivation to continue on any of these streams of thought deserted him, and he slept soundly as soon as he hit the bed.

#### AND ELSEWHERE

"Your breakfast sir," said the cultured voice.

"Thank you, Manfred. No word from Lydia yet?" The Purple Mask asked the question, though he already knew the answer.

"None, sir. The Golden Killers are in custody, pending the arrival of their attorney from Zurich.

"Best to let them depart for a while. I have other resources."

"Yes, sir. Though I would be willing to forgo a year's wage in exchange for the head of the monster who assaulted me at the hotel."

"That won't be necessary. All in good time, Manfred. I'm aware of who they all are; disposing of the Millennium people will not be a problem. But for now, having an enemy in place, one who you know, is an advantage."

"Yes, sir. Do you require my presence during this meeting?"

"No. Brother Mayhem and I need to talk privately. Please show him in, in ten minutes."

Manfred nodded and left. The Purple Mask, at one of his many hideouts, now had to face his 'creator' and explain his failure at the hands of those he'd dubbed 'the Millennium people', not knowing how close to the truth he was. He ate quickly, every so often checking a pocket for something, but he couldn't remember what was missing. No matter. In ten minutes, the doors opened, and the cloaked evil that was Brother Mayhem entered.

"Mask."

"Brother. Welcome."

The creepy rasp of a voice drifted from the black cloak. "You have had a rough time recently."

"Nothing I cannot handle."

"Your trusted second gone, your best hitmen in gaol. Perhaps I erred in enhancing you."

"Mere nothings," replied the Mask in as bland a tone as possible. \_Arrogant bastard...\_

"And as to your future plans?" asked the Brother as he walked around the room, his shaded eyes never leaving the Mask for a second.

"The elimination of the Double Cs is still on track. Those who obstructed the evidence the first time, won't have a second chance."

"Ah. The single car crash on High Street, and the heart attack at the Athletic Club. And the money men?"

"Both out of the country. They will return upon word that 'the case' no longer exists."

"And you insist that we cannot merely liquidate these men?"

"No. To do so would allow their handpicked successors to take their places. Their prosecutions will cast doubt and disfavor on their underlings, and it will be my picks who control the two largest banks in the city."

"You aren't worried about losing control of the Sons?"

"I have their leash tightly in hand."

Brother Mayhem stopped his circling, faced the Purple Mask. "Best keep a strong grip on it, then. Very well. For now, I will yield to your council. Do you want Lydia back?"

"Where is she?"

"A yes or no, please."

"Yes."

"All right. As a show of good faith, I'll arrange her release. Don't make me regret my decision." With a swirl of darkness, Brother Mayhem departed in silence. Leaving the Mask to angrily brood. And to suddenly remember what he had lost from his grasp that night at the hotel.

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#### AT THE HOSPITAL

Early Sunday morning, with a minimal shift on duty, Alex Speakes relaxed in the well-earned glow of a mild painkiller, and reflected on the night's activity. He thought happy thoughts about the nurses who had so kindly spent additional time making him comfortable upon his arrival, then put it aside. His ribs still hurt from the strange beam he'd intercepted. Stupid move. Can't enjoy being a rich retired rock star if you're dead, Alex. He sighed. In the corner, one of the guards watched MASH on a small TV, the volume barely up. While he gave a moment to trying to hear the dialogue, the door to the room opened.

The guard looked up, and saw it was another guard allowing a doctor to enter. He stood, and the doctor motioned to him to sit down. "I won't be a moment," she said.

"Too bad," Alex murmured. "I think Ashley left some of the astroglide under the bed." He watched the doctor approach, a woman in her late 30s, with intelligent eyes and red hair framing a fair, slender face. She was quite attractive, and to Alex, who had a worldwide reputation for enjoying the company of redheads, was quite pleased to see her.

"Hi Alex, I'm Doctor Walsh," she said quietly. "I need to examine your wound and have it rebandaged."

"Hey. Go right ahead."

"Does that man need to be in here?"

"Lloyd's of London says so. Sorry. Maybe after I'm discharged, we can get together for dinner."

"That's not what I meant, Alex," she replied, but felt a bit of a rush. She wasn't here to banter with this man; her work was far too important. Still, there was a charisma to him... "Roll on your left side, please," she finally said.

"Ok," he answered, rolling to his side. She quickly undid the bandage, and carefully examined the disrupted cells covering the side of his torso. From a pocket, she produced a camera and took a picture of it.

"Aw, you're some tabloid reporter, aren't you? Do you have any idea how many lawyers I have on retainer?"

"I'm no reporter, Alex. But no one documented your wound aside from regular paperwork. We need this to ensure your treatment is as effective as it can be. And that includes photographing the topology of the distressed area."

"Hey, fine, great. You aren't married, are you?"

"No, I'm not married. And I don't date patients. Sorry."

"That's ok, I'm not planning to be a patient for too long."

"Goodnight, Alex, and thank you. Sorry to have disturbed you."

"Yeah, ok, bye." He watched her depart, exhaling in appreciation. Then he sighed, and turned to the guard.

"Take this down, cause I'm gonna pass out now. 'Memo - why did I receive a visit from CDC Doctor Leslie Walsh, as identified in USA Today?' Got that? Thanks."

[Back to the turns page.](#)



[Turn 30]

Sunday morning, at the Red Sky Diary mansion, continued:

Thirty seconds after putting her phone away, Amanda realizes that more people than her mother might have left messages since the last time she'd been home -- when had that been, anyway? Yesterday morning? She'd been too nervous about the show to linger there long. She dials in to see if anything else is there and listens to Chase's request with a silent groan. She'd completely forgotten about Dominique, wanting nothing more than to put the events of that godawful night behind her.

\_So, what are the issues we're dealing with right now? Jake wants to leave the group. Fine, whatever. We're not the Mafia, he can quit if he wants, if he's got things he considers more important. Who knows, maybe it would be for the best, at least for a little while.\_

It had come as a somewhat painful surprise, the fact that as far as Jake's concerned, she's persona non grata. On reflection, she can understand why he feels that way -- in the course of talking with Josh over the past week, she's learned a few things about the Faulkner family. \_From the sound of it, I'm just a convenient way for him to get at his brother, and if I wasn't here, he'd find some other way. But still....\_ She finds herself a little upset, a little angry anyway.

\_It's always something -- but does it have to be something before the second date every time?\_ She turns her attention back to the larger problems facing the Millennium. \_Probably not a good idea for me to try to talk to him right now, anyway. Maybe once everyone's had a chance to calm down a bit.\_

\_The Sigil. Two of them are still wandering around out there somewhere. No real clues on them, unfortunately.\_ She pauses at a sudden thought, sparked by Rob's idle comment of the night before. \_Shelley.\_ After a moment, \_No. No, I'm not even going to think that, that's awful.\_

\_What else? MagnaFlux wants to talk about Dominique, who has weird powers even by current standards, doesn't know who she is, and has something to do with Helios Hope in Cuba, which is a total mystery zone at the moment. There's the question of exactly what SORT etc. are doing with our 'friends' once we've taken care of the hard part. And all the problems we had waiting in the wings before all of this happened, with the drug dealers, and Snowman, and this masked guy from the Doubletree still on the loose.... Good grief.\_ Taken all at once it looks overwhelming.

"All right, enough of that. Have to start somewhere," she says out loud, and heads downstairs in search of caffeine and, she hopes, a couple answers....

There are still FBI guys in the place, with almost as much electronic equipment as the band used for the Unplugged show. All the MTV equipment was long gone, the massive framework of lights and cameras and microphones completely removed and loaded into the big trucks that were also long gone.

Amanda pointedly ignored the FBI guys watching her stride across the floor toward the kitchen. She happened to notice that one of the security guys from last night had followed her down the stairs, and was a few steps behind her. He did not follow her into the kitchen, but waited outside with a couple of others politely outside the door.

The kitchen reminded her of the one in an old sitcom about a wealthy couple and their butler who used to get involved with all kinds of crimes. But for the life of her she couldn't remember the title. At any rate, the kitchen was impressive. The center held a massive marbled top carving table, and a circus of copperware hung over it from a large rectangular rack. Huge aluminum doors to refrigerators and freezers occupied one entire wall, a deep pantry the opposite wall. A large aluminum venting hood over a stove with an unpronounceable German name sat between the two walls, bordered by lots of generous counter space and sinks.

"Any chance of getting some coffee," Amanda asked Alain, Jonas, and Rob, who were the only people in the kitchen. Rob was poring over a sheaf of notes, and marking occasionally with a red pen. Jonas was at the stove, making a very intricate omelet. Alain, as was his normal morning wont, was near the espresso machine frowning.

"Gotta narrow it down. Espresso, cappucino, coffee..." Alain said.

"Just coffee," she replied.

"Colombian, Hawaiian, French roast, Javanese..."

"Sheesh, Alain, how about Savarin?"

"In the pot on the left." Alain handed her a cup from a cupboard. She took it and poured a cup. This was a mark of being accepted, Alex had told her, when Alain stops treating you like a guest. "Glad you didn't say Chock Full O'..."

"Hey, hey, hey, Alain, that's not nice," Jonas said. He gave the skillet a snap, and the omelet obediently folded itself.

"How's Alex this morning?" she asked.

"Ticked. Said some government doctor came by to take nude pictures of him last night," Jonas said.

"We've got to start telling the hospitals not to medicate him," Alain said. "He's always hallucinating about naughty nurses or something bizarre like that."

"Guys, I'm done. I checked all the rest of the names, and we got everybody," Rob said.

"What is it?" Amanda asked.

"I got a copy of the guest list. We've been passing it around, seeing if we can figure out who doesn't fit. But we've nailed everyone on the list."

"So the Sigil, they weren't on the list? Then how'd they get in?"

"Good question. Maybe there's another list somewhere."

"That's Shelley's list. I got it from her office," Jonas said. He had carved the omelet in half, and was offering one half on a plate to Amanda. "Denver style ok?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you."

"Don't thank him, he learned to cook in the Army," Alain helpfully added.

There was something of a commotion outside the door, and they looked up to see Alex come bustling through. "Hey."

"Yo, Rambo, welcome back."

"Hey, man."

"Hey. Coffee?"

"Yeah, please," Alex said to Rob. He looked at Amanda. "You ok?"

"Sure. Thanks for asking."

"Ok, may I ask what you thought you were doing last night?" Alex asked her.

"What?"

"I'm over by the side of the row, trying to get a fix on what's happening and seeing if you guys are ok, and I see you coming back to dive after Josh instead of going out with the security group."

\_Uh oh...\_ she thought.

"Look, Amanda, you are a valuable member of this little band. And I know we went over this when we were signing four thousand pages of contracts; security has the say when the stuff hits the fan. Our days of brawling through a gig are over."

"Ah the good old days," Jonas sighed.

"Alex, I really can take care of myself," Amanda said.

"How? You toting a .44 Magnum in an ankle holster? You bulletproof? Please, please, please, don't ever do that again."

"Josh was in danger," Amanda said, and folded her arms.

"Got you there, slugger," Rob said.

"Not our style, to bail on a friend," Jonas added between forkfuls of omelet.

"Not your style, either, Alex, non?" Alain asked.

Alex kept looking at Amanda, then finally frowned. "Ok, fine. Sheesh, have a history of decking guys, and you never outlive it."

"You outlived it, Alex," Amanda pointed out.

"So I have. Ok. Hey, Amanda, I almost forgot, Hadji's outside for you."

"Who?"

"Little Hindu guy, expensive car. He's out front. Says he's a friend of yours and Josh's. Security says he's ok."

\_Tehsin?!\_ Amanda thought of Glassjack's manservant and driver. \_Has to be him.\_ "Yeah, I'd better see what this is about."

"Take Willie with you?"

"No, no, I know him. It's ok. Besides, I'll be right outside." She left before Alex could have a chance to argue the point with her. Her instinct was correct; Tehsin Said was outside, standing quietly by the Bentley Continental, while a small group of security men watched him.

"Hi! It's good to see you!" she greeted the smaller Tehsin.

"Miss Halle. I bring regards from my master in London."

"How is he?"

"Very well, but the government has recalled him to active duty under the National Secret Act. He will not be back for some time."

"What will he be doing there?"

"Top secret. I am not cleared for it. May I ask you to join my passenger?" he asks, standing by the back passenger door waiting to open it. She approaches, tentatively, then with confidence. \_Pax Avia, and if things aren't meant to be peaceful, well, I can handle that, too,\_ Amanda reminds herself. But she is somewhat surprised at who is awaiting her in the Bentley...no, not Colin Blake, but...

"Mr Bloomfield?" Amanda says, quite surprised.

"Good morning. Scone?" The older man, local business magnate and central figure when the new Millennium group first stood together, offered a biscuit from a plate. Amanda shook her head.

"No, no thank you. I'm sorry, what brings you out here today?"

He indicates Tehsin, in the front seat. "William's batman, there. If I understand him right, Mr Paine will be out of the country for some time."

"We really needed him right now."

"I think I understand. He came to me about having some evidence handled, and whom he could trust with it. I thought he could go to Tom Pitney with it, but it seems I was mistaken."

"Who's Tom Pitney?"

"Attorney General's office, based here in Lexington. Turns out he's as

twisted as a spring. I think he's the one who tipped off the people in William's evidence."

"Where's the evidence now?"

"When he came to me, we went to my office. I had a couple of my tech people convert it electronically, and put it on a CD. William took the CD, and we went back over the workstations and 'cleaned' them. The CD is with a Mister Blake, William's grandson from England."

"And he's..."

"Tehsin says he's begun his own enquiries, and will meet with you later."

"Yes, Miss Halle," Tehsin says. "Please call me later, and if Colin has called in I will get him in touch with you."

"All right," she says.

"If you need anything, remember, call me. See you," Mr Bloomfield says as Tehsin exits the car and opens the door for her. She looks to the shorter Hindu man. "Is Sir William all right?"

"Why, yes, of course. In fact, Miss Halle, I believe this is a good change for him. Much more challenging than the X-Files has become."

"X-Files?"

"You did not know? He has been a writer for some time for Chris Carter. Good day." Tehsin gives a bow, and departs. Amanda watches the car go, and suddenly notices with her enhanced eyesight that at the edge of the driveway, a number of people, media by the looks of them are outside of the grounds. \_Great. Fame and fortune begins here.\_

Amanda turns and heads back inside, to the kitchen. Alex has a cel-phone clamped to his head, while the others are commiserating on the previous night's events.

"Alex calling in an airstrike on Tokyo?" she asks.

"Joint Chiefs have him on hold," Jonas smirks. "Actually he's trying to find Shelley."

"No one's seen her since the end of the gig," Rob adds.

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St Joseph's Hospital, a private room, Harrodsburg Road. Monday, February 14.

"Hey, Carl," said Mark. He looked liked the wrong end of a crosscheck. A large grey-yellow fading bruise discolored his temple, where he had taken the hit. The eye was still shockingly red from the burst blood vessels.

"Nas-T," snickered Carl lightly. "Laid a good one on you for sure. Sorry we couldn't have more to show for it. Mask bolted, and sent hired guns on us. We sent a few of 'em up anyway, includin' your girlfriend. Liked to have had you when the bullets were flying though. Tough part is, we still ain't found

Josh's cousin." Mark asked a few perfunctory questions and Carl brought him up to speed, but his heart wasn't in it.

"Goodbye, Lydia. Sorry Carl, have a seat, won't you?" Mark spilled a few tablets from an open pill bottle into his hand and dry-swallowed them. "Migraines," he explained simply.

"Did find a neat kid wrapped up in this, though, 'nother New Year Baby. Seems like he may throw in with us." They fell into the uncomfortable silence of two men, alone, with all-too-little in common. Reflector seemed about to say something when another knock sounded on the door.

"Oh, 'Manda did say she might drop by too," noted Carl. At her entrance, "Hey, chica."

Amanda raises an eyebrow at the appellation, but smiles at both of them. "Hey there. Nice to see you up and about again," she tells Mark. "How's the head?"

"Only hurts when I think," Mark quipped gamely, though the half that wasn't joking was painfully obvious.

"I don't think the guys are going to make it, but Josh asked me to give you this for him." She handed him a CD of various Canadian Anthems.

"Tell him thanks for me," said Mark, gracefully accepting the record. A playful smile flashed by. "Hey, how about signing it for me?"

To Amanda, Carl said. "Yeah, caught your act on the news this mornin'. Sounds like you guys had a big weekend after shippin' me off. I didn't realize these 'Red Shoe Diaries' was such a big noise in the biz. My girls'll..." Carl trailed off as Mark and Amanda snickered. "What?"

"Carl, Amanda's band is the 'Red \_Sky\_ Diary.' You're thinking of...something else."

"Um, yeah. That's different." Though she wouldn't put it past Carl to have done that deliberately. "Speaking of that, though," she adds as the chuckles die away, "We need to get the gang together, soon-ish, and talk about some stuff.... I don't want to go into it here." She glances at the closed door and continues in a more serious tone than is usual for her. "Lot going on right now. Sorry we've left you kind of out of the loop," she apologizes to Mark.

Mark sighed and rolled his head back on his pillow.

"Somethin' on your mind, hermano?" asked Carl.

"Besides throbbing agony?" Mark's voice trailed off, then he seemed to come to some internal resolve. "Ok, this isn't going to be any easier with more of you. It's like this: when we started, it was a gas. Those turkeys on New Year's, Lydia. But look at our toll -- Sound, near death. You Carl, one patrolman away from being sliced to slimy bits. Me. I have a confession to make. I'd been in one fistfight before New Year's, and every one since then has been as unpleasant as I remembered it."

Carl's face was edging to disapproval, but Amanda put in gently, "No offense

Mark, but how did you think it was going to be?"

"I..I don't know. Not like this. And that's not all of it. At the start, with Book and Bloomfield -- I thought we'd be more, I don't know, official. The cops are tolerating us, but we're not embracing them and... I'm not going for any hot buttons, Carl. You raise some points I hadn't thought of. That's the point, I guess. None of this is what I thought it was going to be. I'm an engineer, not a soldier, and I'd be kidding myself to think otherwise. My Mom's in town. I won't trade away my time with her, heck, my life for this. It's not me."

"So you're out?" said Carl coolly.

"I stepped in when Bloomfield was attacked. I think I've done my good deed. I'm out, no regrets."

Amanda shoots Carl a look. "It's your decision," she says gently. "And I think I understand how you feel. Whatever did this to us, it didn't take a lot of factors into account. Kind of like being drafted, I guess." She shrugs a bit. "Everybody's got choices...." For a moment she looks very far away. "And I'm not going to say you're wrong for feeling the way you do. Maybe right where you are, is where you need to be, for some reason we don't even know yet."

Carl stood up abruptly. "Yeah, man, your choice. Take care. Of yourself. I'll wait for ya outside, 'Manda." Carl rapped the foot of the bed in farewell and left.

"Fine," started Mark. He looked back to Amanda. "I do feel bad, letting you guys down. This wasn't any easy thing...it's not a cop-out. Is it?"

"I don't think so," she says firmly. "Remember back when we met? Book said we're all important, but he didn't know on what scale? We'll miss having you around, but maybe the world needs you to be designing a building right now. No way to tell what's going to happen. You know the number if you ever need a hand with anything, 'kay?" she adds with a smile.

"Yeah. Sure." He doesn't seem convinced.

"Right." She glances down for an uncomfortable moment. "Take care, all right? I mean it," she adds forcefully.

"I will. You, too. All of you."

"We'll try. Give a ring when you're feeling better." Knowing that he probably won't. "See you around."

She heads out, sees Carl standing at the curb, scowling at the scene around him.

He looks like he's about to say something. "I know," she cuts him off, the unwonted curtness mitigated by a sigh; now that they're outside she looks somewhat tired. "But forcing the issue wasn't going to do any good. And we've got mega-problems, as our young friend might say. I think we need to get the whole gang -- including Chase -- together to talk some stuff out, and then figure out what we need to do about it."

"Yeah, you mentioned. What's goin' on?" In rapid-fire sentences she lays out the events of the past weekend, including a glancing overview of the Faulkner family's woes. Seeing Carl's expression growing darker again when she mentions Jake's resolution, she adds, "Josh seems to think he might come around, but things are really stressed right now with those two, and it might take a while. I don't know how long we can wait, though."

The news about the Faulkners outweighed even his growing disgust. "Mierde, I guess we oughtta get a meet in. How's Josh holdin' up?"

"I think it came as something of a shock, but he seems to be all right. I don't know. There's a lot of family history in it that I'm not sure I really understand yet." She tucks a flyaway strand of hair back into place, and passes on details about the funeral arrangements. "I guess other things will just have to wait until after that."

Carl grunted in acknowledgement. "'Ey you up for a quick cup? Y'know, while you can still walk the streets anonymous." Carl's sly tone indicated that his mood was temporarily derailed.

"Coffee, no. Beer, yes."

They wander into the local watering hole, empty except for the local color, and order draft from the disinterested waitress. Outside, morning was bright and clear enough to make their other lives all seem a bit fantastical. Carl took a healthy draught, then settled attention on his companion. "I din't know you before New Years', obviously, but you really got it goin' on now, chica." Seeing her expression grow suspicious, he chuckled, "No, no. Sometimes I like ta twist th' knife, but this is straight up. You got the whole package, you make a serious impression these days. On \_men\_." Into the looming silence, he added, "Thissa compliment, chica."

"Your point?" she asks in a somewhat guarded tone, idly canting her glass.

Carl considers her response, a shade put off, then laughs heartily. "Damn, I get more swim outta \_other\_ team's groupies." More seriously, "This music gig you got goin', judgin' by the TV coverage, this's huge. 'For long, tourin's gettin' into the mix..."

"Is this about my commitment to the group?" Amanda started.

"No, not this time. I'll scowl at that bridge when it gets here. This's about what's gonna try ta change ya. My life ain't outta People Magazine, but I got some time in the public eye. Lot of it way too soon. See, here's th' deal. Out there ev'ry eye on ya brings emotion, feeds it to ya. It's pretty damn addictin' is what it is. Puts ya outta yer normal head, inta some other space. Over there, ain't hard ta forget what you got goin' in yer duller life."

"Ah." She considers her response for a while. "Carl, what you said before about not knowing me... I've been doing this for a long time now. Nothing like the scale the Diary's got going, but believe me, I know this business. Of course it's a huge rush. Saturday night I didn't \*care\* if people started shooting at us again. I mean, it's good of you to be concerned. And I know the bridges are going to be rough when they come, but... it's not something I can pass up. The guys are there, too, they've been dealing with all of



this for a long time -- I think I'll be able to keep my head screwed on in the right direction. And if the rest of my life is 'dull' by anybody's standards, I'd like to know whose they are," she adds with a smile.

"No joke," he acknowledged with a grin. "But just so we're clear -- I'm thinkin' 'bout you, sure. I'm also thinkin' 'bout Josh. He's like me -- we're regular Jose's. Walkin' down the street, ain't no woman gonna drop her mascara over us." With a wicked grin, Carl added, "That takes time." Back to the matter at hand, "You, you're all woman: this deal's gonna throw guys at you might shake yer mascara. Too mucha that at the wrong time..." Carl shifted uncomfortably. "No sense makin' mistakes... others made."

Amanda sits back with an angry sigh. "Do I have 'soul-destroying bitch' stenciled on my forehead or something? Jake, now you. Christ." She takes a breath and goes on more gently. "I'm sorry. I appreciate your honesty, and I'm really glad you two are getting along well enough now that this is a concern for you. But I really don't think you need to worry. It's still a little early, for one thing." \_Has it really only been a week? Not much longer than that. Good grief.\_ "But I'll keep it in mind," she assures him seriously. "I've made my own share of mistakes." Anything else she can think to say would have sounded like criticism, so she leaves it unsaid.

It still wasn't coming through, but Carl had run out of impersonal ways to approach it and she was clearly past impatient with the whole thing. Internally he framed, "It ain't just him, chica, it's what doin' to him can do to you." Externally, he shrugged and dropped it. All I'm askin' is when they do you on VH1, don't start out 'I couldn't handle the success.' That is \_so\_ played," Carl joked. He stood up, downed his beer and motioned for the waitress. "See you Tuesday, the wake, right?" Amanda agreed, left her own half finished and wandered off with a wave.

Watching her go, Carl muttered wryly to himself in Spanish, "\_Man\_, does the de la Cruces charm need a little polish." As he paid the waitress, he said, "Whadda you say, chica. I'm a good lookin' guy, right?"

"Oh yeah, a stud," she replied dead flat, and without bothering to look at him.

"Like bein' married again," observed Carl.

(ok, so maybe it wasn't DeNiro and Pacino in 'Heat' chatting in the restaurant, but at least these two fiery characters are speaking to one another...let's catch up with Amanda again...)

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Monday night, outside Amanda's apartment.

Amanda is startled at 9:15 when the strumming of three guitars and corresponding "Aribas" are shouted outside her window three stories below.

"Ms. Amanda Halle?" a microphoned voice bellows "You are to be serenaded by" a pause as the guitars again strum in what must have been intended to be unison "...The Bluegrass Boleros!" The Marachi's open their medley with "La Gloria Eres Tu" by Luis Miguel.

"What in the name of...." Heedless of the freezing air, she opens the window and leans out to survey the street below. Her gaze falls onto three out of

practice and amazingly tone deaf thirty somethings trying their damndest to play in the bitter cold. Clad in the stereotypical over-sized sombreros, sequined bolero jackets, tight slacks, and dark shoes of a Mariachi. She notices they all have the group's name in Christmas lights on the back of their coats.

It's too much. Shaking her head at the sheer exuberant weirdness of it, she laughs until tears come. When the song ends she gives them a round of applause. A couple of the neighbors are poking their heads out as well by then, somewhat bemused by the spectacle.

Willing to play on well into the night, the lead singer is inevitably cut short by his sidemen being unable to play through the mittens and parkas they had to put in sometime during the third song. Stopping at that tune's end he allows them to take five as they take turns sipping hot chocolate from a thermos. Stepping forward after a distasteful scowl at his "partners" he says, "Ms. Amanda we have a gift for you from Senor Faulkner who again apologizes for being away tonight."

"You're wonderful," she assures them all, noting the scowl. For a moment, a real tear threatens to join those produced by laughter's release; too many high emotions in too brief a time. \_The funeral's tomorrow, and he's apologizing?\_

He produces a very large package wrapped in brown paper and taped together hurriedly and offers it upward in a questioning manner.

"I'll be right down!" Resisting the urge to take the short route, and leaving the open window behind, she hurries down the stairs two at a time to emerge shivering on the building's front walk and accept the mysterious package. "Thank you."

The band's front man gives her the package. Then with a dashing sweep of his hat he bids her "Adios" and as they pack up their gear Amanda can hear him mutter at the others that they should give up their day jobs as attorneys and stick brokers respectively to rehearse if the "Bluegrass Boleros are to make good their comeback." Already up the stairs Amanda can see them drive off in a Ford Fairlane with a sombrero on the roof -- it too lit up like Christmas.

Spying a note sealed in an attached envelope she opens it first before tearing into the package. It says "I told you they sucked! I appreciate camp as much as the next guy but come on..." The package contains a potpourri of documentation of all the "just missed" moments they have discussed, all with post-it's attached:

\*A picture of Josh at 6, if Jocelyn's handwriting on the back is correct, swinging atop a tire swing in his underwear pounding his chest as if he were Tarzan. The post it reads: "Not the first time I wore Garanimals in public...and probably not the last!"

\*Josh at 16 in sitting on a coach holding a pair of high heels wearing a strapless canary yellow chiffon dress, horrendous make-up that barely covers up his teenage 5 o'clock shadow. The note attached says simply "..."

\*A photo of him around the same time on stage playing bass for "The Flannel Firing Squad" according to the barely legible because it's too stylized

handwriting on the oak tag board in front of the lead singer. "My first band. God we sucked."

\*Attached by a paperclip to a Carnegie Hall program for a "Night of Jazz" is two clippings from the Village Voice short list section hailing his efforts in particular in The Alphabet City Opry and his punk band "36-24-36". Opening the program to where the clip begins she can see his name listed in the orchestra.

Sifted to the side of the makeshift "box" is an old homemade cassette..."Flannel Firing Squad's eponymous debut lp" is the full unabridged title. Recorded in 1987 on somebody's two track. Josh is the only one who shows even the most remote spark of talent -- the singer's voice switched from warbles to ear breaking falsettos as his voice cracked at the drop of a hat. The guitarist and drummer were typical boys goofing around -- what teen doesn't have aspirations of being in a band? especially a punk-funk band?

There is also a very professional looking 36-24-36 CD entitled "Barbie's Dimensions" the cover features the trio in plastic, mannequin-like "Barbie suits" credited to some sculptor that Josh knew. Quick perusal of the lyrics (most written by Josh and Darby, the lead singer/guitarist) show a true agit-punk band chock full of socio-political comment. His thank you's include most notably "his two favorite Riot Grrls Annie and Lynn."

\*And finally his senior class yearbook from High School. On its cover a note says "I spend some of my days identifying people from mug shots---finding your smiling face was a breeze." The book's pages are dog eared for every page she's on.

She spreads it all out over the beat-up kitchen table for study, deeply amused and somewhat astonished by all the time this must have taken him. \_So close, for so long... and we finally run into each other trying to stop a terrorist attack on the New Years Day parade. Life is so strange.\_

Amanda spends a long while leafing through the yearbook -- she hasn't looked at any of hers in years -- lost in thought and memory. Imagining a series of spheres extending into one another, shifting slowly and apparently at random within the larger spheres of place. Sometimes they just miss one another, sometimes collide and bounce away... sometimes merge.

With a start she realizes that it's almost eleven. After a pause, she picks up the phone. No one there; probably with his family, taking care of last-minute details. "Thank you," she tells the answering machine with a smile. "That's the most wonderful thing since... oh, at least last week. Though you're right, they *are* pretty terrible. And yellow's not your color." After an imperceptible hesitation, unsure of what to say, what to think of the way she feels, Amanda ends simply, "I'll see you in the morning."

Tomorrow's not going to be easy on anyone. Best to make an early night of it. But after a half hour of staring at the ceiling turns into an hour, she gets up again. Not too much later, anyone awake and looking up at just the right moment might think they saw something winged moving high over the city.

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[OOC: Josh's childhood remembrances are based on "Ben's Trumpet" by Rachel Isadora.]

Josh makes his approach to Christian's suburban homestead and can't help think this isn't how Bernie would have been spending the winter of his life. Scrambling up the snow covered cobblestones both hands tucked firmly into his leather jacket he quickly knocks on the door. "Smilin'" Bernie Christian was one helluva bassist when Josh was a boy. In fact it was under Bernie's tutelage that Josh really started playing in earnest. He remembers their first meeting almost like recalling pages from a from a children's story...

The Faulkners had lost their home in a fire the year before (this unfortunately happened again on Josh's fourteenth birthday almost a decade later) due to faulty wiring and the contractor they hired swindled them of most of the money they had in their savings to rebuild. They were living in an apartment in the center of downtown while Jonathan scraped pennies together to construct another home on their land. Between Jonathan spending much of his time on his beat and toiling with hammer and nails and Jocelyn focusing much of her attentions on Jake who had been born not too long before the blaze, Josh spent many nights alone on the fire escape. He listened with great enthusiasm to the music dancing out of Ben's Trumpet, a jazz club on their block. He would often join in playing his imaginary bass. In the hot summer nights Jocelyn would often find him asleep on the cool metal railings.

He would stop by the club everyday on his way home from school to watch the musicians rehearse. The rhythm of the bass would carry his feet homeward bound. Once there he would play for his mother, baby Jake, Grandma Jane, Jonathan and his buddies on their poker nights, whoever, whenever he could. One day on his stoop Smilin' Bernie complemented him on his "playing" and said "they'd have to see what they could do about getting him a real one." Bernie's charm and kind heart inevitably earned him a place at their table in this very trying time for the family. He was an extra set of hands for Jocelyn, another strong back for Jonathan, a mentor for Josh, and a confidant for them all.

Music was a "wild hair" for Bernie as he returned to law a few years later. Some sort of mid-life crisis affirmation thing but that time with that Bernie was vital to Josh. He really couldn't think him enough...his thoughts are interrupted as the door opens...

Bernie stood there for a moment bringing reality back into focus for Josh. Bernie today was larger in the center, with thinning hair that was more salt than pepper, clad in a suit and wearing bifocals but he was still an even 6'0. He was neither weighed down by regret nor any closer to death than the man that changed Josh's life those decades ago. He gave him a hearty hug and brought the younger man into his home with an arm across his shoulders.

Chet Baker's rendition of "Someone to Watch Over Me" from "My Funny Valentine" was playing lightly in the den. Losing his best friend was the second devastating blow Bernie had endured in as many years. His beloved, Rachel passed on last year after a hard fought battle with leukemia. Pictures of Jake and Josh are scattered throughout the halls. The couple never had children of their own so the two men are the closest thing he has to sons...a fact he tries as best he can to hide in their business dealings even tho' he's lousy at it.

"Sorry that my first visit in a while has to be under these circumstances." Josh says as he hangs his coat in the hall closet, rubbing his hands together to get them warm.

"Don't think twice about it...we've all had a lot on our minds. Come to the kitchen and we'll get some coffee in you to get rid of that chill."

The two men sit down and talk over their steaming beverages.

"It still baffles me that you take your coffee straight - I thought every red blooded New Yorker took his 'sweet and light'" Bernie says as he adds copious amounts of non-dairy creamer to his own.

"Well you know me Bernie, I like my coffee like I like my men: hot, black, and in a cup." Josh half-heartedly quips reflexively.

The two chuckle briefly with images of Larry Blackmon in their heads before Josh resumes staring into the blackness of his mug.

Bernie allows him the moment of contemplation reading him like a book before touching his hand saying, "Your father didn't die hating or blaming you, Josh. You might not be able to believe me now when I say that but maybe after you take a look at this..." Christian produces a sealed envelope from his breast pocket of his navy blazer and slides it over to Joshua.

"What is that?"

"Hopefully some peace for you. It's a letter from your father. I took dictation for it since he couldn't hold a pen anymore when I visited him for the last time earlier this week." Bernie pushes back from the table and stands up "I'll give you some time alone with it."

Josh rests his fingertips on it for a full ten minutes before tearing through one edge of the envelope. Inside is a tri-folded single sheet of paper. He can actually hear his father's voice come through the rambling, nigh-confessional words:

"If you're reading this then odds are it's over my dead body. Heh...I tried this so many times even while you were in New York and my stubborn pride kept getting in the way. It was unfair for me to resent you for leaving. I'm sorry. There I said it. Took the wind out of your sails too didn't it boy?

In all honesty I probably would've lost all respect for you if you had stayed. Lord knows I wouldn't have taken that from my old man. That business was my dream NOT yours. It might scare the hell out of you but you and I are a lot more alike then you think. We both feel the weight of the whole damn world on our shoulders. I buckled more times than I care to count but you, you're made of stronger stuff than me Josh.

'Course that doesn't mean you won't fall on your face but you'll do it your own way. And then you'll dust your self off and get back in the ring.

I'm rambling here...Do you remember that Big Bluegrass Festival I took you to when you were a kid? God, we were so close then lots of things got in the way...anyway you looked up at me with those big puppy dog eyes and told me "that's gonna be me one day." I hope you get your chance. I bought you a

Bill Monroe album for your college graduation present...your momma might be able to find it for you. It's a good one. You do still have a record player right? It'd be my damned luck if you only listened to those CD things now.

I also want you to fix up that old Shadow of mine. We used to go to the grocery store all the time on that bad boy, do you remember? Treat her right and she'll take care of you.

The thing I'm gonna hate the most is missing out on you boys having sons of your own. Jim and I were a rotten lot - two fuckin' bad apples that only got more rotten around each other. You don't know how many times I thanked God that you and Jake didn't end up the same way. Your boys will be even further removed from that bad blood. Keep loving your brother and I'll be happy. You got my love of music but he got my temper, cut him some slack when he isn't being too pig-headed and give him a what for when he deserves one (just make sure your momma ain't around when you do!)

Your family's bigger than just us and always has been; you got Bernie here who was more of a father to you than I ever really was; Tuck might as well as well change his name to Faulkner; your momma was always telling me about those girls you spent all that time with in the city, and Jake mentioned some new young lady the other day. Point is son you've been lucky to have so many different people to care about you. All those friend's are the family you choose treat him like it.

Visiting hours are almost over and I'm gonna have to let Ol' Bernie here go. The world's changing outside this window if I can believe all the News shows -- I hope some of that excitement rubs off on you. "

Love,

Dad

The whole letter had been written by Bernie but somehow, through some willpower Jonathan managed to eke out the small three-letter signature.

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Tuesday, February 15 - Jonathan Faulkner's Funeral

~~~ How do I say goodbye to what we had? The good times that made us laugh outweigh the bad ~~~

Amanda has been trying hard to make herself invisible. Attending the funeral of someone she never knew feels kind of odd to begin with, and while she wants to be there for Josh, she doesn't want her presence to exacerbate any lingering tension amid members of the family.

~~~ I thought we'd get to see forever ~~~

Feeling something of an interloper into such an emotionally charged and intimate setting, she finds her thoughts drifting during the service itself. Death seems a lot closer than it ever used to these days. Can she really blame Jake for thinking the way he does about what they're doing? She has lost friends in the past -- Carole to suicide, Brad to the accident, Michael to AIDS. They hadn't, any of them, gone out into the world looking for things that could kill them. If they had, would she have felt differently when they died?

~~~ But forever's gone away ~~~

\_Yes,\_ she decides. \_I would have been just as angry, but not in the same way. And if I had known they had died \*for\* something, something they considered important -- it would have hurt just as much, but at least there might have been some good. And what we're doing is something I think we all consider important.\_

~~~ It's so hard to say goodbye ~~~

After the brief sermon Pastor Davis calls Josh forward from his seat next to Jake and Jocelyn. He quietly steps forward his head bent down as he approaches the dais barely a few feet from the open casket. Once there he pulls the letter from the inside of his jacket.

~~~ To yesterday ~~~

"I never understood my father. He was always a mystery to me. The man was full of contradictions. He was generally quiet but had one of those big boisterous belly laughs that echoed even after the joke stopped being funny. I'll miss that. Whenever I thought I was getting close to putting the puzzle together he would distract with some comment out of left field or some sleight of emotion and re-arrange the pieces. There were times I think I even threw them on the floor...when the picture on the puzzle started to resemble me just a little too much instead of the image of him that I was forcing them to depict. I'm sure I sound like I'm babbling - I'm not that good with visual metaphors and I'm a little baffled myself as to why I'm relying on them now. I guess it's that I know music and that I never really knew him. I don't know."

~~~ I don't know, where this road is gonna lead ~~~

"What I do know is that I don't have to be afraid of sharing traits he had anymore. He was a good man. There was something about him that drew great people to him despite how very bad he could be at times. His alcoholism got worse when he was thrown off the force and was a monster for a time there. No matter how hard he tried to push you away you never left. That meant the world to him. He'd never tell you that but then again he didn't need too. You all already knew it. He claims here in this letter that I've got that gift too. I can only hope that's the case. I never gave myself the chance to say that to him and he almost didn't get to tell me. He reminded me that I have been blessed with a wonderful family. Furthermore I have been blessed yet again by developing the friendships I've made over the last few years and recent months. I don't want to die not getting the chance to tell you all that you are my family and I love you."

~~~ All I know is where we've been ~~~

He folds the letter back into his pocket and holds his hand there over his heart for a moment. He heads to the casket wreathed in flowers and banners and kisses his father's hands and whispers "Thank you."

~~~ And what we've been through ~~~

Josh's eulogy is a knife in Amanda's heart. She tries not to think about anything but the moment, let the words flow around her. To concentrate on

the people present, the occasion that has drawn them together, the loss that others are feeling. She finds her own cheeks wet despite her best efforts. \_Father. How did this happen? Have I already lost you, is it too late to ever say anything again?\_ Her deepest unspoken fear, that it has always been too late....

~~~ If we get to see tomorrow ~~~

The inclement weather makes the burial pass quickly. After words of condolences most of the attendees head to the Faulkner home for a wake. Josh stands over the freshly moved earth and channels the sound of his own heartbeat into a 21 gun salute. He turns rain and tears streaming down his face towards his "family".

~~~ I hope it's all worth the wait ~~~

By the time things are done she's managed to regain some measure of composure. Standing near the grave with the others, her eyes say everything she does not trust herself to speak aloud.

~~~ It's so hard to say goodbye ~~~

Jake had been holding it back pretty good... until now. As a tear starts to make its way down his cheek he doesn't fight it or the ones that follow. He was always known as the emotional one in the family. It was a bit surprising to see Josh open up so much though. He was never one to show his feeling too much, to never let you know what he was thinking. It's got Jake a bit concerned about his brother's state of mind. After the other night Josh has seemed different. He didn't know Josh had felt so much guilt and that he himself had held such resentment toward Josh. The both had let their emotions fester too long. He knew it was best that they had gotten those feelings out in the open. He just wasn't sure how long it would take the two of them to move past the other night.

~~~ To yesterday ~~~

At the wake, Carl chafed in the out-of-date dark blue suit he wore maybe every other year. He felt fairly out of place, all these people he didn't know nakedly showing their grief. As happens at wakes, every now and then, hushed laughter would float around, urging people to cope. At his size, fading into the background was not an option, but he at least backed a wall to stay out of people's path. He'd been unable to convince Chase to come, thinking it might help the kid come to some realization about his own dad -- was he really as bad a teenagers can think -- but Chase had danced out of it. Been nice to have someone to talk to.

~~~ And I'll take with me the memories ~~~

At one point Josh wandered by, and Carl stepped out from his wall post. He put an affectionate arm around the man, who was gamely battling a wildness crowding in from the edges. "Hey 'mano, you ok?" Carl fumbled with his next words for a minute, finally settling on the inadequate. "You need anythin', from a beer on up, don't think twice, sabe? Any crutch you need, 'mano, any crutch you need." If he noticed Josh's recent bruising, it made no impact.

~~~ To be my sunshine after the rain ~~~



Pausing to really answer the question and to appreciate the larger man's kindness. "Not ok yet but I'm startin' to make some peace with it all...and thanks, man it's really good to hear you say that." He squeeze's Carl's shoulder with a strength that his words can't articulate.

~~~ It's so hard to say goodbye ~~~

Jake wandered by moments later. Carl stepped forward somewhat more coolly. "Hey, man. You tight? Sorry 'bout...my condolences." He firmly and formally returned Fury's handshake. Jake's lack of bruising made about as much impression.

~~~ To yesterday ~~~

"Thanks, I know it means a lot to Josh to have some of his friends around. He's having a rough time of it." Jake, feeling almost as uncomfortable as Carl, returns to mingling with the small crowd. He was a little surprised so many people turned up. He goes to the kitchen to check on refreshments, noting that he's going to have to make another trip to the store soon. He returns to the living room to find Josh who truly does seem bolstered by the love of the well-wishers and Jake wishes his could exchange the cold comfort of his anger for that...

~~~ And I'll take with me the memories  
To be my sunshine after the rain  
It's so hard to say goodbye  
To yesterday. ~~~

\*\*\*\*\*

Wednesday afternoon, near the Patterson Towers. Jake walks alone, or so he thinks...

Jake walks the windy commons of the University grounds, en route to the library to isolate himself in the reassuring warmth of higher education. There's very few people out this time of day, and that suits him fine.

As he pads along the well-worn brickwork, head down against the cold, he notices someone step into his path, and looks up. Fellow in a tan longcoat, athletic, keen eyed, with light brown eyes to match his complexion. A hat, too; who wears hats these days? A professor? Not one he recognizes.

"Jacob Faulkner? Frank Templeton, LPD Homicide," he says, offering his hand. Sizing him up, eyes like drills. "My partner lounging over there is Timothy Byers. Sorry to hear about your father." Templeton indicates a pale, thoughtful-looking fellow dressed similarly, wearing wire-rimmed glasses

Jake muttered something along the line of thanks. "Homicide?"

"Jacob, we're looking for your cousin. Jason? We'd like you to come with us down to Main Street, tell us what you know about him," Byers says.

"That's easy, I don't know anything."

"Fair enough, but we still need you to come with us."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Have you done anything to merit being arrested, Jacob?" Templeton asks. Jake hears the unasked part of the question: \_Like aiding and abetting a cop killer?\_

"I ain't done a damn thing. Fine. Let's go."

\*\*\*\*\*

Wednesday night.

\_The Wile Store. Just like homecoming,\_ Phoenix muses, dusting herself off after her rapid search of the premises. Looks like she's the first one there. It had been hard enough finding a time that worked out well for everyone, though they all seemed to agree that a meeting was necessary, to deal with some of the issues at hand. For one thing, her conversation with Colin, although inconclusive, suggested that the group has some decisions to make, and the quicker the better. She wonders who else will appear....

On his approach to the store Josh can hear a single heartbeat in the presumably abandoned storefront. It's a rythem he immediately recognizes. As he makes his way through the loose timbers barring entrance to the decrepit space he says "well I can't say as I'm surprised to see you beat me here...shatter any windows on yer way over?" he jokes.

"Not today. I don't think there's an unbroken window in the place anyway," she adds with a faint smile. "Seems like forever since the last time we all got together... is Fury going to make it?" she asks a bit hesitantly. "I know everyone else was planning to, at least, unless something came up."

"If he doesn't make it here he'll call ahead and we can update him once we have a plan of attack. Does that mean Mark's ok?"

"Oh." She realizes that she'd forgotten to mention something. "Um, he's not coming. Ever."

Beat.

"I think he's going to be all right, but he's still in pretty bad shape from that whack on the head. I guess he's decided that this really isn't what he wants to be doing with himself, right now at least." Amanda finishes.

"Damn." is Josh's succinct summation. He's genuinely surprised but as that wears off and it becomes increasingly clear that not everyone is looking at their "gifts" the same way he does.

"Mark and Jake were our strong arms -- that could leave us in a real bind. We'll have to focus on hit and run tactics to emphasize what assets we have left -- stealth and ranged attacks."

"Well, at least we're pretty good at those..." She peers through a gap in the boards, hoping to see one of the others approaching. "Though I for one could use a chance to practice some, I think. It's a bit hard to find appropriate targets, unfortunately."

"This may be the first club ain't called \_me\_ the strong arm," rattled the

Nightcrawler's gurgling voice. He resolved with a stretch out of the darkness. Carl smoothed over the unsettling effect his nighttime entrances had with a sly crack, "Sorry. My mama always knocked first when I had gals alone in the dark." Not that his arrival was a secret to Sound.

.....Although he almost became the target Phoenix had been looking for; she jumped at the sudden sound of his voice and reminded herself to relax. No reason to be so tense; no one was going to sneak up on them in this place. "Ha, ha. Do you know if MagnaFlux is going to make it?"

"Dunno. Ain't spoke since before th' funeral." A quick glance at Sound. "'Ey, while we're waitin' I got somethin' for ya. You're the only one I know still usin' them cancer-sticks. Ya might could use this." From underneath his gloppy sheen, the Nightcrawler produced an ornate lighter, decorated with WWII vintage fuselage art: some redheaded 'good girl' beaming at the enemy's imminent bombing. "Got this off th' Mask. Might work on stuff other than napalm."

After some close scrutiny Josh adds "I think it's called a Marjorie or a Maggie or something like that -- this things are like gold to Zippo collectors. Thanks, mi amigo." Josh idly draws the lighter part out of its Marjorie case. "Well look at this; there's an inscription on the inner piece. 'D.H. McCain, 36th Squadron, A.A.C. 1942'. If this is the same guy, he'd have to be in his 70s at least. So who can clue me in on the Double Cs and this evidence Glassjack had?"

"Well," Phoenix starts, leaning thoughtfully against a dusty pillar, glad to have something concrete to think about. "I did manage to get a few words with our mysterious visitor -- not as many as I would like, but he did tell me that Sir William is back in England for the foreseeable future, working on something he 'regrets to tell me cannot be discussed.'" She imitates his accent quite well. "And, I received a visit from Mr Bloomfield, chauffeured by Sir William's manservant, if that's the word. He confirmed what I could get out of Colin Blake, and offered his assistance if we need it."

"I'm kind of worried about the papers disappearing," she admits. "It looks as if these guys have friends in high places, which makes that avenue of investigation look less promising. We can only hope that they don't know where the papers came from, or that they think that was the only copy."

"Mierde!" swore Carl passionately. "I knew that was gonna happen. Jeeves was the closest we had ta a sure thing, an' he couldn't keep it down. Now somebody knows we're onta 'em. Who's this new guy? Any reason ta think he's anythin' but a step down? We need ta get him movin' -- the black hats is sure cleanin' up anything them papers point to. Mierde!"

After a moment mastering himself, Carl continued. "I gotta little somethin' else. Me 'n Double Cs' bro', Rojo, we gotta history. He gets desperate enough, he might leave a tag for me." A quick pause, then he translated, "Graffiti aimin' at me. 'Nother gang, Sons a' Chicago, is jockeyin' the Cs, and my buddy Snowman's cuttin' 'em both down. Might push Rojo ta contact, an' we might exploit that. I'm thinkin' a takin' down some Sons ta see if that greases his windpipes."

"What kind of 'history?'" Phoenix inquires, a bit uneasy. "You think that if he's in a bad enough position, and thinks you're kind of on his side of things, he might be willing to talk?"

Nightcrawler shrugged. "He'd like ta think so. I might let that idea ride a bit, to get traction. I'm jus' thinkin' out loud here. Mebbe you guys squeeze on the Cs, he runs ta me for relief -- that might work too." With a disgusted shake of his head, "This is screwed. I don' wanna give up on that info till we know the trail is swept over. It's only been a week. [or so?] We need ta light a fire under Jeeves Jr's ass before it's all cold. After that, mebbe we look at some other runs."

Amanda says, "As for Colin, he's Sir William's grandson, and judging from we saw at the show he takes after the old guy. I don't think he's powered, but he does carry a few unusual gadgets around with him. I can understand why he's being cautious, I guess; he doesn't really know the landscape here, doesn't know us.... It's not a complete loss don't think," she goes on with a little sigh. "Now we know we can't trust the high road. And I don't see any way they could trace the information back to us, at least -- if it led anywhere, it would lead to Sir William, and he's out of the country. They might actually feel safer, now that he's gone. I don't know."

Placing a cigarette between his lips Josh raises the zippo toward his mouth and snaps his fingers on the lid flipping it open and spinning the wheel to light it in one smooth gesture. "If we can't get to the men at the top of the food chain here and we do pressure the Double Cs then what's to stop the Sons from stepping in for them?"

"Presumably, us," Phoenix sighs, glances at the lighter and wonders about fingerprints. She suspects Carl would still be dead-set against ringing in the police, and after what happened to their last evidence, that might not be bad thinking. "I'm sure that between us we can put the fear of God into a couple of punks if you think it'll help. As for Colin, I don't know how involved he can get beyond handing the stuff over, but we can find out."

A resigned amusement colors the Nightcrawler's gurgling response. "This is soundin' more 'n more like my other job. We got a sayin' over there. 'Drugs and Crime ain't goin' away. All we c'n do is focus on the Addicts and Criminals.' " Carl wetly smacked fist into palm. "'Course we c'n also make life damn uncomfortable for the Predators runnin' the show. We pull 'em out as fast as they get pulled in. Son's step in, we hit them next. Then whoever's behind them."

Waving the small pin-prick of light that the coal of his cigarette produces as he exhales a puff of smoke Sound says "Do we have a way to contact Colin? Can he get us the info now?"

"Yes and no, if you mean right this instant, but I suspect he has it with him. It would only make sense. We could probably pick it up tonight. Once we do, though, we need to know what our strategy is going to be?" she half questions. "Maybe once we know who they are, if we start keeping an eye on some of these guys, we can catch them in something that can't be covered up?"

"Let's put the call out to him. 'Crawler you're the one that knows their operations the best we'll have to use your greater experience for developing our strategy. What do you think the chances are that if the rest of apply pressure then Rojo might spill some info to you about their pipeline to the higher ups? Maybe you could convince him we were going to hit some drop off point and tail him?"

Carl considered. "Well, he ain't gonna spill his guts 'cause he likes my pretty face. What you said sounds like the way -- lay on the heat, let him come ta me, then finesse an' sneak. Before that, definitely get back what we can from Jr, then you guys go over it. I been through it once, an' its all Greek ta me, but finance ain't my specialty. If you know a moneyman ya trust, that might help. I know one, but I don't trust him. Anythin' we can get outta T-Gold's stuff has a short shelf-life so we oughtta milk that first.

Thinking that Bernie's certainly had to deal with convoluted scenarios at some point in his legal career Josh replies "I know an attorney that might be able to help in a worst case scenario but let's see what the spy boys have turned up."

"I'm thinkin' a swingin' by Flux' place. Thought he was gonna be here tonight, just wanna check up on him, make sure the kid's ok." Carl's body language indicated a grimace. "Hey, let me know when that comes out yeah? Nothin' a kid likes worse'n bein' called 'kid.' "

"Flux in trouble? -- the kid's not pulling a Lone Ranger routine is he?" Josh's cigarette drops to the ground cartwheeling in the store's stale air. He crushes it under his boot.

"Sure it's not Dominique you're going to see?" jibed Sound slyly.

Carl rumbled in laughter. "No, no, not me. These gringo women too hard on my ego. I'm thinkin' Swedes."

"I would be too if one called me 'Mr. Fantastic' after seeing me in my skivvies.'" Josh smirks.

An arched brow is the only response to that from Phoenix. "All right, then. We have a plan of action, at least as far as dealing with this little problem goes. Guess I'll find out if Colin's accepting visitors, and see what he can tell us. Once we have that, maybe we can pick our targets for strong-arming the lower ranks."

"So just what do the ladies say when they see you in your skivvies? 'Get a mouse trap!'" jabs Chase as enters with Dominique following behind. "Sorry for the delay. I hope we didn't miss too much."

"Hey, nice of you to drop by," Phoenix's quick smile removes any sting. "Just trying to figure out what to do with our friendly neighborhood drug problem." She outlines the discussion that has already taken place. "We have a plan of action. Guess I'll find out if Colin's accepting visitors, and see what he can tell us. Once we have that, maybe we can pick our targets for strong-arming the lower ranks." \_Listen to me pretending I know what I'm doing....,\_ she think wryly. "Before that, though, you mentioned that you wanted to talk about some stuff?" She glances inquiringly at Chase. "I mean, I don't know how involved in all of this stuff you really want to be...."

"I would be smarter to NOT want to be involved, but ultra-militantly straight-edge as I am...Hey, let's drop the pushers! And yeah, there is some stuff I have to mention... kinda got blown over back with the whole car chase day and I didn't know what to do with it at the time anyway. It seems

Reverse-Memory Girl here may have the clue that can explain why we became what we became if anyone's interested in exploring their inner-hero..." Chase motions to Dominique, "That is, if we can ever figure out who she really is, because she doesn't know."

Josh is amazed at Chase's enthusiasm it's a hopeful sign after losing Reflector, Glassjack, and maybe Fury. "Great to see you two back -- what do you mean she has a clue? what makes you say that?"

The Nightcrawler burbled, "Oh man, 'f this's gonna be involved, we sure we wanna get into this now?"

"We probably won't figure it out tonight, but I don't think a few minutes is going to make a critical difference one way or the other right now," Phoenix remarks. "And I'm certainly interested in anything that might point toward knowing what caused all of this. Of course, wherever Mr. Book's involved you never know what's going on..." Wondering why he'd brought her to Lexington in the first place. For safety? "Dominique, have you remembered anything more since last week?"

Dominique, having arrived following Chase, has been standing quietly near one of the pillars here in the remains of the old Wile Store. "There's nothing wrong with my memory," she replies. "Except for the day I had the car accident, everything seems to be back where it was. But the day of the wreck is still a blur to me, like something just cut my senses off from my body. I don't know how else to explain it."

After lightly brushing some lint from her skirt, she continues, her voice the measured calm of a teacher, or a diplomat perhaps. "My full name is Dominique Parisi, and I'm most recently from New York City. For the past two years, I've worked with the translation staff at the United Nations." She draws a card out of her small purse, identifying her as she has described. "Apparently, I've lost my position there due to my disappearance. And that's fine; I found a good position with Lexmark International as a liaison with their Japanese subsidiary. But I guess if Chase means I've forgotten what I can do, powered-wise, well, I can't say yes or no because I can't remember ever being able to do these things."

Phoenix continues, "Are there things that you've done or seen that seem to have brought up memories for you? Places, objects, names?"

"I'm sorry. Nothing other than mundane things like my old phone number, or dinner number 16 at Fat Choy's."

Josh leans back with the sole of his left foot parallel to a wall as he rotates the lighter in his left hand at his side. He stands in quiet amazement at how quickly Amanda has adapted to their new lives...she's really jumping in to fill the breach. "...Pick our targets to strong arm" indeed...

"Hm. I don't know if art imitates life, from I've read it's not unusual to lose memory around a traumatic event. But if you know \*who\* you are, and that doesn't seem to be the issue, then the answer must be somewhere in that day..." Amanda muses. "You were in an accident, right? Would there be some way to contact the hospital, find out more about what happened, or what caused it?"

"As far as the accident, the papers said I got run off the street by a truck and into a big metal dumpster. I don't know if that's really important, though. The hospital was Presbyterian, over on the upper East Side; it wasn't too far from where the accident happened."

"When did the accident happen? On New Years?"

"Waittaminnit," broke in Nightcrawler, exasperation creeping into his rattling voice. "I'm feelin' dense here. Lotta us had some trauma with the change. If it ain't visible, it ain't hard ta see not knowin' it at yer Powered at the drop of the Apple. She's got her memory back, most of it. How's Book think we c'n help her? Seems she's no worse'n the rest of us."

"As opposed to some of us, who couldn't help but notice we were a bit different," Phoenix shares a wry glance with the Nightcrawler. "But anyway... who knows, with Book? He shows up, he's cryptic, he goes away. He says she's important, so...." She shrugs resignedly.

"No need to feel dense -- we all had our powers triggered by events that happened to us on New Years -- like getting ambushed by bad guys and such...Dom might not have gone through this...until the car accident which may have happened later..."

"Who knows how Book thinks we can help? It might be piecing together events of that day or just being around us..."

"Well me, I'd love ta know what this's about," the Nightcrawler put in, waving his gloppy arms meaningfully. "But we don't get nothin' done if we don't focus. We're on the clock with T-Gold's info, an' that nutball's out there somewhere breathin' down your neck. Why don't we knock that stuff down first, get some breathin' room. We still got the Mask an' Snowman out there too, and God knows what else comin'. Let's start cleanin' house."

"So how do we want to play this?" Josh asks. Looking to Amanda he says "Phoenix, me, and Fury start roughing the rough necks..." Glancing at Crawler, Chase and Dominique "...while you guys hunt for this powered nutcase? Do you know where to start?"

"I guess you're right," Phoenix admits, glancing at Nightcrawler. "Maybe once we've made some headway on this other stuff, we can go poke around some as to what might have happened that day -- maybe a visit to the big city? -- but until then... that seems like a good plan," she replies to Sound, though she does wonder what Jake's response to the whole idea is going to be...not to mention where he might be.

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150 East Main Street. Police Headquarters, about two blocks from Faulkner Bail Bonds. 'The Box'

Detectives Templeton and Byers, and a sullen Jake Faulkner, enter a small room. Maybe 15 by 20 feet across, with one-way glass in one wall, next to the door. Byers resumes his lounging position, against a wall, as Templeton motions Jake to sit down at a metal table.

Jake bumps his foot, sees the heavy iron ring set into the floor. That's where the leg irons go, if you happen to be wearing them.

"This really isn't a good time for this," Jake begins. Templeton looks back at him, motionless, his eyes wide with righteous anger.

"There isn't a good time for cops to get killed, either, Mister Faulkner. But that's what I've got. A chief with a bullet wound screaming for answers, the media living in the parking lot, in my driveway. Ghosts of two cops going, Frank, do something, for God's sake, find the man who killed us." He speaks, but doesn't move, doesn't budge. The effect is that of a statue of justice come to life, pronouncing from on high. "Only I've got no answers to give them." Movement, a turn of the body, at the hips. "Nothing."

"Look, Jason and I do not speak, and haven't spoken in years. I do not know where he is; if I did know, I not only would tell you, I would drag his ass down here and deliver him to you," Jake responded.

"So you're saying, blood isn't thicker than water in this case?"

"We never got along. At all."

"And he never talked to you, never said anything at the holidays, never spoke at the hospital..."

"He was never at the hospital."

"Never talked to his parents?"

"Barely ever."

Templeton shook his head. "I feel sorry for you. To not be able to talk with your own family, that's pretty rough."

"I don't know, maybe Jake's one of those strong silent types," Byers chimes in. "That's what I've heard, anyway. Jake's a regular one-man army when it comes to running down his man."

"See, I don't know anything about this guy," Templeton replies, ignoring Jake for the moment. "He doesn't have the commitment to be a cop, but he wants to run around and bust bad guys."

"For the reward," Byers says.

"For the reward," Templeton repeats. "Is there a reward out for Jason Faulkner, piece of cop-killing trash I can't wait to sit down in the chair and watch them pull the switch?"

"25 big ones."

Templeton whistles. "That's a good day's work. And this Jake guy, he's good at finding people?"

"Real good. Like his old man was, I hear."

"Damn. So why hasn't he tracked down Jason Faulkner yet?"

"He hates the guy."



"So he says," Templeton and Byers continue, pointedly ignoring Jake at the table. "But I'm supposed to believe that Jake Faulkner can't find a guy who lives in Lexington, has family in Lexington, and is worth a five figure payoff on delivery? Can't be found by Jake who hates his guts?"

Byers shrugged, looks past Templeton at Jake. "Coincidence?"

"Coincidence?" Templeton turns around and faces Jake. Quiet for a moment. "But I don't believe in Coincidence. Do you believe in Coincidence, Jake?"

Jake sighed and rubbed his eyes. This had long day written all over it.

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Amanda called the Dame Vera Farm later that day. Tehsin gave her Colin's cel-phone number, and she got in contact with him directly, just enough of an accent to fill the phone she noted. He agreed to meet her and the others, and they quickly arranged a rendezvous at the empty Commonwealth Stadium parking lot.

They agreed that since Josh and Amanda had already met Blake, they would openly meet him now, with Josh's 'sonic switchboard' keeping the others informed during the conversation while they observed from vantage points nearby.

His arrival would have been difficult to miss. A BMW Z-3 hurtling into the parking lot at high speed will get anyone's attention. Colin Blake drew alongside the pair and stopped.

He stepped out into the cold February sunshine, a grey coat over his suit. Amanda once again noted the resemblance between him and Sir William, and wondered briefly how many hearts the old man had broken in his heyday as a secret agent.

Almost in sync with her thoughts, Amanda and the others could hear Josh quietly 'whistling' the song 'Secret Agent Man', thankfully without the Bruce Willis vocals.

"Hello," he said. "I enjoyed your performance last night."

"Oh, thank you," Amanda replied. "I guess I owe you some thanks for your help."

"I got there in the nick of time," Colin said, indicating his watch-gadget.

\_Oh fer pete's sake...\_ Josh muttered over the switchboard.

"So, what have you got for us?"

Colin held up a CD, and flipped it to Josh. "My grandfather had a backup made of the data that was supposedly lost by the local authorities. The information is amazingly detailed: gang membership, arrival dates, transactions, sales locations, processing houses."

"How old is the data?" Josh asked.

"It cuts off in mid-January. There were two men responsible for the worst

part of the drug smuggling, or more precisely, the laundering of the drug money. Herschel Ellis and Howard Morten, of Bank One and National City Bank."

"What did you mean 'were'?"

"Howard Morten is dead. Small plane crash off the Florida Keys. His pilot was trying to elude a Navy fighter running picket duty over one of the more active drug lanes into the United States. I've been in contact with a couple of people familiar with the level of money laundering Herschel Ellis would have to be doing; he'll be back in the country for one last big shipment, then it's off to some friendly Caribbean island without an extradition treaty."

"So do we have enough on this disk to bust him?"

"Maybe. Or, we go for the sure thing, catch him in the act at the delivery point tonight." Colin reached back into the BMW and pulled out a laptop, and asked for the CD from Josh. "A lot of the information about where deliveries would take place was encrypted. Grandfather worked out the code and discovered the locations were keyed to the specific GPS maps for Lexington. The delivery tonight will take place here." He points to a location on the GPS maps on his laptop.

"The Red Mile."

"Harness racing park, is it?" Colin asks. Amanda nods, and he continues. "They'll use two trucks and two cars. Drugs in the trucks, money in the cars. Drivers trade places, and everyone leaves. It all takes place within 30 seconds. Drugs are verified, probably with some sort of chemical sensor, money gets transferred electronically, and everyone goes their merry way."

"Are you sure," Amanda asked, "that Ellis will be there?"

"Tonight's delivery is the difference between freedom and jail for him, my contacts have advised me. I can't imagine him not being there." Colin turns to Amanda, and looks her in the eye. "This could be very dangerous."

"So can I, Mister Blake. Let's make our plans to shut this kingpin down for good."

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