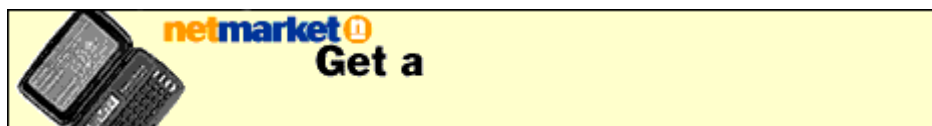


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[Addresses](#)**From:** David Utter <du1@email.com> | [Block address](#)**To:** Fury <rlshelor@adelphia.net>, MagnaFlux <spectrum13@hotmail.com>, Phoenix <rjstevenson@sprynet.com>, Dan <sound2k@yahoo.com>, Nightcrawler <jmccoske@sedona.ch.intel.com>**Subject:** The 4 Winds - Turn 35**CC:** JDressel <jdressel@optonline.net>, patric@patric.net, Bec <rstevens@hubdata.com>, NinjaDar@aol.com, John Stith <john_s@bellsouth.net>, Sound <stmark36@aol.com>, DLowe <David.Lowe@hotelinfosys.com>, Rich <burnerrich@aol.com>, Jay <birdman529@yahoo.com>, Christian <cdirish@earthlink.net>

Ok, apologies for the delay. I wish it could have been avoided. For the rest of the list who didn't know, my wife's father passed away last Wednesday evening.

Now on to game administrivia. Item the first: I've altered the Chase/Amanda scene a bit from their posts. I really wasn't thrilled with the way Chase was going to possibly reveal Amanda's secret identity; how can he go from not hearing of Amanda's band, yet able to call on her for a personal favor, and all this in light of Chase revealing his powers to Jill. The posts just didn't flow for me, so I have crafted an alternative. Blame me.

Item the second: Roger has earned ten negative levels for dissing lacrosse in his post, one for each year I played and/or coached. Congrats, Rog, from an old goalie who's seen a number of All-State football players turned defensemen bail like chickens from a little white speeding ball :) Now Dan and Jeff have to play catch up with you.

Item the third: Jeff, you get Linux installed yet? I've got it dual booting with NT Server, heh :)

Item the fourth: I know there will be questions after this post, so send em on.

Item the fifth: the entire freeservers.com domain seems to be down, which includes my web site. I don't know if this is temporary or what yet.

david

[Turn 35]

During the break, sometime before February 29th...

Josh arrives at the office a little later then he would have normally. It was one of those mornings that required two cups of java and an extra Camel. Business had been slow the last week or so. As Josh approaches the front door his keen hearing picks up the sound of music coming from inside. "Metallica. What's Jake doing here so early?"

Jake hadn't been around much the last week; business hadn't dictated his services. As Josh makes his way through the front door he can see that Jake is in the back office and hadn't bothered to open for business. What's new? He approaches the doorway of the back office and can hardly keep from busting out in laughter at what he sees.

Jake is standing in front of the full-length mirror that they keep on the inside of the closet door. He is dressed in a black spandex outfit with his domino mask shielding his face. There are hard padding in several places like the elbows, forearms, hips and knees. The front of the suit is covered by a large red triangle coming from the tip of the shoulders down meeting in a point about mid-solar plexus; the edges of the triangle are jagged like lightning bolts. The collar is a high black band, almost a choker, with a snap closure on the left side. The ensemble is topped off with heavy gloves and black leather boots. But the most amusing part is he is doing dramatic action poses in front of the mirror with "Enter Sandman" blaring from the stereo.

"Villains beware." Josh can't hold the laughter in any longer. Much to Jake's chagrin.

"Ha Ha Very funny. I would expect no less from you. So what do you think?"

"It's definitely better than your Fila exercise outfit tho' it'll make endorsements tough..."

"Yeah, I got a hold of Mark's secret tailor the other day. I picked it up last night." Jake goes over and turns the stereo off.

"So should I take this as a change of heart. You haven't been too talkative lately. But I could tell something was on yer mind..."

"I knew after the fight at the Red Mile. While we were at the stadium, as I looked out over the field, I realized what I was doing was wrong. With dad's passing I looked back at my life, my accomplishments. All I could see was what I had given up, what I hadn't finished. But I realized you can't go back. You can only go forward. I don't need to honor dad by making the police force. Dad would be proud of what we are doing. Besides, with Mark gone you guys need me more than ever. That fight showed that to me. I can't remember the last time I took as much as I gave in a fight. You were right we are the only ones suited for taking care of guys like these."

"Welcome back, bro" Josh says with some relief as he hugs Jake. Pulling back hands still on Jake's massive shoulders he adds with no small concern, "What about school?"

"Oh, I plan on finishing my degree. It's something I still need to finish. But after that I don't know."

"Well I'm glad to see you finally resolve this issue."

"Me too, I feel so much better about it now. Let me change and I'll treat you to an early lunch." Jake makes his way to the bathroom.

"What a minute what do you mean hadn't gotten as good as you gave? What about our tussle in the woods behind mom's?"

"Oh please Josh. You know I can take you anytime." Jake gives his big brother a wink and a nuggie as he continues to the bathroom.

"Yeah whatever." Josh adds with a chuckle.

Outside Indianapolis, a furnished basement in a suburban neighborhood home.
Morning of 2/29.

"I'm bored," said the Imp, as he teleported to and from the small refrigerator, retrieving a bottle of Citrus Jolt during the trip. "How about mugger patrol?"

"In the suburbs?" asked Brickyard, laying back on the floor while idly staring at the ground level windows above him.

"We'd be arrested for provocation if we went into the city looking for trouble, probably. Best to wait and listen to the scanners." This was a female voice, from the heroine called Indigo. "One of you, come help me with this shelf."

"Little out of my reach, babe," the Imp replied.

"I got it," said Brickyard, bringing his full 6'8" frame to a standing position. He walked over and held the shelf in place while Indigo applied a power screwdriver to a couple of places, securing the shelf in place. She and Brickyard exchanged smiles. The wonderful side effect of their powers, enjoying each other's company. Indigo didn't know why that was, only that being around Brickyard and Imp gave her a feeling of belonging that she'd missed in a childhood of foster homes. Of course she and Andy, Brickyard out of costume that is, were even closer these days.

"And don't think I missed that 'babe' crack, Imp," she said.

"That's ok, I'm not missing it from here either," the smaller man grinned as he drank from the Jolt bottle.

"Elliott?" Brickyard asked, a tone in his voice.

"Ok, sorry. Gosh ~sniff~ I thought we were all pals here."

"We are, Elliott. So knock off the fake tears. Pal." Indigo unplugged the power tool and put it back in its case. She shook her head and smiled where Imp couldn't see; after a few weeks, he'd saved her life twice. She in turn deducted his stream of insults were a defense mechanism. The more he liked you, the more likely he'd crawl under your skin and needle you. _Probably grew up like me in some ways,_ she realized.

Imp leered at Indigo as she finished her work, then picked up a newspaper. After a few minutes in the Star's regional section, he looked up at the others. "How far to Lexington?"

"Kentucky?"

"No, Brickhead, Massachusetts. Of course Kentucky. How far's the drive?"

"About three, four hours, depending on traffic. Why?"

"I think we should go meet our brothers in arms," Imp said, as he turned the paper around. There was a picture, from way back on New Year's Day, of Phoenix hovering over Main Street during the battle with the Luminary terrorists. "And sisters," Imp quickly added when Indigo seemed ready to forcibly correct him.

Early morning, at the Fortune Motel. Phoenix finds Shelley, but now has visitors to handle.

At two and a half times the speed of sound, there's not much time for worrying on the way to the Fortune Motel. _I was afraid this might happen.

Dammit...._ Whether Shelley truly was involved, or is only blaming herself for the near-catastrophe, Amanda has no intention of allowing Dominique's vision to become reality.

Not much time for planning, either. As the building comes into view below, it's pretty clear that this is about the last place anyone would have thought to look for the missing woman. _I'm surprised they *have* towels._

That's her car. So much for "all points." There doesn't seem to be anyone around, not that she really cares at the moment. Phoenix arrows down to the parking lot and hits the ground running, using her wings to brake. She barely remembers to retract them before banging on the door of room 18. "Shelley? Shelley, it's Amanda. Please open the door. I'm alone," she adds, on the off chance that it might make a difference.

Rushing in, Amanda finds Shelley in the bathroom tub. There are four bottles scattered on the floor, little pills of various colors spilled in places, but not nearly as many as there should be.

The pretty, helpful young woman Amanda has known only a short time lays quietly in the tub, barely breathing beneath her robe. Amanda rues Shelley's thoroughness; most likely she hasn't got much time to save her. She's going to try anyway. Lifting Shelley out of the tub, Amanda turns to leave.

And comes face to face with Fate.

"Sorry, my dear, but I think I like my odds without the beautiful loose end. Why not just leave her here? I'm willing to make it worth your time to just walk away," says the Sigil member.

Behind him is the young woman, Entropy, giggling at the doorway.

You are in *big* trouble, girl, Amanda thinks to herself, once her heart's started beating again.

"Thanks anyway," she says with a bright smile, shifting Shelley to a fireman's carry to free up one hand, "but this doesn't look like my kind of party. *We'll* be going now." _I hope this works..._

With a speed well beyond anything humanly normal, Amanda lashes out with her free hand. The far wall with the large window, a common feature to motel rooms everywhere, disappears in a rush of coruscating fire. Dropping her

other hand low, Amanda sends a blast of fire Fate's way as well. She's already moving for the opening and out, even as Fate has turned his head and raised his hands at waist level. With disgust, Amanda picks up with her peripheral vision Fate absorbing the energy like a sponge. But there was no time to deal with him further; St Joseph's was a mile away on a straight line, and Shelley had to get into an emergency room now.

Soon, the double doors of St Joe's Emergency wing were flying open. Amanda took a bare second to retract her wings and assume a look of concern before entering. She dropped Shelley onto the nearest gurney, and grabbed a nurse. "She's OD'ed," Amanda said, and rattled off the names on the bottles she'd seen on the motel floor, thankful for her ultra-sharp vision. "Within the last hour, maybe longer. Help her!"

As Shelley is whisked away to an OR, and Amanda collapses into a chair at an admissions cubicle, a quiet man in a rumpled trenchcoat steps out of the waiting area to the outdoors. Once outside, he retrieves a cel-phone from his pocket and makes a call, speaking for exactly six seconds. Then, a cheap cigar lit and chomped in place, he enters his Peugeot 403 and drives away.

Ten minutes later, as Amanda tries her best to give what little information she has on Shelley to the admitting nurse, a hand falls on her shoulder. She looks up to see Alex standing there, with a welt on his chin; behind him are three of the larger gentlemen of the security detail.

"Can you give me the Reader's Digest version? Right now, someone's undoubtedly calling reporters; them I can handle, but I need to know what's happened."

Just then, Amanda felt her cel-phone begin to vibrate.

At the Fortune Motel, two minutes after Amanda's departure.

The drive ended quickly, behind a closed furniture outlet. The Fortune Motel certainly didn't reflect its name, not at 18.95 a night. Even with HBO.

"Which room?" Josh asked.

"I don't know," Dominique replied.

"Let me see what I can find." Josh focuses his considerable senses across the small hotel room by room trying to detect the hidden Shelly. He tries to

recall the particular nuances of her heartbeat as well as cutting out the chaff from other people. Her heart would sound differently than the fat, out of breath middle aged man who climaxed with his mistress some minutes ago in room 2. Her lithe frame would demand less than that SOB but the emotional state she's in now would distinguish it from the cleaning woman in room 4.

Josh does this all the while as he pages Amanda...if she's already found her then I can just home in on the beep...when Dominique points out a room, where the wisps of burnt curtains wave in the night air out of a window. And two people are leaving and quickly getting into a car.

"Damn! It's the Sigil!" Josh is into a run quickly, but Fate guns the engine of the Lincoln he's driving and deftly maneuvers it onto New Circle Road.

Dominique goes into the room while Josh is running, and meets him as he returns. "Smells like burnt wood in there. Pill bottles everywhere, but no one's in the room. Where's the nearest emergency room?"

"With her speed, they all are. But I think she'd go to St Joseph's, just by virtue of closeness. Let's go."

Carl mounted the steps to the Callahan's row home, absently noting the dirt patches where flowers should be. He knocked on the door, and his eyes again flashed to the 'New York Islander's' logo pin on his flannel shirt. The confused jumble of thoughts that brought on were interrupted by the opening of the door.

"Well look what the cat drug up," said Barbara. Barabara was a small, blonde woman. Any brighter and she'd have been in college. She always looked better under artificial lighting, and the guarded expression kept her smile from saving her. "It's customary to call the girl you almost turned the Millennium with, y'know. You've said more to Shawna than me."

If there was one thing Carl was reconciled to at this point in his life, it was his sheer inability to read women. So for him to pick up that he really didn't want to let on he had actually come to see Shawna this time was a testament to Barbara's mood.

"Hey, Babe, gimme a break. The Y2K bug got me. Then the schedule picked up..."

Barbara eyed him speculatively. "Valentine's came and went, y'know."

Uh-oh. This was one of those 'do I look fat?' moments. They hadn't really had anything going, besides some strong post-game flirtations, but the understanding that they were giving it a spin had been clear.

"I was with you in my heart, chica," he mock-exaggerated.

"Liar." She glared at him a bit longer, just for good measure, then broke out a smile. "I could almost forgive you, but you didn't even _tell_ me you got called to the Show. ESPN2 is how I have to find out!?"

"Yeah, that." Carl fingered the Islanders' pin, then compulsively took it off and handed it to her. "Rash a' pulled groins and they go shopping for hired muscle."

"You big dope, don't give me macho. You must be bursting over inside! The NHL, Carl, you scored a goal in the N-H-L!" Shyness was not the attribute that got Barbara into the post-game parties. She bubbled a happy hug around him. "That is soo cool!"

"It is pretty cool. So what you doin' tonight? I might wanna spend somea this Major League money."

"Oh, I am _all_ over that. 7:30, I'll be in my shortest, blackest dress. You put the place around me. This is so cool, I've never dated a Major before."

"Hn. Hey, speakin' of your sister, what's new with her? She straighten her act up yet?"

Barbara shrugged a little disgusted and a lot past caring.

"Maybe I'll stop by early, talk to her a little," he continued.

Barbara gave him a suspicious look and rolled the pin in her fingers. "She's gone. Caught a bus to LaLa Land while you were gone."

"What?!"

"Carl, the Double Cs, RoJo, all the OGs and Tiny Gs, even the dumbest of the dumbest runners, they are gone. Something put the fear into her. She gets a call, 'bout a week ago, jams the phone down and begs me to get her to the Greyhound. The first bus there was going west. She got on."

Carl felt himself emerge from a fog. He'd known something was wrong when he'd gotten back late, and now he knew he had to check it out.

Barbara changed the subject back to the proposed date. "Not too early. You need to clean yourself up, don't rush that. And I really wish you'd asked me about the haircut thing before you did it."

Carl shook himself back into the here and now, and playfully slapped her on her thigh. "Bite me."

"You show enough of that NHL money, I might," she fired back.

And Carl's phone rang.

Blue Grass Army Depot. Later, morning of February 29th.

General Johnnie Allen was waiting when Colonel Ulrich arrived at his office. Ulrich recovered nicely, fell straight into parade posture and salute. The General, a slender, bespectacled man whose appearance belied a long military career including Special Forces duty, returned the salute, then told Ulrich to sit down.

"Colonel. Good morning."

"Good morning, sir. Welcome to Blue Grass."

"The Pentagon has sent me to oversee Operation Panopticon. This is no reflection on your capabilities, Colonel."

Bull. thought Ulrich.

"The Joint Chiefs wanted to make sure the Operation is functional and online today. I'm here to ensure full cooperation from any resource required."

"I understand sir."

"I am not assuming day to day responsibility for the Operation. That is your responsibility, Colonel Ulrich. Do well and I assure you the JCS will be grateful."

Uh huh. Ulrich frowned inwardly.

"In addition to myself, there will be advisors and support personnel from FEMA on base. They will handle the hands-on contact with those who are brought in to Operation Panopticon. Your primary responsibility will be ensuring base integrity and security. You've got carte blanche, Colonel, to make whatever recommendations for improvement you personally feel are necessary, and have them reasonably fulfilled."

"Reasonably, sir?"

"What do you mean, Colonel?"

"General, I know you must be aware of our storage of chemical weapons at this depot. Bringing in the sort of...people...that the Operation concerns...well, I am concerned about the risk. What if one of these powered loons gets loose?"

"There's a problem with that statement, Colonel."

"A problem?"

"Yes. Your problem. I am aware of the Depot's function. Due to public sentiment about the chemical agent issue, we can't risk moving them."

"Not to mention the threat of hijacking by some powered freak."

The General nodded, slowly. "They're safer here than anywhere, for now," he said, in a quieter tone. "The design of the Depot and its facilities makes it essential to the Operation. I'll have your further recommendations by 1400, Colonel." Standing and replacing his hat, the General nodded and waved off the return salute. "See you later."

"Yes, sir." Colonel Ulrich didn't watch the General leave his office, or close the door. Instead, he sat down, and opened the folder, marked with the Umbra clearance stamp. The Colonel was about to become host for FEMA's doctors and their powered patients. And if one of them should get loose, and get to the chemical agents stored here...he shook his head. 1400 was a few hours off. He made a few calls, assembled his staff, and sent them on inspections. If anything failed here, it would be FEMA and not the Army. Not him.

"Chase, chill." It was his friend, Jill.

"Sorry. Thought I was being abducted. What's up?"

"This," she said, and handed him a paper bag. "I found this in my car this morning. I'm guessing it made the nice hole in the passenger window that was there, too."

Chase drew in a deep breath. Inside the bag was an 8-ball, with Chase's name written on it with some sort of grease pencil.

"You weren't kidding about this powered thing you tried to tell me about after the Red Sky Diary show, were you? You'd better level with me, Chase, right now."

Dread fills Chase. Jill is definately in danger now and 8-ball's message

makes that more clear than ever. "I DID level with you Jill. I wasn't lying.
My cell was batttery-drained when I was giving you my lame demonstration.
But if you need more proof...." He walks toward the line of lockers in the hall. Leaning against one and shielding one lock from the view of passersby,
Chase waves a hand over the lock.

"Say the Magic Word and PRESTO..." the lock pops open prompted by magnetic coaxing.

"That code I set for you, Star 13, try it now on your cell."

She does, and hears the answering tones from Chase's phone.

"Where are your folks this week?" he asks.

"Cozumel, working out their sensory integration issues or some bull like that, why?"

"Can you stay with someone, just so you're not alone tonight? I want to deal with this, and keep you out of harm's way, see?"

"Ok. I'll stay with Jessica Todino, her dad's a state trooper. Damn, I'm late for calculus...be careful Chase."

With that out of the way, Chase walks Jill back to class.

"Use that code if you see something strange..." Chase pauses.
_Waitamminute!

The team is probably just as upset and Troyer was lurking earlier. They might be working with him._

"That includes if the former b-ball team, any of them, are following you.
Don't hesitate to use that, I don't care how unimportant it seems. OK?"

"I understand. Thank you."

Leaving her at class, he turns to go to his own making plans for his evening. _Good think Pops hit the road when he did. Might be a late night for me. Guess I should call 'Crawler in on this too._

Chase dials N.C.'s code into his cell.

When he answers, Chase runs through the details briefly. "So, you wanna help me stalk someone tonight? I wanna get this toolshed caged before my friend gets hurt."

Carl was listening as he was walking back to his car, and driving back toward Vine Street, toward the LexTran station. Lots of big concrete walls there. The city bulletin board, if you knew how to read it.

The taggers didn't let him down. He read the signs; the Double Cs were

through. The Sons of Chicago had taken over, just like that. No war, no drive-bys. Just one major drug deal gone bad, one interrupted shipment, countless money from that deal, all gone, thanks to T-Gold's evidence, Glassjack's analysis, and the New Millennium's interference.

All that just to trade one group of color flaunting jerks for another.

As Magna-Flux spoke, the tension eased out ahead of Carl's slimy coating. A sly grin pulled at Carl's mouth. "Yeah, I needed to get out tonight anyway. On my way."

"Thanks See-thru. I'll call you after school to set things up."

Chase hangs up his cell and rushes to class. Once there, he thinks of his plans for the night, only vaguely aware of his teacher drone on about endless amounts of info he studied days before.

_If Todd knows anything, he could either lead us to Meyers or we could terrorize him into talking... Yeah that sounds like the thing to do! Better 'mag-tap' the records office for his and his buddy's addresses. Guess I'll tell Rita I have got to study with Jill for a few nights and may be out late..._The Colonel expects nothing but the best grades in his absence after all..._

And what was up with that apology? The old man can't actually start showing signs of having a heart!!! A shred of genuine feeling from him might just disrupt the entire space-time continuum as we know it! Better to focus on something I can do something about, and I'm definitely gonna do something about Quag-Meyers the Cue-ball! SCRATCH!_

A quick stroll through the Resource Center gives Chase the other info he wants on Walter VanHoose, the only other remaining player besides Troyer still in school. With that in mind, he departs, and prepares for his rendezvous with Nightcrawler.

[Jake's Apartment, February 29, Evening]

Jake had been working on his psych lab work for almost four hours. He needed a break. It was almost 6:30 and he was famished. He figured he would run out and grab a quick bite at MickyD's and head over to the gym for a little workout to loosen his tensed up muscles. He had been working on this stuff for too long. But it was so easy for him to get lost in his work. He grabs his coat and heads out.

After a couple of Big Macs, two large fries and a milk shake he was feeling

much better. Throughout his work out he keeps thinking back the proposition he got today. Rachel was cute too, in an athletic way, very sure of herself. That intrigued Jake. But lacrosse, it's such a wuss sport. Not nearly enough contact. Plus is it really fair for a 'Powered' to play organized sports? It's not like it's conference level. I could probably get away with it if he could keep it under control. He'll have to try and find Rachel after class tomorrow.

Later, after his workout he decided to go downtown and check with some of his street contacts to see if anything had come up lately on Jason. He had put out some more feelers last week. He even tried calling in some favors but no one has any clues. But his luck wasn't any better this time either; none of his stoolies had any new information. He heads home bewildered at where Jason had gone too. When Jake gets home he gets out Jason's gear that he recovered from the rock quarry. There had to be something that he was missing here. Jason couldn't just disappear like that. Jake falls asleep in the recliner with Jason's gear laying about his feet. He doesn't rest easily tonight.

And at deSha's, not far from Rupp Arena...

Carl met Chuck at the finest eatery in Lexington that accepted blue jeans. He had already ordered drinks, and had a good start into his vodka martini. He offered the margarita rocks like it was a Stanley Cup. Tables around heard Chuck's exuberant greeting.

"Amigo! How's it feel, your first NHL paycheck? Did I tell you we'd get you there? Did I?" Carl accepted the drink. One sip told him Chuck had gone to the top shelf for it. Between the warming on his tongue of fine liquor and Chuck's infectious glee, Carl was smirking despite his guard.

"I'll tell you what, Chuck, you didn't take us the easy way."

Marston guffawed good-naturedly. "Can you believe they wanted you to coach? Coach?! Thanks 'Blades, but no thanks."

"Slow down, hombre, one desperation rotation don't make me franchise material."

The agent waived off Carl's reserve impatiently. "You got no idea, Carlos."

They showed you on TV, layin' that hit on LeClair...there you were bigger than life." Chuck fluttered his lower lip, " I tell you I almost cried. My little amigo, all grown up."

"Alright, Chuck, I get the picture."

"No offense Carl, but like fun you do. That's why you pay me. Five games, and you've got a highlight reel -- you scored you magnificent bastard! And you have no _idea_ what effect 'de la Cruces' on the back of that jersey had...speaking of which, I see our other guest has arrived."

"Other guest?" asked Carl darkly. It was always like this with Chuck, Carl should've known that by now.

A smartly dressed Hispanic man wandered over, caught sight of Marston and lead with his hand. "Amigo!" Marston greeted him brightly. "This is Carlos de las Cruces -- late of the New York Islanders. Carl, this is Manuel Fortuna."

"How do you do Carlos..."

"It's _Carl_," he corrected strongly. Fleeting disapproval ran across the other man's face.

"Manuel is a reporter for _La Boca_, a Hispanic news..."

"I know what it is." Carl put his margarita down.

"Mr. de las Cruces, I can't tell you how happy I am to have an exclusive on this interview. So few of our people make it as far as you have in this sport. And to have such a great series...our readers are dying to know more about you..."

Carl turned on his agent. "You sandbagged me, Chuck."

"Guiltily," Chuck declared good-naturedly, with minimal remorse.

"I knew you'd never agree to it if I asked. We get some press on you on top of what you've been doing on the ice...Carl we're in."

"Gomez and de las Cruces, in the same year?" interjected the reporter. "What a tremendous statement. What a tremendous story."

"Alright, first off, I never consented to no interview. Sorry, 'migo. Second of all, Chuck how could you do this if you knew I'd say no?"

"Carl, buddy, I'm lookin gout for your interests. You've got to trust me on this. An NHL bid is ours to lose right now...it's what we've wanted for ten

years. Right here, reach out and take it."

"Chuck, you got no idea what I want."

Carl stormed out, and there was an embarrassed silence between the agent and the reporter. Chuck recovered first, of course. "After a month like he's had, no wonder he's a little edgy. Get out that pad, Mr. Fortuna, and let me buy you a drink. I want to tell you about what Carl does on his days off..."

Around the same time. Snow begins falling, a late winter gift from Mother Nature to a Bluegrass that was averaging 50 degrees during the so-called winter months thus far. On one of the older streets on the northeast side of the city, not far off Main, the falling snow made for an idyllic scene, collecting gently on the sloping lawns of the townhouses.

But precipitation brings out cabin fever in some, a need to get out and conduct business despite the weather. And one man was out tonight, his expensive car not at all out of place on the street as he ascended a short flight of stairs. He didn't knock; the door opened at his approach, and he was inside.

The foyer looked like all the other foyers on the block, with its foyer table and foyer plant and foyer mirror and foyer chandelier. The visitor walked through to the living area, and then to the kitchen and out the back door. There was a large greenhouse out back, only it really wasn't a greenhouse. Oh, it looked the part from the outside, if the weather were warmer it would even smell right. But it was a workshop, a singular place for a singular individual to ply his trade.

"Craftsman," the visitor said to the closed door of the greenhouse. It opened quietly, and the visitor went inside.

"Please," came a smooth voice from within the elaborate metal/workshop, which was the true use of the greenhouse. "Come inside."

The visitor walked toward the center of the darkened shop, and was met by the speaker, a 40-ish man in glasses. He was dressed in the economical way all true skilled artisans dress, for efficiency. Sleeves rolled up on a striped shirt, heavy cloth trousers belted at a trim waist, shoes capped with safety toe inserts. "It's finished. I think you'll be pleased." From a coat rack, he pulled down a one piece, hooded suit, in a shade of grey never before considered for a garment. The suit resembled a toddler's pajamas; the Craftsman indicated the visitor should put it on. "Pull it over your

clothes. Leave your shoes on. It's quite remarkable."

Nodding, the visitor dressed. "How's it close?" he asked, indicating the apparent lack of a zipper or other closures on the front of the thin bodysuit.

"Run your finger up the seam," the Craftsman replied. The visitor complied, and the seam vanished as he slid his finger over it. "Nice bit of tailoring. Kind of ruins the cut of my suit, though."

"Don't worry. In 60 minutes, you will understand a great deal about this garment for which you have paid so generously. You have allowed enough time for instruction, Mr Halle?"

"Oh yes," he replied. "I'll not be held back from my goals for lack of knowledge. Should I take notes?"

"If keeping physical evidence on you makes you comfortable, go right ahead. No? Very good. We'll start with the basics, wearing the garment every day..."

Outside Coach Myers' place. The stakeout, as conducted by Nightcrawler and Magna-Flux.

Magna-Flux's instincts were right on, all right. There was quite a gathering of people at the coach's place, sixteen in all. Magna-Flux recognized many of them: ex-players, a couple of fathers, two of the former assistant coaches.

"Guess they armin' for you en masse. We'll be the underdogs 'gainst that many suckers," Nightcrawler said.

"That's all right. You're the Nightcrawler, and I am Magna-Flux. All they got is a bunch of well-conditioned, ticked off athletes and one joker who can toss a billiard ball through concrete."

"That's reassuring. Look, they movin' out."

They were. By ones and twos, the visitors departed, and went their seemingly separate ways. Nightcrawler and Magna-Flux looked quizzically at each other.

"I didn't see Coach Screwball come out. Everyone else is gone," Magna-Flux said. "What are they up to?"

Responses due January 21.

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Turn 36

At St Joe's Emergency, where Alex has just arrived. February 29.

"One second," she tells Alex, pulls out her phone. Page from Sound.
_Please,
not another emergency._ But only normal late-night traffic noise seems
to be
in the background when he picks up. "What's going on? ... Oh, she did?
What
happened? ... Crud ... Okay. We're at St. Joe's. No word yet. See you
soon."
And tell Dominique to work on the wide angle in her visions, she adds
silently.

"I'm glad you're here... not much to tell," Amanda goes on, folding the
tiny
device away before glancing up at Alex. "I couldn't sleep, so I went
for a
drive. Saw her car at this motel. I found her in the bathroom. Looks
like
she took half a pharmacy, so I got her here as fast as I could. Then
you
walked in." Highly edited, but without a direct lie, at least.

Alex nods, only half-hearing what she's saying.

Impulsively, she adds, "I don't think any of this was her idea. It
looks
bad, but.... There was a car pulling out when I got there. I'm pretty
sure
it was the two that got away at the show. We'll have to see what she
can
tell us when she wakes up." She remembers Shelley's tears that night;
thinking about the Sigil sends the same fierce anger through Amanda
that
Lydia's manipulations had.

"I already know what's happened. Jonas went to New York and had a chat with Norm Carnelie. He's the Sony A&R who was at the Unplugged gig. Without coming right out and admitting it, he acknowledged getting those Sigil nuts involved. Naturally, he claimed they weren't trying to hurt anyone, just to make us look bad." Alex rubbed absently at his ribs, where Entropy had shot him. "I hired a bunch of PIs to watch the emergency rooms around town; I was afraid this might happen."

Alex shook his head, and continued. The massive security men looked uncomfortable, listening to this, but waited quietly as Amanda's eyes opened. "Shelley didn't realize how bad things were with us and Sony. Naturally that's my fault. Norm got a hold of her and said he wanted to arrange a surprise for us, kind of a welcome home surprise, and he needed her to get the Sigil in the door. She thought she was doing us a favor. Slick talking son of a bitch."

Amanda realized the depth of Shelley's pain, now. She'd been deceived, and she obviously didn't think an apology would do much good with the band. Amanda's hands itched to hold Fate by his smug face, stick her fingers up his nose, and force-feed him a fireball brainpan cleaner; _See if you can absorb that, you bastard_. But Amanda kept that off her face, instead saying, "If she knows something about them, they might try to keep her from talking. Good thing you guys came along," she glances at the security guards, though she's a bit dubious about their ability to handle such a threat. _I guess Sound and I can stick around and make sure nothing happens._

"Go home, Amanda. This is my job, dealing with this. It'll be all right. Believe it or else, there've been through worse times. Ask Alain about Amsterdam sometime. Go home. I'll call everyone and let them know what's going on later. Sheesh. Hey, Barry, how about grabbing me some coffee, extra thick. Thanks. You guys thirsty?" Alex had turned his attention to the security men, and away from Amanda. Taking advantage of the break, Amanda headed for the doors, to check the parking lot for Josh.

On the drive to the hospital, Josh is turning ideas over in his head. Odds are since the band was still searching for Shelley then they would be keeping an eye on hospitals (they can certainly afford to), and once she's admitted at Joe's then it won't be long before Alex and the others are there...which means Amanda will have to explain Dom. Josh had a brief flash of what an encounter between Dominique and Alex might look like.

Parking the car and turning the engine off he asks her to stay in the Bug to avoid the scene he envisioned.

"No problem. I'd hate to embarrass the poor guy in front of his friends." She rubs her knuckles across her chest. Smiling.

Josh chuckles and mutters "Damn secrets..."

Josh bolts off to the emergency room and hears Amanda and Alex beyond a living shield of security guards that tower over Josh's six foot frame.

"Is she all right?" he adds nearing the group. Amanda is breaking off from them just as he gets close, takes Josh by the arm and leads him back. "She's been admitted; I don't know how she is just now. Look, we should stick around tonight, in case the Sigil come around."

"I agree. I can settle in somewhere on her floor. You going up?"

"Yes," Amanda answered, then stopped. "Look, are you ok with this, I mean, being in a hospital again..."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm ok. Really. At worst, I'll make myself ok, for Shelley's sake."

Amanda squeezes Josh's hand, and smiles at him. "Thank you." It's all Josh can do not to get carried away by emotion.

The night passes quietly, the quiet of the snow unbroken by any activity during the night. Josh keeps himself going on coffee and the occasional Camel. As he lights one, he sits down to consider his recent search on the McCain name he found engraved inside the Zippo lighter he's had for quite some time now. Apparently, from old newspaper records, the elder McCain was a pilot during WWII, flying in the Pacific Theater against the Japanese. The Marjorie girl on the lighter was the squadron's pet good luck charm. Josh gave some effort to finding any survivors from that group, but time had taken its toll. McCain's squadron were all ghosts now, forgotten relics of a time when Americans from all walks of life had stepped forward when called, to face the greatest evil in recorded history. McCain's record showed an exemplary tour of duty, but a quiet welcome upon his return home.

And is that the destiny for heroes today? Fifty years goes by, and all our works are just fodder for a snoozer of a history lesson for some fourteen year old to come? Josh mused, thinking on his indifferent attitude toward history in high school. He remembered an old copy of Mailer's "The Naked and The Dead" sitting on a shelf at his parent's...his mother's house. Maybe it was time to give it a read.

The McCain name didn't give up much in the records, so he decided to apply Occam's Razor to the problem. McCain today was likely a criminal, maybe the cops knew about him.

Josh had to admit to a little shock at his reception at 162 East Main. The police who had once welcomed him in the door like an extended member of the family now treated him with careful indifference. He wasn't Josh, now, he was Josh 'Faulkner', cousin to Jason, killer of two of their own. Yes, there was a petty hood named McCain, just finished doing four and a half for trafficking. No, he hasn't been around, to their knowledge, and would there be anything else, sir? Thank you for coming by.

The younger McCain was Mark, nicknamed Chance. He had a youthful talent for crime that grew into a skill at drug smuggling. But he got busted in '94 when one of his crew turned state's evidence, and found himself enduring the tender mercies of the federal correctional system.

So now, Josh had a name to go with the Purple Mask's alter ego. What to do with it now?

Later on that day, the 29th. Outside Eightball's home.

Chase looks at Nightcrawler, the confused look in his eyes hidden behind his paintball mask. "If I understand this empathy thing right, then he could be getting involved in some kind messy evil thing, the same way we've taken to serving the light side of the force, above and beyond what he wants to do to me. I'm sure he must've felt the same vibe off me, but he can't know what I'm capable of yet or my ultra-keen powered name, but if we don't catch him at something other than want to put the ugly on me, than I'm still in just as much danger from the 'establishment' that's trying to regulate us powered! At the very least he could reveal my i.d. if we aren't careful here."

Chase looks back at the house, stretching his magnetic senses out to "feel" through the house and see if anybody they can't see might still be lingering. "All we could get him for right now is vandalizing my friend's car. And there's not even enough evidence for that!"

Carl's head elasticly spun to his young friend. "Nutball knows who you are? He know you like this? How 'bout the Biff'n'Chad Squad? Last thing we

need
is these rocket scientists connectin' the dots." After a moment's
thought,
"If he is steppin' up, his crewcut boys's gonna be the ones on the
heavy
liftin'."

"No, he's never met "Magna-Flux", but connecting me on the flying
skateboard
can't be too hard if I come after him with no other cause!"

Using his EM senses, Chase "feels" a body inside the house, " Someone
IS
there. It could be him. Why don't you get see-thru and and check out
inside
the place, Gummi-worm. I go aerial and see where his posse might be off
to.
I'll do a fly-by pick up over his house in 10. Is that a plan?"

"Do till one comes along," agreed the Nightcrawler. With a sucking
sound, he
launched at the disgraced ex coach's home, becoming only a faint
shimmer in
the air before even arcing past the street lamps. After that, close
observers could only make out a vague visual hint around the attic vent
and
the Nightcrawler was in.

Meanwhile Chase levitates skyward, riding magnetic waves on his deck
and
searches the ground for one of those last to leave. _ I know you're up
to
something ultra-stinky Cheese-ball, but what..._

Inside, oozing through the ventilation system, the Nightcrawler emerges
into
a room, ready for anything. What he gets is a steadily drinking
ex-Coach
Meyers, clad in t-shirt and boxers, watching SportsCenter as his eyes
drop
lower and lower.

Mierde. Waste o' my time, the Nightcrawler growls and heads roofward.
Magna-Flux arrives on time, asking what he found.

"Stupid drunk, what I found. He ain't doin' jack. Whatever's goin'
down, he
ain't involved tonight. Let's make sure none o' the Ken dolls took a
match
to yer crib; we wastin' time baby sittin' here."

Together, the Plasmic Avenger and the young Master of Magnetic Fields
raced
back to Chase's house, which stood untouched by any sort of mayhem.

"Look, mebbe he's just givin' his crew a pep talk, keep th' faith an'
all
that. You want, I'll crash on yer floor tonite, case the boys come
around,
but I'm bettin' that ain't gonna happen."

"No, no, it's all right. I wonder what he's up to. Look, thanks, I'm
sorry
to drag you out for no reason."

"S'ok. You need me to get yer back, dial. Later." And the Nightcrawler slung himself into the night sky, and was gone.

In the morning, Chase found out exactly what Coach Screwball was up to. A sheriff's deputy stopped by, at 7 a.m. with the subpoena. Coach Meyers was gunning to get his job back. Chase put it together real quick; if Meyers got reinstated, that would mean Chase would be on the outside even more than he was already. And Meyers meant to put him there. Bastard. Chase looked at the date. The hearing was scheduled before the school board March 9th.

"This is ultra-bad," Chase reflected.

[Morning of Wednesday March 1, 2000]

Jakes' morning hadn't went well, and with a 3 hour Abnormal Psychology class coming up within the hour it didn't look like it was improving. He hadn't seen that Experimental Psych quiz coming. He did well enough on retention alone to make a "B" on it but he just hated that feeling of not being prepared.

That same ideology is what brings him to the library in between classes. He figured he better see if he could find a book on lacrosse before he got back in touch with Rachel. He knew a bit about the game, just what he had picked up from watching ESPN2 for years. But he wanted to know more about the rules and structure of the game before he got out there and made a fool of himself.

While walking between the stacks he has a flashback to a couple of weeks ago. When he had received a bad vibe during the encounter the with the two men whispering among the books. He had completely forgotten about that incident. He hadn't seen either one of the men around the campus since. Jake just pushes the memories back; nothing he could do about it now. 'Not until I see one of them again.'

Speaking of putting things off he needed to get a hold of Josh this afternoon and let him know about Mr. Watterson's offer to buy the business. Watterson was leaving town the next morning.

'I probably need to do some checking up on Wade Watterson before I call Josh.' The checking goes as he expected it. The call to Texas took a little longer. Wade had a long history in and with law enforcement, going back to

the Vietnam War as a young marine MP. Jake found himself listening to several Wade anecdotes before satisfying himself the man was as good as his supremely self-confident word.

Jake finally finds an appropriate book, Milton Roberts 'History of Lacrosse', and after checking it out heads across campus to class. There's a certain confidence in older students that Jake had always noticed and found irritating his first time through college. The so-called 'adult' students always seemed to get the best grades, yet didn't act like they were as stressed as the college-age students. Jake remembered one guy, from a required English lit class taught by a real Englishman. Leonard something or other, he was about 26; the instructor was about 76 and an absolute ball-buster. Mr Hayden was his name. Had the underclassmen terrified. But not Leonard. Hayden would break out the quizzes; Leonard would grin, and thank him as they were handed out. Before exams, when the whole class was frantically cramming in the lecture hall at the last minute, Leonard would come strolling in with a cup of hot chocolate and a sports page, and catch up on hockey scores while waiting for the exam to start.

Jake overheard a co-ed ask Leonard how he could do what he did in class. Leonard explained that he worked a 40-hour week and had two children, and compared to the demands they placed on him classwork was a welcome diversion.

Hot chocolate. Not a bad idea, especially today. I'll pick one up...
Jake stopped. Two of the SORT armored vehicles were roaring by him toward downtown. Instantly, he thought of Jason. Without another thought, Jake began running to student parking, retrieved his bike, and headed down Rose after them.

The Triangle Park fountain, currently not running due to the weather.
March
1, 2000.

"So this is your great plan, Imp? We sit here and wait for someone to notice us?" Indigo asked, leaning back on the bench in her namesake color bodysuit. Brickyard was in the middle of the bench, idly sipping at a Starbucks cafe mocha, while Imp had unfolded the foil wrapper from his lunch and was using it and a newspaper as a reflector to cast some sun on his chin. Imp wore a leather jacket and flight goggles; he resembled a gremlin from a WWII era Bugs Bunny cartoon more than anything else. Brickyard kept things simple, a

black tracksuit with a brick pattern worked into the jacket. The pattern was the same shimmery fabric commonly seen in some surf clothing lines. Brickyard and Indigo both wore domino-style masks.

"Sure. Eventually someone calls someone's sister's aunt's cousin's nephew, and boom, they'll show up."

"And then what?" Brickyard asked.

"I dunno, maybe we all go for nachos and brews. Hey, it beats sitting around the house today."

"Kind of cold out here," Indigo said, and moved closer to Brickyard.

"Warmer than the rooftops," Imp replied. They sat in silence for a while. The trip actually had went well. They'd visited Rupp Arena and the basketball museum there, and had a decent lunch over billiards at Yesterday's. Brickyard bought a puck from the Thoroughblades shop, and considered the prospects of a slab of vulcanized rubber as a throwing weapon, with his strength.

Someone stepped into Imp's sunlight. "Hey, pal, you make a better door than a window," Imp said.

"Um, Imp," Brickyard started.

"Come on, move along buddy," Imp ignored Brickyard. "No spare change today. Vamoose."

"Imp!" Indigo said, and Imp opened one eye. Then he opened the other one, because it was easier to see all the SORTies arrayed in a semi-circle around them.

"Hey, how you guys doing? We're the good guys from Indianapolis, you may have heard of us?" Imp asked. "I'm..."

~~Shut up and stand up. Turn around and place your hands on your heads.~~ came the flat electronic tones of one SORTie voice. As one, they all hefted their 5.7 mm bullpup rifles to firing level.

"Look, you don't interrupt the Imp, slick, unless you want that peashooter stuffed up your..."

The cascade of shattering glass from nearby prevented Imp from finishing his colorful metaphor. Everyone looked in that direction.

Brickyard whispered to Indigo, "I don't think shrubbery is supposed to act like that."

Indigo sighed, and hoped the locals would arrive soon.

Responses due Friday, January 28th. Questions to the usual place.

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Turn 37

Feb. 29

It was a long end of a long night. Amanda wasn't sleepy anyway, busy chewing over what Alex had told her. Frankly amazed that he seemed so calm about all of this, she made a mental note to find out about Amsterdam some day, but the whole thing didn't sit right with her -- least of all the apparent fact that the people behind it were going to get away with it.

She had to grin despite herself, imagining how persuasive Jonas could be if he wanted to. _Must have been pretty harsh if this guy actually more or less admitted what he'd done. Make us look bad, hah. I dunno, how bad does a charred corpse look?_ She would definitely remember Mr. Carnelie's name. _We were thinking about a trip to NYC to check into Dominique's accident. Maybe the Millennium should pay him a visit, too._ She couldn't help but wonder, despite Alex's apparent confidence, if they really knew the story, what was going on in these peoples' minds.

Amanda stretched, got some more coffee, thought fleetingly of Josh. He'd had some other things to do today, but said he'd be back later. The past couple weeks had been just a little bit awkward on that score. She was more than willing to give him whatever space he needed right now, let him call the play when the time was right, but having things up in the air was just giving her extra time for second-guessing herself. _If it ever will be the right time -- that would be exactly my luck,_ she thought with an almost-silent sigh. _Call me queen of bad timing, I guess. Better friends than nothing._ It was how things always seemed to turn out anyway. She wasn't sure why she kept trying sometimes.

----^^^----^^^---

Private room 408, St. Joseph's Hospital. Late February 29th.

He'd been short with Amanda, Alex knew, but he really wasn't in the mood to explain the enemy today, friend tomorrow paradigm of the music industry. Still, an apology was in order; he pulled a small recorder out of his pocket, and made a quick memo to have Ghiardelli's send along something to her. Did she even like chocolate? Alex wasn't sure.

He wondered if the feeling was going to come back to his left hand. Thirty seconds before the PI had called, Alex was ready to head to the hospital himself. Everything from the elbow on down had frozen almost solid. _This is how it started for Catfish,_ he thought, remembering the late Yankee pitcher who'd developed Gehrig's syndrome and died from it. Midway into a panic, he stopped. Rob had tried teaching him some of the more basic relaxation exercises he knew, but to Alex and his twenty-one hour a day uptime, they didn't really take. Still, he tried, and his heart stopped pounding and his mind stopped screaming momentarily.

For the first time in the room, he looked at Shelley. Wired with various tubes, one of which ran down her nose into her stomach. She was still beautiful.

You should have told me, Shel. It wasn't your fault. Alex absently rubbed at his ribs again, where Entropy had shot him instead of Josh. Which

wouldn't have happened had Amanda not been so dense as to try to come back to the scene instead of leaving with the security people. Some well-dressed Brit had foiled the start of their plan, he'd found out later from various people who'd been near him. Sheesh, what a night. The publicity was worth millions.

But it isn't worth this. Wake up Shel. The whole band had done stupid things in their time. Hell, Alain still isn't allowed into Canada or Great Britain. Alex was lucky to be alive, let alone worrying about his next series of nerve reconstructions. And Jonas, from his time in the military doing who knows what, always got some sort of grief when touring in Europe. At least Rob was still a good guy. Alex presumed Amanda was a good person; he couldn't imagine anyone showing up with international warrants for her arrest.

I know you did this because of me. And I should have told you why I've kept you away. That was the real problem. Alex was a lot of things, but 'stupid' definitely wasn't one of them. When he first laid eyes on Shelley, all those years back when she was a junior getting ready to graduate college early in Texas, at one of their concerts. He was pleased to find she wasn't a groupie airhead; she was amazed to find he wasn't a single-minded jerk. After the concert, they went to an all night restaurant, and talked until sunrise.

After the tour, he'd went back to Texas, and Shelley took him home to meet her father. Her mother had left them long ago, and she and Daddy were very close. Daddy was an oilman, one of the ones still making money hand over fist, and after dinner while Shelley was freshening up, Daddy told Alex that no way in hell was his baby going to end up with a musician. And for once, Alex, who normally responded to being bullied by swinging a bar stool into someone's face, backed down. Shelley loved Daddy very much, and vice versa. In his mind, ruining that for his own happiness wouldn't be right.

Alex left for South America not long afterward. He'd kept Shelley at bay until he left. In Rio and other places, Alex went to all the night spots where the paparazzi virtually lived, and made sure they got plenty of photographs of the bad boy norteamericano bass player cavorting with gorgeous women. When he returned to the States, Shelley did not try to call him one time. _Imagine my shock when you came through the door that day._

'That day' was the day they finally decided to hire someone to handle the business side of the band when they weren't on tour. Alex was top-notch at the tours, but he was bored by the downtime stuff and it was costing the band money. So they put out an ad for a business manager, and the agency sent Shelley over for an interview. It lasted three questions: Hello? When can you start? What salary do you want?

Definitely one of my better decisions. And it was. Shelley was a detail-oriented, sharply organized manager. The relationship became very professional, and stayed that way. Alex hoped she was past him and moving on in her personal life. But that wasn't the case.

Leaning back in his chair, Alex breathed quietly in the dark, and watched her sleep. And waited for the sun to rise.

And also, while the snowy night continues, the Nightcrawler goes to work

It wasn't hard for the Nightcrawler to read the tags to find the Sons of Chicago, since they pretty much moved in on the Double Cs old turf and hangouts. Where some might get depressed over the ease with which the business continued, under new management, Carl was perversely pleased. One set of scum packing, second stringers in. The more the trade was disrupted and changed over, the less it could get a hold on the kids in the twilight

between street and future.

The cold and snow was finally starting to bother Carl, despite his slime's ample insulation. Carl had thought to brining Flux out tonight, give the kid a chance to vent a little on some deserving targets, but Chase had declined. Dad or Nutball or something weighing on his mind. Phoenix and Sound still at the hospital with their friend, Carl didn't want to get in on that, and Fury hadn't responded.

Just as well, for all the action he saw tonight. The cluster of camoflauged bangers were grumbling and stamping against the cold, not so camoflauged against the dirty snow, glowing yellowish under the streetlamp. He'd watched them trek from crackhouse to connections without leaving the fringes of the operation. Carl oozed down the building's side, cold, frustrated and wanting to send a message before heading home. At least without the rest of the Millennium, he could he pull a serious Freddy Krueger on them.

"Evenin' fellahs. What you doin' on MY streets tonight?" The rattling, nightmare voice echoed wetly off the snowy alleys. The bangers looked around, uncertain until one spotted the menacing grey torso elongating towards them in an unsettling, twisting approach.

"What the f--?"

"Oh mama, that ain't right..." Two of them bolted right away, while two others reached into cargo pockets for blue steel courage.

"Whadda you screechin' for, frickin' little girls. It's that 2K creep."

The Nightcrawler swept the two off their feet and splotched them two stories up, on the side of the wall. Between the cold and wet, frozen concrete, they wouldn't stick long, but Carl had eyed a nice, street-cleared snowbank for them to fall into.

"You kiddies is outta your league, an' that poison ain't gettin' you nothin' but trouble here." Carl oozed his face, nearly but not invisible into them, and contorted his malleable face into a malicious sneer, an ugly, disturbing exaggeration. His voice was a menacing cauldron of boiling sludge. "Pass it on."

He was rewarded with terrified whimpers before arcing for home.

Too damn cold, but keep 'em off balance. It was like guerrilla warfare -- no chance to get comfortable with their new status. Even the small victories still count.

Above the quick encounter, the one person truly at home in the weather watched the Nightcrawler go. The two punks who had fled, well, they should have stayed behind instead of trying to carjack the first taxi they saw. The cabbie would be all night trying to scrub out the blood; good thing the seats were vinyl and not cloth.

The Snowman never considered drifting down to the gangers pinned to the wall. They had done nothing wrong that he'd witnessed, technically. Getting plastered by a walking pile of toxic waste wasn't a felony, at least not one the Snowman was aware of, anyway.

Through the frigid night came the sounds of a car crash, one block over. The Snowman drifted that way, to observe. A black Infinity was backing away from a lightpole. Normally, an ice-induced wreck wouldn't hold the Snowman's attention, but his senses were ringing loudly. He made his way across the street, as the Infiniti sped off. As a matter of course, the Snowman committed the license plate to memory, and the face of the driver as he leaned out of the car to look across the roof; then he saw the reason why

the car had fled. The body in the snow.

The scene was all too obvious. Somehow, the Infiniti lost control, hit the woman (she cleaned some of the smaller shops downtown overnights, before walking to the bus stop about a hundred yards away), then hit the lightpole. The rest, well, you saw that yourself.

With a shake of his helmet, the Snowman checked the woman for a pulse, for breathing. Found neither. He looked around. There were no other witnesses. There would be no conviction for the driver, who undoubtedly was reporting his car as stolen right now. All that was left was what the Snowman could do, the sort of action a weak-spined do-gooder like the Nightcrawler could never understand.

His contacts came back with the information quickly. The car belonged to Ernest McGondel III, son of the local department store mogul. Wealth and privilege, and to him life was so very cheap. The Snowman quietly promised to ensure young Ernest's last lesson in this life would be a lesson in humanity. He placed a quick anonymous call to 911, describing the accident and the license plate. As he hung up, the Snowman decided this would be a test, his test, of the system in Lexington. If it worked to convict the driver, he would let the system handle his punishment. If it didn't, well, with the Snowman, there's always plenty of sharp blades of ice. He already knew what the outcome would be. Still, the amusement value of proving himself correct appealed to him.

When the first lights of approaching emergency vehicles probed the scene, the Snowman had long departed. Leaving nothing behind, not even a footprint.

[A bit later, Josh and Amanda]

He cringed a bit as the bus pulled to its stop. He didn't have time earlier to think about the last two times he was at a hospital. He was well past his own injuries, it seemed more like months instead of weeks since the fight with Element. The grief over his father's death gnawed at him, but the quiet time away from everyone recently had given him some control over it. Amanda was key at both of those moments and tonight would be the first time he really got to speak with her since the Red Mile.

He walked past the nurses' station and passed the lounge with its rows of uncomfortable chairs and television talking to itself quietly. A familiar figure was sitting there. Farther down the hall he could see the guards at Shelley's door.

Producing a thermos from the inside of his jacket he says, "I thought you might want some good coffee instead of the tar they must have down in the cafeteria."

"You've saved my life," she pronounces with a little smile. "No sign of our 'friends' so far."

He places the container in the center of the table as he turns a chair around as he sits into it. "Faulkner's Roast" will keep us perked up 'til they show" he grins unscrewing the lid and pouring the hot beverage into it. He smells it almost passionately before passing it to Amanda. "Hope you don't mind black..."

"I can stand it." Just the scent is reviving. "And I almost wish they *would* show. I didn't even bring a book." The prognosis is encouraging, but there hasn't been much news, since she doesn't want Alex to know she hung around.

"How's our patient?"

"Hanging in there. I haven't been in." She sighs, not sure at all what's going to happen next as a consequence of Shelley's mistake, how the others will react. What, exactly, does one say under these circumstances? "You find out anything interesting?" she asks of the researches mentioned in passing earlier.

"Damn interesting actually...I got his name. He is...or was... a petty career criminal named "Chance" McCain."

"Not so petty any more," she observes, sipping the coffee. Hot. "Well, that's a lead."

"Agreed" Josh adds as he sips from the thermos itself. Pausing longer than he intended he was a little unsure of how to continue. Yeah, being alone gave him time to resolve some issues he had with his father but it also allowed heretofore unnamed concerns over his feelings toward Amanda to surface. What if the strength of his emotion for her was some by-product of the "vibe" -- it would certainly explain the uncharacteristic quickness of it all. "'Been a while since we've been alone."

"Hm." Not really wishing to make reference to the last time it had happened. _Yup, awkward,_ she reflects, remembering her earlier thoughts. _Well, best find out the worst, I guess._ "How is everything?" She sets down the coffee, fiddles with the end of her braid for a moment before forcing herself to stop.

Great, she's just as jammed up as I am, he thinks to himself as he registers the tones in her voice. "I think I'm through the worst of it," he says, recalling his breakdown in his father's old hospital room. She was so tender that night. "I can't count how many times I almost picked up the phone to call you..."

Almost? A quick glance up, not sure if she ought to ask, letting her eyes do the speaking. "I'm glad things are getting a little better. I know this must be awfully rough."

Reaching out slowly, cautiously to her hand he says "It has been but I'm ready to get back out there." The caress of his thumb against the back of her hand in his says it all.

Amanda blinks, startled, having expected the conversation to take a somewhat different turn at that point. Her hand tightens a bit on his. Then she smiles. "Glad to hear it." After a moment she adds, "You should stop over some time. I have something for you."

"Really?" he says with a naughty grin not quite leering enough to make Carl proud but...enough to try to increase the lightened mood. He notes his reservations about the vibe and damns them at the moment. Maybe he shouldn't even care? Maybe he's just looking for an easy out to punish himself. Fsck it.

"Really," she affirms archly, adding with a grin, "It's just little, mind you. No mariachi bands are involved."

"Bigger than a breadbox?" he quips as he offers to pour her more coffee.

"Thank you -- nope," Amanda answers. "You'll never guess." She'd started to wonder if she was going to get a chance to pass the little gift to its intended recipient at all. Now she relaxes back into the chair (as far as that's possible, anyway). "Y'know, you can call any time you want," she adds gently.

"Thanks. That means a lot." he adds still determined to keep his worlds apart as best he can for as long as he can. As much as he knows her offer is genuine and feeling that just HER listening would have helped, how could he unload about his own father's passing to her without dragging their powered world into the picture? Is she ready to talk more about that? would it pain her? is there anything we can do anyway? Maybe keeping things compartmentalized is just his way of dodging the vibe issue. He winces as the thoughts noticably ram at his temples. He adds, rubbing them, "I need more coffee...waking up at 4 all but killed me today." He chugs more from the decanter.

"Sorry 'bout that. I guess she could have let you sleep, after all." Amanda half smiles, head slightly cocked, observing the fleeting traces of conflicted emotion. She leans forward again, bringing them into closer proximity. Trying to make it clear that she'll listen, without pushing.

"Hey! On the good news front Jake is back with the group." Using his powers to increase the volume on the teevee he quietly adds "I even saw his new costume. No more endorsement options there." He leans forward resting his head on both hands. Being so close has all but melted the anguish from his face.

"That's great! We can certainly use him around." A door bangs somewhere down the hall. The hasty noise of the ER seems a thousand miles away instead of just a couple floors. _Gee, I hope the Sigil doesn't decide to show up now._ "Guess you were right about him coming around." She touches his arm lightly, reassuring.

"Yer glass is half full" he teases commenting on his optimistic nature he brushes her cheek lightly with the back of his fingers.

"Generally," she agrees. "It's worked pretty well so far." Recognizing that whatever it is, she's not going to hear about it tonight.

"You should go home and get some rest. I'll take over guard duty."

"Rest? What's that?" she jokes wryly. "Are you sure? You didn't get any more sleep than I did last night, and unlike some people I don't have much by way of a day job to report to."

"Yeah. Running the place has its perks. Get out of here."

"Well, if you insist," she allows with a smile. "Give a ring if our apocalyptic buddies show up, though. Fate and I have a conversation to finish." She stands up, trying to arch the stiffness out of her back, then stoops to kiss his forehead lightly. "I'll see you later," she promises softly, and departs with a backward glance.

Early, March 1. Office complex on Vine Street, behind Rupp Arena.

"You still work here de las Cruces?" The voice was recriminating, but the dark face was smiling. Carl smirked at Heronimous "Hero" Jefferson, his supervisor at the Kentucky Social Services Department.

"Whassa word, Hero?"

"You tell me. Thought you don't work 'till after the season."

"Ain't workin' 'less you get paid for it," responded Carl at the Department's perrennially under-funded status.

"Well, it ain't NHL money..." jibed Hero. The two had been pacing down the

musty, dated halls of the 50's vintage government building. You could practically see Donna Reed or Ozzie Nelson walking down the halls with them. When they tuned through the frosted glass door of their offices, Carl snorted and shook his head. His desk had been covered in Islanders pennants, and newspaper photos. "Hail the conquering hero," said Hero, slapping his back.

"What's up with the papers?" asked Carl.

"Deadhead noticed you in the background of some Philly paper's shot of Lindros." Sure enough, you could just make out Carl's form, steaming for the big center. Carl found that almost as interesting as the unconnected headline next to it, "Doc Liberty, SWAT Free Hostages."

Confronted by the villainess Red Songbird, Doc Liberty managed to negate her powers by increasing the quantity of helium around her. 'Can't super-squeal with a larynx full of helium, I'd hoped,' the white-coated Doc was quoted as saying before lifting off on his Liberty Hovercycle...

"Good for you, Doc," thought Carl and again wondered at how the selfless hero made such an impact with the notoriously closed Philly cops. "An' here I'm holdin' SORT at arms' length..."

Hero interrupted his thoughts. "So you gotta tell me what it's about, the Big Time..."

"Some other time, Hero," Carl responded, a little shortly. "I just came in ta put out a APB on some gutterboy. Jason Faulkner, fell out with his family, might be in the system somewhere. They lookin' for him, thought I'd get him on the wire."

Jefferson nodded, a little disappointed. He made small talk while Carl worked the paperwork to get Jason's description and name out to the state's soup kitchens, shelters, and hostels. With a quick glance to his boss, Carl put his own number instead of the department's. "Honest mistake," he muttered.

When he was done, he impulsively filled out another form, for the Federal System, with Shawna's information.

[Later on the 29th, off Trent Boulevard. Yes I know it's confusing.]

Being home brought with it a vague, claustrophobic sense of uneasiness. The intense relief that accompanied Shelley's reappearance, and her renewed hope where Josh was concerned, had somehow just given room for Amanda's remaining concerns to expand. Or maybe it had to do with seeing him, and thinking about some things, or with spending time in a hospital again with nothing to occupy her thoughts. In any case, the vestiges of her lightened mood faded swiftly. She tried uselessly to distract herself, first with music and then with cleaning -- a sure sign of desperation -- when she proved unable to concentrate for any length of time.

After a couple hours she gave up on that as well. Dug into one of several small boxes that remained in the apartment with no place for their contents to go, and pulled out a framed photo protected by bubble wrap. As always, it had arrived two weeks after Christmas, joining an ever-growing series. Put them all in a row and see the changes the years had wrought. Picture in hand, she sat down on her new couch, studying every familiar detail. The six of them in front of the big fireplace in the family room, a few evergreen branches poking into one side of the shot, decorations evident in the background. Everyone looked happy and well-groomed, like beaming ambassadors for "family values," with no idea of the changes the next week would bring.

But how much, exactly, had changed? That was what she most wanted to know and could think of no way to discover short of the most direct.

It hadn't gotten any easier to think about the situation. It didn't seem real, and she suspected that it would not until they had proof. Nor could there be any start to healing the sharp pain that already seemed like it had been with her always. Not until she knew the truth.

She'd spoken with her mother only a few times since her realization at the hospital. If Rose knew what was going on -- and something was, Amanda could sense it in the pauses, as surely as her mother could sense that she wasn't being told everything that happened in her daughter's life -- she said nothing of it. _I'll have to ask the others,_ she decided, reluctant though she was to even imagine raising the topic. _Next time we meet... someone else may have some idea, since it seems I might be worse than useless where this is concerned._

"What are you doing tonight?" she whispered aloud, touching her father's face in the picture.

Later, in bed, she remembered that there was something she had wanted to do. Might as well do it tomorrow. It would give her something else to think about.

March 1, early morning.

No weird dreams this time, at least none that she remembered. For a moment she couldn't remember why she'd set the alarm. _Oh, right._ After her shower, struck by a sudden thought, she stood for a few minutes examining herself in the mirror. Thinking back to the past few meetings with the others, comparing the memories, the way her clothes didn't seem to fit quite right anymore.

We're still changing. Not as drastically, but.... It renewed her unusual sense of determination as she headed out into a sun-filled morning, toward the public library. Of course, it was of some comfort that the Main Street branch occupied the lower floors of Park Place, where Josh (oh my gosh, and Dominique, how could I have forgotten her!) have apartments. She tried to call Dominique, but she was out, probably at work.

Amanda spent the morning in the periodicals room, looking at newspaper and magazine articles since the year turned, trying to get a broader sense of the picture that had resulted when powered people showed up in the world. _It's like we've spent the time so far just getting our lives back on track, starting to learn how to deal with all of this, and that's fine, but I can't help thinking we should be trying to *understand* it, if we can. Whatever the future brings for *all* of us, we have to try to help make it... God, listen to me, I sound like a bad motivational seminar. Well, I might find something useful, and it's not like I had anything to do today anyway._

No doubt every cub reporter in Lexington had been over exactly the same ground, but she spent the morning in careful, methodical searching, trying to get a sense of world events, of how powered people were fitting themselves into their surroundings and how those surroundings were reacting.

It was Bill Moberly's column that got her attention, in the local paper. He'd recounted the New Year's Day events, and discussed the odd scene at the Red Mile. How powered people weren't just some big city phenomenon.

How Robert Halle, newly announced candidate for governor, was building a platform with the banning of powered people as one of his planks.

Eventually she just sat there, thinking over what she had read, nails tapping unconsciously on the table's scarred wood. She realized that she was

still trying to work through that impossible part of "Wired." And it just got a lot more difficult.

Turn 37 continues

Jake speeds along behind the caravan of SORTies. Making sure that he is far enough back not to be spotted. Suddenly they stop near the entrance to Triangle Park. Jake moves his bike in a little closer to gain a better vantage point. Jake finally spots their prey as the SORTies approach three people seated on a park bench. From his point of view the trio was doing nothing but seating there talking. Jake could hear the raised voices but couldn't make out what was being said. _Wish Josh was here._

But he has a sense of what is going on and for some reason he just knows something is wrong about this whole scene. It just didn't feel right for some reason. Jake Reaches for his cell phone. _Time to call in the cavalry._ Jake says to himself as he dials up Josh's number.

"Hey, Bro'. Get your gear and get over here as soon as possible." Jake quickly calls the other Millennium members, then puts away his cell phone. The situation seemed to be getting worse with the little guy arguing with the head SORTie. Jake reaches into his backpack for his tightly rolled up suit. "Now, where to change?" Jake says with a quick look around.

The solution presents itself rather neatly for Jake, as an eruption of tangled, thorned vines suddenly traps him within an enclosed cocoon of plant life. Cursing, Jake remembers where he'd seen this before. "LaPlante. He's back."

Jake does take advantage of his unexpected privacy. There's enough room for him to work his way into his new Fury supersuit. As he finishes, he's suddenly aware of the deep cuts he took when he freed himself and Josh, Carl, and Mark from one of LaPlante's thorn cages. In spite of his innate toughness, the shards of sharp plant still caused him some pain. Still, he had to free himself; there'd be plenty of time for Bactine later. He reached to take two good fistfuls of vines...

...only to see them suddenly part in front of him in a flash of purple energy. "Phoenix?" he wonders aloud.

"No," comes the reply, a woman's voice from outside the tangle. "I'm called Indigo."

Fury, briefly unsure of Indigo's intentions, starts to feel that familiar warmth of connection he feels with the other members of the Millennium. Indigo, dressed in dark slacks and shoes, and a deep purple cloak with the hood thrown back, also picks up on the vibe. Her posture relaxes a bit. "You're one of Phoenix's friends, from New Year's day?"

He nods. _She's got a freakin' lightsaber!_ Indigo does hold a flashlight-like cylinder in her hand, a short length of purple energy shimmering from one aperture. "I've fought the person responsible for this before. He's called LaPlante. Somewhere nearby he's occupying a tree or a big plant. He can also create new forms out of plants and animate them."

"Like the big green ape-like monsters over there?" Indigo asks, turning to indicate the entrance to the office building next to the Hyatt. There were four large animated things resembling apes, shambling through the plate glass front with a loud crash.

"They were dogs last time. Damn, where's Nightcrawler when you need him?" Fury growled.

Indigo turned to yell in another direction. "Imp! You and Brickyard free the

people from the tangles. Then get up to the roof, fast."

"I hear and obey, Mistress Indigo," Imp replied.

"Imp?" Brickyard rumbled from behind a tangled person.

"Sorry. We'll be there. Jeez, B.Y., just tear a hole, I'll do the rest."

Fury got to see what he meant by 'the rest.' The big guy she'd called Brickyard, and he was absolutely huge, would tear open one of the tangles, at a height where the 3'6" Imp could see. Then Imp would disappear and reappear with some surprised person who had been inside the tangle. He turned to say something to Indigo, but she was running for the ruined office front.

[Phase 35 - Fury]

Chasing after Indigo, Fury found himself behind one of the massive shambling plant-things. He decided to grab it and toss it back into the in a nice arc. The plant-thing hammers into the roadway of Main Street, creating a substantial crack in the pavement as it disintegrates into a massive pile of soggy plant compost.

[Phase 26 - an Elderly Bystander]

Harry Marvin was waiting patiently at an elevator, to visit his lawyer on the eighth floor, when all hell broke loose in the lobby. He ducked the flying safety glass and watched as the four massive plant-things make their way inside. They were growling something over and over, he couldn't quite make it out. But they weren't going away; the staircase seemed to be their destination.

Unfortunately for Harry, or so it seemed, he was in their way.

One of the plant-things swung a tree-trunk-like limb at the 5'6" Harry. Now, what you have to remember about our Harry, is that he was a champion wrestler in his youth. And it has been hinted that Harry has regained some of his youth and prowess much in the way the heroes of the New Millennium gained their abilities. It should come as no surprise that Harry uses the momentum of the swing to slam the offending creature into a nearby wall, and watches as it collapses into an unmoving pile of compost.

[Phase 24 - Indigo]

With a leap worthy of her on-screen hero Ewan McGregor, Indigo catapults herself into the back of one of the monsters. Her energy weapon slashes through the unliving animation, and it collapses into a mess of strewn grass and vines.

As she comes to a stop on her feet, she spots the elderly bystander, clad in slacks, a leather bomber jacket, and a herringbone driving cap, as he dusts his knuckles. She cocks her head to the side. "You with the guy outside?" she asks.

[Phase 21 - the Plant Thing]

Still growling a phrase over and over, the monstrosity crashes past Harry and through the stairwell door, and proceeds upward as fast as possible.

[Phase 20 - Fury]

"Is that it? Wasn't there another one?" Fury asks. Harry answers by pointing a thumb at the stairwell door. "Thanks, old man. You'd better go before you get hurt." Fury continued after the creature.

[Phase 11 - Harry Marvin]

In answer to Indigo's question, Harry shakes his head. He then goes back to the elevator and reads the directory on the wall next to it. "That's what it was saying." Turning back to Indigo as he pushes the Up button, Harry says "I know where it was going. Think I'll go to its floor and see if I'm right. Coming along?" He holds the elevator door open for her.

[Phase 9 - Indigo]

"Sure." As she approaches him, she notices the same vibe she got from Fury. "You sure you don't know him?"

"First time I've ever seen him, miss. My name's Harry Marvin," he says, and offers his hand.

"Um, hi. Could you just call me Indigo?"

"Sure. Like 'Mood Indigo'?"

"Right. It's an old Duke Ellington song."

"I think Floyd Cramer wrote it about twelve years before the Duke recorded it. But that's ok, miss." The elevator doors closed.

[Phase 6 - the Plant Thing]

(delays to 5) As Fury charges after it, the plant-thing grabs him with a huge limb, and carries him up the stairs with alarming speed.

[Phase 5 - Fury]

"Damn!" he yells as the beast scoops him up and starts moving. Fury can see the ground floor getting more and more distant. No doubt the thing intends to drop him a few stories straight down. That might not be good.

With a huge shrug, Fury tries to shake free. But the monster's hold is too strong, and Fury doesn't have enough leverage to get loose!

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You work hard...



Turn 38

(Dancing In The Streets)

[Phase 30 - Phoenix]

As the sound of a small explosion opens one of the larger balls of thorns, Phoenix looks that way and sees a number of the SORTies emerging with arms at the ready. "Hi there!" she says in as friendly a voice as she can summon, swooping down into voice range of the scene. "Problem, officers?" Hoping that they know the Millennium by rumor, at least, by this time, and will not overreact....

They do indeed seem to recognize her, judging by the lack of incoming gunfire. One of the larger SORT officers steps forward, speaking through some sort of device built into the helmet, making the voice flat and featureless.

~~We had a report of unknown powereds here in Triangle Park. Upon attempting to question them, we were surrounded by this structure. The three powereds departed. Two of them are over there. Location of the third is unknown.~~

Phoenix follows the pointing of the gauntleted hand down Main Street, where the Herculean Brickyard and the diminutive Imp are breaking into another of the barricades.

[Phase 27 - Imp]

Pulling another pedestrian with him out of a tangle, Imp teleports next to Brickyard. "Look at that mess," he says, pointing to the building where Indigo and Fury headed. A truly impressive wall of thorns has grown over the front of the building, and it looks impassable!

[Phase 25 - Brickyard]

"See," says the smaller man, jerking a thumb up at Phoenix. "I told you she'd show up if we came to Lexington."

"I think she's more concerned about the rampant plant life," replies the larger man as he rips open another ball of thorned vines.

Imp vanishes, then reappears with a stunned-looking businessman. Phoenix begins to pick up on the vibe, that communal feeling of trust and partnership she has with the Millennium.

"Maybe she can help," Brickyard says.

"She could be with them, you know, and try to arrest us for this," Imp replies.

"No. I don't think so. We were trapped with them."

"We didn't help them out of there."

"But we were safeguarding the public. That comes before consideration for public servants, which I'm guessing they are." Brickyard walks toward the

group as Phoenix and the SORTies face him.

[Phase 15 - Phoenix]

She watches the powerhouse and his companion approach her, and to Phoenix's dismay, feels her pulse suddenly hit the red zone. For a moment, she is transfixed by the red and black clad man. _Like seeing one of the Greek gods_, she thinks.

Even the SORTies seem affected by Brickyard's aura, standing with weapons a bit more respectfully pointed away from him. He approaches Phoenix and offers a hand.

"I'm called Brickyard. The gremlin's name is Imp," says the strongman. "Indigo followed some guy into that building. He was wearing a mask and a black bodysuit. I'm guessing he's one of your partners."

Imp begins to snicker in a Beavis and Butthead fashion, but quickly stops. "Right. They went that-a-way." he says.

"Y..y..uh huh." Phoenix stammers.

"I think one of your friends is in that building with our partner. We had planned to go in the front way, but that might take too much time. Can you suggest another way in?"

"I can," said Imp, pointing upward. "Open window, about six floors up. Hope that's not Indigo about to become street pizza there."

And Phoenix, who could easily sort out exactly who is descending, can't break the spell to fly away. She isn't alone. Other people, those who have just been rescued, they're all moving this way and looking at him. That's the weird part, Phoenix thinks. Everyone's looking at him.

[Phase 10 - Nightcrawler]

"Hey, ev'ryone. Snap out of it. What's goin' on?" yells the Nightcrawler. Phoenix turns to look at him, then suddenly seems to really focus on him.

"Stuff. Fan. Impact," says the Nightcrawler as he sees the little grass plots that line the street in places, where trees grow to beautify downtown. From these small plots, four-legged animal shapes, like large dogs, emerge. Their bodies completely green, except for their eyes, which glow with a sickly fluorescent blue light. Nightcrawler remembers all too well the last time these beasts unleashed their eye-beams. It felt like his guts were going to explode; intestinal flora gone haywire was the way it was explained later. Flora, plants, La Plante, he can control them.

"Gotta find th' main man, shut 'em down. Hey, new blood, hope yer up to this." With a snap, Nightcrawler pounds one of the creatures as it continues to form, sticking it in place. He hopes he's quick enough to take down the closer ones.

(Nowhere To Run To)

[Phase 37 - Fury]

Struggling against the monstrous mound of mulch, Fury finds he is held tight, and the lack of leverage is helping to keep him tightly in the horror's grip as they climb another staircase.

[Phase 22 - Fury]

"Urnnnnn! Arrgggh!" Desperately, Fury reaches out to the beast mentally, seeking to enrage it into letting him go. But the creature is not guided by any sort of built-in brain; no, the evil thoughts behind its rampage belong to someone different.

[Phase 20 - the Plant-Thing/LaPlante]

Where Fury can see, a mocking face grows into the side of the beast, as it stops on a landing before two great windows overlooking downtown. "Well look what LaPlante has caught. A mighty bug. You seek to halt the progress of my fell beast, Fury? Ha hahaahahhhahahhaahhahaha. You're in the wrong this time; the greater villain is at work upstairs." As LaPlante mocks Fury, the beast shifts Fury to the front of its body, vines wrapped around him so he can't struggle any more.

"Stopped you before, LaPlante. We'll do it again."

"'We', mon petit? I don't think so. You know what Fury?"

Struggling against the bonds, knowing what's coming next. "What, LaPlante?"

"Drop dead."

Time slows. LaPlante gives Fury a few horrifying seconds to realize just what is about to happen to him. Turning him toward the windows. Out to the city. Toward the clouds.

The green plant-thing drops Fury, and as he falls, a pseudopod lashes out. Fury catches the full force of the blow in his mid-section, but the strike is so fast he is propelled away instead of wrapping around the limb.

The sound of breaking glass all around him, Fury feels himself flying outward, and upward. Then, gravity takes over.

If Josh were here, he'd be singing 'Guilty' right now. Fury thinks, as the unyielding plant stuff keeps him bound tightly.

The brief, silent moment, between ascension and descent. All is still, almost completely to a stop.

Freefall.

[Phase 10 - Sound]

Seeing Carl emerge from the office buildings on the way down Main Street, Sound stops quickly and motions him over. Together they hurry down Main, as Carl exudes the formative plasma of his alter-ego.

"Everyone's lookin' up," says Nightcrawler.

"I've got this," Sound replies, and bolts toward the falling Fury. He sings and warbles an Archimedean field of sonic energy under Fury, who hits and starts spiralling downward, the deadly velocity of his freefall bleeding away, until he reaches the ground.

[Phase 7 - Fury]

Now safely on the ground, Fury breaks the quickly-drying mass of plant tendrils from around him. He looks up to see Sound standing there, and they nod. Without another word, Fury heads for the front of the building again, and begins to dismantle the growth there. His muttered oaths of revenge are almost enough to curl the plants.

(Red Rain)

[Phase 26 - Harry Marvin]

"Those walking piles of compost were saying 'Ken Perloff' I think, Indigo. That's the name of someone up on the eighth floor." Harry tries to recall the name, but it doesn't mean anything to him. Indigo, across from him in the elevator, nods and waits for the car to reach its destination.

[Phase 19 - Indigo]

"I'm sorry. We aren't from Lexington, Mr Marvin. We just came down for the day, hoping to meet people like us. I guess we succeeded in that."

[Phase 11 - Harry Marvin]

"Looks to me like it's fortunate that you did. Here's our floor. Let's see if that pug-ugly shows up." (Delays)

[Phase 5 - the Plant-Thing/LaPlante]

Breaking open the fire door, the Plant Thing finds two more obstacles in its path: the old man, and the young heroine.

"Step aside, miss. Your little flashlight won't work this time." And the Plant Thing lashes out and crushes the door to Ken Perloff's office suite.

[Phase 5 - Indigo]

Leaping impressively upward, Indigo slashes out with her lightsaber. But instead of destroying the creature, the energy passes harmlessly over the surface of the beast!

"I don't believe it!" she yells. Then, regaining her senses, she reaches out mentally to Brickyard, sharing with him the image of the battle taking place.

[Phase 5 - Harry Marvin, from 11]





"Think about it, miss. Lightsaber. Light. Makes plants grow. This one must be tougher than the others." Harry advanced with a bound toward the extended limb, his elbow smashing down. LaPlante cackled as the limb cracked violently under the assault. "You'd best get back and let me deal with this."

The two foes separated, the green behemoth and the old, rejuvenated fighter, circling each other. Then, the two rushed at each other, the innate antipathy vibe urging them together in a final, devastating assault.

"Harry!" Indigo shrieked.

(And somewhere, poor Magna-Flux is stuck in AP Calculus.)

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[Turn 39]

[Phase 50 - Phoenix]

Shaking her head sharply, a somewhat mortified Phoenix returns her attention to the battle. _Hope I'm not blushing too badly._ She tells 'Crawler, "I'll see if I can spot him," then takes off for a better view of the area. Nothing about the landscaped trees and bushes of the little park stands out, but she does note the flower shop in Victorian Square across the way.

It's something of a long shot, but LaPlante is demonstrably bizarre... and a few seconds one way or the other shouldn't make any difference to the Millennium vs. plant-dog battle shaping up here on the ground, so she darts in that direction to check the place out. Can't see anything from the street with the sun on the windows like that, so she opens the door to peek in.

A number of leafy green plants, exotic flowers shipped from all over, and staples like balloons and wreaths fill the cozy shop, which measures about 50 feet across and maybe a hundred deep. To the right are several refrigerated window cases containing arrangements.

No one seems to be in the shop.

Not quite ready to abandon her hunch, Phoenix moves back into the store, toward a small counter with register and various books of arrangements and FTD delivery prices. Something hits her on the shoulder from above. It is a woman's shoe.

She steps swiftly to the side and glances up to see a woman, apparently in her fifties, hanging there bound with vines and staring wide-eyed at Phoenix. She is struggling, but can't seem to break free. Also, the store seems to be coming to life. In a very organic way. However, all is quiet for the moment.

[Phase 35 - Phoenix]

"Hang on, have you down in a moment. Hey guys!" she calls, hoping Sound at least will be able to hear her. "I could maybe use a hand here...."

Hope this works, Phoenix thinks as she raises her hand toward the woman. Her eyes get even bigger as the flames begin to form. With immense concentration, Phoenix wills her living flame to burn with a preciseness never exhibited before. To her surprise, it happens easily (Inventing roll=12%; I'm burning your dice, Bec) and she directs the fine-tuned burn to cut the woman free. She drops, and Phoenix thoughtfully catches her with the non-burning hand.

[Phase 23 - LaPlante]

From one side of the shop, from a wooden structure housing a number of plants, the plants weave and form into a caricature of a face. "Didn't anyone tell you it's not nice to play with fire, girl?" LaPlante's voice sneers from the mouth.

Some of the leafier plants hoist a heavy concrete planter and hurl it at Phoenix. The planter hits her full in the stomach, knocking her into the ceiling before she and the planter hammer to the floor. Being airborne negated much of the impact, fortunately (7 points, 5 to power). Other plants begin to mass at the front door, blocking that exit.

[Phase 20 - Phoenix]

Rising from the ground, Phoenix glances at the shopkeeper. "I'm sorry, but I have to do this," she says, just before blasting at the structure containing LaPlante's 'face.' The structure splinters and falls apart, dirt and plant matter falling to the floor. Behind the structure, Phoenix can see that the

structure actually covered an open area of wall, and that the plants it held had roots outside the building.

"Dammit! Sound, he's loose somewhere!

Outside

[Phase 35 - Fury]

Fury, with Sound at his side, begins to break through the plant barricade.

It is somewhat deep, and the going slows as even Fury finds he has to respect the sharp thorns on the barricade. "Come on, bro, help me out here.

This compost's three feet deep."

He looks back to Sound, who's attention is turned toward something across the street. "Bro, you hear me?" Fury asks.

[Phase 24 - Brickyard]

The huge man runs to Fury, with Imp at his heels. "There's a quicker way.

You need to get to the eighth floor. Imp can get you to six right now. I'll open the wall up here."

"An' believe me, pal, after watching that Phoenix bird fly around, I'd really like to see her come back," Imp adds.

"That a fact?" asks Sound.

"Is it ever. Whoa mama. What a dish. Come on, tough guy. Express elevator's

waitin'," Imp says, grabbing Fury and looking up at the broken windows on

the sixth floor, where Fury had recently been tossed. Fury looks up and starts to ask a question.

Inside

[Phase 29 - Harry Marvin]

Seemingly trapped within the monster's bear hug of a grasp as Indigo screams, Harry instead knows exactly what he's doing. He digs his fingers

into the monster and rips outward. But the grass is slick and he's unable to

get as good a grip as he likes. A lengthy and impressive stream of curses

emerge from Harry as he continues to battle the beast.

[Phase 24 - Imp]

"Shh! Ya might ruin my concentration," Imp cautions. The next instant, he

and Fury are standing on the landing of the sixth floor. Imp begins running

up stairs. "Indigo and some guy are up on Eight with the monster, come on!"

He begins running, with Fury close behind, and comes to a stop at a fire

door on Eight. Imp tries it, but it's locked. He pounds on the door.
"Indigo! Open the damn door!"

[Phase 20 - Fury]

"Let me," Fury says, and grabs the handle. There is a creaking, then a tearing of metal, and the door flies open! (Fury maxes on damage to the door, and it looks really cool!)

[Phase 19 - Indigo]

Aware of the door opening, Indigo turns her attention back to the monster fighting with Harry. She raises a hand, and makes a grabbing motion. One of the monster's limbs lifts away from Harry, held out by Indigo's power, but she can affect the creature no farther. _Oh, no, Brickyard's hurt!_

[Phase 14 - Harry Marvin]

With a little breathing space, Harry digs in again and pulls out a chunk of the creature, tossing it behind him. The thing lets loose with a horrid deep shriek.

[Phase 9 - Imp]

"Hey, babe. Miss me?" Imp asks of Indigo, but before she can answer, he turns to the monster, moving to its side. Then, he vanishes, appearing in a blur next to the monster and striking it with his fist. The strike slides off the grassy monster's surface. "Uh oh. Kim chee, extra deep. Hey, tough guy, it's all yours," Imp calls to Fury.

[Phase 5 - Fury]

Fury smiles, and begins to unfurl the standard emergency fire hose from the wall. He spins the valve control and aims the nozzle; a powerful blast of water crashes into the monster. The desired effect begins to happen, as the dirt and crud loosen and pieces of the monster drop to the floor.

[Phase 5 - the Dogs]

Bursting through the doorway even as the monster continues to crumble in mid-air, the three Dog creations of LaPlante fire their beams. One tags Harry in the back, and he drops to the floor, retching. One lashes toward Imp, but just misses the little man. The last, however, cannot stop its movement, and lands squarely in front of the hose held by Fury. The crushing water shatters the Dog instantly.

[Phase 4 - Indigo]

Concentrating more fully, and actively ignoring Imp's comment, Indigo again

raises her hand. This time, a Dog explodes outward in a shower of dirt and grass. She then moves toward Harry, snapping her lightsaber to life as she steps between him and the last Dog.

Outside

[Phase 22 - Sound]

Running to the florist shop, Sound finds the door held fast. "Damn. Phoenix! Where are you?" he yells. (delays)

He is answered by part of the side wall suddenly splintering and crashing outward. "Dammit, Sound, he's loose somewhere," he hears. Moving that way, he lowers himself and moves inside.

[Phase 22 - Nightcrawler]

"Figures. Ev'rbody jets, leaving me to clean up." Seeing the dog-like creatures' glowing eyes, all of which seem to be looking his way, Nightcrawler moves. Fast. (Evading)

[Phase 20 - the Dogs]

Five of the critters immediately run for the building, where Brickyard has finally opened the barricade. One turns to fire rays at Nightcrawler; but the Viscous Vigilante has already moved, and the beams go harmlessly past.

Two of them fire at Brickyard, hitting him crossways. He drops to the pavement, clutching at his midsection. The other three continue inside.

[Phase 7 - Sound]

"Are you all right?" he asks Phoenix.

"Yes. We've got to get back out there, now."

"Right."

Sound moves back out through the opening, and watches the assaults on Brickyard and Nighthcrawler. Closing in, he belts a sonic blast toward the Dog attack Nightcrawler, which misses.

[Phase 7 - Nighthcrawler]

As the beast moves to avoid Sound's attack, the Nightcrawler again lashes out, plastering the Dog to the roadway. "I'm bettin' he's in those trees over there," Nightcrawler says to Sound, pointing out the small plot of trees near the entrance to the Hyatt. "Let's go make some mulch."

[Phase 5 - Phoenix]

Picking up on the scene, she sees the attack on Brickyard, and without a

word to Sound goes flying that way. Looping up over the two Dogs, she extends her arms, firing blasts of flame from both. The monsters spring to either side, and the flame misses them completely.

Meanwhile, finally let loose from his AP Calculus class, Chase Ulrich hurries to the computer lab. He quickly logs in to the Fayette County government web server, and connects with the traffic cameras linked to it. He quickly begins cycling through them until the Main Street cameras show him what he's missing.

"Man, they need me! I hope Ecto-Flex doesn't get messed over too bad," he says quietly out loud. That's when he hears a voice at his shoulder.

"How's it hanging, Ulrich?"

Oh no. Turning around. Looking straight into the face of ex-Coach Meyers.

"Looking forward to seeing you on the 9th," Meyers, the self-described Eight Ball, continues. "I'm going to get my job back. And you're going to help me."

"I am?" The feeling of antipathy and anger rising in him.

"Everyone knows it was you, Chase, who ruined the lives of so many people. But here's the deal. You're getting a second chance if I get one. So when the hearing comes up, you're going to tell everyone what a good guy Coach Meyers is."

"Uh huh. Snowball. Blast furnace. Do the math."

"I'll do better. Much better. You think about that, Ulrich, til next week. See you."

Chase looks quickly around the lab. _Too many people here. Yeah, I'll see you too, Coach,_ he fumes, and makes his way to the cafeteria.

Responses due February 18th. That's Friday, Jeff.

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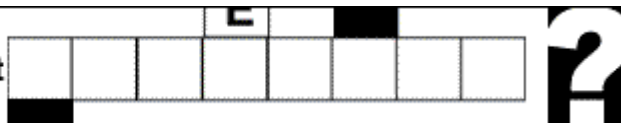


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<cdirish@earthlink.net>

[Turn 40]

Inside

[Phase 31 - Fury]

Checking to ensure there are no other current threats, Fury then turns to Indigo. She is helping Harry to his feet. (Fury uses action to make Detect Danger and succeeds; there are no current threats in the building on this floor that he can tell.)

"Maybe you two can check out the guy hiding behind the desk in there," Fury says, indicating a peeking man with his thumb. He looks at the older man, Harry Marvin; the vibe is there, and Fury feels a bit taken aback. _Another one?_ After all the guy looks like he's in his fifties, albeit a very fit fifties. But Mr Book is probably at least that old, too. "Sir? Are you all right?"

[Phase 27 - Hurricane Harry Marvin]

"'S what I get for eating at Bob Evans this morning. Thank you, young man," Harry says, and offers a handshake. Fury accepts; pretty solid for an

old
guy...for another powered person. "That's a good suggestion. Me and
Miss
Indigo will have a talk with this fellow."

[Phase 25 - Imp]

"C'mon, tough guy, elevator's waitin'," Imp says to Fury. "Hey, Gramps,
keep
yer hands off my main squeeze while yer up here," Imp leers at Indigo
as he
addresses Harry.

"You call me 'Gramps' again pipsqueak and you'll need a proctologist to
remove that helmet," Harry replies drily.

Imp grinned. "Yer good people, Honest Abe. We'll chug some Geritol
sometime.
C'mon Fury, let's go." Imp bounds through the door with Fury close
behind,
down to the sixth floor. "Ok, grab my wrist and try not ta puke on the
way
down," Imp says as he hops up to the windowsill and looks down. A
moment
later, he and Fury are at ground level, where the remaining two dogs
are
barely avoiding a Phoenix generated blast.

[Phase 20 - Indigo]

"He's in pain," she say aloud, not meaning to.

"Sorry?" Harry replies. "Who?"

"My b...my partner, Brickyard. The dogs hurt him, like they did to
you."

"Go on, then. I can handle this guy by myself."

"But, Harry..."

"No butts, Miss. I was chasing Chinese fighter pilots around Korea
before
your parents were probably born. I can deal with Mr Perloff. Go."

And, anguished for a moment, Indigo does leave for the window on the
sixth
floor, whips a spike into the sill, and dropping down the side of the
building tethered to a thin cord. She seems to slide down the brick
facing
of the structure, in a controlled descent, and quickly makes the
ground.

Outside

[Phase 51 - Phoenix]

"Normally I'm a dog person, but I can't say I like you, pup," Phoenix
mutters, throwing another blast of flame at a remaining mobile dog. No
doubt
more will be on the way soon. _Missed!_ she grimaces as the frantically
dodging 'dog' leaps hard away from the attack.

"You going to be okay?" she asks Brickyard, overcompensating so it

comes out
somewhat brusquely, and receives a faint affirmative. _What the heck is
wrong with me?_

[Phase 36 - Phoenix]

What, indeed. Phoenix suddenly becomes aware of her surroundings, on a
phenomenal level. Suzuki might call it a state of no-mind. Guided by a
tactical intellect, experienced beyond her enhanced intelligence,
Phoenix
fires again at the retreating dog, missing it. Or so it seems.

[Phase 30 - the Nightcrawler]

He's beginning to feel pain. He starts to question, then stops.
Daytime.
Days don't do much good for a Nightcrawler. Mierde.

Last t'ing I do, I show any pain. I c'n take this.

With one long pseudo-pod the Nightcrawler tries to splorch a
dog-creature,
but its wild ovements in reaction to Phoenix make it impossible to
grab.

"Never a can a Roundup around when ya need it," grumbled Carl.

[Phase 23 - Brickyard]

Lifting himself from the ground, wiping his face, Brickyard looks
annoyed
and embarassed at the same time. He begins to move, but sees something
in
Phoenix's posture that roots him in place. (Delays.)

[Phase 21 - Phoenix and the dogs]

Her last blast having 'missed', the two remaining chlorophyll dogs are
now
together. They look up at Phoenix together.

Their antipathy. And hers. Together.

Brickyard can feel the rage between the canines and the heroine. He is
a
good man, with a heart to rival his body in strength. He feels greatly
concerned for what he sees; from a folded pocket, he draws some beads
into
his hands and asks for guidance. But at the moment, all he can do is
watch
the terrible reckoning take place.

The beasts howl a mighty challenge. Their eyes alight with the full
wrath of
LaPlante, master of the organic world. Four pupils, if they could be
called
such, wide and focused on the descending Phoenix. Her reply is silence,
wrapped in a cocoon of cleansing fire. And when she descends, it's with
the
speed and power of a wrathful Olympian god.

Rays from the eyes of the beasts meet the column of fire. Phoenix
doesn't
even slow for an instant.

The impact sends a circle of flame outward, all sound and fury, but burning nothing. The flame explodes upward, a brilliant Ionic column defying LaPlante's evil.

Then the light goes out. And Phoenix, down on one knee, says a single word.

[Phase 21 - Sound]

"Josh."

Sound hears her, his name barely a whisper. He'd hear it from a million miles away, from those lips.

He runs to her. Phoenix on one knee, her head down, her fingertips touching the sidewalk.

"I'm here. I'm right here," he says, helping her to her feet. She shakes her head; her eyes clear, and all feels right again. "Come on, we need you. Can you do it?"

"Yes," she answers. Her posture snaps squarely upright and strong. "The trees, he's in them."

"We figured that out."

"No, you don't understand. He's *in* the whole copse of trees. Look."

And Sound looks. (Delays)

[Phase 20 - Indigo]

Catching up to Imp and Fury, Indigo nods to them. "Harry is questioning the guy upstairs,"

"Why ain't ya keepin' him company? He's no spring chicken, Indigo," the Imp says.

"He can handle himself just fine."

"Yeah, yeah," Imp shrugs, and looks up at Fury. "Wimmin. Go figger."

"Go figure," Fury replies, and turns to look at the small copse of trees that occupies the small area of Triangle Park. Indigo leaves them and catches up to Brickyard.

"Are you hurt?" she asks, in a tone she hopes is at least passingly professional.

"I'm fine, Indigo. Thank you." He takes her hand, and she can feel the small cluster of beads within his grasp. She looks at him with concern. (Indigo, Fury, Nightcrawler, Imp, and Brickyard are delayed to phase 7. You'll see why in a moment :)

Fury looks across the street as the Nightcrawler slithers his way next to a building, making himself translucent as he does so. Nightcrawler seems to be looking at the copse as well. That's what Fury realized later. All of them were looking at the trees.

[Phase 7 - LaPlante]

From within the copse of trees, as the Millennium and their new friends move toward them, a rumbling of earth and stone erupts upward. The trees seem to intertwine, and meld together. From within the mass, LaPlante's sneering laughter comes out.

"Ha hahahahah ha! You've left me one option, heroes, but that's all I need to cleanse the world of Perloff. You might thank me for this one day, except for the fact you'll be compost when I'm done with you! Ha hahahahaha hahahaha!"

The mass of trees and earth stands 60 feet tall now, and packed with much of Triangle Park. The monstrous construct takes three long strides toward the heroes...

[Phase 7 - Sound from 21]

"I've never done well with plants," Sound muses, thinking a weird thought of how an air fern died in his old place in New York. "Everyone smile, we're going to make the news tonight." He turns and warbles a blast of sound at the construct. Bits of plant matter drop away, but not nearly enough to stop it. _Gotta try something else._ he thinks, and looks around for Nightcrawler.

[Phase 7 - Indigo from 20]

Squeezing Brickyard hand, Indigo runs at the construct, her weapon igniting in her hand. She slashes at a lower limb, where there is a lot of stone and not much plant matter. Her weapon shunks off a bit of concrete, but fails to make a serious dent. Dropping to the ground, Indigo moves to keep the construct in front of her.

[Phase 7 - Fury from 16]

Lamenting the lack of effect his power of emotion had on the smaller construct earlier, Fury realizes it would be a waste to try it on the huge juggernaut of earth. "Let the beatdown begin," he says, and moves to the limb opposite Indigo. He swings and hammers a powerful fist into it, rewarded with a nice chunk of the construct bouncing behind it and down

the
street.

[Phase 7 - Nightcrawler from 15]

Head...pounding...damn... The Nightcrawler sees Sound looking his way.

Damn everything if he'll show any pain now. With an arcing sloodch, Nightcrawler splashes to Sound. "You ready to try that move? I don't think we c'n miss at this range."

"I agree," Sound answered. "Let's do it." Over the quickly erected 'sonic switchboard,' Sound tells everyone to stay down. (Nightcrawler delaying to 6)

[Phase 7 - Imp from 10]

"How low can we go?" the Imp muses at Sound's warning. "Ok, I can do low."

With an exaggerated, Heisman pose, the Imp tucks his chin to his chest and

fixes on his target. With a whistle, Imp suddenly seems to cover the intervening space between himself and the construct in an eyeblink.

From

behind the construct, a large chunk of what would be called 'the vitals' in

polite company goes flying out of it, as the Imp tucks and drops to the ground, rebounding up like a ball between Indigo and Fury.

"Hey, tough guy, think that impressed your hotheaded hottie teammate? Ooh la la, I'm hoping so."

[Phase 7 - Brickyard from 8]

"Mind if I play through?" Brickyard says as suddenly comes leaping over Imp

to land a very impressive punch. A chunk of matter goes flying out of the

limb opposite from where Fury hit.

[Phase 7 - the Construct]

A higher limb reaches down, grabbing Brickyard. As the mighty Hoosier struggles, the construct simply tosses him straight up into the air. A long way up.

"That's impressive," Imp mutters.

[Phase 6 - Phoenix]

Standing next to Sound one second, the next she is airborne, chasing after

Brickyard to save him. She says not a word to Sound or anyone else as she does so.

[Phase 6 - Sound and Nightcrawler's delayed 15 action]

"Now!" shouts Sound, too busy to ponder Phoenix's actions, and the

Nightcrawler complies. Using his mastery of sonics, Sound has created a sonic bubble, which is now currently filled with Nightcrawler. As the Nightcrawler bounces toward the construct, Sound hits the beast high with a blast. Though it doesn't even stagger, it still is open to Nightcrawler's landing in an explosion of entangling gunk.

[Phase 5 - Indigo]

Aiming again at an area with less plant matter, Indigo scores out a chunk that includes, among other things, a sewer hole cover.

[Phase 1 - Fury]

Thoroughly throwing himself into the melee, Fury leaps and kicks out hard at the construct. Avoiding the Nightcrawler's viscous vengeance, more of the construct goes shattering outward.

"Damn. Still coming. Anyone got a better plan, now's the time," Fury yells.

"Mindless violence seems to be working rather well," Sound yells back.

"Speak fer yerself, Shriek-boy, I've got a great mind under this helmet," Imp replies.

"I can't even see Brickyard up there," Indigo says, daring for a moment to look skyward.

"Somebody run ta Home Depot an' get a Weed Whacker," the Nightcrawler called out. "An' where the Hell is Phoenix?"

(Shame there's a Nightcrawler stuck to the construct, those SORTies might have been able to help out. Next response due Friday the 3rd. Magna-Flux, you're on lunch break as of now. Up to you if you want to drive up for the mop up or meet later.)

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Interlude

The cool of fluorescent lighting. Faint odor of disinfectants and
denatured
alcohol, and human perspiration.

One man sits in a hard-backed chair. He hasn't moved from the bedside
for
hours, a cup of long-chilled coffee lightly in his grip. Occasionally,
a
large security guard dressed in black will interrupt the silence, see
if he
needs anything. The man shakes his head. His gaze returns to the woman
in
the bed. She has hair, true blonde golden hair, that makes him think of
the
sunrises he's missed in over a decade of being a professional musician.

He thinks of missing those sunrises with her. How he put aside his own
desires out of concern for her relationship with her father, a man who
cared
nothing for him. Considering his single-minded drive to make his band a
success, and how the business still consumes his attention, this runs
almost
counter to the way he lives his life.

"Hey, Alex," says a quiet voice from the bed. He looks over, the stubble of his wait rising from his face.

"I'm right here, Shelley."

"You know much about dreams, Alex?"

"You mean, how to interpret them?"

"That's right."

"No. I'm sorry. I don't."

"You're a smart guy, Alex. You can figure one out, I'll bet."

"I'll try," he says, putting his coffee aside.

"I dreamed we were running through the streets of Moscow, past the old Lefortovo prison, the Kremlin. All those places from the Cold War. You've seen them, right?"

"Yeah. About three years back. We were there."

"My father is chasing us. And he's got all these soldiers and guys in black trenchcoats chasing us. And everywhere we go, there they are. But you're dragging me along, saying you can find the way out, and we're running so fast. Riding on buses and in cars, and still running. And they're always there. When we're about to get out, and I know we are because I can see water and sand, I wake up."

"You should write that down. USA Network would probably make it a series."

"Don't joke, Alex. What does it mean?"

Alex thought for a moment, not about the dream, because he could figure that out easily enough. He thought about what he was going to say. Then he said:

"If I tell you where it ends, would that be ok?"

"You know where it ends?"

"Yeah. The dream, I mean. Tobago. A fisherman with a gold tooth and an old boat takes us to this little beach, and there's no one else around. We spend time swimming and gathering shells, and cooking up seafood over an open fire on the beach. When the fire dies down, we count stars until the fisherman

comes back for us."

"That sounds great. Come here, Alex. Let me ask you something."

He gets up and leans closer to her, and she whispers in his ear, and smiles

while he looks a bit embarrassed. "I suppose so," he finally says.

"All right! I'm going to score with a rock star on a beach."

"A retired rock star."

"No such thing, Alex." Then she starts crying, and telling him she's sorry.

He spends a while consoling her, and telling her everything will be all right.

[Turn 41]

Just down main street, anchorwoman and reporter Angie Gravano turns to her

cameraman. "You have to be getting this, Matt."

"Getting it, getting it. Man, you should be glad I suggested the Melodeon for lunch today."

"Come on, I don't want to miss any of this," she replied.

[Phase 50 - Phoenix]

I wonder if this is what it's like to have an out-of-body experience. She

can still think, anyway, everything is just... odd. _Bad day. Come to think

of it, yesterday wasn't all that great either..._ Pause for a moment of startlingly clear thought, alone with the rushing air. _I'm an idiot._

No time to worry about it now; Phoenix has her eyes on the figure above. She

matches speeds easily enough and grabs Brickyard's hand. As she'd somewhat

expected, the effect is even more evident at this range; for the first time

since she began wearing this getup she feels self-conscious about it, and

tries to avoid eye contact. _Now for the hard part...._

"Hang on," Phoenix suggests, and starts putting on the brakes, wincing a

little at the strain. Why did he have to be so darn *tall*? She can slow his

fall enough to make the difference between a rough landing and a funeral, at

least.

"Got you," she said, seizing hold of his hand. But as she tried to

compensate for his greater weight by flying a little stronger, she felt something give. Namely, her grip. Phoenix stared after him in disbelief as he began to fall again. (Heh. Heh heh hehehe. Rolled a 20. With your dice. Hehehehe.)

[Phase 35 - Phoenix]

She catches up to Brickyard, just as he's about to land hard behind an ambulance parked a block away from the fight. A paramedic watches the two of them as they descend to the ground.

Funny, thinks Phoenix, _he felt lighter just then. Bit of good luck for a change._ She turns to face the woman in the blue jumpsuit, with the Star of Life and the name Mulligan on it. "Hi. I think we're ok." In response, Brickyard stands and nods. Mulligan is too surprised by the moment's events to comment; the impressive demigod that is Brickyard has her attention as well. Then, the two of them are turning away, back toward the battle raging on Main Street.

Maybe I can get in one good shot. She takes a shot at the thing's legs, wondering if it would be easier to deal with on the ground, hardly able to wrap her mind around its size. It might take them all afternoon to chip away at it like this. For a moment she thinks of the night they met Dominique and Chase, the ferocious explosion of energy that had finished off Josh's car, among other things (which she still feels bad about). _Wish I knew how that happened._ If there was some way to direct it....

While her mind swirls, Phoenix almost as an afterthought pegs a blast at the mammoth back of the critter, well above where the rest of the group and their new friends from Indianapolis are furiously chipping away...

[Phase 35 - Fury]

As Fury begins to look for his brother to talk strategy further, perhaps prying open a nearby fire hydrant and hoping for the best, he realizes that the threat has transformed into a really huge column of collapsing rock and earth.

"Everybody MOVE!" he yells, and takes his own advice.

The Green Goliath implodes, cascading to the ground in a maelstrom of swirling dust and skittering rocks. Imp reaches out, snags Indigo's wrist, and the two of them vanish in a frenetic hum of power. Sound backs off, fast, while the Nightcrawler springs off the falling mass with a sickening glitchy noise.

The collapse ends in silence, as the dust settles from the cold air. Slowly, the Millennium approach it, looking for some sign of LaPlante. But as Sound surmised, the Chlorophyll Criminal is nowhere to be found.

From nearby, Brickyard approaches, followed by Imp and Indigo. And from another angle, the SORT squad also appears, weapons held ready but not aimed at anyone, currently.

But none of them are looking at the destroyed behemoth, Sound would remember later. They all looked at Phoenix.

Imp nodded his head, in agreement to some unspoken suggestion. "Ya know, hot stuff, right about now is where I'd start extolling my virtues as date material. But, um, it's been a long day and all, so you'll unnerstan' if I just wanna dip my toes in a tub somewhere. Heh."

"We can't leave yet, Imp," said Brickyard.

"Yeah, knew you'd say dat," Imp replied somewhat glumly.

"He's right, Imp. We have to help clean this mess up." Indigo turned to the group, looking to Sound. "We will help you with this."

"We're s'posed ta clean up?" Nightcrawler whispered to Sound. "Ya never see Batman pickin' up after hisself in Gotham."

"Indigo is right, Nightcrawler. This isn't some comic book game. We're supposed to be, I don't know, heroic. But it's the little things that make the hero, not the battles."

Fury looked back to the office building that LaPlante had assaulted. "That Perloff guy is still upstairs. I'd better see if Mr Marvin is getting anything out of him. I'll be right back."

Indigo and Brickyard set to work, her telekinetic power and his massive strength moving bits and pieces back to what was left of the small copse of trees next to the Triangle Park fountain. The Imp drew a sack out of an

interior jacket pocket, filled it with as much material as he could, and teleported back and forth with his load.

The Nightcrawler, his head a dull throbbing ache from the daylight, gritted his teeth and, with a motion to Sound, put their previously discussed 'Greaseball Special' maneuver to the test. Only it was Sound and Phoenix helping to load up the Nightcrawler, who would then launch the load back to the park area.

During this time, the SORT troops quietly withdrew without so much as a goodbye.

Down the street, Angie Ricono and her cameraman were ecstatically approaching the scene when a woman stopped them.

"Aren't you Angie Ricono, from the news?" the woman asked.

"Yes, that's right. I can't chat right now, I've got to get down there and..."

"Down where?"

Angie frowned and pointed down the street. "Are you kidding, that big battle, the heroes who saved Alan Bloomfield on New Year's Day, how could you miss..." The aspiring anchorwoman looked down the street, her voice coming to a halt.

"What the..." Matt began to ask, hoisting the camera from his shoulder. "Where'd they go?"

Main Street looked perfectly normal. No torn up earth, no mass of flailing heroes, no leviathans storming down the road.

"How?" Angie began to ask.

"I don't know," the woman answered. "But you're right, I've held you up for too long. Isn't that your van parked over there? It is? Well, it was great meeting you. See you on the news tonight."

The reporter and the cameraman departed, shaking their heads even as they drove down Broadway. The woman watched them go, then smiled after them. She turned and hailed an approaching cab, which expended a significant amount of effort stopping for her.

"Hey, Miss Dominique, how ya doin'?" the cabbie asked. "Headin' back to Lexmark?"

Dominique nodded. "Lunch break's over. Take me to the main entrance, Mr Reilly?"

"You got it, miss. Lemme get that door for ya. Say, did you see what happened down here a few minutes ago?"

"Why don't you tell me all about it?" she replied as they drove away.

Upstairs. Ken Perloff's office.

'Hurricane' Harry Marvin wasn't one to get angry for no reason. But treating him like an idiot would do it, no doubt about that.

"So you've got some terrorist mad at you, and you have no idea why?" Harry asked.

"Who said there's a terrorist mad at me, Mr Marvin," replied Perloff, who had with substantial coaxing finally emerged from behind his desk after the Chlorophyll Canines attack was stopped.

"People come gunning for you every day? Come on."

"I'm sorry, but I really don't know what's going on."

"You were cowering behind your desk like a shell-shocked draftee!"

"You and your associates startled me."

Harry wanted very much to reach across Perloff's desk and shake the lying bastard. But he didn't.

"What's going on?" came a voice from the doorway. Both men looked, and saw Fury there.

"Mr Perloff claims to have no knowledge of the attack that just took place. What do you think of that?" Harry asked Fury.

Could've sworn I saw reporters down the street, thought Phoenix as she glanced back down Main. "No press conference for you today, Sound."

"Good. I seem to be short a mask at the moment."

"Why don't you go see that costume guy that Reflector mentioned?"

"Soon as we're done." The work was going very well. Brickyard was a human moving machine. He'd found a large dumpster nearby, moved it into position, loaded it, and took the contents to the growing pile that was the park. Safety officers from the police department had arrived, and were carefully directing traffic around the scene. Suddenly there was a commotion, and the heroes turned to look in a new direction. Had LaPlante returned already?

But it was Magna-Flux, thrashing some moves over the police and the small crowd, who was causing the disturbance. He finally floated over to Sound, Phoenix, and Nightcrawler. "Hey. Caught the show on TV. I miss all the fun?"

"Just the first act," Sound said. "LaPlante claimed there was a greater villain at work here. Fury's checking it out."

"LaPlante? What's that, the evil master of salad?"

"I'll tell ya all about it later," Nightcrawler answered. "Give us a hand?"

Magna-Flux looked at a couple of wheelbarrows sitting outside the florist where Phoenix had first found LaPlante. He extended his power to them; they were metal, all right. "No problem." With a bounce, the two wheelbarrows came rolling across the street. Magna-Flux sent them running in little ovals with their loads from the battle scene back to the park as they were filled.

Finally finishing, the two hero groups retreated with speed from downtown, meeting behind Rupp Arena in the lower outdoor parking area. "I hope we were of some help today," Indigo said.

"I think you did fine," Phoenix answered.

"Perhaps you can visit us sometime?" Brickyard asked. Phoenix prepared to feel a rush, but didn't. Whatever effect he'd had on her, it was much less now.

"Only if ya c'n promise us a giant monster ta fight," the Nightcrawler replied, looking with some interest at a concrete retaining wall nearby.

"Nah, we ain't got big homewreckers like dat," said Imp. "Worst that

can
happen, we introduce ya to yer worst ever hangover."

"Sounds enchanting," said Phoenix.

"Well, not you, of course. I know this great Italian place called Amici's, we can discuss da state of the world over antipasto while the violinists play," the Imp followed up.

"Um," said Brickyard, interrupting Imp before he could make things worse.

"We do have to go. You seem to have plenty of people to handle LaPlante.

You've even got reserves," he said, indicating Magna-Flux.

"Reserves?" Magna-Flux started to protest, but the overwhelming feeling of empathy among the group kept him from taking it personally. They all felt it, the strange camaraderie and connection Mr Book had told them of at the beginning of the year. Magna-Flux had learned of it by virtue of exposure to the group, and to Dominique as well.

"Here's a number you can call, if you want to keep in touch," Sound said, handing Indigo a small card.

"Thanks. I think I've got one...yes, right here." She gives the card to Sound. "My cel-phone."

"Yeah, don't call late at night, though, you'll wake me up," Imp grinned as Indigo closed her eyes in a 'why me' expression. Brickyard just exhaled.

"On that note...nice meeting you heroes today. Take care." With that, Brickyard gathered up Indigo, and leaped high into the air.

"Showoff," grumbled the Imp. He looked to the exit. "Like the big oaf said, take care. If ya need me to bail ya out of trouble, call." Then, making a beep-beep Road Runner sound, he vanished.

"Quite a crew," said Phoenix.

"Yeah, quite," said Sound. "Hey, Nightcrawler, what's with you, anyway?"

He'd been staring at the concrete wall for some time, as he realized the message there. It was in the language of the taggers, but the author was no

tagger. If the message could be believed. Somehow, he knew the message was for real.

"Sorry. It's a daylight thing. I'm outta here. Gotta migraine like I been at ten hours of Stomp. Me 'n Magna-Flux gotta chat, anyway. See you." The Nightcrawler departed, with Magna Flux following close behind. And the Nightcrawler had meant to talk to Magna-Flux, but the message was in his head and would not leave. It read:
--Nightcrawler, talk tonite, LNB 12th floor, north side. Alone.--

And it was signed, Snowman.

Finally finishing up with the others, Jake and Josh chatted briefly about the offer for the business. There really wasn't much to discuss. Josh had only come back to help in his father's absence, and wanted to continue with his music career, and Jake was already back in college.

"Guess we take the money," Jake said.

"We can do Mom a lot of good with three million dollars, Jake. You know Dad didn't take care of money too well," Josh answered.

"I know. And Mom comes first. Ok. I'll go see Watterson. See you later."

Jake drove down to the Hyatt, very near where the earlier battle had taken place. He called Wade Watterson's room from the lobby. The Texan delightedly invited him straight to his room, which was on the top floor and a full suite.

Watterson was dressed more casually than before, but still with his Stetson. He had a big smile and ushered Jake right in. After offering a drink, and accepting a couple of signatures (Watterson had a lawyer along to witness everything properly), they waited patiently for the banks to transact the agreed upon amount.

"You know, Jake, word is you're one helluva tracker. No reason you can't still keep your hand in the business that way,"

"I thought about that. I've got one pressing case that takes up my spare

time."

"The police shooting?" Watterson asked. "It's all right, I've read all about it. I'll make sure my new office here gives you all the help you need. Looks like we're done," he said, looking back at a laptop computer on a table. "Why don't you give your bank a quick call, Jake? Nothing like hearing someone recite a string of numbers to you that're all yours."

Jake did indeed check up with the bank. They were a lot nicer to him than they normally were, he immediately noticed. The deal was complete, the money was present. Watterson called for a bellhop and escorted Jake to the door. "Great doing business with you, Jake. I'm heading back home tonight. You come through my neck of the woods, you stop on in and see me, ok?"

And after some brief pleasantries, Jake departed. Just for fun, he stopped at an ATM and got a balance. He startled two women by dancing away from the terminal and back to his bike. Now, he could really concentrate on finding his cousin, and bringing him to justice.

Ok, now everyone's turned loose. I get the feeling there'll be a few questions from the players real soon... Turn responses due Friday the 10th.

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