

FIFTH WEEK

Monday, September 1, 2003, 12:14 PM
New Orleans, LA

Okay, let's review the situation. I am Michael Cole. Tomorrow, in front of 15,000 or so people in New Orleans, I am being expected to call two consecutive hours of play-by-play for SmackDown! Right now, I am supposed to be reporting to Paul Heyman. But Paul isn't here. I suppose I could tell Shawn, but... well, Shawn isn't here either. He's in Lafayette. Of course, Paul could call Shawn and see if I'm with him, but that won't solve anything either... man, this is going to be a mess.

"Yo, Coleslaw... what's eatin you?"

"Oh... I was just thinking about... well, about the guys in Mexico."

"Ah yeah... tough for them, ain't it?"

"Well, I mean... what if that had been us, T?" *Did I just call him that? Who knew?*

"What if we'd been down there. I'm not much better than Zach, and you know what happened to him."

"Oh... like that? Well... it wasn't us. You weren't there, and I weren't there, right? And hey, what happened to Gowen... could've easily happened to him in the ring. We're performers, right?"

"It's not that easy, Tazz. It's... it's not. I mean, no, I wasn't there, but... doesn't it bother you that it's always the vulnerable ones that get hurt? I mean, I'd feel a little better about it if Taker had been jumped, or Bradshaw... you know, because they could defend themselves. Right now, I should be upset, but I'm... just... sad."

"Hey... we gotta talk about it on TV, right? Maybe when we see ol' Zach backstage, we'll feel better."

"Is he still with us? Wouldn't he go home?"

"Nah... kid's a trooper. Don't worry MC. He's gonna be all right. He'll be back soon enough."

"I hope so."

Man, it's times like this that I wish I had someone to talk to who knew my plight. I mean, there's only so much you can do without breaking character. How could I explain to Tazz that I know how Zach felt firsthand? I couldn't! But I could possibly talk to someone else about it... if only we could meet up...

"Hey, Tazz, you wanna head to Lafayette tonight?"

"You mean for RAW? Sure thing! Hey, after lunch let's hit the road!"

"Thanks."

03:44 PM
Lafayette, LA

We wandered backstage looking for the various heads of the RAW brand. I saw Hurricane and Lita talking off to one side about old times. Molly and Trish were seen approaching Pat Patterson about teaming up that night. Chris Nowinski was engaging Triple H in a game of chess. *Boy, talk about cerebral assassinations there.* And all the

while, Ric Flair was putting the moves on anything he could.

I ducked down a back alley and turned towards the visitors' locker room in the Cajundome. There sat Vince and Shane McMahon along with Jim Ross, Jerry Lawler, and Brian Gerwitz, planning last-second details about the show at hand. None of them saw me, and I didn't see who I was looking for. Blessed with a sort of anonymity, I switched my regular glasses for my special ones.

The transformation that was undergone in the room startled me. I expected to see only four of the people still present, but I didn't even see that. Only Shane and JR remained. Lawler and Gerwitz were every bit the lost souls that Vince was. *Wow... from being the intermediary to falling off the cart... amazing.*

"Hey, you... no looking in on business. Follow me."

I turned around. Shawn Michaels was staring at me, giving me a stern look. I followed him back to the main locker room, where he dragged me aside and spoke in a hushed tone.

"Michael... what are you doing here? I've been getting calls all day from Heyman about you."

"Well, Shawn, he's not due in until tonight. I don't know how I got here... I mean, Tazz and I came together, but... I'm as confused as you are."

"Confused? Dude, if you came with Tazz, just say so."

"Oh... sorry, Shawn... you just mentioned Paul and I thought he was asking about me in particular... like he was one guy short."

The words seemed to sink in with Shawn. He realized I was trying to talk to him in code. He put on his glasses and looked at me again. Then, as quickly as he'd put them on and made a mental note of who I was, he removed them.

"Hey... I was wondering about that. Yeah, Paul called me to see if you were with me. I'd better let him know you're safe. He's been freaking out about you and Kath... thought he had no one to go to."

"Oh, Kathleen... I can explain. She's..."

"Still recovering? I thought so. Paul mentioned that things got a little tense in there. Look, next time you try to talk to her, try to be gentle. She was only 16, remember?"

"Am I horning in?"

Shawn and I looked in the direction of the voice. I didn't see anything. Shawn evidently did, and he handled the conversation.

"Oh, William, it's you. No, we were just going over notes for the week's shows. Michael wanted to watch RAW backstage."

"Oh... well, that sounds like a bloody good idea. Michael, I don't know if anyone's said, but I suggest you go back to your old prescription lenses, or at least get some contacts. Those things make you look like a Punch and Judy act."

I simply smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I know." I didn't try to do any more, since I didn't know if he was even looking my way or not. The less I participated in the conversation, the better.

"Anyway, William," Shawn continued, "I heard that Trish and Molly wanted to work together... they're our two strongest divas in the ring, so it would be in our best interest to make sure they are featured as much as possible. Any ideas?"

"I have a few, yes... I think if we built Molly up for a big win over Jazz to

legitimize her face turn, we'll all be in the black as far as prestige. Molly's a sweet young thing, and as long as she's face, we can postpone the Molly/Trish angle towards WrestleMania, don't you think?"

"Yeah... so who does Jazz team with? I mean, we're short a few divas, you know."

An idea came to me. "How about Teddy Long?"

Shawn looked at me funny. William must have, too, judging from his response:

"What? A bloody manager in the ring with a group of ladies? Are you flippin' mad, Michael Cole?"

Shawn then seemed to be thinking. "Actually, William, he has a good idea... but how about if we make it a Back Alley Street Fight -- you know, have Teddy Long say it's a sista's environment and all that."

William must have been thinking. *If only he hadn't seen me with these on. I could've removed them by now.*

"You know, Shawn, I think it might be a cracking idea. I'll go tell Mr. McMahon about it, and see if he approves."

"Excellent."

Shawn's eyes followed off to the distance as I heard footsteps moving in the direction of the RAW writing team. Eventually, after what seemed like about 10 times longer than it was, Shawn turned to me.

"Okay, he's gone. You can take the glasses off."

I did so. "Whew. I thought I'd never get the chance."

"I'm sure you saw something about Regal. We know all about it. There's a lot of trouble on this side -- morale's in the tank. Triple H is ruling the roost, and there's really nothing we can do about it. It's frustrating a lot of people... a few of them are turning away."

That might explain Gerwitz. "So what can I do?"

"Well, I'm not sure yet. See, you're only here today. The best thing you can do is what Paul told me Greg was trying -- work with the victims in Juarez."

"Yeah... I'd love to."

"Oh, dammit, that's right... look, Andy, you're over that. Physically, it's all over. You're free of scars. Mentally... well, mentally, if you want to drop it, drop it. You're not Zach. And spiritually, rest assured, you're alive and brighter than ever. So just buck up a little. I'll work on the rest."

That doesn't help me now.

"Okay, but... the gang isn't coming in until tomorrow. What do I do until then?"

"Talk to JR and King, man. Compare notes. Act like you're his understudy."

"Am I?"

"Well... Ross is a little self-conscious. He and Vince aren't on the best of terms, and he is afraid of his retirement. That's why Coach is being fazed in. Soon enough, Cole is going to be the Voice of Wrestling in most locations. More than Coach, more than Tenay, more than Matthews... and JR wants to go out on his terms. So as long as you don't act like a threat, it'll be all right."

"But what if... what if he makes a big mistake?"

Shawn didn't reply.

"Shawn?"

"Andy, maybe it's best if JR doesn't see Cole. He won't listen to you if you try to

correct him. He doesn't trust you."

"Is he... jealous?"

"No. Just scared. It's kinda like I was way back when."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... you notice how I almost never lost the title? I mean, I'd get hurt or break up the team or..."

"Yeah, I saw your matches... what about it?"

"I was scared that I wouldn't be remembered. I was scared that people would see me as weak and move on to someone else. I didn't want to give it away. I wish I had just allowed myself to lose. All the enemies I had -- all the bridges I had to rebuild -- it wasn't worth the invincibility."

"And that's what J.R. feels? Vulnerable?"

"Yeah. He doesn't want to be forced out. And the funny thing is... if he isn't careful, he's setting himself up to BE forced out. I've seen it in Vince. He's just waiting for the right time. I keep wondering if JR's just around to humor Austin."

"What would happen if he left?"

"I don't know... it would be... he might work for the Jarretts, or Feinstein, or with Styles... but I just see him spending his days being bitter."

"He's that proud?"

"He's that scared. He doesn't want to admit he's lost it."

"But isn't it obvious to everyone?"

"There's only a few that matter. If JR doesn't know it's over, and Austin doesn't know it's over... well... things are gonna get ugly when Vince pulls the plug."

"When will that be?"

"We don't know."

05:57 PM

The dark matches were just finishing up. Heat would begin taping in a few minutes. I was still on the phone, attempting to get through to the boys in New Orleans. As I dialed and re-dialed, various people saw me yelling at the phone. *That's one habit of mine that didn't die with me.* Finally, I got through.

"Heyman here."

"Hi, Paul. It's Michael Cole. Shawn said you wanted to talk to me?"

"One second, please." I heard something wiggle around, then a door open. I didn't know what was going on over there, but Paul seemed to be trying to fix something.

"Okay, Andy, I'm in the conference room now. What are you doing in Lafayette?"

"Well, I needed to talk to someone, so Tazz and I came over to watch RAW and help JR and Lawler. While I was here, I was talking to Shawn... thinking he might be of some help."

"Okay... I can understand... look, in the future if you're separated like that -- like if you're at a publicity signing or doing rehab or whatever -- call me first, okay? Greg and I were worried."

"Right... who is he anyway?"

"Greg? He's RVD this week. Kathleen's still in Recovery. You know, Andy, you gotta be more careful when you talk to people. Seriously, the things you said were just wrong."

"Sorry, Paul. She just..."

At this point, Goldust walked by. "Michael... Shawn told me to see you."

"Um, Paul, can I call you back. Someone wants to talk to Mi... to me."

"Sure. Catch you after the show."

I hung up. "Can I help you?"

"No need to act," Goldust said. "I can see right through you."

I hastily put on my glasses. "Lindsay?"

"Shhhh... don't say that too loudly. People will think you're crazy."

"Oh yeah... what do you want?"

"I wanted to see how you were doing, and to let you know who I was."

"Thanks... how are we going to communicate?"

"I'm in your messenger list. Look for me Friday afternoon. We'll catch up then."

"Okay... sounds good. Now, move on. You got a show to do."

"Sort of. I'm only on Heat. I get the rest of the night off. So you wanna watch?"

"Sure. That's why I'm here. Actually..." I checked my watch. "Darnit, I gotta find Tazz and JR. I'll catch you later."

"Sure thing." Before I knew what else happened, Goldust grabbed me and planted a kiss right on my forehead. I stared at him.

"Lindsay, are you crazy?" I shout-whispered. "Don't do that! You'll give yourself away!"

"Not this week. Anything weird I do is just another act from..." she took a deep breath inward. "...Gooooooldussssst."

She walked on, totally into her act. I thought about what she did and skipped on towards the curtain, ready to help out.

07:47 PM

Only a few people knew I had shown up so far. RAW was going to begin in ten minutes or so. I found Tazz and told him that today we might be better off watching and helping in the back as we could. Tazz agreed, saying Lawler was giving him some mixed signals about his presence.

"Lawler's giving you static? About what?"

"Well, I think he fears us, Coleslaw. I mean, it's somethin' I've seen before... you know, we're the now, he's the then, and so on... it's like Vinnie Mac was with ECW, ya know?"

"Heard that before... Shawn was just telling me J.R. felt the same way about me."

"Well, I think you got a ways to go before you catch him, Cole. But you'll get there."

"Um... thanks?"

"Don't mention it. We got a show to watch."

He walked off to the locker room, chuckling to himself as he did so. After a few seconds of trying to sort out if I should be offended or not, I followed.

In the locker room was most of the RAW team. Al Snow and Michael Hayes -- the new HeAT crew since the promotion of Jonathan Coachman -- were busy going over last-minute sound bites for their broadcast. Meanwhile, the main people were gathered in the front of the big screen, awaiting their cues. HHH, of course, sat up front, next to Vince and Shane.

I took my seat near the back. Tazz and I were seated on the end of one of the rows. He took the outside, which left me boxed in, something I wasn't comfortable with in life and only slightly more so now. Next to me, though, was Lita, her neck showing visible scars from her surgery. Reports had been circulating that she would be making her return to television very soon.

"Ahem... may we, Amy?"

"Huh? Oh, it's you, Mike. Sure, go on ahead. I'm not waiting on anyone."

"Thank you."

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Sept. 01 / 03.

- Live from Lafayette, LA.

- Your hosts are **Kingfish**, **Coach**, and **Good Ol'**.

- Opening sportz entertainment segment: **Randy Orton** has taken over the Highlight Reel, renaming it "RNN NewsDesk". If they're going to go back to percentage updates on various body parts, I can soooo live with this. He's even gone so far as to christen the big screen the "OrTron 200", in what I hope is the start of a new running gag. His first guest: **Booker T**, who apparently couldn't beat Orton even if his shoulder was down to 46.5%. Ooh, TENTHS of percentages, now we're getting edgy. Booker tries to maintain his composure, but Orton keeps saying he's the past, and that **Evolution** is the future. He claims Booker will mean nothing on RAW as long as Evolution is here. I love shoot comments that aren't meant to be shoot comments. Booker takes umbrage as only he can, clearing house and attacking the shoulder. Fun little opener.

About a half-dozen people got up out of their seats to report for the next segment. HHH hugged Vince and Shane on the way out. I surreptitiously slipped my glasses on and looked. There was nothing wrong with Trips, contrary to what I might have expected. I removed the glasses before I could be noticed.

I noticed Hurricane on the phone in the background. I couldn't pick up anything in the conversation, but even through the mask, Helms's frustration was showing. I heard the word "Jeff" mentioned. *Jeff? Jeff Hardy? What's that all about?* I was going to bring it up to Lita, but the commercial ended while she was talking to her fellow Divas.

- Backstage, **Evolution** gets mad at the segment. **Orton** thinks of costing **Booker** the title tonight, but **Flair** tells him to hold back, grasshopper, because if Booker has the title, Orton's the de facto challenger at Unforgiven. **HHH** grunts about **Goldberg**, leading to...

- Handicap match: **Goldberg vs. La Resistance. Grenier** is tossed almost immediately outside the ring into the guardrail, taking a HUGE bump and knocking himself out. **Dupree** attacks from behind, but Goldberg naturally no-sells. FLAG OF DOOM turns the tide, though, as the referee is checking on Grenier. Dupree works the arm, trying to neutralize the Spear. Figure-four armbar, but Goldberg picks him up and throws him into the corner. Grenier finally rolls back in... and is instantly speared and Jackhammered at 4:29. Everyone sold enough to make it work. *1/2 **Maven** and **Rob Conway** are shown in the front row, wearing USA T-shirts. It's like a Mad Libs feud. "<wrestler> and <wrestler> don't like the heels because they're from <country>, so they promise to <verb> them."

Stacy got up around this time and headed out. HHH returned and took his seat. Meanwhile, Rene Dupree limped back into the locker room, with Goldberg helping him out.

"You okay, buddy? I didn't hurt you too bad, did I?"

"No, no... I'll be fine... just that throw to the buckle was really strong, man."

"Hey, sorry. I'm just a bit upset out there about something else."

"It's all right, really, M. Goldberg. I understand."

I looked around. Rene had come in alone. Something didn't seem right.

"Where's Sylvan?" I asked.

Rene looked at me. "Oh, M. Cole, it's just you. Sylvan is off in the clinic, making sure his hamstring is all right. He thinks he tweaked it at SummerSlam, and M. Patterson wants him to give it special attention."

After Dupree took his seat, I looked over at Tazz. He looked back and made an exaggerated wink. I nodded. No words were necessary. I think we both knew what the special attention was all about.

- **Spike Dudley vs. Scott Steiner**. No match, as Steiner just brutalizes Spike before the bell. The referee and **Stacy Keibler** both insist he stop, but Steiner is on full-blown rage and continues the fight. A stretcher comes out to pull Spike away as Stacy admonishes Scott. Interesting way to start a heel turn, to say the least.

I finally saw that Lita wasn't busy. I got her attention.

"Hey, Michael. Something up?"

"Well, earlier tonight I noticed Hurr... Gregory talking on his phone. He mentioned Jeff... is he OK? I kinda miss the guy."

"Oh... I don't know. He doesn't return calls or e-mails. He's kinda falling off the face of the earth. Matt doesn't want to talk about him. I just let it go. He wanted to be free, and now he is."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Well, sure it does -- but I'm not Jeff's mom. There's not much I can do on my own."

"Well, have you talked to Matt about seeing him?"

"I already told you -- Matt doesn't want to deal with it. I don't know why either... look, I'm glad you're concerned, Michael, but... this is Jeff's problem to deal with."

"Okay... I guess." I turned back to face the screen, uncertain as to whom, if

anyone, Lita was protecting. One thing I knew: her statements seemed to ring hollow, as if she herself didn't believe them. Was it possible she was simply doing Matt a favor?

- **Christian vs. Chris Benoit.** Just before I'm fully able to mark out, **Big Show** joins us on commentary. The CANADIAN PHYSICAL INTENSITY is unloaded right at the opening bell, as the announcers play up that Benoit feels he has something to prove. Benoit gets the rolling Germans almost immediately, but a clothesline is ducked, leading to a naked choke drop by Christian for two. Christian goes for a suplex, but Benoit snaps him over. Christian bails, so Benoit hits a tope suicida. **Lawler:** "Can you do that?" **Show:** "Don't tempt me." Back in, three MORE German suplexes get two. Christian tries for whatever off the top rope, and Benoit hits the Crossface to complete the homicide in 7:16. I can't even rate that, it was just... wow. Big Show, of course, then challenges Benoit. All muscle, no brain. The match is set for Unforgiven.

The women left their seats and reported to the back. Around this time, Scott Steiner returned. He took a quick seat in the nearest available chair. It happened to be next to Shane McMahon, who seemed less than pleased with the situation.

"Scott's not making too many friends, is he?"

"Doesn't look like it, Cole. He's not got too many friends around here. Hell, Flair had to beg Vinnie just to keep the guy on last month!"

"Really?" *Wait, I knew this. No, wait, John Cena knew this. I didn't... ugh... this is confusing.*

"Yeah, didn't ya hear?"

"I might have. It all blends in together after a while, you know?"

"Guess so. Hey, what were you talkin' bout with Lita? Invading Matt's turf, Cole?"

"No! I'm not like that!"

"Oh, come on, buddy, you know you wanna."

"Tazz, this isn't the place to talk about this."

I quickly looked over my shoulder to make sure Lita was still oblivious to this conversation. Thankfully, she was.

"Tazz, it was about Hurricane. I was just seeing if everything was okay with him, and, you know, Gregory and Amy go way back and all..."

"Sure... that's all it was."

I rolled my eyes. This was going to be a long week.

- **Hardcore match: Molly Holly and Trish Stratus vs. Jazz and Teddy Long.** Normally, I'd complain about another hardcore match, but with these four, we're going to need it. Long runs for cover as Jazz rips Trish down. Molly jumps her from behind and all three women get into rolling around in the dirt. I quietly hope **Lawler's** head explodes from the visual, but no such luck. Long returns with a riding whip, which he uses on Trish. Finally things settle down and the groups pair off. Molly and Jazz remain in the ring, as Molly works the arm. Shoulderbreaker gets two. Jazz with a reverse suplex for two. Single-leg crab, but Trish uses a chair to break. Long returns with a table, as the crowd starts chanting for the **Dudley Boyz**. Molly goes up top, but Jazz powerbombs her out of the Molly Go Round for two. Jazz hits a missile dropkick for two. A second one is countered

as Trish runs in with the handstand rana. Now THAT'S how you do that spot. Acid Drop goes nowhere for Trish, as Long grabs her foot and Jazz slams her down. Molly saves and hits a German suplex for two. **Rodney Mack** runs in, PASTES Trish with a chairshot, and Jazz crawls over for the pin at 6:25. Entertaining crap. 3/4* **Chris Nowinski** joins in the post-match fun, but the **Dudley Boyz** save. A huge brawl erupts and Long goes through the table due to a Stratusfaction.

As everyone returned to their seats, I decided to get up and walk around with Tazz. We were discussing the events of the night so far as we bumped into Trish and Molly, who were discussing their future as a team.

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry, Trish," I stammered as I moved past.

"It's okay... no problem," she replied, winking as she did so. "I hope we bump into each other again." *Is she flirting with me??*

Meanwhile, Tazz was having less luck. "Hey, Moll, it was an accident, I swear."

"Whatever. Just back off."

Molly stomped away. We both stared at each other. "That was different."

"Yeah, Cole... looks like the ladies love talking to you tonight, eh?"

"No, I mean... Molly was just... she..."

"Eh. Whatever. I can be a bit of a sleaze when I wanna."

We walked on and made our way to the curtain for the next match.

- Meanwhile, in a remote lair somewhere in the building, **Lance Storm** plots the demise of the **Hurricane**. He points out he'll need backup, as the Hurricane is a sneaky one, but if he can overwhelm him, he can take over the WWE. Lance needs work on his evil laugh, but he's so into his character I can forgive him.

- **Randy Orton** vs. **Hurricane**. Speaking of evil sidekicks, we have Randy Orton. I mean, really, isn't it just obvious he's going nowhere fast here? Anyway, Hurricane dives out to start with the CAPE-ASSISTED SUPERMAN SPLASH OF DOOM, knocking down Orton. Back in, Hurricane hits the rana, but a blind charge misses. Orton with Play of the Day for two. Double arm DDT gets two. Kneelift (learning from the master, I see), but Hurricane rolls him up for two. Shining Wizard cues the comeback. Hurricane hits the Overcast for two. RKO is blocked as Hurricane goes for a back body drop for two. KICK WHAM, but Orton's PEDIGREE is blocked, so he settles for a powerbomb for two. Hurricane is stood up, but a running dropkick is ducked, bumping the ref. **Lance Storm** enters, sprays Hurricane with something that causes him to wilt (with hilarious overacting by Hurricane), and Orton gets an academic RKO for the pin at 6:55. Was the comic book stuff really necessary? ***1/4

I heard some crying off in the distance. I went to investigate. As I rounded the corner, I saw Molly sitting in the training room alone with an icepack and the TV monitor, visibly shaken and upset. She wasn't holding the icepack on any part of her body -- just holding it, as if to try to numb her hand.

"Nora? Are you all right?"

She looked at me. "Oh, it's you. I'm... tell Tazz I'm sorry for being so rude earlier."

"Hey, he took nothing from it. I'm worried. I heard you crying and..."

"Michael, please. Just leave me alone."

"You sure you don't want to talk about it?"

Nora hesitated. She seemed to be looking past me for something. I decided it wouldn't be wise to turn around, in case my instinct was wrong. She finally spoke:

"Actually, if you could stay here for a while. I'd probably be a lot better."

"Sure."

- **The Rock** heads to the ring before the main event. He cuts his usual awesome promo on **Kane**, talking about how it wasn't personal before, but it is now. We get the return of the **SIDEWAYS-TURNED OBJECT OF DOOM**, as a can of petroleum wins the honors. **Rock** basically tells **Booker T** good luck before heading off to the announce table.

Molly smiled at me during the break. "You know, Michael, you're not as bad as they say you are."

"Who says?"

"Oh, you don't know? Don't worry about it. It's all part of this rivalry."

"No, no... what is it?"

"Oh... J.R. and Lawler love to try to put down you and Tazz. They talk about how they're better than any other commentary team and how you guys should thank them for giving you advice."

"Advice? I don't think I need Jim Ross's advice. Tazz and I have our own style."

"I know that... but like I said, it's all part of this rivalry thing."

"I guess so." I noticed her waist. The Women's Title belt was fastened ultra-tightly around it.

"Nora, why are you wearing your belt now? We're off the air."

She looked at me funny. "You SmackDown guys keep asking me that. Relax. I'm just trying to make sure I don't lose it."

"We're backstage! Put it with your stuff!"

"It's not that easy... I'm... I guess I like to be reminded of how far I've come in my life, and how much work it took to get there."

"Nora, no offense, but... there's something else. I can tell."

"Maybe, but... if I said I didn't want to talk about it, would you understand?"

"Well... not really... I..."

"Michael, please, let's just drop it, ok?"

At this point, William Regal walked in. He pulled off his shoe and began to tape his own ankle. Molly went silent, trying to see if the show was back on. I got up to leave, but I felt Molly's hand on my arm. I decided it might have been best to stay.

- Main event, Intercontinental Title: **Booker T** vs. **Kane**. Kane slugs Booker down to start, and Booker bails outside. Kane follows, so Booker begins to play stick-and-move with him. Dropkick and clothesline help keep Kane at bay, so Booker charges with a running axe kick... and Kane catches him and dumps him over the top. Oops. Kane drags Booker back in and chokes him down. Referee **Earl Hebner** admonishes Kane, so Booker climbs up top and hits a missile dropkick and big knee drop for two. Booker tries a suplex, but Kane grabs the chokeslam for two. Kane throws Booker into the corner, but

Booker charges out and dives under the big boot, grabbing a MAIN EVENT SLEEPER in the process. Kane shoves him back into the corner, then punches him dead-on in the face. Booker flies out of the ring, but returns with a springboard clothesline (!) for two. Booker goes up top, but gets caught in the Tombstone, only **Rock** runs in for the DQ at 8:25 to save the title. Normally a DQ finish would be painful, but in this case it was necessary. Kane destroys both men with Tombstones after the match, then chairs Hebner for fun. Booker/Kane were trying to do the Sting/Vader template, and it was ok for what it was. **1/4

The Bottom Line:

Well, fast-forward on Unforgiven, with 4 matches already set some 2 weeks in. I guess the level of cram in the booking kind of requires this, although I don't know if Booker/Orton and Rock/Kane can live up to the hype. Benoit/Show will be all Benoit, and I think we all know how HHH/Goldberg will turn out.

Oh, and Big Show, you WISH you were twice the man Benoit is.

Tuesday, September 2, 2003, 08:15 AM
New Orleans, LA

Tazz and I reported early to the booker's meeting, where Paul Heyman and Vince McMahon were seated. Before I entered, though, a man pulled me aside. It was HHH.

"Cole, what were you doing with Molly last night?"

"What? She... she asked me to stay there and keep her company."

"So you two weren't badmouthing anyone? Cuz Willie says he heard you say some nasty things about JR."

"Me??? No! I was just talking to her about her Women's title! I never said anything about JR."

"You'd better not have. I don't want to have to see if you need to be replaced."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Good."

He walked on. *I said nothing about JR. I certainly said nothing to anyone while William was in the room. Why would he lie about me? Was I getting in the way of something? I don't understand.*

06:55 PM

Tony Chimel stood in the ring. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you the commentary team for UPN's broadcast of tonight's SmackDown! telecast."

The heart monitor sounded up, then flatlined. Fireworks went off as "Thug

Superstar" played. Tazz and I walked down the ramp to a good-sized round of applause. I passed by a sign that showed me counting the pin on Vince, with the words "Thank You MC" written on it. I shook the hand of the person who made it and promised them an autograph on the poster later if they wanted.

As we headed to the table, we watched the monitor.

"You ready for this, Tazz?"

"I was born ready, Cole. You ready to rock?"

"Let's do it."

We pounded fists and got ready to begin.

- The SmarKdown! Rant for Sep. 04 / 03

- Taped from New Orleans, LA

- Your hosts are **Michael Cole** and **Tazz**.

- Opening match, US Title: **Eddie Guerrero** v. **Billy Kidman**. Guerrero attacks to start, working the lower back of Kidman. Kidman reverses a cross-corner whip and hits the 10 punch countalong, and Eddie bails. Kidman does his backflip out after him to drive the crowd wild. Back in, Eddie pulls hair to stop the momentum and grabs the abdominal stretch -- with the ropes. Eddie's trying soooooo hard to be a heel here, but the crowd doesn't get it. Or want to. Or something. Anyway, slingshot senton gets two. Tornado DDT gets two. Eddie gets frustrated and pulls out the rolling verticals, but Kidman blocks the third one, only for Eddie to make it a DDT for two. Oh, TAG. To the top, and Eddie with a Frankensteiner for two. Frog splash hits the knees, giving Kidman two. Powerbomb try, but even Eddie Guerrero has to learn that YOU CAN'T POWERBOMB KIDMAN! That gets two. Kidman tries the Unprettier, but Eddie shoves him off into the ref. Eddie goes for the belt, but **Undertaker** does a ride-in and yanks the belt away. Eddie tries to attack him, but Taker no-sells, allowing Kidman to get a bulldog and the Shooting Star for the pin and the title at 9:20. Normally I'd be pissed that Undertaker stuck his nose in a perfectly good match, but we all know it's main event time for Eddie anyway, and the US Title was an anchor. ***1/2

I turned to Tazz during the commercial break. "Good grief. Eddie's out there cheating like there's no tomorrow and they still cheer for him! Why don't they turn him?"

Tazz mused for a while. "They will, probably... just as soon as this thing with Taker's over. I just see that being the big thumbs-up, you know?"

"I hope so. It seems ludicrous that we have heels being cheered. Not just Eddie, but Cena as well."

"Dude... check the script."

"I know, I know... but it's gone on too long."

"Well, that's the sort of thing th-- oh, back in 5."

- **Test** is angry. Yeah, what else is new? He accuses Stephanie of not having the cojones to use him. Well, DUH. Didn't they teach sex education in Toronto? Anyway, **John Cena**

of all people defends her honor, and Test objects. The fight is on, and Cena appears to have it won, allowing the face turn to be official. Ah, but Test comes back and hits the Boot, causing the Usual Idiots to break up the festivities. Crowd is RABIDLY cheering on Cena here. Good move.

"Whew," I said as we went to break. "What else could go on tonight? This is crazy."

"Welcome to SmackDown!, Cole. Honestly, you've been here as long as I have with the split and all. Didn't you know this is how things go?"

"Well, sure, but..." *but this is the first time I've experienced it up close and personal.*

"But what? You all right, Cole?"

"Yeah... just that today is going fast even by our standards. I mean, one title change, one turn... what else could happen?"

"Just wait."

"I know... okay, we're back in 5."

- Cruiserweight title: **Rey Misterio v. Paul London**. I was wondering when the guy would get the call to the big leagues. London attacks early, but gets nowhere. Lockup, and Rey takes over with about 5 different rans. Outside, London tosses Rey into the STEEL steps and gets two back inside. London hits an electric chair drop for two. Swanton Bomb gets two. Rey with a Greco-Roman ballshot to cue the comeback. A trio of dropkicks puts London in place for the 619, but he catches Rey mid-swing and turns it into a guillotine on the top rope. Ouch. It gets two. London bridge (har har) gets two. London tries a piledriver, but Rey wiggles out into a headscissors. 619 hits for real, and West Coast Pop finishes at 8:44. What's all this wrestling doing on a wrestling show, anyway? ***1/2 **Jamie Noble** attacks him after the match to make sure Rey knows his place or something.

- "Desire" video featuring **Zach Gowen**. Figures. Just as soon as they make a star, life interjects. Well, thankfully he doesn't have a title to forfeit and demand land on the waist of his friend. Although with **Hogan** back, you can never be sure...

"Shame what happened to Zach, isn't it, Tazz?"

"Yeah, no doubt, Cole. I was beginning to like the little guy, too. He was provin' he belonged and all that. Ah well, I'm sure when he gets back he'll be ready to go again. Just wish it could be sooner rather than later."

My mind began to wander back to that night. I was flashing back, though, not to Juarez, but to Recovery. As if on its own, my conscious jumped from being beaten physically to the emotional beating I gave Kathleen. *Why don't people warn me about these things?*

"Cole? You ready to go?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"Don't worry bout Zach, he'll kick ass as always. Back in 5."

- Tag Team Title match: **World's Greatest Tag Team vs. Spanky and Tajiri**. Giant

brawl to start, and Tajiri hits **Haas** with a few dozen kicks and gets two before **Shelton** saves. Spanky tries for Sliced Bread #2, only to get caught by Shelton into a back suplex for two. Tajiri delivers a handspring elbow to Haas, who stumbles over Spanky into a rollup for two. Shelton hits a superkick on Tajiri for two. One minute has elapsed, by the way. ONE MINUTE! Spanky goes for a rana, but gets caught by Haas as Tajiri is escorted to his corner, allowing Shelton to do the leapfrog choke. Haas hits a German suplex for two as Spanky is YOUR face-in-peril. Shelton in with a dropkick (MAJOR airtime) for two. Knees in the corner and he hits the chinlock as we take a commercial break.

"Whew. That was a wild first minute, eh, T?"

"No kidding. I wish I could go like that in my day."

"Yeah. And I wish I could referee a match like that. It looks classic."

"No doubt. I hope the crowd knows we're in the chinlock cuz of the break."

"Don't worry, these two can go off of it for a while."

"Yeah, I hope so."

"Heads up, Tazz. Back in 10."

"Gotcha, Coleslaw. Let's rock and roll."

We return with Spanky trying to walk the ropes to reverse the hold, but Shelton lets him fall. Ouch. Haas in, and a figure-four gets several two-counts. Shelton shoots the half-nelson for two. Heel miscommunication leads to a false tag, allowing WGTT to get off their finishing sequence for two before Tajiri saves. Spanky dropkicks Haas into Shelton, but Haas cuts him off JUST before the hot tag as the Southern crowd goes bats. Shelton with an STO of sorts for two. Haas flies in with the Oklahoma Jam and Oklahoma roll for two. Shelton misses a clothesline, Spanky ranas him down, and FINALLY it's a hot tag for Tajiri. Kicks paste both men, and Tajiri hits the Tarantula on Haas. Shelton baseball slides him to break, causing Haas to roll forward straight into a cross-body from Spanky for two. Oh, TAG. WGTT go for the Doomsday Device, but Tajiri crotches Shelton and Spanky hits a Victory Roll for two. Crowd is having a heart attack. Haas goes for a back body drop, but Spanky tries a sunset flip. Haas partially blocks, so Tajiri mists him to send him over... and gets DQ'ed at 15:10. Any other ending in the world and it's a MOTYC. ****1/4 WGTT continue the fight, so **Ron Simmons** and **Bradshaw** hit the ring. But Tajiri pastest Simmons with a superkick and all three teams are going at it. The crowd is TOTALLY behind the **A.P.A.** here, which is frightening. Everyone tries to clear the ring as we take a break.

"Man... how can you top that?" Tazz was short of breath as he turned to me. "That was... wow."

"Tazz, remember yesterday in Lafayette? Well, this morning HHH came up to me and told me I was talking about replacing JR. You never heard this, did you?"

"Not from anyone I consider reliable, no. I mean, William Regal was trying to put the badmouth on you, but he's so stuck-up, half the RAW guys don't believe him. What happened, anyway?"

"I was seeing if Molly Holly was okay in the trainer's room when Regal came in. He didn't like me there, so I got up to leave, but Molly tugged on my sleeve and motioned

for me to stay until he left. I swear, that was it."

"I dunno, Cole... I would think that maybe those two..."

"Oh, come on. Molly's a virgin and proud of it, you know that!"

"Just sayin', Gordon Coley. HAHAAAA!"

"Gordon what?"

"Never mind... I thought it was cute. Okay, back in 5."

- During the Break, we see **Rey Mysterio** and **Torrie Wilson** get beaten down by **Jamie Noble** and **Nidia**. Well, ain't that special.

- **Test** v. **John Cena**. And dear God, would you hear the pop Cena gets on his entrance? Cena dominates to start, winning a slugfest and hitting a German suplex for two. Test hits the Boot for two to turn the tide. Testdrive gets two. Cena blocks a second try and hits a boot to the face of his own. Owenzuigiri gets two. He goes up top for the Super Fallaway, but Test blocks and falls on top for two. Test goes low, earning a warning from the ref. So Cena goes low in reply, and he gets warned. Test tries for the pumphandle, but this time Cena falls on top for two. Quasi-famouser follows, along with a Samoan drop for two. F-U is countered by Test into a pinning combination for two. Cena is doing all the work here, of course. Test blocks a shouldertackle and tosses Cena into the referee. Test grabs the chain, but Cena knocks it out of his hand and delivers the F-U. He revives the ref rather physically, but Test pops him with the chain as he heads over. Test gets two. Cena rolls him up for two. Both men argue over the count, and a simultaneous ref shot guarantees a no contest at 7:44. Both men continue fighting to the back. **

"Okay, what's next?"

"Alright, Gordo, it looks like a busy segment here... we got a Brock interview, Eddie's challenge for next week, and Hogan against Rhyno."

"Why do you keep calling me Gordon?"

"Solie, man. Heard of him?"

"Ohhhhhhh, Gordon SOLIE. Right, stupid me. I can't believe I forgot about him."

"Yeah, only the greatest announcer ever, man."

"I know, I know."

"Don't worry about it, MC. Just get ready for the next match. It's pretty packed."

"Right, I saw. Run-ins everywhere, a tag match the next week... yikes. Okay, back in 5."

- Backstage, **Brock Lesnar** waxes poetic about **Kurt Angle's** request for a rematch. Short answer: Earn it.

- **Rhyno** v. **Hollywood Hogan**. Oh, joy, Hogan's back. LOCKUP OF DOOM is won by Hogan, but Rhyno charges out and tackles Hogan. Kicking and punching follows by both men, and to the outside, where Hogan does the BACKRAKES OF DOOM to liven things up. Back in, Hogan goes for the ten punches, so Rhyno powerbombs him out of the corner. Powerslam gets two. To the bearhug, but it's not **Brock** so Hogan powers out. Rhyno with an airplane spin (!) and a drop toehold (!! for two. He hits the rope straddle for two. Cross-corner whip into a GORE GORE GORE gets... two. Hulk up, yada yada

yada legdrop... gets two. Huh. And now **A-Train** runs in and tosses a chair into the ring. The ref goes to dispose of it, leading to Rhyno and Train doing the T&A whip combo, ending in a GORE GORE GORE for the pin (!!!) at 6:24. Not as excruciating as I expected it would be, and Hogan lost, which is all I ask for. * Rhyno and Train continue the beating, and **RVD** again saves Rhyno's victim. Hmmm.

- Backstage, **Eddie Guerrero** challenges **Undertaker** to a match next week. If Eddie goes over, I'll be happy.

I looked at the last page. "Wow... show's almost over, Tazz. Any thoughts so far?"
"Yeah, you owe that kid in the aisleway an autograph."
"I know, I know... I mean about the show."
"Well, I mean... whew... it's been wild. When even Hogan works his ass off, you know it's a special night."
"Yeah, no kidding. All right, ready for the main event?"
"I guess so. Hey... don't forget we're on for only 90 next week."
"Oh yeah, thanks. All right, back in 5."

- Main event: **Kurt Angle** and **Undertaker** v. **A-Train** and **Matt Hardy**. Matt Facts: Matt gets more beads than his brother at Mardi Gras, and Matt's career record over the Undertaker is above .500. You sure about that one? Taker and Train brawl on the outside while Angle and Matt go at it on the inside. We go to split screen to keep up, as Train and Taker head into the crowd, where the ever-concerned fans attempt to collect Train's back hair. In the ring, Angle nearly gets the Angle Lock, but Matt enzuigiris out of it. Train returns to avalanche Angle, who OF COURSE is face-in-peril. Like there was any doubt. Matt hits the yodeling legdrop for two. Train with a backbreaker for two. The heels do DEMOLITION DECAPITATION~! for two. Matt with a drop toe hold and a camel clutch, but Angle makes the ropes. Matt and Train do a stack superplex for two. Train with a Trainwreck for two. Matt misses a crossbody, hot tag Taker. Soupbone! Soupbone! Soupbone! Chokeslam on Matt, Train saves. The match breaks down as Matt does his brother's railrunner on Taker on the outside. Back in the ring, Angle vaults over top of Train mid-Derailer and sunset flips him for two. As Train kicks out, though, Angle slaps on the Angle Lock for the submission at 9:13. About as good as Kurt v. Matt could've been, averaged with how bad Taker v. Train would have been. **1/4 **Brock Lesnar** F5s Kurt just to remind everyone who the world champion is.

The Bottom Line:

BRING THE WRESTLING! With the US title off of Eddie, the main event must beckon. And I don't see how the APA can hold down the likely three-way next week. The only thing that sucks is that UPN is doing some stupid show that'll cut SmackDown! short.

This is why the US will always be second to Canada -- UPN.

11:17 PM

I headed back to the hotel with Paul and RVD. We were discussing the show and how it went. I was still nervous about blowing my cover. It was the most I had talked since I died, and every fiber I had felt tired, every nerve frayed.

"How'd I do out there, Paul? Was I too bad?"

"Too bad?" he said in mock surprise. "If anything you were too good! Cole usually makes a mistake or two out there. This was one of his best performances!"

"Really? Thanks, Paul."

"Hey, I can tell you were doing your best. Seriously, there were a few things we can fix in post-prod, but nothing you need to worry about. Now, a few days of rest are in order. Oh, and Lindsay wanted me to remind you to get on AOL Friday afternoon. Around 2 o'clock, she said. Got it?"

"Sure. Hey, Greg, notice anyone troubled backstage?"

"I don't know... I mean, Eddie was okay, but I haven't seen Chavo all week. Eddie told me he was back in El Paso filing a police report so that he could get the insurance on the cars."

"All right... we'll see him this weekend."

"I think so."

Thursday, September 4, 07:55 PM
Red Hook, New York

"Hey, Coleslaw, get in here. We're almost on the air!"

"All right!"

Tazz was kind enough to let me room up with him. I had no idea if this was permanent or not, but for the week, I didn't mind the company. At the very least, I could stop being concerned about my duties.

The meeting with Vince yesterday for post-production had gone on without a hitch. I tried to talk to him afterwards about the accusations Regal had made, but he hadn't heard of them yet. When I explained that HHH confronted me, he seemed a little calmer. He told me that whether it's true or not, I knew what I could or couldn't do in the future. If things are false, he said, I would be the first to receive an apology from HHH. I left with a smile on my face, certain that Nora would exonerate me.

"Got the popcorn, T?"

"All set. Let's hit UPN, babeel!"

Friday, September 5, 2003, 02:11 PM

GoldDustin has signed in.

SDCole: hi

GoldDustin: hey!

GoldDustin: andy?

SDCole: yeah!
GoDustin: hi
GoDustin: how's life as cole?
SDCole: awesome
SDCole: tazz is so cool
SDCole: how's your week?
GoDustin: can't complain
GoDustin: terri says hi
SDCole: ok
SDCole: how is she?
GoDustin: she's wonderful
GoDustin: she loves me you know
SDCole: you mean she loves Dustin
GoDustin: yeah
GoDustin: lol
SDCole: do you do anything about that?
GoDustin: huh?
SDCole: i mean
SDCole: can you love her back?
GoDustin: we are married
SDCole: but you're not
GoDustin: ohhhh
GoDustin: I see
GoDustin: well we could
GoDustin: but I haven't
SDCole: why not?
GoDustin: I'm not used to my role 😊
SDCole: your role?
GoDustin: yeah
GoDustin: this is lindsay, remember?
SDCole: *lightbulb*
SDCole: I get it lol
GoDustin: yeah
GoDustin: so how's sd going?
SDCole: great
SDCole: tazz and I watched it yesterday
SDCole: he's a great guy
GoDustin: cool
GoDustin: no problems then?
SDCole: well
SDCole: matt's kinda bumming out
SDCole: I tried to talk to him about jeff
SDCole: and he wouldn't say anything
GoDustin: really?
SDCole: can u talk to helms about it?
GoDustin: I'll try

GoDustin: he's usually busy with geek stuff

SDCole: like what?

GoDustin: comic books

GoDustin: computer games

GoDustin: that sort of thing

SDCole: oh i see

SDCole: how's the raw morale?

GoDustin: not good

GoDustin: things are falling apart here

SDCole: why?

GoDustin: goldberg

GoDustin: 's threatening to walk

SDCole: really?

GoDustin: yeah

GoDustin: he's upset at not being over

SDCole: well

SDCole: whose fault is that?

GoDustin: I know

GoDustin: but a lot of it is hhh's too

GoDustin: he doesn't put people over

SDCole: so?

SDCole: it's not his say

GoDustin: ummm

SDCole: right?

GoDustin: it is

GoDustin: he has creative control

SDCole: why?

GoDustin: steph

SDCole: ugh

GoDustin: I know

SDCole: is he abusing it?

GoDustin: kinda

GoDustin: I mean

GoDustin: goldberg's not clicking

SDCole: why not?

GoDustin: dunno

GoDustin: he's just becoming old fast

SDCole: wow

SDCole: that's weird

GoDustin: yeah

GoDustin: is hogan like that?

SDCole: no, actually

SDCole: he's been a total team player

SDCole: even put rhyno over

GoDustin: saw that

GoDustin: next week should be awesome

SDCole: why?
GoIDustin: I'm main eventing
SDCole: you are?
GoIDustin: well, goldust is
GoIDustin: lol
GoIDustin: I won't be
SDCole: yeah 😊
SDCole: that's so weird
GoIDustin: I told ya
GoIDustin: it'll take time to get used to
SDCole: I know
GoIDustin: so
GoIDustin: how's greg doing?
SDCole: he's holding on
SDCole: having a blast
SDCole: I mean
SDCole: I don't see him or anyone much right now
GoIDustin: yeah I know
GoIDustin: I hated being lawler or jr
GoIDustin: couldn't talk to anyone
SDCole: not even like this?
GoIDustin: not the same
SDCole: I guess not
GoIDustin: don't you want to talk to people in person?
SDCole: yeah
SDCole: but that's not doable
GoIDustin: can't you visit philly?
SDCole: tazz isn't fond of seeing paul
GoIDustin: and you can't go?
SDCole: i'm staying here
SDCole: we're rentmates
GoIDustin: ok
SDCole: besides, i'm talking to you now
SDCole: and that's enough
GoIDustin: andy, please
GoIDustin: don't go there now
SDCole: sorry
SDCole: I just miss everyone
GoIDustin: I know
GoIDustin: but this won't help
GoIDustin: just live your life
SDCole: I do
SDCole: or, I have
GoIDustin: ?
SDCole: I'm dead, right?
GoIDustin: only if you think you are

SDCole: ?
GoLDustin: this is your life
GoLDustin: we're here to live
GoLDustin: and to help others live
GoLDustin: it's what God wants
SDCole: yeah, but
GoLDustin: ...
SDCole: who am I?
GoLDustin: you are andy
GoLDustin: remember that
SDCole: no I'm not
SDCole: I'm cole this week
GoLDustin: wait
SDCole: and someone else next
SDCole: yeah?
GoLDustin: that's only what other people see
GoLDustin: what's important is what you see
GoLDustin: the only person who can be you
GoLDustin: is you
GoLDustin: remember that
SDCole: ok... I guess
GoLDustin: it's early yet for you
GoLDustin: it took me months to get used to this
SDCole: months?
GoLDustin: yeah
SDCole: wow
GoLDustin: that's why I'm so calm now
GoLDustin: I've done this for years
SDCole: don't you ever want to be yourself?
SDCole: take a week off?
GoLDustin: sometimes
GoLDustin: but I can't
GoLDustin: and I shouldn't
SDCole: why not?
GoLDustin: because our work is important
SDCole: that is?
GoLDustin: to save Vince
GoLDustin: and to help the WWE people
GoLDustin: and to make the world better
SDCole: nothing major, just save the world 😊
GoLDustin: lol
GoLDustin: basically
SDCole: don't you feel overwhelmed?
GoLDustin: I would if I were alone
SDCole: you aren't??
GoLDustin: well, you're here 😊

SDCole: no, I mean, we're not?
GoDustin: nope
GoDustin: look at the crowd through your glasses sometime
GoDustin: we're everywhere
SDCole: And so are empty people
GoDustin: right
GoDustin: and each one needs our help
SDCole: why couldn't we do this while we were alive?
GoDustin: but we did
GoDustin: we just didn't know how people were
GoDustin: but if you were a nice guy
GoDustin: and you helped others
GoDustin: you made the world better
SDCole: it sounds so easy, but it's so much
GoDustin: I know
GoDustin: you'll get it eventually
SDCole: I hope so
SDCole: tazz wants the comp
SDCole: I'd better go
GoDustin: ok
GoDustin: bye
SDCole: bye
GoDustin: *kiss*
SDCole: thanks *blush*
SDCole has signed out.

Saturday, September 6, 2003
04:45 PM

Tazz was still out getting some groceries when I got back from a PR session at Madison Square Garden. Traffic in New York was unbearable, but it was the last thing on my mind. I'm not even sure how much I tipped the cabbie to get here. All I could think of was seeing my co-workers again. *My co-workers? My friends. My... family.*

Yeah, my family. I guess they replace my family now. It wouldn't do me any good to see Mom and Dad again. They wouldn't recognize me or believe me. Maybe that's better that way.

I mean, we all have to die sometime, and that's what's happened. I'm alone. I'm glad my family still has each other, but... my parents, my sister, my grandfather... uncles, aunts, cousins... how are they handling it?

And why am I so calm? Why has nothing gone wrong yet? I know it's been a month, but I still can't understand why I'm used to this. Wait, am I?

Just yesterday I was telling Lindsay how I felt dead. But I'm alive. I'm conscious. I'm breathing. I'm in a life. But it's not mine. I'm not me. I won't be for the next 50 years.

How much longer before I accept this and wake up every Monday ready to take

on my next lot in life? And what do I do when Vince dies, or converts? I'll have to be a bunch of people I don't know. That would certainly make things more difficult.

I don't know how much more I could take of this. At least I'm alone right now. Being around Paul... it always felt like I was working. Even a ghost needs time off, I guess. Heh.

I wonder how Kathleen's doing? I treated her so unfairly. She seemed ready to die all over again. Everything she had was stolen, and now I'm trying to tell her she's better off without it. No wonder she got mad.

Is Michael Cole thinking this or am I? And what is it like to be possessed? I can't imagine what's in his mind. Wait, I don't have to. I have access to it. If I wanted to, I could look up all his personal details. That would be fun.

But it would be pointless. The minute I do something wrong, I'll get transferred or faded... or I might be destroyed! What was Lindsay telling me about Sunny? That could've happened to me with John. Wow. So many things can go wrong.

When your body dies, and you're just a soul, your margin for error is so small. Maybe that's why we have assignments, work to do, all the time. Maybe that's why Recovery is so necessary. I can't imagine having to be perfect. What if I couldn't Recover? I'd probably break!

But I can't rely on that. I have to rely on myself. Well, myself and whoever I am. I guess each week I have to figure out the person's strength, and use it to make the world better. Michael's is that he is a voice people listen to. He's on TV. That makes him important... to some. But is there more?

I mean, I know I used being Taker the right way, but... I haven't done much else, have I? It's hard to find opportunity. What would Paul say right now? What would he think of me if...

I was snapped out of my train of thought by the phone ringing. I knew I could pick up -- something told me whoever called knew about our living arrangement. I hustled over and answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Gordo?"

"Tazz, is that you?"

"Yeah, 's me. Whazzup, Coleslaw?"

"Not much. I just got back from MSG. Anything I can do?"

"Yeah, could you check the answerin' machine, make sure we don't have any messages?"

"Sure." I walked over to the machine and pressed a button. I heard Vince's voice on the other end. I quickly held the phone to the speaker so Tazz could hear it too.

"Gentlemen, this is Vince. You need to come to Stamford tomorrow to discuss a recent turn of events on the RAW brand. It's pretty serious... I can't fully explain over the phone, but I need everyone involved with the production to be there. The meeting starts at 3 PM. Show up or expect repercussions. This is urgent. Thank you."

I put the phone back to my ear. "You get that?"

"Yeah... well, guess I'd better clear my calendar. We'll talk about this when I get in, ok?"

"Sure. Catch you then."

"See ya."

I hung up. *Just in time. I'm meeting Vince himself... but it's not personal, and something tells me it's not good.*

Sunday, September 7, 2003, 03:10 PM
WWE Headquarters, Stamford, CT

I looked around the table. Tazz and I were joined by Paul Heyman, Dave Lagana, and Stephanie McMahon on our side. On the other side of the table were Jim Ross, Jerry Lawler, Triple H, Shane McMahon, and Brian Gerwitz. I expected Vince to walk in at any moment to begin the conversation. He did, but he brought Linda with him.

A murmur went around the table. If Linda was involved, this was a serious issue. Dave leaned over to me and whispered, "I thought this was about regular TV... why's Linda here?" I couldn't answer. I didn't know.

Vince took his place aloof from the table. Linda placed a series of folders in front of her. I tried to read her expression, but couldn't get any such luck. She had the same stony visage that she used on television. Vince, on the other hand, was bent over, his tie almost into his pants pocket, his hands clenched together in front of him. Whatever had happened, it had taken a large toll on both people.

"I want to thank you all for coming here on such short notice," she began. There was an audible crack in her voice, as if she had just finished a very stressful period. Triple H coughed in an attempt to break the silence. It didn't work. Linda paused, then continued.

"As of right now, our plans for the next few events are in a crisis. Our main event for Unforgiven is up in the air due to events of the past few weeks. The results of SummerSlam, as altered as they were, did damage to the long-term success of the RAW brand. The ideas put forth were not the problem; instead, it was the continual use of creative control clauses by members of the community that led to a lack of acceptance by our fanbase. Unfortunately, that problem has manifested itself into an even worse situation.

Yesterday at 3:45 PM, I received a phone call from an agent representing Goldberg. He informed us that the continual decisions of the management to attempt to remove him from the main event scene, coupled with a lack of co-operation shown by his primary opponents, led him to become unsettled in his current role. As a result, it was the inevitable and necessary decision of the management of World Wrestling Entertainment to offer him a full and unconditional release from the company, which he has accepted."

The SmackDown! side gasped. Stephanie stared at her fiance, who showed no outward emotion. Jim Ross held his head in his hands and seemed deflated by the announcement. I turned to Tazz so he could see my stare of disbelief. *HHH refused to put over Goldberg. I get it now. And now he's quit. I don't know who is worse.*

"Because of this turn of events, we no longer have a viable main event for Unforgiven. However, one thing is clear. There is enough blame to go around in this situation. In retrospect, decisions made by the writing team leading up to SummerSlam contributed to an appearance of a weak challenger. This appearance, then, became reality when the title did not change hands. As soon as it became clear it was time to move on, the next step was refused. At every step of the way, plans that were in the best interest of

the company were either overruled or derailed. I do not wish for this to happen again.

I have called people from both brands here to discuss a possible solution for the current dilemma. Right now, I am open to any ideas. However, only a great idea will be accepted. It is necessary to provide for the fans first and foremost. To that end, we must provide the most acceptable solution for them. Try to think like the fans. Try to understand the fans. I feel a lot of us have been away for so long we don't have the instinct to represent their needs. But let's do our best anyway."

Lost sight of the fans? Us? But I am a fan. First and foremost, we're all fans, aren't we? I looked around at the table. Twelve of us were in the room. Five had a personal stake in the business. Four of us were actors. Three of us were stagehands. None of us could truly be called a fan. We had all missed the mark.

"Well, if I may suggest something," said HHH. "Perhaps if you put me and Flair in a tag match at Unforgiven. It would get us on the card, and we'd get to give the fans a clean win without the title changing hands."

I waited. No one said anything. I couldn't see protest or agreement in anyone's eyes. I looked closely into Brian's eyes. He was outwardly nodding furiously in agreement. I checked with Ross. He didn't make eye contact. He seemed to think of himself as just a talent. *Either that, or he's afraid.*

"Okay, I think that might work," Vince said from the back. "Now, as for the opponents, we need two people who--"

"Wait, Vince. I thought of something."

The table looked at me. I barely had the words out of my mouth when I realized what I was about to say and why I was about to say it. Deep down, it was to get the belt off the man I had hated to see win -- when I was Andy. But as Michael Cole, my words carried more weight. I was in a position to make it happen -- and I was all too eager to jump on it. It scared me that power went to my head so fast.

"Yes, Michael? What is it?"

"Well... sir... it's just that it's a Pay-Per-View event, and the title needs to be defended. We are having all the other titles on the line, and it just wouldn't do if the centerpiece of RAW, on a RAW event, was unavailable. Besides, with HHH anticipating his time off soon, shouldn't we attempt to pump the belt while we still can?"

A long, heavy pause followed. I swallowed. *I've overstepped my bounds, haven't I?* I turned to Paul, hoping for a re-affirmation. He simply looked ahead at Vince and Linda. *Why is he hanging me out to dry?*

"Michael, it's all well and good to say, but who do we have that's on the level of HHH and can fill in on such short notice? I mean, Chris Benoit is already assigned a match, as is the Rock."

"Well, sir... we could have someone go twice."

"Twice? I'd better be winning," scoffed HHH. He looked at Gerwitz with almost an overbearing glance, as if to say, 'I am winning, right?' Gerwitz simply waited for Vince's word. Vince didn't speak next, though; Linda did.

"Well, I can't say for certain that it would be in the company's best interest for you to retain, even against an opponent pulling double duty."

"Excuse me? I am the only credible man on RAW. You've seen what people like Scott and Kevin were able to do with me -- nothing. There's no one left who the people buy as a credible champion outside of maybe Shawn."

There's a good reason for that, I thought, somehow hoping my brain waves would pierce through the gold plating of the belt on his shoulder and reach his heart. Triple H sat in a confident, relaxed position, awaiting Linda's realization of his wisdom.

"Well, maybe we could create one. Besides, you will be gone for a week or two in October. If that's not a reason to drop the title, what is?"

JR stepped in. "Linda, I don't want to insult anyone around here, but I think you should consider the source before you make a decision. Triple H here -- he's been in the WWE for eight, nine years now, and he's been in wrestling for much longer. He has the seniority and the experience to make the idea work."

I turned to Tazz and whispered, "Was that about me?"

"I think so," Tazz replied, almost sadly. He then spoke up. "Well, if it's a matter of being in the wrestling business, I think I can speak up a little here. Fact is, Cole's idea has a little merit. I'm not saying the title should change hands or whatever, but we certainly should give someone an opportunity to become a star. Hey, it's a free shot -- we're not askin' them to draw, right?"

"Wait, wait, wait..." Lawler spoke next. "Are you honestly saying that we base the entire Unforgiven around Triple H? Are we going to plug in an opponent or not? I mean... it's the World Title match, and they're the main event. Maybe we should, you know, build a story."

Linda raised her hand for calm. "I have an idea. What we need is to return the action to the fans, right? Well, the easiest way to do that would be to give them a say in how to build this up. What better way than to have wwe.com do a fan poll to determine the next challenger for the World Heavyweight Title?"

"Brilliant, boss!" I said. Everyone turned to me. "Er... I mean... good idea."

"No, no, it's not that," Heyman said. I listened carefully, certain every sentence would have a double meaning. "It's that JR might have a point. I mean, you are one of the newest people to the business of those among us. Your enthusiasm is admirable, and I think it's a good idea too, but... let me handle this, please."

"Why? Am I... what?"

"I've been a manager and a promoter, Michael. Trust me. It's my job to be persuasive."

It took every effort I had not to smile at the second, more important meaning of his last thought. *Yes it is, Paul. And Vince is right there, so let's get to persuading.*

"Okay... I'll play along for now," said HHH. "But how do you expect anyone to believe the belt might change hands? I mean, I gotta provide some semblance of being vulnerable and all."

Paul thought. "Well, it's not necessary to base this around the title, I think. Remember that for Vengeance, the main event was Brock Lesnar and Kurt Angle and the Big Show, but we hyped Zach Gowen's first official singles match as our big draw. We can do the same here."

"But that tanked," I said out of habit. I'd seen the numbers. Vince and Zach were the worst draw up top since Sid. But had I just scuttled my own idea?

"It tanked because Zach Gowen was an unknown quantity. Thing is, we have a known quantity to hype Unforgiven around -- The Rock making a quick return to the ring. He and Kane could sell easily. Can the Hollywood hero slay the ultimate supervillain? There's your moneymaker."

Because of Zach? Why because of Z... oh, I guess telling Vince he can't draw is a bad idea. I'm glad he's doing the talking.

HHH leaned forward. "Okay, I'll bite. But do we do a straight-up poll, or do we have a winner?"

"Well, it's probably best if we just have a winner. I mean, I know I don't want to be, say, Hurricane or Goldust and find myself in the main event after planning to take most of the card off."

"True enough, Jerry, but... I dunno... Shane, what do you think?"

The eyes of the room turned to the heir apparent of the empire. He waited in thought for what seemed like much longer than a minute. When he did speak, every word seemed measured, as if he was trying to convince everyone that he was agreeing while putting in his opinion.

"I think if we're going to do it this way, we have to be careful how we handle the buildup. We can't give anything away. The hardest thing to do would be to treat five guys -- to use a number -- to treat five guys as equals. Plus, if we don't read the crowd correctly, the poll will look rigged. I think we shouldn't decide the winner for a while. Certainly we can announce the poll tomorrow, but it's best to wait."

"So how do we book the remaining RAWs if we're unsure who to give the shot to?"

"Well, Mom, what I think we can do... or, what I'd do... is keep the main events we have right now, and build each person up in their individual storylines as before. Then, the next week -- the last one -- hmmm..."

"I've got it," said Lagana. "We could have a big ten-man tag. All five challengers against HHH and whoever is appropriate. Heck, Ric Flair can be thrown in if necessary. I think it'll work."

"Well, if it will work, I need to know right now who the people are who will be in the poll," Gerwitz chimed in. "And if the Rock's in there, he's going to win. How do we handle that?"

"Simple. I beat him."

"Now, wait, HHH, it's not that simple," Paul interjected, seemingly trying to keep his cool. "The fact is, the Rock would be expected to beat you. But Brian's right -- if the Rock wins, he's an even less available champion than you are. I don't know how to get around that."

"Do we have to decide this now?" I asked. "I mean, if, as Shane said, we're going to wait until we have a clear winner, can't we delay worrying about how to handle the winner until we know who it is?"

"Michael has a point. Gentlemen, it--"

"Mom!"

"Sorry. Lady and gentlemen, it would be in our best interest to let this play. Two weeks may not seem like a long time in the wrestling world because of the lack of shows, but we have 14 days to meet and decide. Brian, I want you and the rest of the RAW team to work things out. Give me five names to announce on RAW."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay, I think we may be able to salvage this yet. If you have any other thoughts, feel free to discuss them with me sometime during the day. Thank you."

I was surprised at how much Linda had taken over the meeting. I knew she was

CEO and technically the voice of the company, but I thought that was a figurehead. Had Vince gone soft?

As I walked over to Paul to talk about expanding the idea, I saw HHH talking to -- well, lecturing to -- Brian and Shane about ideas. He seemed to fill the room with his presence, both literally and figuratively. He demanded attention, and he usually got it.

Stephanie had crossed the table to perch herself on HHH's arm. I thought back to how just a couple weeks ago it was Kathleen there, or Lindsay, or someone else. *Why was she usually being inhabited? Was this a plan to get to Vince through the one person who could get him to listen?*

Just then, JR came up to me. "Michael, can we talk?"

We stepped outside. "Look, Michael, I don't know how I sounded in there, but I'm not trying to put you down. I--"

"JR, it's not that. Truth is, I was nervous in there. I mean, I see things from the SmackDown! side, and I don't see any ego being starved or force-fed over there. You have Undertaker working with Eddie Guerrero, Hogan putting Rhyno over... it seems like everyone's cooperating, which isn't what I got from being in RAW on Monday."

"Michael, I don't know what you saw, but there's a lot of chaos. HHH is -- well, he's really put a hit on morale. The Rock is not happy with being put in nothing matches. He can stay over as ever, but he's really considering defecting to Hollywood full-time. We really hope it doesn't come to that."

"Yeah, it would be a huge loss... I mean, he's one of the icons of the WWE, along with Austin and... well, some guy in a cowboy hat."

JR smiled. "You think I'm an icon?"

"Yes, I do. I want to tell you that right now. There's been some stuff going around that I want to overtake you, push you out the door. It's all lies. I respect you. We're not rivals -- we're friends. Right?"

JR seemed to try to force his right side into a pleasant demeanor. He lowered his voice as tears seemed to fill his eyes. "I'm no fool, Michael. I'm old and fallin' apart. Me and King -- we're not the now. We're the past. I'm just trying to get to the point where I can retire with dignity. I know my time's come and gone. That's why Coach is getting the time. I just hope he doesn't get raked over like you did."

I paused. "Jim... Mr. Ross... everyone has to take their lumps. There's only one Gordon Solie, and there's only one Gorilla Monsoon. There's only gonna be one Good Ol' JR. The fans will accept that. I've accepted it. I'm going to be my own guy, and I want you to be your own man. And that man is the best damn announcer in the WWE today."

Ross simply looked at me. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

Just then, Paul opened the door. "Cole, JR... we need your advice on the poll."

I stepped aside and let the master in the hat lead the way.

12:15 AM

It was late when I got back to Tazz's place. *This has been fun, but it ends tomorrow. Tomorrow I'm back to being a normal guy. That is, if there is such a thing as a normal guy.*

Tazz was ready to head upstairs before we prepared for our flight to Alabama. As he did so, I felt the need to have a conversation.

"Hey, T, I was just thinking."

"If you was just thinkin, you're gonna hurt yourself."

"Very funny. What do you think it must've been like for JR when he got the palsy?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"I mean, here's a guy who makes his living talking, right? And he has to go through an extended period of time being unable to say anything to anyone. What do you think that would be like?"

"Not talkin? Geez, Cole, that would be really hard. I mean, not just job-wise, though there I'd get understanding. I mean, not talkin' to anyone?"

"Yeah. Not being able to communicate, really."

"That would suck royally, man. Stuck in your own world, unable to find a friend to confide in... I'd have to write shit down to keep from losin' it, you know? Well, what would you do?"

"Me? I guess I'd have to work on mimicry."

"Ha! You a mime! That's a good one!" Tazz proceeded to do the old stuck-in-a-box routine, tossing in Hulk Hogan poses as he did so.

"You know, a mute wrestler would be an interesting concept. Someone who didn't speak a word, just went out and kicked ass."

"Nah... even Kane had to talk. A guy with no mic skills... he'd never get past the midcard."

"I suppose. Oh well. You know, talking to JR made me realize how lucky we are, man."

"How so?"

"Well, I've heard the comments -- I've heard people call you a sellout, and call me a... well, it's not nice or true... but when you think about it, we're young and set. We have a steady job ready for us, and it'll keep us for life, you know? Just invest wisely, live like we do..."

"Yeah, I guess, Gordo."

"Why do you keep calling me that? I'm not Soley."

"Ya might be someday. Ya might be."

As I pulled out the converter bed, I thought about this. *Why couldn't Michael Cole be the next big name? Isn't he being set up along those lines? Solie, Monsoon, Ross, Cole? But the difference is, he has no credibility. Who am I kidding? Styles or Tenay is the next JR. Not me.*

But why be the next JR? Why be the next Solie? Why not just be me? Wait... why not just let Cole be Cole? Damn, it's been so much fun I've forgotten it's almost over.

I went to sleep that night imagining whose voice would be coming out of my mouth next.

Monday, September 8, 2003, 07:00 AM
Jacksonville, FL

The alarm went off. I slowly rolled over and attempted to hit the snooze button, but I couldn't find it. The darned thing was on the other side of the table. *Great. Now I have to get up.*

I slowly staggered out of bed. The first thing I noticed was that whoever I was slept au naturel. As soon as it registered with me, I dove back under the covers and scrambled to find a towel. Fortunately, there was one lying by the bed. I grabbed it, slid out of bed, and slipped it on.

As I walked over to the bathroom to wash up, I heard a voice behind me talk to me. The voice wasn't familiar, and when I turned around I couldn't see the face of the person who spoke, but what caught me was how it was said. I couldn't understand a single word of it at first.

I asked him to repeat it, but found the words coming out of my mouth to be equally gibberish to my mind. *Is this a prank? Am I dreaming?* When the voice repeated his question, I found myself suddenly able to understand what was said -- even though these were words I had never heard before. I answered his question, again only knowing what I said because I thought it.

I rounded the corner and slipped into the bathroom, keeping the lights off until the door was completely shut. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *I have a feeling when I flip on this switch, I'm not going to be happy with what I see. So far I've had a conversation I couldn't repeat but which I understood completely. The only thing I can think of is if I and my roommate speak some sort of code -- a mangled English that I'm relying on the memory banks of this person to translate for me. Well, I'll soon find out.*

I turned on the light and opened my eyes as much as I could. As I saw in the reflection, I couldn't possibly open them as much as I was accustomed to. But more was revealed to me. I saw the matted-down black hair and the facial hair I should have expected. I grinned and saw the evil grin come back to me. More than that, though, my mind and my being both clicked in.

When I spoke to Tazz about being mute, I was figuring it as a hypothetical. I always thought that, while on this job, I would have the capability to talk to Paul at the very least. But here I was, in Week 6, and already I realized that I wouldn't be able to do this. I had no idea how to proceed with my mission.

The face was Oriental. The code we spoke was Japanese. The man I saw was Yoshihiro Tajiri.

SIXTH WEEK

Monday, September 8, 08:04 AM
Jacksonville, FL

We all were in the lobby. I attempted to find a seat near the center "aisle" of wrestlers so that I could work with Paul almost immediately. My gut instinct told me I was going to be at a disadvantage this week, and I needed to know if I should follow certain instructions. *Well, if I could understand his instructions, anyway.*

As I sat and waited, I let my ears and mind wander to other conversations. Next to me, Rey Misterio and Brian Kendrick were talking to each other. I figured it was something I could listen to, but when I tried, I found I was only able to get the occasional word. What I was hearing was definitely English, but at the same time, it sounded foreign.

In another location, Shannon Moore was next to Matt Hardy. I tried to read lips, but found myself equally frustrated by my efforts. What I could tell, though, was that Shannon was trying to tell Matt something, and Matt was nonchalantly refusing to believe it. Or maybe he was refusing to do a certain task. Or... *what is he saying, anyway? I know Matt has a strong accent, but this is weird.*

I thought back to just the previous night in Brooklyn. Tazz and I -- okay, Tazz and Cole -- were discussing what it would be like to be unable to talk. I was thinking in terms of not having a voice at all. But here I was, unable to talk to virtually everyone, and my voice was just fine. I felt like a stranger in a strange land.

Wait a second... I can hear some words. When Rey and Brian were talking, I could make out things like "and", "the", "rope", "hit", and so on. How can that be? Does he really know English? No, because I couldn't follow the whole thing. Wait... maybe he kinda knows it. I'd better stop thinking about this; it's giving me a headache. I'm going to have enough trouble as it is.

In the front, Stephanie got everyone's attention. She began to explain... well, something. I couldn't figure it out, but I heard a bunch of city names in there. I was guessing she was going over the itinerary. I heard numbers, too. I couldn't put it all together, though, because every sentence seemed to have a key word that I couldn't quite understand. *If it was a schedule, then I could easily follow it. I'd just stay with Paul until the bell rings.*

Paul took the announcements and seemed to be going over the order of the matches for that night. At least, I could tell that much from how the names were paired up. If I could follow things correctly, I was booked against Matt Hardy in Match #3 of the night. It sounded like I was given a bit of time, and that I was to lose -- at any rate, Matt was told which was which. During the question and answer session, Shannon asked for what seemed like a personal favor that Paul shook his head over. After a few minutes, we were told to head to the cars for the six-hour ride to Columbus, GA, for the show.

I grabbed my things and waited by Paul's car. I looked around nervously as other people walked by to the van assignments. The first person to approach the car was Chavo Guerrero, smiling and ready as he tossed his bags into the trunk. He waved to me and began to speak. I couldn't pick up more than a few words of it, and I merely shook my head in reply. Surprisingly, I knew what was said next. "You ok?"

I responded, trying to explain the situation, but Japanese came out of my mouth

instead of English. Chavo began to signal for me to calm down, then brushed it off as if to tell me to forget about it. He hopped into the front seat of the car as I continued to wait. *Great. I actually have to make an effort to talk. Wait... can I...?*

Paul Heyman finally emerged next with Shannon Moore. Shannon seemed to be keeping to himself, not trying to interact more than necessary. Paul went to the front seat and said something to Chavo, who got out and moved to the back. Shannon entered the front seat and buckled up. With that, Paul turned to me and asked me something.

I tried to ask him to put his glasses on, but I was getting nowhere. Paul gave me the same "stop" signal Chavo had, then spoke slowly. "Tajiri-san, in English, please. What is it?"

I began to think of the right words, but they weren't coming to me. I shook my head to him sadly. Then, a thought occurred to me. I began by pointing to him, then slapping my pocket. I motioned as though putting the glasses on, then formed glasses with my hands around my eyes. I finished by pointing at myself.

Paul pointed back and forth between us and at the car. I nodded enthusiastically. Paul got out his glasses and looked at me. He motioned to the car and indicated I should get in. I worked my way around and climbed in next to Chavo. I smiled a wide smile as Paul got in the driver's seat and started the car.

03:03 PM
Columbus, GA

Andy--

You can speak and read some English. I will try to use easy words so that we can talk. I know you will be mad this week, but I want you to know I will help you. I can't speak Japanese, but Tajiri and I can talk to each other just fine. Your motions were good enough for me to get your message.

Kathleen is Shannon Moore this week. She is still angry at you. Shannon will be with Matt Hardy tonight. I want you to take care of her out there. Matt is okay with Tajiri's style, but I don't think Kathleen will get it. Please be careful.

Greg is Chavo Guerrero. Chavo is going to be back on TV this week, and he is very happy. The arm is not at full power yet, but it is good enough for him to be in the ring. It is a good thing that he will not have a match yet, but we will see how it goes.

You are facing Matt Hardy, as you know. He will win the match because of Shannon. I told Kathleen not to hurt you or let her feelings get in the way, but I don't know if she can. Be ready if she does something too hard.

Thank you for trying. If you can't do this very well, see me and I will get you out. Please try.

Paul

08:44 PM

The web browser loaded up, and out came Matt Hardy first. Shannon was by his side, with both men flashing the V.1 symbol. I waited on the outside, giving both men plenty of room to enter and play to the crowd. As Matt jumped off the turnbuckle, I snuck back in and paused behind him. He turned around and ran straight into a big chop to the head. Shannon bailed out as the bell rang.

I continued my flurry, slapping away at Matt's flesh as hard as I could. I sent him flying to the opposite corner and charged in, hitting a spinkick as I did so. Matt staggered out of the corner, so I decided to return to an old spot and bit him in the pants. Matt hopped around in pain, complaining to the ref, while I imitated his hopping around. The laughter from the crowd was satisfactorily loud.

Matt saw me and clubbed me down from behind. He continued adding the stomps to my back as I headed for the safety of the ropes. The referee told Matt off, while Shannon came over. I braced myself for what was next. He lunged back and swung mightily. CRACK! I bounced off the bottom rope and instinctively grabbed my eye, trying to prevent any swelling. As I looked to the outside, Shannon was holding his hand.

Matt continued the onslaught with a German suplex for two. He caught me off the ropes with the Side Effect for another two. After a series of punches, he sent me over the top rope, where Shannon was waiting. He grabbed me and, with what seemed to be all his might, chucked me into the steps on the outside. I wanted to tell him to stop, but I couldn't find the words in my state, and Shannon just stared at me when I shouted in Japanese for him to take it easy.

Matt came out and tossed me back in, then yelled something to Shannon as he returned. Inside the ring, I regained my senses and kicked out at two before taking a leghold. I was right next to the ropes and got out as soon as I could. Matt continued to stomp on the leg as I pulled myself up. Shannon got onto the apron while Matt yelled at the ref. *Oh no...* Shannon grabbed my hair and jumped down, leaving my throat feeling like it had been crushed. I bounced back into Matt, who suplexed me for two, then returned to kicking the leg around.

After a few minutes of the torture, Matt went up top and yodelled to the crowd. I knew this was the cue, so I waited until he was airborne and rolled aside. The crowd began to come alive as I chopped Matt to the corner and hit him with a flurry of karate strikes that left him dazed. I climbed over top of him and hooked the Tarantula, waiting for the referee to tap my leg so I would break it. Before I got there, though, Shannon came over and yanked me out of the hold, nearly dropping me headfirst onto the mats below.

As the ref dealt with Shannon and Matt recovered, I regained my feet. Hidden under the ring near this post was a tiny baggie of colored water. I grabbed it and held my hands to my mouth. Shannon came over to toss me back in, but as he turned me to face him, I spewed the contents of the baggie right into his face. Shannon recoiled in horror at first, allowing me to sneak into the ring before he returned to being angry rather than blinded.

I climbed back in and slammed Matt down, then hit a standing moonsault on him for two. I went to whip him into the ropes, but he reversed. I flipped at the ropes and flipped back, pasting him with a back elbow. As he staggered to his feet, I gave the pose and set my foot at the ready. He turned around, and I swung at him with a superkick.

Matt ducked, and the referee got nailed with it.

Matt went for a Twist of Fate, but mid-holler, I shoved him off and slapped him. He spun around to his knees, and the crowd began to buzz. I whirled my foot at him, making enough contact to register with him that he'd been hit. I made sure to find his back rather than his neck or head. With Matt down, I bowed repeatedly to the crowd. As I turned to the fourth corner, I saw Shannon in the ring, holding a chair. He swung at me.

11:44 PM

I was reclining in the front seat of the car with an ice pack over my head. My eye had swollen up, and I had blacked out from the chair to the head that was the finish. Chavo and Shannon were in the back, staring at each other. Neither said a word.

We arrived in Birmingham much later, due to traffic and Paul getting gas. I slowly got out of the car and stared through my good eye at Shannon. He said nothing to me as he tried to shake some feeling back into his hand. Chavo came up to me and patted me on the back. "Get some rest," he said. I bowed and struggled to reply, "Thank you," before getting my bags.

Paul stopped me at the elevator. "Andy, I'm sorry," he said. "Kathleen -- I don't know. I will talk to her. What she did was wrong. Do you hear me?"

I nodded.

"Okay. Try to sleep. We need you tomorrow. Good night."

The door opened. I climbed in and searched out the right button with my one good eye. *If only I could tell her how sorry I am. If only I could say the right words to undo this pain she has. If only I could let her know that this was all a misunderstanding, that I had her best interest in mind, and that I don't want her to be mad.*

The one week I need to talk things over is the one week I won't be able to talk to her at all.

Tuesday, September 9, 2003, 10:15 AM
Birmingham, AL

Oh, my head. I hope I'll be able to go tonight. I was due to see the doctor later in the day and get medical clearance, if possible, for tonight. The pain in my eye was dissipating, as was the swelling, but a noticeable mark remained from Kathleen's enthusiasm. I entered the auditorium with an ice pack on my head, so that I could keep from focusing on the throbbing.

Brian Kendrick sat down next to me. He patted me on the shoulder and tried to make me feel better, somehow forgetting that I didn't understand fast English. I used as much non-verbal communication to indicate that now was a bad time as possible, and eventually he sat down elsewhere. I needed the time off.

Matt Hardy, Shannon Moore, and Paul Heyman all entered together. Shannon was subdued, almost a zombie, compared to everyone else. Paul walked businesslike to the front, while Matt was lecturing Shannon. Every once in a while Shannon would nod his

head, almost forced, before continuing to listen. *Why did I have to be incapable of understanding English?*

The Guerreros sat down next to me. Eddie began a conversation with me in Japanese, which I appreciated. Although he struggled with a few words along the way, and often needed things repeated, we seemed to have less trouble overcoming the language barrier. I did everything I could to keep Eddie involved in the conversation, fully appreciating his difficulties with a language not only tertiary to him, but sporadically used. The gist of the conversation was that I shouldn't take last night personally and to remember to be professional. I acknowledged and agreed, adding cryptically that last night was about personal issues.

Strangely, Eddie didn't ask what they were, especially since Tajiri and Moore had no common ground and would have an almost impossible time talking to each other.

Besides which, the general sounds from the front of the stage and from Stephanie indicated the tape was cued up and ready to begin.

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Sep. 08 / 03

- Live from Huntsville, AL

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Jerry Lawler**, with **Jonathan Coachman** handling ringside interviews.

- RNN: **Randy Orton** welcomes out co-GM **Eric Bischoff** with much fanfare and general ass-kissing. The "OrTron 250" shows highlights of **Evolution** in action, which ends with **HHH** standing tall above the rest. Yup. Bischoff then drops the bombshell: **Goldberg** failed to show up for events over the weekend and was fired post-haste from RAW. By FedEx, of course. So now fans can go to WWE.com and vote for HHH's challenger from among six worthy competitors. He says the winner will face HHH at Unforgiven, even if he has to pull double duty to do it. **Steve Austin** crashes the proceedings, because it wouldn't be a 20-minute yakfest without him. He says "What?" a lot and complains about Bischoff circumventing him over Goldberg. He also says **Vince** won't bring him back, meaning Goldberg may be gone for good. Darn. Austin re-iterates he's still the referee at Unforgiven, and he won't let anything get in the way. Except maybe a pair of cans on that girl in the front row. His words, not mine. Beer is drunk, commercials and sent to.

- Well. It looks like ol' Goldie finally crossed the line, doesn't it? I can't say as I'm surprised here, since the experiment was clearly failing and he was just being set up to eat the Pedigree anyway. The big question is, which of the guys (and, for the record, it's **Rock, Booker T, Goldust, Scott Steiner, Hurricane, and Benoit**) gets the vote. I mean, I know Rock is the people's favorite, but with his publicity tour for the Rundown coming up soon, he can't be champion. So that leaves three questions: who do you nominate instead; how do you bait-and-switch the fans; and will the NOSE OF DOOM allow the guy any offense at all? Ponder.

- **Chris Nowinski** and **Rodney Mack** vs. **Maven** and **Rob Conway**. This is a #1 contenders match for Unforgiven, though what either team has done to earn such a distinction is unknown. Further, given who has the heat with whom, the outcome of this match is less than a mystery. At any rate, Nowinski and Maven start and do some very generic Tough Enough stuff. Conway in, and a dropkick and Northern Lights suplex send Nowinski bailing. Mack tries his luck, but Maven and Conway do a neat dropkick/missile dropkick combo on him for two. **Theodore Long** is his usual self, and the distraction makes Conway face-in-peril. Mack punches Conway down for two. Nowinski with a German suplex and a neckbreaker for two. Mack's Blackout is reversed to a judo throw and a shoulder tackle, hot tag Maven. Armdrags and dropkicks abound, but Nowinski and Mack hit a Doomsday Shouldertackle for two. Heel miscommunication leads to a moonsault from Maven, but **Rene Dupree** appears and distracts the ref, allowing **Sylvan Grenier** to punk Maven with the flag for the Nowinski pin at 7:10. Not that I'm saying any of these six guys are ready for prime time yet, but as OVW matches go, I've seen worse. **

- **Maven** and **Conway** throw a fit for **Jonathan Coachman** and challenge the frogs at Unforgiven. Well, that's two more matches already. I like this pace. They introduce their tag name: **New Blood**. Okay, okay, WCW sucked, WE GET IT ALREADY!

- Handicap match: **Big Slow** vs. **Tommy Dreamer** and **Spike Dudley**. The point of this match is to highlight the Unforgiven showdown and to try to establish Show as being "twice the man **Benoit** is", so he's taking on two guys. High concept, I know. Speaking of the Wolverine, he's on commentary here, basically saying that, yeah, that's two people, but Christian was an Intercontinental Champion on several occasions, and these guys could only win a meaningless Hardcore title. Oh, TAG. If it sounds like I'm avoiding the match, there's a reason: Show finishes off the jobbers with the usual at 3:44. *

- Backstage, **Stacy Keibler** is bound and gagged, so **Hurricane** comes in to free her. but IT'S A TRAP!, as **Lance Storm** is waiting to drop an empty bookshelf on Hurricane. This is so cheesy it just might work.

- **Ric Flair** vs. **Scott Steiner**. **Stacy** is noticeably absent due to the previous segment. CONTINUITY~! is a good thing, you know. Flair blitzes Steiner to start, but he no-sells everything outside of the chops. Overhead suplexes (the only kind he knows) follow. Elbowdrop gets one before the push-ups. Steiner is actually getting over. Frightening, I know. Flair clips him to take over. Kneedrop gets two. Figure-four is completely no-sold (screw you too, Steiner), and Poppa Pump mugs Flair in the corner. Steiner Flatliner finishes the slaughter at 5:17. Steiner continues the assault, yelling about **HHH** the whole time. Realistically, Steiner was the weakest of the six names on the board in terms of credibility, so we'll see if this goes a way toward making him a star again. Flair bumped for ten, of course, but these two guys just aren't what they used to be ten years ago. *1/4

- The Cast of Rent joins us in the ring for an interview. General playa hatin' ensues. **The Dudley Boyz** object to some claims and a brawl erupts, ending in **D-Von** being put

through a table. The beating continues as **Trish** runs in to even the odds, and the Usual Idiots pull everyone apart as we take a break.

- When we come back, the situation has turned into...

- **Trish Stratus** vs. **Jazz**. No complaints here. Jazz opens the fun with a set of punches and a roundhouse kick for two as all five men on the outside cheer on. Stratus reverses a whip and hits a rana for two. Jazz recovers and works the leg, building to a single leg crab and STF. Trish makes the ropes. Jazz to the top, but **Bubba Ray** "crotches" her (which serves only to make her lose her balance) and Trish hits the Stratusphere for two. **Nowinski** pulls Bubba out of the way and tosses him into the STEEL steps as Trish hits the Dudley Dog for two. Bubba Bomb gets two, as the announcers note that maybe some influence is showing. Really? As if to prove their point, Jazz tries for a Blackout in a whip reversal, but Trish elbows out. Jazz tries to toss Trish out, but she slides back in underneath and baseball slides **Long** into the rail. Cross-corner whip bumps the ref, and all heck breaks loose. Double Arm DDT on Trish, 3D on Jazz, and everyone's down. Long throws Jazz on top, but **Molly Holly** appears on the top rope, Molly-Go-Rounds Long, and reverses the pin for the three at 8:01. Total ECW booking, but there was a good match involved and the crowd was red hot throughout. **3/4 A giant brawl erupts and an eight-person tag is imminent. No problems here.

- **His Rockiness** does a promo on Kane, promising to make him burn in hell for hurting him. He also declares that he will win the World Title.

- **Austin** announces a huge ten-man tag for next week, with the five contenders (sans **Rocky**) facing **Evolution**, **Lance Storm**, and **Big Show** as the main event. If they do this right, this could easily be milked for half an hour.

- Main event: **HHH** and **Randy Orton** vs. **Booker T** and **Goldust**. HUGE brawl to start, as Trips and Booker visit the crowd while Goldust tries for a Curtain Call on Orton, but spazzes out and can't finish the hold. Now that's how you use it. Orton punches Goldust down and goes up top, but Booker re-appears and crotches him, allowing Goldust to do a Shattered Dreams variant with a dropkick. Yes, a Rhodes family member did a dropkick. HHH in with a low blow from behind to give Orton two. Hell of a low blow. RKO is blocked, and Goldust with a sliding punch for two. Booker in, and Orton bails, so Booker delivers the BLACK GUY OUTTA CONTROL no-hands plancha onto both team members. Back in, it gets two. Blind charge misses, HHH enters and USES THE KNEE~! and Booker is YOUR brotha-in-peril. Where is **Theodore Long** when you need him? Facebuster gets two. Orton with Play of the Day for two. He goes up top (?), but Booker slams him off... and HHH cuts off the tag. No, really. Honest. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. Sleeper is blocked, and Booker walks the ropes for two to counter. Orton back in, and a clothesline and elbowdrop get two. Running clotheslines, but Booker catches the third one with the Bookend, hot tag Goldust. Flip Flop and Fly gets two. Curtain Call for real, but HHH saves and the match breaks down. **Ric Flair** gets involved and pops Booker with the belt, causing him to stumble back into KICK WHAM PEDIGREE for the pin (duh) at 11:45. Given how WrestleMania's buildup went, I hold

out hope, but not much. Match was fine until the funny ending. *** **Evolution** continue the pounding until **Steiner** and **Benoit** turn the tide, but Booker is none too appreciative and a massive title contender staredown ends the show.

The Bottom Line:

Well, when life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Or something. I don't think they'd put HHH/Rock on with such short notice, but they've done dumber. The only question is, whose gain is Goldberg's loss? I haven't seen the poll, but if they don't rig it, it'll be interesting to see the results.

That said, I can see all five guys voting for someone else to do the job.

The doctor was busy talking to Paul after the physical. I couldn't make out what they said. I held my breath. The ringing in my ears was gone, and I no longer needed the ice pack. I still couldn't remember losing the match last night, but I remembered why I had forgotten. I had also been told who would be doing a run-in tonight.

"Good news," said Paul. "You can go tonight."

I smiled. That was all I needed to hear.

Tuesday, September 9, 2003, 06:44 PM
Birmingham, AL

Paul and I were in the conference room. He had asked to speak to each of us separately. I had no idea what Kathleen was told, but Greg talked to me after he came out. He said something about Matt Hardy being a concern right now. He said that Vince was still lost, and that we weren't to get discouraged. He mentioned that changes may need to be made soon. I nodded and tried to ask for further info, but my efforts were stymied seemingly every time.

"Andy," he said, every word weighted not from anger, but from caution that I understand it. "Andy, I know this must be hard. I have never been in your shoes, and I don't want to be. How are you doing?"

I pointed to my head, then made motions with my fingers to indicate that I was seeing stars.

"Can you wrestle tonight?"

I nodded.

"Okay. That's good. Let me look you over."

He pulled out his glasses and put them on. He opened my eyes one at a time and peered into them. He examined my hands and arms. I gave him a confused look as he did so.

"Please, I know what I'm doing," he said. I waited. I tried to ask what was going on, but in my excitement everything came out in Japanese. He looked again at my face, then frowned.

"Okay, I think you can make it another day or two. Andy, I'm testing to see if you're having..." I couldn't make out what came next. I stopped him right there.

"Sorry. Andy, you are losing yourself. How much of your talking has been Japanese?"

I wanted to say almost all of it, but when that too came out in Japanese, Paul laughed.

"See? Do you know what happened last week with Greg?"

If this is about Stacy and that Test thing, I'm not sure I want to know the rest of what Paul is going to say.

"He told me today that the first day he was in Recovery, he still looked like Stacy. When Test moved, Stacy took over, and he suffered. The same thing could happen to you."

Who, me? But I'm okay. I still know who I am. My thoughts are still in English. What's he talking about?

"Yes, you, Andy."

I didn't even realize I was speaking there. I panicked. *What did I say?* I tried to ask, but again the words came out wrong. *Dammit, I have to think to talk!* I began clutching my head in frustration.

"Andy, please! Just listen. Can you do that?"

I nodded.

"Okay. Good. Now, Kathleen tells me that there's a problem with Matt Hardy. She's been hanging around with him for a while now, you know. Apparently, Jeff is... well... all she knows is that Jeff has no job, and Matt is trying to take care of him. Do you understand?"

I nodded. *Should I ask if I can talk to Matt? Wait, that wouldn't do any good at all.*

"Now... please... don't do anything to Kathleen tonight. I want you to be the better man. Kathleen is already on notice. I'd hate to lose her. I told her she had to get out, but she wouldn't listen. Please, Andy, don't do anything to her. Try to make her feel better. I'm begging you."

I had to talk. I took a deep breath and searched for the words. They came out slowly, but they did come out.

"Do... I... have... to?"

"Yes! Come on, I've told Kathleen the same thing. I've told her she's not right. I don't know what it is. She's got into trouble on RAW, too. It's... look, Andy, just... just do it, okay?"

I sighed.

"Okay. Look... are you all right? I'm going to make the same offer to you I did to her. Do you want out?"

I shook my head. To be honest, I wanted to try to stick this out. I didn't think anything bad would happen.

"Andy, trust me. If you think you're losing who you are, see me right away. Before you got here, and while I've been here, there was someone who... well... was losing himself. The next week, he... he continued to be the other guy. He didn't change. We had to transfer him. He... he forgot who he was."

Wow. That is bad.

I nodded. "I... will... tell... you... Heyma-san."

"Thank you. Now, listen. Vince has been a little unreachable, I know. It's hard to get to him unless you're in a good position. But what you did last week was great. You did a good job. Thank you." "I'm sorry, Andy, I got carried away. You did a good job last week. Vince told me he thought Cole was an example to follow. Thank you."

I frantically waved my arms. He was going too fast.

"Sorry, Andy, I got carried away. You did a good job last week. Vince told me he thought Cole was an example to follow. Thank you."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I wanted to say you're welcome, but I couldn't. I just figured it would be better to thank Paul back.

"Domo."

Oh dear.

7:58 PM

Spanky and I waited in the ring as the hard guitar chords of the APA's theme music started up. Ron Simmons and Bradshaw emerged from the back and played to the crowd. I turned to Brian and tried to communicate non-verbally. It wasn't easy, since he was too busy staring down his opponents.

As the World's Greatest Tag Team came out and joined the fray, all six of us stared at each other. It was tornado rules, and one fall to the finish. I personally couldn't wait. We had no idea who would strike first. *Well, let's go for it.*

I kicked Bradshaw hard in the chest and tackled him down. Everyone paired off and began fighting. Bradshaw got up and started punching at me. This time, I knew what to expect, and I braced myself for the worst. The punches bounced off my skull and rattled my brains for a split second. I reversed course and fired back, hoping to give him a taste of his own medicine. Before I could, though, Haas grabbed me from behind in a German suplex. My head bounced off the mat. I felt sick.

I grabbed Haas and began to flip him across the ring, following in with a slide kick to his gut. Shelton grabbed me, and the duo did a double brainbuster. *Of all the weeks to be dropped on my head repeatedly, why oh why this one?* Shelton picked me up for a fisherman's suplex, but I blocked and hit a knee attack out of it. I felt someone grab me from behind. Assuming it was Haas, I ducked when Shelton's foot flew in.

Simmons went flying outside, where he and Bradshaw regained their senses. Back in the ring, I saw Brian being set up for the leapfrog choke. I intercepted Shelton with an enzuigiri, then clipped Haas from behind. Spanky climbed the ropes and dove out onto the APA in one quick motion. Meanwhile, I was hit with a double lariat from behind. Shelton grabbed me and delivered a front Russian legsweep, holding my arms so I couldn't protect myself.

As I cleared the cobwebs, Haas hoisted me into an atomic drop position. I saw Shelton waiting for me to land and thought fast. I began to bite as Haas' forehead. When he dropped me, I smacked his face so hard he fell down. I played to the crowd, with the result that I never saw Shelton's boot come at me.

I fell to the outside, straight into Bradshaw's waiting arms. *Please, man, go easy.* I wanted to beg with him, but my words meant nothing to him. He tossed me into the post

as Simmons and Brian re-entered the ring. From there, I was this close to getting bulled over by a Bradshaw lariat. Fortunately for my health, I ducked. Then I kicked him in the back of the head. It felt nice to give rather than receive.

I jumped into the ring and grabbed Haas from behind in a tiger suplex. I tried to bridge, but the pressure was on my neck, and I gave out at one. Haas picked me up and tried to ask if I was all right. I nodded. I don't know why. He grabbed me and suplexed me to the canvas. Meanwhile, Shelton dove off the ropes to splash me. I got my knees up.

I slowly made it to my feet as Brian escaped and came over to me. He climbed the turnbuckle under which I was resting. I pulled my arms up to him as all four men began brawling. Brian yelled, "Incoming!" Everyone turned his way as I made the throw motion. Brian soared at them, and even though they were warned, they couldn't get out of the way.

I dove onto Bradshaw to cover, but at two he tossed me off. I timed it so that I landed on Shelton and got two on him before his shoulder came up. Simmons grabbed me and tossed me into the turnbuckle. I staggered back to him, and he caught me and tossed me down in his spinebuster. My head bounced off the canvas on impact. *This is not my night.*

Simmons covered, and Brian saved at two. In another corner, Haas and Shelton hit the leapfrog choke on Bradshaw. Spanky went onto Simmons for a victory roll, and I nailed Ron in the back of the head to help him over. Shelton saved at two. Meanwhile, Haas had Bradshaw pinned, but I dove in to save. At this point, Matt Hardy and Shannon Moore ran in, and everything fell apart.

The ref desperately called for the bell as eight men went at it. I was paired with Matt, trading blows in one corner. Brian had Shannon rocking in another. We went to whip the two together, but Shannon vaulted Matt and crashed his forearm across the bridge of my nose. I went down in a heap, not expecting this. Shannon continued the assault, but Haas pulled him off and delivered an Angle Slam-like move to keep him down. I pulled Shannon up, but he sent his arm up for a low blow, then slammed my face to the mat. I rolled to the outside to gain my composure.

While out there, I slipped under the ring. A ring crew guy handed me a baggie. I bit down on it and pulled it out, getting the green water ready in my mouth. I jumped back in as Shannon and Matt were delivering stereo Twists of Fate to the APA. I reared back and let Shannon have it.

He didn't even flinch.

Fortunately, Shelton superkicked him. That made him fall down. I stood over him, signalling for the Buzzsaw Kick. But before I could deliver, Paul's thoughts crept into my mind. *Be the better man. Be the better man. Ugh. I hope someone cuts me off.*

Haas saw it happening and tackled me. I chopped at his throat, while he punched around my face. Eventually, referees pulled us all off of each other and tried to escort the people to the back. Shannon and I were left in the ring. Everyone else was in the aisle, surrounded by a dozen officials. I dove at everyone first, cheering the crowd. Shannon faked like he would follow, then slid out of the ring and grabbed the belts. He took off through the crowd while we all picked ourselves up.

That night, we rested in our hotel rooms. I took a long hot bath, feeling grateful that with Tajiri's body I could fit in it without much trouble. I soaked myself to alleviate the pain of the numerous blows to the head. I was tired. Very tired.

After a long bath, I climbed into the bed. Funaki hadn't arrived yet. I sat back and went to read a book. *Oh, that's right. I can't read English. Wait, I could read Paul's note - I think. I'm confused.*

Wednesday, September 10, 2003, 07:45 AM
Birmingham, AL

I answered the alarm and looked over at Funaki. He was still asleep -- he didn't want to wake up before 9 anyway. I stretched and made my way to the bathroom. As I did so, I nearly knocked the glasses off of the table. I picked them up and stared at them. *When you think about it, they really are curious things, aren't they? They mean so little to whoever has them, yet they're everything to me.*

I was supposed to meet Chavo and Paul for an early breakfast. I washed up and got dressed. As I did so, for a lark, I put the glasses on. I wanted to see what I looked like in Tajiri's outfit.

Instead, I saw Tajiri's face on my body. I too saw certain elements that made me know I wasn't gone. My hands were calloused, with a scar on my left index finger and a lesion on my right from long long ago. My arms were covered in pockmarks, which the family doctor could never explain but which were never noticeable to anyone who wasn't looking for them. But my face was not mine.

I dashed downstairs, carrying the glasses with me. I found Paul and Chavo in the lobby. Paul could tell from my excitement that something was wrong. I forced the words out of my mouth.

"I... am... no... use. I... need... out."

Wednesday, September 10, 2003
Recovery

I was alone.

I knew I was alone. Kathleen and Greg were just fine. I remember the words Paul gave to me before letting me escape. He told me I had done the right thing, and that escaping wasn't a failure.

Was it? What was my mission? Why am I here? Is it to help others? How can I do that while I'm stuck in no man's land? I can't. But then again, if I blink out or if I lose my identity, I can't do it either. I have to think about my priority.

I guess it's to me, in the end. I can't do any good for other people unless I make sure I'm doing the right thing. Was this the right thing? Of course, from that perspective, it is. I had to save myself before I could save others.

But what about the others I'm with all the time? I suppose Greg can fend for

himself, but Kathleen was impossible to deal with. She blames me. She hates me. No, she can't hate me -- she's still here. Or am I assuming too much? I don't know anymore.

I just hope she learns quickly to behave. I can't have her keeping a grudge all the time. Wait, what's this "I" stuff? It's not me she serves, is it? No! I shouldn't care how she is when I need help.

No, that's a stupid thing to think. She needs me, and I need her. I need Greg, and Owen, and Lindsay. I need Paul and Shawn. And in a way, I need Vince. I need to be reminded why I'm here. I'm here to help Vince McMahon. He needs it more than anyone.

Except that as long as he's still alive, he can be saved. I'm dead. Kathleen's dead. If we're lost, we're gone. So who's the priority? I guess we all are. The only way we can save Vince is by working together. So we're only as strong as the weakest one of us out there. No wonder we couldn't get anything done.

So, I guess right now, the first thing I need to do is patch things up with Kathleen. But she's out there, and I'm in here. Oh well. That's why there's the rest of my life. I just hope Paul can talk sense into her. She was absolutely trying to hurt me out there. My head, my nose, my...

Wait a second. I don't have a headache. My nose is okay. Why is that? Oh, of course. It was Tajiri's nose and head that got pummeled. It wasn't mine. Man, I guess I was worse off than I thought. I'm glad there's no mirrors or reason to talk in here. I don't want to know what I look or sound like.

I hope everyone's okay out there. I'm glad I only get a few hours of a day. But I left so soon. Why? Isn't that a mistake? No, wait... Lindsay left on Monday once. This is so confusing. I should just let it go. I need to make me better. I should focus on building myself.

But the first thing I need to do is get this burden of Kathleen's envy, anger... pride... whatever it is off myself. I'm feeling weaker for having caused it. I don't know if I can perform my duties out there while I'm... troubled like this. I gotta focus on something else.

Wow, I'm tired. My time must almost be up. Maybe tomorrow I will get an answer. But I can't sleep like this. I need some form of closure... come on, change the subject. You're only in here a few days. Before you know it, it'll be Monday again, and you can go back to working on... on...

What am I going to do when I get back? What person do I work on? Wait, Paul mentioned something about Jeff Hardy. But I can't reach him. He's... he's not in the WWE. If only there was a way. Maybe if I'm Matt I'll have a chance. I need to know what it is. It's weird. I shouldn't care about him, because he's outside my scope. But then again, he's a human being. He needs love.

Heh -- don't we all? I closed my eyes.

Thursday, September 11, 2003

I didn't see anyone. I guess that's another day off. I got up and walked around. My mind was more at ease than yesterday. Even then, though, it floated through to the future and the time I would need to fix my problems.

I paced around the room. I figured it was best to write off this week, since I had

been given a "bad" assignment. *I guess God thought I could handle it. Maybe I could. Maybe another day or place, I would've excelled at overcoming the language problems. But too much was happening. That side issue with Kathleen was clouding everything up.*

Kathleen. How inconsiderate can one person get? What was she thinking out there? _Was_ she thinking? I don't know. It was all about her feelings, her life, her death, her past. How'd she ever end up on our side anyway? How did it come to this? Why, if she were here right now I'd...

"Ow!"

I jumped back. I couldn't tell where the voice had come from, and looking around, there wasn't anywhere obvious. But I knew the voice. Now was my opportunity to let loose.

"Kathleen? Where are you?"

I darted up to the front tunnel, but before I reached it, she spoke again.

"Back here."

I turned around and began to scan the area. There was no sign of another human being -- or former human being -- anywhere in the room.

"On the ground. Can't you see me?"

"No. No, I can't."

"Oh, no... I'm too late..."

I heard tiny sobs coming from in front of me. I tried squinting to see if it would do any good. I still couldn't see anything. The whole room had an air about it -- like an episode of the Twilight Zone. I gulped.

"Kathleen, you're going to have to be specific."

"I can't... I don't know where I am."

"Did you just get here?"

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe you're not all here yet."

"No... Mr. Heyman says you are. I'm just gone... it's too late."

Too late? For what? If she's here, she's here.

"Please, calm down. Talk to me. I'll sit down if you want." I sat down and waited. The story came choked with tears, lost in a sea of sorrow and piteous wailing.

"It was... earlier today. W... we were g...g...going to the next show. Greg and I... we... he was telling me to try to focus. I couldn't hear him. I could... barely hear anything. All I could think of w... was you.

Paul couldn't g...get my attention for most of the day. I... I... I was lost in my own world. You hurt me. You made me feel insignificant. I wanted to hurt you. I wanted to make y... you suffer. But I... I kept hurting my... self at the same time.

When we got to the hotel... Paul t... took me aside and told me to... to look in the mirror. I couldn't see me. I couldn't see anything b... b... but these green lights from be... behind the glasses. I was feeling so weak. My vision w... was going. I had to look... right at Paul to... to know what he was saying. I d... d... don't remember anything else."

Her voice went up in volume. "Andy, I'm dead again! I... I'm gone! I'm gonna die! I'm gonna go to Hell!"

The sobbing became wailing. I would have comforted her if I knew where to look. Just then, two streaks of flesh appeared, about eight feet away from me. I moved around to where they were, taking a wide berth lest I step on her again. I looked closer and saw

two eye shaped disks, a bright green, at the top of the streaks. Every few seconds they'd shut off and come back on again, accompanied by a new line of flesh appearing, with the occasional brown intertwining in the pink.

I was at her head.

"Kathleen, no. It's okay... you're alive. You're here. I can see where you are now." I tried to scoop underneath her head and bring it to my chest. "You're all right. You survived."

"I'm a piece of crap... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Andy... I... I deserve to die." I felt an arm grab my arm, and a body struggle to pull itself up. She must have buried her face into my chest, just as Torrie did when I was the Undertaker. She hadn't stopped crying.

"Kathleen... no one deserves to die. I can't think of anyone who'd want something bad to happen to you."

"Yeah, right. You wish I was dead."

"No, no! I wish you were happy. Right now, you're upset at a lot of things. You don't like your friends... you don't like your job... you don't like me... but that's all right. Look at me. Look into my eyes, please."

I felt a body pull away for a few seconds. The two green disks were pointed at me, surrounded by trails of tears, colored in the pink of living flesh and the brown and black of char. I heard a big snuffle.

"Do these eyes seem like they'd lie to you?"

"I... I don't know. You're just trying... to make me feel good."

I felt her head return to my chest. I looked down at her. I could see her now -- sort of. She was unbelievably faint, almost an outline of herself. I couldn't find any color, and I had to stare to see form. It was as if someone drew her with a three-dimensional pencil.

"Well, you need to feel better about yourself. I don't want you to die again. I can't. I need you, Kathleen."

She looked up again. "You mean that?"

"We all need each other. You, me... and Greg and Paul and Shawn... even Owen and Lindsay. We all need each other. I've thought about this for a long time. Kathleen, without the rest of you, I'm nothing. I might as well be a myth. We validate each other. We have to -- we're the only ones who understand."

I brushed her hair as I let her cry some more. *Poor girl. I can't imagine what it's like to stare your own mortality down. I was lucky -- I died instantly. She was lucky -- she was unconscious. But now... now she had to face her own death. And it would've been permanent. I don't ever want that to happen to me.*

"Andy?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

I thought for a while. From her perspective, there was no reason for me to like her. But I knew differently. "Because I was 16 once. Because I thought I could conquer the world before I was ready to run my own life. Because I realized what it was like to have my dreams shattered when I went off to college and saw life wasn't easy any more. And because I died too. And death is terrible, and it shouldn't happen to anyone as young as we were."

"Yeah, right... you just want me to feel better."

Maybe I do, kid. It's what you need right now.

"Kathleen, if you keep thinking negative thoughts, you're not going to get any better. You've improved already. I can see most of your face, and you're getting your form back. How do you think I'm able to comfort you right now? What's important is that you exist. What's important is that you live again."

I felt her shift around in my lap. I lay down and waited. She placed a hand near my heart as her head used my stomach for a pillow.

"You need to rest, Kath. You need to think happy thoughts."

"I can't. I'm too scared to think. Have you ever been like that, Andy?"

I smiled. "Once, when I was alive," I said. "It was... actually, it's funny you bring this up. You know what day it is?"

"Thursday."

"More to the point, it's Thursday, September 11."

"Yeah? So what does... oh my God, Andy, were you...?"

"Well, not really. I was working downtown in Washington when it happened. I don't know if I was ever in danger. I may never know. It's not important. But I thought I would die. I did everything I could to get out and flee to home. I was scared. I was worthless that day."

"But weren't we all worthless?"

"Nope. Not all of us. Certainly not those guys who brought the fourth plane down -- they probably gave me the last two years of my life for free. The Mayor -- Rudy -- he wasn't worthless, keeping the spirit of a nation alive. The Red Cross, the police, the fire department -- they did all they could, and the lives they saved... I'm sure the world will never know. But I was worthless, because I was too focused on myself."

She looked up. Her "eyes" were paler now, and I could better see the visage she had tried to hide from me. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Maybe. Maybe I am. Or maybe I'm trying to tell myself something. Kathleen, the point is that we both made mistakes. And as long as we think of ourselves first, we're gonna make mistakes. Isn't that what gets people lost in the first place?"

"I dunno. I always thought it was because they screwed up." She tried to roll over and face me. "Am I ugly?"

What do I say now? How do I find any positive in a face that she thinks is hideous? Her missing ear, her burnt lips, the splotches of color everywhere -- and now her eyes, glowing, inhuman -- where's the look in that? But wait... I'm being shallow. I'm thinking in earthly terms again. And maybe that's not a bad thing, but it won't do any good now. Do I say yes and re-affirm her self-doubt? Or do I say no and risk her thinking I'm lying to make her feel good? After a few seconds, the answer came to me.

"Kathleen, you can be as beautiful as you want to be. We all can. That's how our life is."

"I wanna be a princess."

"Hey, weren't you already Stephanie a few weeks ago?"

She laughed. As she did so, I saw more color return to her body. I saw a smile emerge on her face -- in fact, I saw all of her face again. She had gotten better -- not recovered, but not on the door of annihilation, either.

"You're funny."

"And you're great to be around. You make me try harder."

"How's that?"

"Well, you're younger than I am. I feel like I got a little sister again. I want to show you how to behave, how to help, and how to act. I lost sight of that over some stupid misunderstanding. I'm sorry I drove you to this." I held her closer.

"Thank you." She relaxed completely. I took a closer look. She was asleep again.
Rest up, kiddo. We got a long weekend together.

Friday, September 12, 2003

Kathleen was still asleep. She wasn't any closer to being healthy yet. I could only imagine how close she had come to dying. I began to wonder what sort of power had overcome her that she was being consumed to such a degree. What was it that made her so bad that even now I could barely see her?

There had to be more than just the problems with me. I wished there was some way to find out, but with Kathleen in such a fragile state, I couldn't imagine what it would've been. To make matters worse, there was literally no way of finding out. I couldn't communicate with the outside world at all. I was trapped, even though I was ready to go back.

I remembered that Paul said there was no getting out until Monday. I knew I made the right call escaping Tajiri -- there was little doubt that the language barrier was making me so worthless as to question my existence. But when I left, Kathleen seemed to be in control, even if she was getting too personal. What happened so quickly?

I didn't know whether to ask her about it. I had no idea whether there could be a relapse. I knew we were in Recovery and all, but there was something about the procedure that didn't make sense. How did this work? How did I get healthier? The worst part was not having anyone to ask. Kathleen wouldn't know. I doubt Greg or Paul knew, either. And contacting RAW about this seemed out of the question any time soon.

For better or worse, I was stuck in my own world right now. For better or worse, I had to put this setback behind me and continue the mission. But right now, there was no way to do that. Even if I had stayed in Tajiri, odds were I couldn't do it either. I was beginning to lose sight of who I was out there. Still, five days seemed an eternity to be away from here.

"Andy?"

Kathleen was awake. I tried to make out her form against the ground. I couldn't see where her overalls were, or her hair, or much of anything. But I saw her eyes. They were still a solid green.

"Andy... are you there?"

"I'm right here. Are you feeling better?"

"No."

"Do you wanna talk some more?"

"I dunno... there's nothing else to do."

"Kathleen, I can leave you alone if you want. That's always a possibility. You know that."

"I don't wanna be alone. I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Hell."

I walked over to her. I reached my hand down. "Here, lemme help you up."

She reached her hand out and held it up, nowhere near mine, and waited. I tried to get over to it, all the while wondering why she was so far off. Pulling her up took more strength than I imagined, and as soon as I had her upright, I heard her fall over again.

"I guess I'm not ready."

"It's okay. But... why did you put your hand so far away?"

"Andy... I can't see you."

I stopped in my tracks.

"You can't? You sure seemed like you could last time."

"No... I was just following your voice. Andy, all I see is green everywhere. I'm blind!"

She covered her face in her hands, as if it would do any good. I leaned over to where she was and touched her arms.

"Kathleen... you'll be fine. You can't be blind forever. You're just sick right now. Give it time."

"Are you sure I won't die?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You can't die here; you're safe now."

"Okay... I guess... I'm just... I did too much."

I could tell it was the moment of truth. I got the feeling that I had to act now. There were words that she needed to hear, whether I believed them or not. I knew the right thing to do was to be the better man.

"Kathleen, I forgive you. You are forgiven. I know you are."

"It's not you... It's Sh... Sh... Shannon I'm scared of."

"Why?"

"If I'm like this... how's he?"

"He's fine. You took his bullet. He wasn't affected by you."

"Are you sure?"

"That's what I was told. I haven't seen any reason to believe otherwise. What's necessary is that you get healthy now. That's what's important."

"Okay... I guess..." She seemed to be shivering from fear. I sat beside her and held her to me.

"You're a good person. You'll be a good person again. You just need to control yourself."

"Are you sure?"

"I know you are."

"Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"I feel better now... like, I trust you. You've been so nice to me."

"Hey... what are ghosts for?"

She smiled as she curled up in my lap and closed her eyes.

Saturday, September 13, 2003

"Kathleen? Are you awake?"

"Yeah. Where are you? I still can't see anything."

"That's not important. I just want to talk to you right now. I want to tell you that... well, that I was rude and insensitive. I didn't take your feelings into consideration at all when I started rattling on about high school. I wasn't thinking."

"I wasn't either, Andy. I guess I'm still not. I just don't want to be dead."

"A little late for that, isn't it?"

"I guess so." She smiled, faintly. Everything about her was faint. It had been three days and she was still a long way from healthy. But there were some signs of improvement. I couldn't believe she was feeling this way about me -- that I was the only reason she'd sunk this far. *Of course, it's not my place to pry, is it?*

"Kathleen -- is something else bothering you? Is there some other reason you're here? I can't imagine I'm such a big deal."

"You're not... there's something else."

"What is it?"

"Jeff."

"Jeff? Jeff Hardy? What's wrong with him? Paul wouldn't tell me everything."

"Matt's worried about him cuz he's not doin' anything."

"He told you?"

"He told Shannon."

"...Okay. What does he know?"

"Well... Jeff's been stuck doing the once-in-a-while appearance for his old backyard group. No one calls him for work. Some group in Philly wanted him, but the fans wouldn't give him a chance, and he took it too hard. He's been trying to hold his own with some band, but they're going nowhere. He doesn't return Matt's calls or messages. He's... Shannon isn't sure he's alive."

"Is Matt?"

"Matt can never see him. He's on the road all the time... it's tearing at him. He keeps wanting to make plans, but he can't get to Jeff... I don't know what's going on."

"Sounds serious. Look, Kath... next week I'll see what I can do. I want you to do the same, okay?"

"Will I be ok next week? I've never been this bad before."

"I hope you will. Besides, you don't have to do anything. I mean, couple weeks ago you freaked out in 30 seconds."

"I know... I know I did. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Cuz of Kane."

"Oh... of course. Too similar to how you died, is that it?"

"Worse." She turned her head away, even though she didn't have a field of vision for me to be in. "I used to be him."

"When?"

"Remember when he and Jim Ross did that segment?"

"Oh, geez, yes. That was just a little over the t..." It hit me. "Oh. You were Kane then."

"Yeah. I can't look at him without becoming useless. It's why I'm here and not on RAW. I had to switch with Owen. And to make matters worse, it was my first day. My FIRST DAY on the job, and I have to go through my death all over again!"

I sat in silence. I waited until I was certain she was done before speaking. "I'm sorry. I understand."

"No you don't... but that's okay... I guess. I don't wanna start this again. I don't wanna be mad at you. Are you mad at me?"

"No. Not at all."

"Thank you."

Sunday, September 14, 2003

"Andy, are you there?"

She was standing up for the first time in days. She was still only half there, and her eyes, while whiter, still had no semblance of pupil in them. Then again, considering she started the week as an outline of herself, this was incredible improvement.

"I'm right behind you. And it looks like you're doing a lot better."

"Yeah... I can walk again!" She laughed as she spun around. Her spirits were a lot higher from our talks. It was as if she just needed the emotional burden lifted from her.

"Hey Andy, catch me!" She began to run off, but stopped and stumbled after a few steps. "Whew. I guess I'm not ready yet."

I laughed. "Yeah, I don't think you'll be out tomorrow. I may be wrong though."

"It's okay... I kinda like the time alone here."

"Why?"

"I can be me. I can be silly. I can do all sorts of things I'm not allowed to do out there."

"Like what?"

"Uh-uh. I can't tell you."

"Oh, come on, why not?"

"Cuz you'll want me to do 'em here."

She had a point. "Well, is that bad?"

She just smiled and winked.

"What's that for?"

"Well... I guess I can tell you. But you promise not to get all excited over it?"

"Sure." *What could I get excited over?*

"Well, ya know how I said I was trying to sleep in an old building when I died?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"So, St. Peter gave me these for my own sake," she said, pointing to her overalls.

Oh dear...

"What do you mean?" *Play dumb, play dumb...*

"Well... I wasn't wearing these when I died."

"You weren't?"

"Nope." She giggled and posed like someone trying to imitate a fashion cover model. "You know what I was wearing?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"Why? Don't you think I'm pretty? Don't you want to think about it?"

Oh bloody heck. "Kathleen, how old were you?"

"Sixteen... why?"

"I thought so. It's not right for me to go any further. And you really shouldn't either. It's not a matter of how pretty you are or were or anything like that. It's just... wrong."

She pouted. "But I like being a tease!"

"Yeah, well, most guys wouldn't want to go along with that."

"Greg did."

"What?"

"He likes me. He wanted to know everything... he made me feel sexy."

My mind froze. I had no idea what that statement meant, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. All I knew was, it seemed to imply something very, very creepy.

"How old is Greg?"

"He says he was 20. He looks a little older."

"Yeah, I'd say so. Doesn't it bother you that if you two were alive, you couldn't be the way you are now?"

"But he really likes me. I know he does. And I like him too. What, don't you like me?"

Lindsay's face flashed into my mind for reasons I couldn't explain. It didn't seem like a total free association -- as if there was a link in there that I couldn't find. I began to speak, to stall for time while I put the pieces together.

"It's not... it's not that. I just don't think it's... it's too smart for you to act this way. If you go too far, I mean... what with you not fully healed and all... don't you think you're playing with fire a little? Isn't it..."

It occurred to me. I suddenly knew why I was so nervous about it. It wasn't because she didn't seem like she would have been good looking. It wasn't really because she was so young. It was because I wanted someone else there.

"Come on, Andy, you like me. Don't you?"

"Well... yes and no. See, Greg may really like you -- and if you two feel that way, more power to you -- but I can't. I have someone else like that."

"Lindsay?"

"Who else? She's the only other female."

"But she's not here. She doesn't have to know what I do."

Oh my God, she's sounding like Jessi! "Kathleen, I'm serious. Stop now. Maybe some other time. Maybe... just... you're being too serious about this. Those words... they're the same ones that stalker John has said. I was there. You're making a mistake. Just drop it. Please."

She sat down, frustrated. "It's all the same. I don't look good anyway."

"I never said that... it's just I'd... you gotta understand. What you were saying... it was tempting. But I can't let temptation be an issue. I need to live. You need to live. What you and Greg do is your business... but I hope it's real love, and not some desire. I know it wouldn't be that way for me."

"All right... go have fun." She yawned. "I guess I'll save it for when I'm alone tomorrow."

"You do that... good night, and sweet dreams... if you have any."

Monday, September 15, 2003, 06:54 AM
Gastonia, NC

I woke up on my own, without an alarm. I looked around. This was no hotel room. There were pennants everywhere of UNC, the Panthers, and the Hornets. A giant poster of 3 Count hung on one wall. The entire bookshelf was stacked with videotapes. Above my bed was a Hardy Boyz poster.

I've been transferred! Oh no! Why wasn't I warned? I panicked. I jumped out of bed to find my glasses, but there were none to be seen. I exited the room and found myself overlooking a large hall on an upper floor. I couldn't figure anything out. It was all a blur.

"Hey, dude, you all right?"

I freaked out. The voice sounded familiar, and it was a male voice, but I couldn't place it. I was almost on autopilot. "Yeah, Greg. Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

Oh, no! Greg's not...

"It's all right, man. Just get some sleep."

What the...?

I peered around the corner where the voice came from. The setup was much the same in the room, but a different person was in the bed. His bright green hair, a special dye made for him, stood out from within the white pillowcase. I knew it anywhere, and after seeing it, I ducked back into "my" room, breathing a sigh of relief.

I almost blew it. But I'm okay. And I wasn't transferred. I'm still here.

I lay back down, but was unable to sleep. I went looking for a reflective surface. There was no mirror in the bedroom. Suddenly, I saw a pile of CDs in one corner. *Of course! The back side of a CD is a reflective surface!*

I treaded through piles of comic books to the CD stack. I opened the first case. No CD was inside. I tried a second one. There was a CD. I flipped it over and held it up to the light. Then, slowly, I pointed it at me.

I smiled as the reflection smiled back. It seemed as though God knew how I could do the most good this week. And here I was, in my best friend Greg's house -- Greg Helms -- as an old friend, ready to hit the road as SmackDown! was in Raleigh, and I was set for the biggest moment of my life.

Goodbye, Tajiri. Hello, Shannon Moore.

SEVENTH WEEK

Monday, September 15, 2003, 02:11 PM
Greenville, NC

Paul was waiting for me as I got off the bus in Greenville. Greg -- Hurricane -- had driven me there as he headed off to Charleston. I could tell he was excited, and I didn't blame him. Tonight he was getting the chance to be in the main event of RAW. I, meanwhile, was about to face a man I had let down.

I had called him on the way over on my cellular phone. Fortunately, I remember the phone number from weeks prior as Michael Cole, although I don't think Shannon would notice if he had never known before. I had to explain to him, while on a crowded bus, where I was and why I was there. You can imagine how well that went.

However, things were about to get worse. Paul hadn't arrived alone -- Matt Hardy was with him. I gulped as I stepped toward the car. I didn't know who to be more afraid of -- after all, if there were plans for Mattitude, Shannon may have ruined them, while if there were plans to help Vince, I may have postponed them too long. I was torn between fears. I felt my heart race.

Matt looked at me and smiled. He piled into the seat next to me and gave me a strong hug of acceptance. "Thanks, Matt," I said. "I needed that."

"Now, are you going to be a pro out there? I don't want Vince to have to send you home permanently. I've got a lot of trust in his eyes from you and Greg... I wanna keep it, and I want you to keep employed."

"Yes, Matt," I said, wearily. "If... if anything was supposed to happen, I'm sorry. I just lost control. You ever have times when you feel like your life's a roller coaster? You know, where everything's just goin' around you and you can't stop it, cuz you're just along for the ride? I mean, that's how I feel. So much over the past week, with Jeff and with you and... other things... it's crazy, man. I can't explain."

"Look, I know what Jeff did must be hard on you. I'm his brother -- trust me, I know it's hard to see him become this. You tried -- that's what counts. But come on, you gotta let that be, man. You can't let it get to you! We got a big warmup tonight, and tomorrow we're back in TLC. It's time to get on track, right?"

"Right."

I could only speak in one-word answers. Something inside me hurt more than just feeling like I was unprofessional. As Matt talked about how hard things were on him, a voice kept saying to me that he didn't truly understand. I couldn't explain the nagging feeling -- I could only hope Paul knew what it was.

03:00 PM

I had requested time alone with Paul in the conference room to try to get a fathoming of the timeline here. Apparently, Kathleen hadn't given me the full story -- or, she didn't want to know it herself.

"Andy, it's a lot more complicated than you think, the whole OMEGA thing. See... well, Shannon and Jeff go way back..."

"I know that. Everyone grew up together, broke into the business together... Paul, I was one of the armchair critics on the internet everyone talks about before I died. Heck, I even asked Shannon about how to get into OMEGA."

"Andy, let me finish! See, I'm sure you've heard the rumors... about Jeff... and, well... let's just say it's not like with me or with Patterson."

"Paul? Are you saying you're..."

"No. I'm not. In fact, I'm trying to say the opposite about me. It's not like with me where they have no bearing, or with Pat where he's open about it. This is... well, not too many people know. I only know because Kathleen thought it was weird and wanted to ask me about it."

"Paul... are you saying I'm... I... and he... we... what?"

"Shhh! It's a secret. You and Jeff want to keep it secret."

I couldn't breathe. This wasn't what I had in mind. I had to know more. "Paul... are we still...?"

Paul sat back, trying to get comfortable with a subject he wanted nothing to do with. "Yes. Yes you are. In fact, that's what got Kathleen in trouble. She had a crush on the guy from a long time ago -- her friends had posters of him, and he always wanted to meet the guy. Well, he went down to Cameron after I told her to take time off. Thursday morning, she was panicked. She told me she couldn't see herself. She was barely alive. She said that she..."

"Never mind," I interrupted. "I can imagine. But if that's the case... how did I get here? I shouldn't be Shannon -- should I?"

"I can't answer that. For all I know, Kathleen went to a new level. She didn't tell me. She just said she needed out."

I paused. A million thoughts went through my head. I had never felt this strongly about a guy before. I was figuring the first time it would happen would be when I became a Diva. But now? I knew that feelings were feelings, but I could never... I wouldn't... can I?

"Paul, I'm confused. I don't wanna have to... I shouldn't. It's not right. It's not who I am."

"Andy, it is who you are. Right now, you are Shannon Moore. Whether you like it or not, you have a boyfriend. Would this be any different if you were Torrie Wilson?"

The thought had literally never crossed my mind. There would be a time when I'd see a guy and not only like him, but have no reason to object to it. In reality, why did I have one now? Was it because of who I am this week -- or who I was in a previous life?

"Paul... if Jeff tries to... I mean... what can I do?"

"Andy... if you were a single woman, you wouldn't be asking me. If you were a guy dating someone, you wouldn't ask. You knew what to do when that ringrat talked to John. You don't need my advice. The names may have changed, but the rules are the same. Just remember that."

I thanked Paul and began to leave. As I did, I kept repeating to myself, *it's all the same, it's all the same, it's all the same, it's all...*

05:45 PM

"Shannon -- you gotta see this!"

I ran over. A group of people had gathered by a computer in the back as things were being run off a printer. It was no one near the top of the card -- they were off planning their matches and stories -- but still a sizable crowd. I tried to jump up and down in the back, but I couldn't see the monitor.

"What's the big deal?"

Kidman and Torrie showed me their copy. "You gotta get a pic of this!"

I stared at it. Certainly the picture was nothing amazing -- some girl modelling a piece of Hulk Hogan merchandise. I had no idea when it was taken, but considering the pose, I'd have guessed well over 10 years ago. Still, something was a little off about it.

"I don't get it. Where's it from?"

"Oh, it's from this wrestling crap site... what'd you say it was, Brian?"

"Wrestlecrap.com," Spanky yelled back.

"Yeah, that," Kidman said to me, as if he knew all along. "This was posted on Friday, and Brian here's been giving everyone copies."

"Why?"

Kidman stared at me, wondering how I didn't notice. "Don't you know who that IS?"

Before I could look a second time, the door opened. Stephanie burst in and stormed to the computer. "Brian! What are you printing?"

"Um... Ms. McMahon... i-i-i-it's not what you think..."

"Sure. Right. I got told you had used some program to create an embarrassing photo of me. For your sake, you'd better hope I was told wrong."

It clicked. *Oh, why didn't I see this before? It's so obvious!* I looked quickly back and forth from her to the photo. It took everything I had to keep from bursting out laughing. *This is about 12 years old. And so's she! Whoa, this is wild!*

"W-w-w-well, ma'am... it is a photo of you... but I didn't create it."

"What are you talking about?"

Brian called Stephanie over to the front of the computer and pointed the monitor in her direction. Instantly, she began laughing, her cheeks glowing red. "Oh, my God! Where'd you find that?"

"Oh, this internet site was going over some old WWF Magazine catalogs and pointing out some half-hearted merchandise in them. This picture was in there. I don't think he meant anything by it... ma'am... I just thought the guys would..."

She stopped him and smiled. "That's all right, Brian. My God, I forgot I used to do that. This is wonderful! Hey, can you get a copy over to Production? I think we can use it on tomorrow's show."

"Really? I mean, sure, thanks! Um... one more thing... Steph..."

"Yes, Brian?"

He slowly raised a copy of the photo he had printed. His smile glowed, making him look all of 10 years old -- a look magnified when he spoke with all the sheepishness of someone afraid to be told they'll be sent to bed without supper.

"Could you -- uh -- autograph my copy?"

09:44 PM

We're main eventing. Wow. We came out for the main event of the evening, first to be introduced. The crowd went insane as we were introduced. I couldn't believe the noise. Everyone was holding up the V1 symbol and chanting "Matt! Matt! Matt!" I was in awe. Soon I would be in pain, but I didn't want to think of that.

The trumpet blast and fanfare led the World's Greatest Tag Team out after us. The crowd booed them out of the building as we stood in the ring. I wasn't told the finish -- merely that Matt would be a part of it and that I would know it when I saw it. I just knew that I was in for a long night.

They charged the ring and began to do their usual playing to the crowd as Matt headed outside. I stood in the back and waited for both men to turn their back to me. As they did, I charged. I bounced off of Haas and flew backward. Haas charged me and began to beat me down as Matt re-entered the ring to take on Shelton. Haas at least was able to protect me as he beat my character down. He picked me up, and a double whip was in order. This was something Matt and Shannon had practiced, so I knew what to do -- leap over him as he ducked underneath. This time, though, my momentum carried me straight into Shelton's superkick, knocking me flat.

Shelton covered, but I was up at two. Matt and Haas had left the ring, leaving me to take my punishment. Shelton grabbed a legbar to keep me grounded. I crawled to the ropes, only to have Haas come in via the top rope and legdrop my head. As he was being escorted out, Shelton dropped me throat-first on the top rope from over his head. The familiar feeling of larynx against cable revisited me. *Why, oh, why am I taking both halves of the punishment?*

Shelton swung me into an inverted powerbomb off of the ropes and covered for two. Matt stood on the apron cheering me on as Haas came in. Haas and Shelton introduced a new tag team move -- and I got to be on the receiving end of it. Shelton flipped me into a fireman's carry, out of which Haas gave me a Stunner-type drop. I felt the whiplash as I hit the canvas. *This just isn't fair.*

Haas saw me grab my throat in pain and mounted me UFC-style. His punches weren't aimed at my face, though -- they were hitting the windpipe. I began to shove him off and tried to regain my breath. As he picked me up and put me in a tie-up, I struggled to ask, "Watch it, man!"

"Sorry," he said as he shoved me into his turnbuckle, "Vince's orders."

Shelton tagged in and climbed the turnbuckle. I was flipped onto Haas's shoulders, as the two delivered a Doomsday Device to me. Shelton covered, but Matt made the save. As Matt was escorted out, Haas grabbed me and threw me onto the top rope. As I lay prone, half my body weight on the rope and half on Haas's shoulders, I braced myself for the 250 pounds that was about to land on my back. Knowing it was coming didn't make it any easier.

After crumpling to the mat, I waited for Shelton to ascend the top rope. I didn't know what it was he'd be planning, but I knew I had to block it. He dove off, flipping in midair in a 450 press. He hit my knees, getting a roar from the crowd. I slowly moved toward my corner, feeling Shelton grab my leg as I dragged him along. He stood up. I felt the leg elevated and felt a twist in it. Shelton had turned it into an anklelock. I screamed

in pain and tried to make the ropes as he continued to apply pressure. I crawled over as Matt continued to yell encouragement. After a full minute, I was within an inch...

...only to get pulled back to the center of the ring. I began to try to stand up instead, but Shelton anticipated this and dropped the hold, switching to an STF-like lock. While in this hold, I whispered to Shelton, "Take it easy! Please!"

"Can't," he replied. "I was told to punish you."

"So I heard," I said as I wiggled in an attempt to get free. I couldn't make the hold any easier to get out of, although I used my free leg to roll us both over for a two count before Shelton flipped us back. However, the rolling got us closer to our corner, and Matt climbed to the top rope. He yelled to the crowd and dove, breaking the hold with a legdrop. He returned to the corner as the crowd cheered again. With every ounce I was rightfully expected to have left, I crawled to the corner and extended my hand. Matt slapped it.

I slowly rolled to the outside and dropped off the apron, exhausted and battered. Every shot had been stiff, every hold cranked, every bending and twisting legitimate. As I slowly stood up, I heard a ring crew guy tell me to turn around slowly. When I did, I just barely had enough time to register that Tajiri was there before a red liquid flew straight into my face. I dropped to the ground motionless again. "To your knees," the guy yelled. *Oh no.* I slowly rolled up, facing away from Tajiri, and prepared for the worst. The boot hit my temple, knocking me flat -- but not as bad as I had thought.

In the ring, I heard an extra set of boots as the bell began to rang. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I heard the crowd booing, and I figured Tajiri had run in to get extra revenge. I slowly stood up and rolled into the ring, pulling myself up by the ropes. I saw Spanky and Tajiri -- playing the heels here -- joining in a four-on-one. Matt flew to the outside, and everyone followed him. I stood up and surveyed the situation. *Here goes nothing.* As Matt slid under the ring, I bounced off the far ropes. Everyone looked up just in time to see me launch and twist in midair. I dove backfirst onto the pile, which collapsed underneath me. The crowd began to cheer loudly as we slowly pulled ourselves up. Meanwhile, Matt had returned from under the ring and climbed onto the apron. As we all stood up, he delivered a quebrada onto all of us, and back down we went, with the crowd going insane the whole time.

We all picked ourselves up, and I felt two sets of fists hitting me in the back. I was tossed back into the ring when I heard the crowd cheer. I turned my head to the entrance and saw why -- the APA were headed to the ring. Simmons tossed Spanky around a few times while Bradshaw pounded Tajiri in the corner. I grabbed Haas as he rolled in and ran up the corner. One tornado DDT later, he hightailed it out. Bradshaw delivered his clothesline to Tajiri, who bailed soon after. The heels walked out as we all celebrated in the ring.

11:45 PM
Raleigh, NC

"John... couldn't we... just take... the elevator?"

I was assigned baggage duty by Bradshaw for himself and for Ron. From what I

could gather, their bags contained all their free weights and enough rubble to reconstruct the Man of the Mountain's face in New Hampshire. It didn't help that they were the sixth floor of the hotel -- or that Bradshaw insisted on taking the stairs.

"C'mon, boy, don't wuss out on me," he yelled. "If I can do it, you can do it!"

"Yes... sir."

Finally, after what seemed like 17 hours, we arrived at the APA's hotel room. John slid his key in and opened the door. I quickly dumped everything off where he said and was dismissed. I crawled out of the room and checked my own keypass. *Oh, joy, right next door.*

If they make me carry those bags again tomorrow, I think I'll go insane. On my door was a picture. It must have come from the WrestleCrap site, because everything was as I recognized it from visits when I was alive.

WRESTLECRAP (res'l krap): n.: 1) a gimmick that is an embarrassment to pro wrestling; 2) any angle that results in pain and agony to all who see it; 3) Shannon Moore no-selling the green mist -- come on, you're only Shannon Moore!

Under it was a note: "Shannon -- you're famous! Spanky"

Great. I have a lot to make up for. I guess I'd better do everything I can tomorrow, or I'll be fired. Okay, or Shannon will be fired.

Or maybe, I'll go with him.

Tuesday, September 16, 2003, 10:35 AM
Raleigh, NC

My mind was so cluttered with thoughts that my head hurt as I walked in for the meeting. Well, my arms hurt too -- turns out Bradshaw did put unnecessary weight in his bag when I was carrying it. I knew better than to complain about a few free weights, since there had to be somewhere to put them, but I thought 25 pounders were just a bit over the top. Then again, Shannon was being punished -- the tribe had spoken, so to speak.

Matt was next to me, his eyes brighter than I remembered in a long time. There was a spring in his step, and I couldn't imagine what was the sudden fanfare. "Matt," I asked, "what's with you? You win the lottery?"

"Nope, better," he replied. "We're gonna win tonight!"

"We are?"

"Yeah! I mean, we're still gonna get the bejezus pounded out of us -- specially you -- but they're giving us a mini-reign of a week or two as we go through our home base."

"Sweet."

"Yeah it is. It's gonna be awesome."

"Wait -- how much we gonna take?"

"Well, it is a TLC match. They're brutal. Trust me, we're gonna fly through tables and off of ladders -- I mean, nothing we all haven't done before, but it's gonna be a lot at once, you know?"

"Yeah, I see." I was hardly looking forward to it, especially with Bradshaw and Tajiri in there to dole out my sentence. However, it appeared Vince had a soft side. I'd have to see, I guess.

Vince walked in and sat down in the front row. The crowd seemed to hush a little with his presence. Unbeknownst to the others, I slipped on my glasses in an attempt to find Greg. As I saw Vince, I yanked them off. In his place had been something I'd never seen before. It was dressed in a black toga, and it seemed to notice my presence -- even as Vince looked the other way, it turned to face me. Just seeing it made me feel scared for my being, even though it was 10 yards away. I gulped as a tear rolled down my cheek. I didn't even know I was crying, but my eyes stung from the vision.

I couldn't pay attention to the RAW broadcast. I only saw things happen in a blur, taking in partial results. *I could look them up later if I wanted to... as soon as this image leaves me.* The results weren't all that surprising, and the show was basically a buildup show. It was nothing we couldn't blow out of the water.

03:15 PM

"Paul, I'm telling you, it was huge. It wore this sheet over its shoulders and it knew I was watching... I was scared for my life just seeing its eyes!"

"Hold on, Andy, hold on," said Paul, trying desperately to calm me down. We were in the conference room, as Greg (Hogan) and I had equally distressed looks on our faces. Greg had seen the same thing I did, but he saw it the previous day. We both trembled as we tried to describe it to Paul, who was confused.

"Let me step outside for a second. I gotta call Shawn. I'll be right back."

He exited, leaving Greg and myself alone.

"Greg," I said, "you don't think Vince is better, do you?"

"Brother, he didn't look better today. I'm scared, dude."

"Me too. I'm just glad Kath's safe this week."

"Where is she?"

"She's still in Recovery -- I think whatever she did was a big mistake... she nearly blinked out. She's got a lot to learn, man."

Greg scoffed at me. "You're one to talk. You nearly broke her will to live. Now look where it's gotten us -- Shannon Moore's this close to being fired, Tajiri's really pissed off... you ruined her."

"Oh, come on. You're just saying that because she..." I stopped myself. *Was I really going to say what I think I was about to say? That would've been a big mistake. I could've jeopardized our entire relationship. Then at best, I'd wake up the next Monday in a new environment. At worst, I'd never wake up.*

"Andy... look, I think I gotta set the record straight, man. I was her age when I died. Not much older, anyway, bro. I never got a chance to live right. I've been doing this longer than anyone else, but I'm new to this assignment. I wanted to make her feel at home. She's a wonderful girl, and I really like her. I don't want anything bad to happen. That's why I'm so defensive."

Longer than anyone else? "Greg," I said, "how old were you? And when did you

die?"

He paused for a long time, as if struggling with a secret he felt shame about. "You saw me. You know I was wearing combat stuff when I got shot. I was 20. But I've been 20 for longer than I've been alive. Andy, I died during Tet."

I paused. "Tet? What was that?"

"You kids don't know your history," he smirked. "The Tet Offensive. It was a big sucker-punch during the Vietnam War. Both sides had a standing agreement to leave the other alone on their holy day. But the Cong attacked us. We were blitzed. I couldn't respond. That's what got me here."

"Damn," I said. "So you died like I did. Ambushed."

"Kinda," he replied. "I mean, I didn't want to fight over there, but... you couldn't avoid it. You couldn't just back off like some of my friends did. That's not who I am. I'm given a task, and dammit, I go do it. That's why I'm being so close to Kath -- I want to teach her to fight through it. I've done this before. I'm almost always paired with young people. It's how I keep the dream alive."

I thought before responding. Here was someone who had been working with his high school and college contemporaries for longer than I'd been in existence, alive or dead. I guess he knew how to handle someone like Kathleen. I also guessed I didn't.

I began to wonder if I was more harm than good. It was certain that I needed to patch things up, but with Kathleen emotionally and physically unstable, now wasn't the time. I bit my lip as I tried to imagine whether my existence was the problem. Certainly, she saw me last week and couldn't handle it, but over the weekend she seemed to cling to me. Maybe it was because she needed someone, anyone, to talk to. I wasn't quite in the position to help. I even hated saying I forgave her -- because I wasn't sure I did.

"Greg," I finally said, "do you think it would be best if I left the mission?"

"No, you can't do that," he replied almost immediately. "You were put here to help others. You can't just leave. You've already done some good -- I heard about Eddie. You're not a negative. You just need to put things aside with Kathleen."

"I don't know if I can... I think I..." I took a deep breath. "I think I should switch off. When Kathleen comes back, she's going to still hate me. I can't have her do that. For everyone's sake, it's best if I just move out of the picture."

"Well, that's not my call to make," he said. "I guess it would be ok if you asked someone else about it. But I don't choose where you go. You have to work that out inside."

Everything he was saying made sense. I couldn't explain why, but it did. I knew that what he said was what was true. I also knew it was what I believed. If I was going to gain any sort of closure, now was not the time. The best thing was to move on, if only for a little while.

"Greg," I said. "How do I put in a request to transfer? At least, I can go to RAW."

"Well, the important thing is to talk to Paul. He'll try to work it out. But the problem is... it's not his decision either. I mean, Paul and Shawn thought Lindsay and I would switch, but if God thinks you're better off with SmackDown!, brother, you're staying there. It has nothing to do with whose Recovery room you're in or what city you stop at."

"So what do I do?"

"Same thing we all do. Ask for help."

Just then, Paul returned. "Guys, I talked to Shawn, and he isn't sure what it is either, but he'll keep me posted. He says he's going to run it by Lindsay and Owen and see if they know. Greg, you sure you haven't seen this before?"

"Not that I can remember. I mean, not this in particular, no. And none of my intermediaries know what it is either."

"Okay, guys... just be careful. Whatever it is... it seems to know about us. That can't be good. Come on, guys. Let's go win some hearts and minds."

As we left, Greg stopped me. He had removed the glasses and paused before readying himself for the transformation to Hulk Hogan. "Andy, bro," he said, "just try to do the right thing. That's all we can do."

I nodded and went on my way. Before I left, though, Paul poked his head back in. "Sorry, guys... Andy, it's Lindsay. She's Maven this week, just to let you know... she wants to talk to you."

I took the phone. "Hey."

"Andy, what did you see? I think I know what it is."

"It was this creature... it didn't even look all that human. It had this glow in its eyes when it turned to face me. Just seeing the thing made me want to run somewhere else. And I took off my glasses, and the thing wasn't facing the same way Vince was. It could move without him and see without him..."

"Wait, it moved when Vince didn't? Oh no."

"What? What is it?"

"He's possessed."

"He's what?"

"Andy, there are such things as demons. This shouldn't surprise you."

"How? People who are lost just blink out."

"Not all of them! Some of them are renewed as evil beings. They live by hopping from lost to lost and destroying them from within. If we can't get to Vince soon, he'll die!"

"But how much time do we have?"

"I don't know... they're all different. Jake the Snake's still alive, and he's been... six years or so. Pillman... Brian didn't last two months. I'd have to see him. I'll let you know next time I see him."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know... he's with you now... I presume he's going to go from MSG to Unforgiven. Next week I'll know more. I'm sorry I can't be of any help now."

"No, no... you've helped a lot. I'm just gonna warn Greg. Thank you. I'll try to see you soon."

I hung up and turned to Greg. "We're in a lot of trouble."

Tuesday, September 16, 2003, 06:44 PM
Raleigh, NC

All four teams were in separate parts of the building getting ready for the TLC match. Each one had a soundbite to shoot that would play over their entrance for the home crowd. All eight of us were to be interviewed about our roles in this event.

Before the soundbite, Matt called me aside. He seemed mildly stressed out.

"What's wrong, Matt?"

"It's just... tonight's gonna be bittersweet, man. All the way up the line, it's been me and Jeff, Jeff and me. We've both stuck together for so long... and now I'm winning with someone else. I feel like... well, no offense or nothin', but... it's just weird. I wish he could be here to share it. You know?"

I saw a chance. "Matt," I said, "Jeff needs to see you. You need to talk to him. He's not good... I couldn't get to him. I think he needs to talk to family."

"Shannon, I really want to, but we got titles to defend. Vince is countin' on us."

"Matt, he'll let you do this for one weekend. Look, how's this: I'll talk to him about taking Sunday off. We can drop the titles back at MSG -- heck, we're only having them as transitions anyway -- then we watch Unforgiven with Jeff and catch up with everyone in Philly on Tuesday. It'll work, won't it?"

"I dunno... I'm just torn, man. I wanna help him, but I wanna... I don't wanna be fired."

"Matt, you're not gonna be fired. Vince isn't like that." *Well, he wasn't before this whole demon thing, anyway.* "He'll understand. He saw what Jeff was like. C'mon, Matt... just... lemme try, okay?"

"All right... lemme be there when we talk, though. I think I know what to say."

09:27 PM

All four teams stood in the ring. Haas and Shelton had just entered and were huddling in one corner. The APA drank a final round on the way to the ring, and prepped themselves. Spanky was busy heeling it to the crowd -- given our status as faces, Spanky had cut an in-house promo to be the heel. I simply stared upward. *That's a long way to climb.*

Tajiri slid out of the ring and returned with a chair. He charged at me. *Aw crap.* Upon impact, I dove backwards over the top rope to the floor. I heard a thousand shots in the ring as the war was on. Tajiri slid outside and picked me up. I low blowed him to regain my bearings, then charged him. He ducked and sent me flying onto the steps. I rolled off of them to the floor as Tajiri returned to the ring. I waited for over a minute as the crowd oohed and ahhed in the ring.

I walked around and found a ladder on the outside. I looked in the ring. The APA were beating on Haas and Matt with chairs. I put the ladder on the apron and climbed over it into the ring. I then picked up the ladder and charged the APA. I tossed the ladder at them, then dropkicked it, knocking them both over. On the other side of the ring, Matt had knocked Haas into the corner and gone down on all fours. I knew what to do next. I charged, ready to vault off of Matt. However, Haas did the vaulting and knocked me down with a huge clothesline, which I spun out of.

As I crawled up, I felt a huge boot on my back. I braced myself as the boot placed its weight on me, then pushed off. I collapsed afterward, then looked in the direction the boot was headed. Matt had done Poetry in Motion off of me onto Spanky and Shelton. *Why didn't he warn me?* I slowly got to my feet, only to see Simmons setting the ladder

up and trying to climb. I pulled him off, then ran up the ladder while holding his head, turning it into a Tornado DDT. When I stood up, Bradshaw came at me with a chair, knocking me back down for quite some time.

As I lay motionless, I heard the crowd chant for tables. Tajiri tried a ladder climb, but was yanked off. I heard Bradshaw hit several people with a chair, until Spanky gave him a Vandaminator. With only Simmons and Spanky up, Simmons delivered a spinebuster on the ladder, then rolled outside to find a table. As he did, I slowly crawled to my feet. Simmons set the table up in the corner as I stood up. Simmons grabbed me from behind and back suplexed me as Matt rolled outside for a second table.

Simmons picked me up and went to toss me into the table, but I slid out of the ring. Meanwhile, Haas and Shelton had recovered and were climbing. Simmons shoved the ladder down, causing both men to fall, then picked up the ladder and charged to the outside. I ran away, then climbed the guardrail. As Simmons stalked Matt, I ran and rounded the corner. I tackled the ladder into Simmons, sacrificing myself again. Back in the ring, Tajiri had found another ladder, and more climbing attempts were being made.

As I got up, Simmons crawled around behind me. He had the ladder and set it up on the outside. I pounded him from behind and tossed him into the ring. He rolled to a spot near the corner as I adjusted the ladder. "Stay down," I said to him as I climbed. At the top, I saw he was perfectly positioned. I leapt off the ladder, doing a half twist in mid-air and landing seated on the top rope. From there, I used the momentum to complete a backflip onto Simmons. The result: a split-legged moonsault type thing that probably seemed better in theory than in execution. *Hopefully it's the thought that counts.*

As I got up, I saw that Spanky was agonizingly close to the belts, while Haas was crawling over. I thought fast and charged the ladder. I dove for Spanky near the top, causing the ladder to tumble over. Spanky, the ladder, and I all landed on Haas's back. We were all down again as Matt and Tajiri started doing their part.

I rolled out of the ring and met Bradshaw on the outside. I started to backpedal as the big Texas seemed like a bull, snorting and foaming at the mouth, ready to charge and gore. He charged, all right, but I sidestepped and sent him crashing over the steps into the guardrail. *Whew.*

I looked under the ring and pulled out another table, bringing the total to three. As Matt, Haas, and Spanky were going at it in the ring, Simmons and I set up the three tables in a pyramid on the outside. Meanwhile, Bradshaw had recovered enough to grab a fourth table. This one he brought into the ring. He clotheslined down three people in a row, but Matt dropkicked him out of the ring. Simmons came back in and doubled him over with a boot to the gut. From there, he turned Matt around and hit the Dominator through the in-ring table, throwing himself down for extra force. With Simmons on his knees in front of Matt and the wreckage, Tajiri dimmed his lights with the buzzsaw kick. Two men out, five to go.

I climbed back into the ring, where I expected Tajiri to attack me. He didn't, though, because Bradshaw returned and did it first. I tried to defend myself from the fists landing against my skull, but they came too fast for me. My left eye was almost swollen shut. I thought fast and went low on Bradshaw to get him to stop. It worked, as he sold the low blow. I tossed him through the ropes to the outside, where he staggered onto the lower deck of tables. Haas grabbed me from behind, though, and held me in position for Shelton to deliver the leapfrog choke. I waited. It took forever, but he finally landed, and

with seemingly double the force, as if he had jumped off a ladd... er... *oh*.

I writhed around on the floor as Shelton climbed the top rope. He was ready to fly off the top rope, but Spanky crotched him. Spanky then climbed up after him and delivered a superplex onto the spare ladder on Shelton. Tajiri, meanwhile, baseball slid to the outside to knock a returning Bradshaw back to the table stack. Both men proceeded to beat each other into a pulp while Haas grabbed me back in the ring. He set me up on the top rope and was to try a back superplex. I twisted in midair and landed on top of him, getting the crowd recharged. On the outside, Tajiri was placed on the lower deck of the table pyramid, and Bradshaw was about to return. I baseball slid him, and this time Bradshaw did it properly, flying back onto the lower deck next to Tajiri. I stood at the ropes when Haas charged. I ducked and flipped him over the top. Haas somersaulted out onto the top table, breaking it and crashing him into the lower two tables, breaking them as well. Haas had put himself, Tajiri, and Bradshaw through tables. I was alone.

I slumped over to where Matt was and revived him. The two of us staggered over to the ladder and climbed. The crowd got louder and louder. Nothing could stop us. We were at the top. I reached, but Matt stopped me. He pantomimed what was basically an "allow me". I held the ladder steady as Matt loosened the strap. The bell rang, and the crowd exploded. The hometown boys had won.

12:14 AM

"Paul, I have to do this."

"Why, Andy? What's wrong?"

"I don't think right now that Kathleen and I can work together. And you told me to be the better man. So I'm willing to move if it will make things easier."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm very sure. I don't know how it'll happen, but I'm gonna ask to be on RAW. You work it out with Shawn. Let him know I'm coming over. This shouldn't be negotiable, ok?"

"Fine. I'll see what I can do. If you think this is the right thing... go with your heart. That's all I can advise."

Friday, September 19, 2003, 11:15 AM
Stamford, CT

Paul drove us to the Titan headquarters. Matt was merely told that he wanted to say the storylines could cover the absence. I knew better. I knew that Vince would likely be a tough sell, especially since his demon knew of me. Paul had been able in the past to reason with him. I hoped now would be the time.

We entered the top floor of Titan Towers. Vince McMahon sat behind his desk. Everything was a glistening silver, from the shine on the metal frame of his desk to the "home gym" apparatus he kept in the corner. The shine was so bright, no one could have

guessed the dark secret within.

"Mr. McMahon, sir," began Matt. "Shannon and I are gonna stage an intervention for my brother. He needs to clean up his act, and we think this is gonna help. We'd like permission to do it on Sunday, and if need be, we'll drop the titles in MSG instead of on SmackDown! Would that help you?"

Vince turned around in his chair. I stared into his eyes. Already I couldn't tell whether they were blue, green, or gray. All I could see was black. *Maybe it's just me. Maybe it's that I know what the deal is. Yeah, that's it.*

"Matt, we gave you these titles as a vote of confidence. If you were going to be absent for the weekend, you could have told us before the TLC match, right?"

"Well, Mr. McMahon... it's that I just found out about this today. Like I said, tomorrow we'll go out and job these over if ya want. We wanna do what's right for the WWE, but first and foremost, we wanna do what's right for my brother."

"I'm sure you do," said Vince, his sincerity ringing a falsehood with me. "Paul, why are you here?"

"Well, Vince, I've talked with the boys on the writing team, and we feel that we can work our way through this if necessary. This sort of thing is probably not that big a deal in the end, and, uh, if they need extra time we can handle that while still building to No Mercy."

"Extra time? These two BOYS want time? Matt, I can understand why you'd think your brother is worth the time of day..."

Vince turned to me. My blood ran cold as he spoke.

"...but Shannon... this is not your fight to win. Don't try to defy me on this. You will submit to my authority, and you will do what I want, when I want it. You can't beat me. What makes you think I have to have my will subjected to that of a little punk like you?"

"VINCE!" Paul screamed and grabbed him by the arm. "For God's sake, he just wants time off! He's not jumping ship! Now let him have it, for your own damn good."

Vince's eyes narrowed, and he stared at Paul as if trying to use laser beams to burn two holes in his chest. Eventually, he softened. His teeth lost their grit. He took deep breaths.

"I'm sorry, Paul, you're right. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I'm gettin' a little old, huh? Anyway, guys, it's all right. Take the time you need. You don't have to drop the titles tomorrow. But I expect that you'll do what's right when you return." His eyes stared right at me again. "Both of you."

I held my ground. "Yes, sir."

Saturday, March 20, 08:03 PM
MSG, NYC, NY, USA

The APA awaited us in the ring as the MSG's screens loaded the Mattitude 'webpage'. I glanced at the Matt Fact: Matt has been part of 2 championship teams. I chuckled. *How typically self-serving.* We entered the arena, showing our V-1 hand sign. The tag team belt didn't seem to fit right around my waist. Perhaps there was a very good reason for that -- I wasn't championship material -- but now wasn't the time to think of

that. Now was the time to die.

It began as soon as we entered the ring. They met us and began pounding away. Thankfully for me, Simmons took me while Bradshaw took Matt. *I've had enough punishment for one week.* It wasn't to last, as I was soon whipped into Bradshaw's Clothesline from Hell. Matt saved at two, but the punishment wasn't over. Bradshaw whipped me hard into the turnbuckle, then charged in, crunching me and sending me to the ground. He dropped a series of knees to my back before I bailed out.

Matt went around and found me as Simmons and Bradshaw approached. Each one charged us, but we ducked and they crashed into each other. We rolled Bradshaw back in and switched off. Matt began working his arm to pause for time while Simmons led an "APA" chant. When I was tagged back in, I landed a pair of dropkicks to the shoulder before continuing the armbar. Bradshaw tries to power out of it into a Samoan drop, but I slid down his back and rolled him up for two. Bradshaw was up quickly, but I ducked him and went back to an armbar. As he made the ropes, I stomped the arm and tagged Matt back in.

Matt went to the top rope and yelled. Bradshaw chased him up for a superplex, but Matt headbutted the arm and delivered a second-rope Side Effect. Simmons saved, but as the ref escorted him out, I entered and did the same thing to Bradshaw that Kathleen had done to me -- dropped his throat on the top rope. I ran back to the corner, smiling, as Matt hit a German suplex for two. I climbed to the top rope as he tagged me in. He grabbed my arms as I leaned forward, and we hit a rocket launcher. I covered for two. I pretended to get mad, then set him up for a Twist of Fate. Alas, I didn't yell prior to it, so the cover still only got two.

I tagged Matt in as we got more and more frustrated. Matt went up top as I climbed the opposite buckle. We dove for the combination legdrop/splash that Matt and Jeff used to do. Of course, this time, it missed, as Bradshaw rolled out of both of our ways, leaving everyone down. Bradshaw crawled to his corner. I clung onto his ankle desperately, only to be kicked away. Matt grabbed his other ankle as I dove to the front to elbowdrop him. I left the ring, but as I did, Matt pulled Bradshaw up for an ankle lock, only to be kicked away to the corner. Bradshaw got Simmons in.

Simmons attacked Matt in the corner, pummeling him with fists to the midsection. I ran in to pull Simmons away, only to get doubled over by a shot to the solar plexus, then spine bustered as only Simmons could. I rolled back out of the ring as Simmons beat Matt down repeatedly. He set Matt up for the Dominator, but I ran back in and clipped him from behind. Matt fell on top for two. Bradshaw returned as the referee lost control, and all four of us were at it again.

In the melee, Simmons tossed me across the ring. I saw the referee standing there, and I acted like I was trying to slam on the breaks, but I couldn't. I collided with Mike Chioda, and we both went down. I rolled outside and grabbed the title belt, bringing it in with me. I hit Bradshaw in the shoulder with it, causing him to grab it in pain. I tried to capitalize with an armbar, but at the same time, Simmons slammed me and grabbed the belt. He clocked Matt with it as a second referee entered. Simmons covered, and the arena counted the three along with the ref.

The APA's music played as I slowly rolled to my feet. I saw Chioda pulling himself up by the ropes as Brian Hebner handed Simmons the one title belt. He couldn't find the other, which Simmons had cavalierly tossed out of the ring. Chioda saw it,

though. He staggered over to Hebner, and the two began an argument. Chioda pointed to the belt in the aisleway, as I walked over to add to the illusion. Chioda and Hebner were yelling about which one had jurisdiction.

Vince didn't tell us which way it would go. He said he'd make up his mind and relay it to the referees. He seemed rather upset, but I know Matt and I said we didn't mind. It's Madison Square Garden. These things happen. I just hope he isn't setting us up. I looked at Matt. He half-smiled as he rolled up. *He must expect to win.* Finally, I heard Chioda speak:

"All right, the call stands."

Sunday, September 21, 2003, 03:15 PM
Cameron, NC

Evan had joined us at Jeff's place -- well, if it could be called a place. The living quarters were in disarray. The TV was set to the PPV channel -- Jeff was ordering -- but it was on top of an overturned clothes-hamper. All around were old clothes. The place had a mildly unpleasant odor that I couldn't place. Pots and pans sat in the sink. I saw a needle in the trash can, which hadn't been emptied in weeks.

"Jeff... bro... what the hell? What's going on?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm applying for a job with CZW, man. I think I can stick this time."

"You in CZW? That won't be pretty, man. Besides, that's in Philadelphia, and you're here in North Carolina! You can't make your life doing OMEGA all year."

"I can try. I don't eat much, I don't get luxuries..."

"Jeff, look at this place. This is what trying has gotten you so far. You were sent out of the WWE because you were out of control. I don't see you in control yet. I, we, want to help you. Shannon and I gave up a World Tag Team title reign to be here with you!"

"Shut up, Matt. You won them. I saw it."

I jumped in. "No, Jeff. We lost them last night in MSG. Vince said to choose between you and the titles. We're here."

"You're idiots. I don't need your help. I don't need to be pulled out of anything, man. I got my friends here, and I got a job here. I'm fine."

Evan walked over to the trash can and pulled the needle off of it. "Is this what your friends give you?" he asked. "Because if so, they won't be your friends when you become another guy out on the street. You know we'll let you in. They won't!"

"Evan, please, let me," said Matt. "Jeff, I know why you left. You're hooked on this stuff. You'll never be let in -- Combat won't do it -- unless you're clean. You gotta get yourself back on track. Whether it's us, or the band, or just starting over in a clean life. You need help."

Jeff stared at Matt. "Do I look like someone who needs help? I'm fine. I'm in great health. I'm taking care of myself."

"Look around!" I yelled. "You call this garbage dump taking care of yourself? This place looks like a welfare home. Do you even get out any more unless it's to work?"

Do you honestly have fun? Jeff, I don't want anything to happen to you. You gotta wake up. You gotta get off this shit and turn it around. Please."

Jeff simply stared at me. He seemed to be at a loss for words. Something was bothering him. He looked at the needle in Evan's hand. His teeth gritted. I could tell he was trying not to cry.

"Guys," I said, "allow me. I think I can help."

I grabbed Jeff's arm and took him into his room while Matt and Evan waited. I closed the door behind me.

"Jeff, listen," I said, thinking back to the actions that Kathleen performed and Shannon remembered. "I came here last week to cheer you up. I didn't do the right thing. Look, I may love you, but I'm not gonna let this be a part of my life. Jeff, you gotta make a decision. Right here and now, decide between me and the drug. I'm not gonna take a backseat to your habit."

Jeff was angry. He put one arm around my neck, and the other went up my outer thigh. "Shannon, baby, I don't wanna lose you. I swear I'm not bad. I really ain't. I just gotta be me. You knew that."

"This isn't being you, Jeff," I snapped as I pushed his hand away from my leg. "You're not a slave to anyone or anything. Right now, you are, because you're not being you. The Jeff I know and love wouldn't let himself be taken over by some inanimate object. Whatever happened to pushing the limits? To living your life to the edge? You can't do that stuck in North Carolina. Please, listen."

"Shannon, it's too late. I..."

"It's never too late. Look, you don't need this wrestling stuff. I'd be so much happier if you were doing some desk job, clean and sober, making money, in touch with us. Matt doesn't deserve to be cut out of your life. Be a part of the human race. Got it?"

Jeff stared at me. He kissed me quickly, while seemingly holding back tears.

"Shannon... get a blood test. Please."

"Jeff... are you going to get help? I want you to go to rehab. You need to beat this."

"Fine. Fine, I'll do it. Just get tested. Please."

I figured there was nothing to lose by agreeing. I didn't feel worried. "Okay. I will. I want you to keep your promise too, though."

"All right... all right. Thank you, Shannon."

"Don't thank me yet. Thank me when you're sober and straightedge. You need help... at least you know now."

He just cried. "Could you get Matt please?"

I stepped outside. "Matt," I called. "Jeff wants to talk to you now."

07:47 PM

We gathered around the TV in Jeff's place, ready to enjoy another Pay-Per-View together like the ones we'd watched as kids. Matt had ordered the pizza, while I got the place in better condition. Evan and Jeff were playing checkers to pass the time. Meanwhile, Spike TV was on, and Heat had reached the main event.

Evil, dark music plays as Lance Storm -- in full black and yellow regalia -- makes his way to the ring. He smiles as he enters the ring, then poses in the middle with a maniacal laugh, which is certainly better than when he started. He waits for his foe.

STAND BACK yells the PA system as the Hurricane enters down a green-lit entranceway. He strikes his pose at the top of the entranceway as the crowd cheers. He enters the ring and stares at Storm, who stares right back. Both men remove their capes and continue staring as they wait for the bell.

They lock up, and Storm chops out of it, tossing Hurricane to the corner and sneering at him. Hurricane stands back up and charges in. A slugfest erupts, which Storm wins by kicking Hurricane's leg, then hitting the clawhold. Hurricane begins to wilt, then when the referee counts two, he dramatically returns to a standing position, charging up the whole time. He knocks Storm down with a right hand. Storm pops back up and gets hit a second time, then a third time.

Hurricane gives the thumbs-up and climbs to the top rope. His moonsault press is caught by Storm, who teases a Tombstone attempt before losing his balance and falling on his back for two. Hurricane and Storm both stand up and stare each other down before Storm tries to go low. Hurricane blocks him and delivers the Shining Wizard for two. Storm is dazed, so Hurricane climbs to the top rope with his cape and hits a Superman dive... that falls about a foot short as Storm backpedals. Storm laughs an evil laugh, then bends over and yells something at Hurricane about his impending doom. This, of course, is Primary Villain Error #1, as Hurricane recovers enough to grab the goozle. Storm reverses it to an armbar, but Hurricane makes the ropes.

Storm stares at the referee, as if trying to intimidate him. He then grabs Hurricane and begins to try to remove the mask. Hurricane blocks it by biting Storm's hand, complete with oversell from Storm. Hurricane then delivers a discus punch to Storm, knocking him down. He picks Storm up for the Eye of the Hurricane, but Storm hooks the ropes and Hurricane crashes down without him.

Before Storm can capitalize, though, the familiar engine roar starts up. Kevin Nash, not seen since SummerSlam makes his return, chugging down the aisle after Storm. Nash boots Storm down, causing **the referee to end the match**. As Hurricane gets up, he objects to the foul play and gets pummeled as well. Hurricane and Storm deliver a double superkick to knock Nash down, but Storm DDTs Hurricane soon after. Nash is back up and clotheslines Storm as all three attack each other while officials try to break it up. Jim Ross screams about how wild the Pay-Per-View will be if this is only Heat.

We turned the channel over to the PPV station as the doorbell rang. "Hey, right on time," said Matt, answering the door. Jeff took a seat next to me and gave me a quick hug. "Thanks," he said.

"No," I replied. "Thank you."

- The SmarK Rant for Unforgiven, Sept. 21, 2003.

- Live from Hershey, PA.

- Your hosts are **Good Ol' JR** and **Jerry Lawler**, with **Jonathan Coachman** playing third wheel backstage.

- Earlier on Heat, **Hurricane** and **EVIL~!** **Lance Storm** had themselves a fine match until **Big Injured Kevin Nash** made his return to break it up. Yeah, Kev may be over, but he's clearly the third wheel here. Match ran 7:03 and got an astonishing ***1/2 despite all the silliness, making it Match of the Night. And with that, we're off.

- Opening match, Tag Team Titles: **Dudley Boyz** vs. **Chris Nowinski and Rodney Mack**. Dudleyz bring **Trish Stratus** out to counter the thugger and/or bugger at ringside. Big brawl to start, as the black team (which is half white) beats up on the white team (which is half black). I wholeheartedly support the use of Nowinski in any storyline where he can be an ironic arrogant heel. It works SO much better that way. Mack pounds on **Bubba** and gets That F*cking Move for two. Bubba elbows out, and he and **D-Von** hit a double neckbreaker (WHICH IS NOT 3-D, JIMBO!) for two. D-Von slams Mack down, but Nowinski pops him with the PHANTOM OF THE OPERA SPECIAL FACIAL APPLIANCE OF DEATH to make D-Von brother-in-peril. Nowinski comes in with a DDT and suplex for two. Mack tries the Blackout, but Bubba saves. **Teddy Long**, of course, adds his two cents on the outside with a few stomps, getting Mack two. Nowinski goes for the Double Arm DDT, but Bubba stops it. Mack cuts off the hot tag and pounds away for two. Team Black hits a double suplex for two. Double clothesline misses, noggins get knocked, hot tag Bubba. Bubba Bomb for Nowinski, but Long tries to interfere. Ref is distracted, so Trish takes D-Von's place in the Wazzup Drop, and Nowinski gets nailed in the Ivy Leagues. Mack catches Trish in a sitout MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER, but D-Von foregoes the tables to object with the Saving Grace. **3-D finishes on Nowinski at 8:24**. Very energetic opener, as everyone had fun out there. **3/4

- BUT WAIT! **Jazz** objects to the result, leading to **Nowinski** putting **D-Von** through a table. **Molly** runs in for the save, and we get...

- Women's Title: **Molly Holly** v. **Jazz**. Molly and Jazz begin catfighting right from the opening bell, which is so unnecessary for these two. Jazz controls with a shot to the turnbuckle, followed by blows to the back of the neck. A bridging chinlock follows, but Molly makes the ropes. Jazz hits a swinging neckbreaker for two. **Rodney Mack** (still at ringside) drops Molly's neck on the ropes, getting two for Jazz. A brawl erupts on the outside and the ref sends them all to the back, missing Molly scoring a rollup for what would have been three. Molly goes up top, but Jazz meets her with a superplex into an STF. Molly barely makes the ropes. She's dead weight, though, so Jazz tries a powerbomb, only to have Molly sandbag it. A second try is reversed to a rana for two. Jazz lariats Molly for two. Blackout, but Molly falls back on Jazz for two. Jazz tries a half-crab, but Molly wiggles out to an enzuigiri. She's barely able to stand, so Jazz is up first and covers for two. Jazz picks Molly up, and a piledriver gets two. Rude Awakening gets two. Fisherman's buster gets two. Jazz tries it again off the top, but Molly shoves her off, then hits the Molly-Go-Round for the pin at 6:59. Crowd was deeply into this match, but it was just the standard women's stuff, only with a story attached. Molly sold like a champ, and JR did his job putting her over too. I smell big things for Molly now. *3/4

- Backstage, **HHH** is searching WWE.com to figure out who his opponent is. **Steve Austin** reminds us he's the referee for tonight.

- Intercontinental Title: **Booker T** vs. **Randy Orton**. Booker cleans house to start, causing Orton to bail. Booker slides out to meet him and the two brawl around ringside. Back in the ring (what a concept), Orton clips him to take over. Kneebar and kneedrop get two. Play of the Day gets two. Legsweep and figure-four follow, but Booker makes the ropes. Orton simply kicks his leg out of his leg for two. He even does **Owen's** "what about me" pantomime, in a bit that I'm sure maybe 5 people caught. But I'm one of them, which is all that matters. Boston crab, but we're in Pennsylvania so Booker powers out. Missile dropkick is ducked, and Booker comes back. Axe kick, but Booker stalls mid-Spinarooni due to the leg. Orton hits a rolling cradle for two. He switches to a Sharpshooter (damn, is Owen's ghost booking now?), but Booker reverses to one of his own. Seriously, this is so Stampede-influenced. The only thing missing is **Evil Ref Sandy Scott**. Orton breaks, then mule kicks Booker before trying an Orto-Roonie. It goes as well as expected. Booker clotheslines him down, then goes up top. Missile dropkick hurts Booker more than Orton, and Orton captializes with a figure-four. Booker makes the ropes. Oklahoma Roll gets two for Orton. He tries an Indian deathlock, but bothces it and Booker kicks away to cover for the mistake. Booker's leg lariat hits the ref, allowing **HHH** to run in. Booker ducks him and gives HIM the leg lariat, but Orton finds both belts and clocks Booker with them (stacked) as **Flair** revives the ref for the pin and title change at 8:14. Orton is improving daily, and I like where this goes with Booker. Preferably to the main event for revenge. **3/4

- **La Resistance** v. **New Blood**. **Conway** and **Dupree** start, and Dupree slaps away and does a cartwheel. Conway goes ballistic with punches, and a belly-to-belly gets two. **Grenier** eats one as well, and both men bail, allowing **Maven** to follow with a quebrada. Back in, Conway gets two. Maven hits a dropkick and a Broncobuster on Grenier (with the announcers questioning whether Grenier likes it -- gee, great, more **Pat Patterson** jokes), but Dupree gets a neckbreaker from behind. Double DDT gets two as Maven is YOUR Yankee-in-peril. Dupree with a suplex and That F*cking Move for two. Grenier gets a piledriver for two. Double suplex gets two. La Resistance toss Maven over the top to the outside, and back in for two. Conway distracts the ref, allowing Grenier and Dupree a chance for a double superkick for two. Dupree dragon screws Maven and hits a figure-four, but Maven makes the ropes. Maven ducks a double-clothesline and hits a double of his own. Grenier prevents the tag, and the French get an suplex / elbowdrop combo for two. Dupree with the ABDOMINAL STRETCH OF DOOM (with cheating, naturally), but Maven breaks out. Grenier with a Flying Jalapeno for two. Dupree misses whatever off the top, hot tag Conway. Dupree is backed into the corner, and something spectacular unfolds: Conway sets him on the top rope for a superplex, but Grenier charges in. Maven charges after HIM, and the result is Conway on Grenier on Maven, and the resulting TRIPLE STACK BELLY-TO-BELLY SUPERPLEX sends poor Dupree literally into the opposite turnbuckle. Wow. Conway gets two, with the foot in the ropes. Maven dropkicks Grenier, but Conway tosses Dupree into Maven, who stumbles over Grenier, who rolls him up for two. Grenier is escorted out, so Dupree legdrops Maven and tries a second figure-four, only to have Conway hit the CLAWHOLD~! as

Dupree spins around. Dupree falls flat on the mat, instantly paralyzed, and the three is academic at 10:42. Jim Cornette is THE MAN for getting all these guys the training they have. **1/4

- **Austin** announces that the poll is closed, and the results are displayed.

Benoit ***** 35%
Booker *** 9%
Goldust * 1%
Hurricane ***** 16%
Rock *** 38%**
Steiner * 1%

- However, he says that he since the vote was so close, he would consider putting both men in the match. To no one's surprise, **Bischoff** shoots that idea down, and says there must be ONE challenger for the title tonight. Darn.

- **Chris Benoit v. Big Show**. Faster than I can type this recap, Benoit blitzes Show and wins with the usual in 0:55. I avoid DUD out of respect for Benoit. 1/4* Still, it felt good to see this happen. I guess I will stop picking on Big Show now. Yeah, right.

- **Kane v. The Rock**. Kane no-sells Rock's punches to start, then grabs Rock's hand and works the arm off of it. Rock scampers to the ropes, so Kane follows. Kane gets sent into the steps and no-sells that, too. Back in, Kane wins the LOCKUP OF DOOM and tosses Rock into the corner. From there, it's a trip over the top to the floor, then into the post, then back into the ring. Rock hits a backspin DDT, but Kane sits up. Rock charges in with a belly-to-belly, but Kane blocks it and casually powerslams Rock. Choking follows. Kane runs through his repertoire of clotheslines before Rock tries to go low to reverse the momentum. Kane blocks the spit-punch and tosses Rock hand-first over the top to the floor. Outside, Rock bounces around for Kane like a pinball before they wind their way to the Spanish announcer's table. Rock reverses a chokeslam into a Rock Bottom through the table, but Kane sits up again. This is a bit much, isn't it? Back in, Kane blocks a roundhouse right and tosses Rock to the corner, booting him out of the ring. Rock blades. Kane then works on the cut on the outside, getting it to .7 Muta. Back in, Kane digs the sole of his boot into Rock's face, all the time yelling about how he'll disfigure the movie star. Rock grabs the boot and tries an anklelock (sort of), but Kane stands up and hits the KANEZUIGIRI. Kane grabs the goozle and chokeslams Rock FIVE TIMES. Without release. Yeeouch. He covers, but picks Rock up at two. Tombstone, but again Rock is picked up at two. A second Tombstone, and AGAIN Rock is picked up at two as the announcers and fans are freaking out. Kane delivers his sixth and seventh chokeslams, then three straight powerbombs before finally the ref just stops the match at 13:15, giving the Brock Lesnar Finish. But Kane isn't done, as he delivers a Tombstone on the steps outside, then tosses the stairs at Rock's already-bloody face. **Coachman** tries to get assistance for Rock, but Kane chokeslams HIM, too. A man runs in (identified as Rock's movie agent, but likely some indy guy), and he gets Tombstoned onto the other bodies. Kane goes for the barbecue, but cops run in and stop it, arresting

Kane on the spot. Kane is booed out of the building. Now THAT'S how you put a monster heel over. **1/2

- As the carnage is cleared, **Hurricane, Lance Storm, and Kevin Nash** return from earlier in the night, still brawling three-way style. Storm and Hurricane give Nash a double superkick, but Hurricane then grabs Storm for the choke slam. However, **Evolution** runs in and demolishes Hurricane just for fun. RKO, Pedigree, sledgehammer, and Hurricane limps to the back with everyone else. **HHH** sees **Rock** being loaded on a stretcher and demands a decision from **Austin**. Austin appears and says he'll be down there in 2 minutes. Good thing he didn't say 3.

- No Mercy promo. Two matches are announced: **Brock Lesnar** re-defending against **Kurt Angle**, while **Undertaker** battles **Eddie Guerrero** in a cage. So far, so good, although I really hope the heels go over in both cases. Just me.

- And by now, **Austin** has returned to the ring. He tells **Evolution** what we already know: that **Rock** cannot go tonight. HOWEVER, he recalls **Eric Bischoff's** words that there must be ONE challenger tonight. And with that, since the winner cannot fulfill his duties, the runner-up assumes his place...

- Main event, World Title: **HHH** vs. **Chris Benoit**. Staredown establishes quite clearly that HHH has the size advantage. HHH works Benoit into the corner to start and punches away. Benoit fires back with CHOPS A GO GO, but Hunter controls it to the outside. Benoit takes a ride into the steps, and back in, Hunter gets two. Hunter proceeds to USE THE KNEE~! for two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two as Hunter is at his usual "methodical" pace. Kneelift gets two. Benoit reverses a DDT with a Northern Lights suplex for two. Hunter chokes Benoit down, then covers for two. Superplex gets two. Benoit blocks a punch into a Fujiwara armbar, but HHH makes the ropes. Benoit hits a hammerlock slam and tries for the Crossface, but Hunter blocks. Hunter with a DDT for two. MAIN EVENT SLEEPER, but Benoit elbows out and hits a back suplex. Hunter up first, though, and a piledriver gets two. Kneedrop gets two. KICK WHAM... but Benoit backdrops out of the Pedigree and rolls up Hunter for two. Benoit with a clothesline and back to the armbar. Hunter uses the hair to get out. **Austin** yells with HHH over this, allowing Benoit to roll him up for two. Benoit walks into a HHH lariat for two. Gutwrench suplex gets two. HHH goes for the sledgehammer on the outside, but Austin steals it. Hunter argues again, but sees Benoit coming this time. KICK WHAM PEDIGREE, but Hunter decides to taunt Austin instead of covering. He goes for a second one, but Benoit doesn't drop with it, resulting in his head going straight into HHH's groin. Clever. Benoit with the rolling Germans, bridging on the third one for two. Up top, but HHH avoids the headbutt. KICK WHAM PEDIGREE, and HHH eventually rolls over for... two. Hunter is in shock, and he proceeds to do the **Earl Hebner** argument routine with Austin, including Hunter shoving the ref. Of course, this counts as provocation, so as Hunter goes for a second Pedigree, Austin spins him around into KICK WHAM STUNNER. Benoit refuses to cover despite Austin's orders, but he does go back up to finish. This time, **Flair** shoves him off. Benoit hits a tope suicida on Flair, but **Orton** pounds on Benoit on the outside. Austin goes to end the disruption (with more

provocation and Stunning). Back in the ring, though, **Goldust** of all people emerges. Low blow, Shattered Dreams, and Curtain Call follow. Benoit returns for... two. YEESH! Flair is up on the apron, but now **Booker T** jumps in. Orton sneaks in from behind and hits Booker with the RKO before anything can be done. While Austin is rolling Orton and Booker out, Flair enters with the belt... and hits HHH. Benoit chops Flair over the top rope, then applies the Crossface on HHH. HHH tries to power out, but Benoit holds on. He tries to go to the ropes, but Benoit pulls him back. He tries the Death Valley Driver counter from their match 3 years ago, but Benoit rolls through and hangs on again. Finally, HHH goes limp, and Austin makes the tapping motion with HHH's hand at 25:17. To say the crowd is stunned would put it mildly. Benoit rolls outside, while HHH starts to come to. He sees the replay on the monitor and punches out Flair and Austin, but that allows one final KICK WHAM STUNNER on HHH. Benoit returns, beer is shared, end of show. **

The Bottom Line:

He's paid his dues
Time after time.
He's done his sentence,
But committed no crime.
And bad mistakes?
He's made a few.
He's had his share of sand kicked in his face,
But he came through!

Yes sir, he WON! He WON! He WON! He WON!

Benoit's the champion - my friends.
And he'll keep on fighting - till the end.
Benoit's the champion;
Benoit's the champion.
No time for jobbers,
Cuz Benoit's the champion...
Of R-AW.

He took his bows
And his curtain calls.
We gave him fame and fortune and everything that goes with it.
Vince thanked us all.
But it was no bed of roses,
No pleasure cruise.
We considered it a challenge before the whole booking team,
And Chris came through!

Yes sir he WON! He WON! He WON! He WON!

Benoit's the champion - my friends.
And he'll keep on fighting - till the end.
Benoit's the champion;
Benoit's the champion.
No time for jobbers,
Cuz Benoit's the champion...
...Of R-AW!

Benoit's the champion - my friend!
And he'll keep on fighting - till the end!
Benoit's the champion!
BENOIT'S THE CHAMPION!
NO TIME FOR JOBBERS!
CUZ BENOIT'S THE CHAMPION!

Thumbs up.

I was dreaming again.
I was walking away from one end of a tunnel to the other. The tunnel was big enough for only two people. I saw a shadowy figure heading towards me from the other side. As he approached, I could make out his features -- the hair, the size, the smile even. We stood still as we came to the point where our paths met.
"Owen," I asked, "where are you going?"
"I'm off to SmackDown! to replace you," he replied. "We have to keep numbers."
"You don't have to do this."
"Yes, I do. And I want to. I heard what happened to Vince. Much as I felt about him, I don't want what happened to Brian to happen to him, or anyone else. I'm going to do what I can."
"But then why am I moving?"
"You wanted to. You wanted to avoid Kathleen."
"I know. But I'm... I'm nervous. I haven't been on RAW before. Am I ready?"
"That's not the issue. The issue is if you can help."
"Can I?"
"It depends. Do you think you can?"
I paused. *I had helped Eddie Guerrero and Jeff Hardy already. I had done my part. What was I afraid of? The unknown. A new life. A different set of circumstances. But I'd been here before. I was ready to handle it again.*
"I know I can."
"Good. I know I can too. Now, let's get to work."
He walked on. I took a few steps, then stopped and turned around. "Owen... good match with Booker T there."
He smiled. "How did you know?"
"I saw the Rumble in '94. I knew that kick. Thank you for making me remember the good times again."

"Hey, no problem. It's why I'm here. And thank you for paying attention to Vince."

"No problem. It's why I'm here."

Monday, September 22, 2003, 07:00 AM
Baltimore, MD

The alarm went off. I tried to roll over and hit the snooze button without success. My eyes opened so I could find it, but I wasn't fully awake. I finally just turned the thing off. I tried to roll over, but my eyes were too alert. After two minutes of tossing and turning, I gave up and sat up in bed.

I looked over to my left. Lance Storm was there, still asleep. *Well, it's official. I'm on RAW.* I got out of bed and went to the mantle for my glasses. I put them on, then turned around. Lance was still asleep.

There was a knock at the door. I went to the door and looked through the peephole, making sure to remove my glasses. A woman stood on the other side, waiting. She was all ready to go in her hot pink shirt and baggy jeans that revealed rather than concealed. Her fiery red hair hung down around her neck and shoulders. Were it not for the sleeve, I was certain I'd see a tattoo.

I opened the door. "Lita... what brings you here?"

"Good news. The boys were able to get Jeff to go to rehab."

"Wonderful. Will he stay this time?"

"Well, he goes in after his last match tonight with OMEGA. Evan has said he'll drop the guy off at the clinic and visit him every few days to make sure he's all right. I hope this one sticks."

"Yeah, me too. Jeff's... I think he needs more help than he realizes. I just want him to get back on his feet."

"I know. Well... I just thought you'd like to know."

"That's great, Lita. Thanks."

I closed the door as she returned down the hall. I began to put the pieces together. *I'm shorter than average. I know Jeff and Lita. I'm rooming with Lance Storm. My outfit... neon green. I don't need the glasses.*

I walked into the bathroom and turned on the light. I spent the next few minutes practicing poses as the Hurricane.

EIGHTH WEEK

Monday, September 22, 2003, 10:14 AM
Baltimore, MD

I tossed my stuff into the back of Shawn's car and climbed into the back seat. The car was certainly more luxurious than Paul's, and it looked like it had been especially bought for the occasion. I pulled out my glasses and looked around at the others. About half, if that, were healthy. Some were faint, some were black-and-white, and some disappeared altogether. It all looked so much grimmer than SmackDown did.

I heard the car door open next to me and turned around. Lindsay had hopped in and seen me wearing my glasses. She put hers on and looked at me as she closed the door. Upon seeing me, she smiled. I smiled back and we hugged. It may have only been a month, but the reunion seemed well worth it.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd be coming over here?"

"I thought you knew. I thought Shawn had told you. Besides, it was all decided so recently." I removed my glasses. "The question is, why didn't you tell me this morning, Amy?"

Lita blushed. "Well, I didn't want your roommate to overhear. Besides, I didn't know. But that's not important. The important part is, we're together now. And we got work to do."

"Yeah, I know... gotta remain professional. It's what caused all the trouble over there." *I wish I didn't feel responsible for Kathleen right now.*

"What do you mean?"

"It's... it's Kath. She's very sick. I doubt she's out yet, and she's been in Recovery for weeks now. She was hitting me straight-up when we were opponents, and she... I don't know. I don't think I'm supposed to know."

"Look, Lita has her suspicions, but if you tell me, she won't know."

"Okay... Jeff and Shannon are... an item."

She gasped and covered her mouth. "No... way. You're kidding!"

"I'm not. I found out first-hand. But that's the thing: Kathleen was Shannon. She went down a week before Matt did to talk to him, and... well, all I know is, the next day, she was in Recovery and was pretty much invisible. I can only assume she did something really bad."

"Wow. That's... that's sad. I mean... I knew she was an impulsive person, but this is... I hope she gets better. We can't survive on just four people for long, you know."

I paused. "Lindsay," I asked, "what would happen if she were to go? If she finally blinked out or went to Hell or whatever?"

"I assume we'd get someone new. That's why you're here. People make mistakes all the time. It's not easy being dead before your time -- it almost guarantees that you won't make it. Every little thing you do is so magnified by the fact that you can't just repent and restore your soul, because that's IT. We are souls, nothing more. It scares me. It scares me straight."

I gulped. *So far, I had been lucky -- I hadn't experienced any sort of connection to a major sin that could jeopardize my life. The closest I came was with Jessi. Had I just not had enough experience? Was I due for a disaster? What was my secret?* "It's scared me too, but I don't know what it's like."

"Andy, be thankful. This is one burden you never want to bear. I never want to bear it again, that's for sure."

Shawn got in the car. "All right, you two, let's hit the... hey, aren't you lucky. Got to be real-life friends too. Guess you two can keep in touch and work together. Congratulations. Now, what's the fastest way to DC?"

"Take I-95 until you reach the Beltway."

"Greg? You say that quickly. Did you used to live here?" Shawn put on his glasses and checked back. "Oh, it's you. Did you, Andy?"

"Yes." *And thanks for reminding me that I used to live.*

03:55 PM

"All right, gentlemen, here's the order of the day."

Eric Bischoff walked out into the MCI center's home team locker room. He posted the booking sheet on the wall, then stood off to the side. "If there are any questions, make sure to talk to the writers. I'm just the messenger."

Lita and I waited for the crowd to thin out, then snuck our way in to look. I scanned for my name. I was set to face Lance Storm again in the second hour. Apparently, the story would be that Heat and Unforgiven were inconclusive, so we needed another go-around. Then I read on. Attached to that segment was, "Kevin Nash -- tweener, clean house." We were out there to expand our feud into a three-way. *But hey, I guess someone had to lose.*

I heard a squeal next to me from Lita. I turned to face her. "What is it?"

"I'm back on TV tonight! I get to help out Molly! I'm gonna have my first match next week! This is so exciting!"

I leaned in and whispered. "Hey, calm down... you just wrestled last week." She smacked the back of my head. "Oh, yeah, right."

"Hey, hero-boy. We gotta talk match!" Kevin Nash had called me over. Lance Storm was already sitting there, reading a book. I walked over and deposited my bag next to me as I sat down.

"Okay, Kev... what's on your mind?"

"Well... I know you guys can handle the stuff before I run in, but... I don't wanna look like a deer in the headlights out there. Besides, me and my leg ain't up to surprises." As he spoke, he tapped his quad muscle with his hand and smiled. *At least he's in good humor about it now.*

"Okay... Lance, any ideas?"

Lance didn't look up from his book. "Nah, I'm fine with what you guys want. Just make sure we aren't made to look too bad."

I thought for a while. "How about if you storm in during a double KO and make your presence felt? Then it's just you being an antisocial jerk or something."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, like if we're both down, you run to the ring..."

"Whoa, whoa, stop right there, Greg. Let's call it what it is. I'm doing a hobble-in."

I heard Lance chuckle. I laughed. "All right, Kev, you hobble to the ring and give the powerbomb to both of us. Or... wait, better..."

"Yeah?"

"You powerbomb him, then you can chokeslam me and, you know, do all the motions and stuff."

"Sounds good. Then what? I mean, that makes me a heel, doesn't it?"

"Look, Kev, you'll have time to talk. I know that's one thing you know how to do."

"Yeah... no problem there."

Lance looked up. "So what do I do?"

Kev explained. "Well, you and Greg have your super showdown thing, then after you're both dead, I pick up the pieces and powerbomb you. Simple as that."

"All right. Good." He closed his book and walked away. I turned to Kevin Nash. "What's with him?"

"Eh. He takes his craft very seriously. Doesn't like to plan. Some people just need to learn it's all for fun out there. I mean, look at me. I don't take things half as seriously as he does, and look where I am."

I couldn't resist. "Yeah, you're languishing in the midcard past your expiration date with a quad muscle held together by chewing gum."

"Hey! That's not fair! This is high quality duct-tape in here!"

We laughed. *I could see why Kevin Nash had survived for so long -- he went out of his way to have fun.*

10:21 PM

STAND BACK! THERE'S A HURRICANE COMIN' THROUGH!

The crowd cheered long and loud as my music hit and I stood on the entranceway. I was able to put Gregory into auto-pilot and let his mind control his motions. My exaggerated poses got the crowd's attention as I stalk-walked down the greenlit ramp and into the ring. A final pose on the turnbuckle, and I turned to face my opponent.

Lance Storm was right behind me, it turns out.

He slapped me across the face, then chopped my chest. I flinched at the force. He whipped me into the opposite turnbuckle, but I ran up the ropes and bounced off straight into him, knocking him down. I punched him in the face, then got up and posed. I pulled Storm up to his feet and went for a Hurriplex, but Storm blocked and hit a stomach claw to break. Storm went into a single-leg hold, but I crawled quickly to the ropes. Storm broke, then sent me for the ride, hoping to nail a superkick.

I ducked and slid underneath, grabbing him from behind into an Eye of the Hurricane for two. I climbed to the top rope and dove off onto him, but he rolled over on top for two. Both of us got up, and he went for a dropkick to the knee. I sidestepped it, then as he was pulling himself up, I hit the Shining Wizard for two. I heard the ref say "go to book" as I was pulling Storm up. I whispered to him, "It's time."

I sent him into the ropes, but he reversed. He went for a back body drop, but I leaped over him and slammed on the breaks. We both stepped up and nailed a superkick

at the same time, sending both of us to the canvas. At that moment, I heard a cheer emanating from near the entranceway. Kevin Nash was on his way. He picked Storm up and delivered the Jackknife to him. I slowly got to my feet, cleared the cobwebs, and extended my hand. Instead, he grabbed my throat. I barely had enough time to see him give the thumbs up before I went for the ride.

We both rolled out of the ring, Storm to one side, myself to the other. I crawled over the barricade and out through the crowd, while Storm limped to the back. As I left, I heard Kevin begin to tell the crowd that he was done with seeing people make a mockery of their career. He was going to teach Hurricane and Lance Storm that the only way to the top is to stop being something you're not and to be whatever you want. The reaction was cheers when he talked about Storm and boos when he mentioned me. He had succeeded in becoming a "tweener".

12:15 AM

"Hey, Lance, what time you want the alarm set for?"

"Oh, let's say 8 o'clock. I'm going to head up to Philly tomorrow. How about you?"

"Me? I'll probably stay here... I think I'll get a head start on the help in DC. You know, take care of the little people."

"You would, you do-gooder."

"Stand back, Citizen Storm."

We both laughed as we headed to sleep.

Tuesday, September 23, 2003, 10:55 AM
Fairfax, VA

"Are you sure it's around here?"

"Yeah, just take a right."

"All right."

Shawn had been kind enough to drive us to my hometown. It wasn't that I wanted to see old friends -- it wouldn't have done me any good anyway. There was something I was told I had to see. Lindsay, actually, had suggested it. I dreaded having to follow through on it, but I knew it was for the best.

Shawn pulled off into the Fairfax Memorial parking lot. We all climbed out and looked around. In the distance, I saw a large collection of flowers. I darted off in that direction. No such luck -- it wasn't what I was looking for.

"Gregory, wait... lemme check with the guide."

"Okay." After about a minute, Lita approached me. She seemed rather somber compared to other times.

"Look, Andy," she whispered. "If you need any help whatsoever, you let me know, and I'll be here."

"Thanks."

"You think you'll be able to do this?"

"You said so yourself. It's not a question of that. It's what I have to do. What was it like for you?"

"Well... it was really crowded when I got there. Still a little too soon, you know? But... they had a list. That was the only thing for me. I guess it was a little easier... but... I don't know. I can't imagine."

"Guys!" It was Shawn. "Follow me." We both walked over to him and followed him for about 200 feet. We came to a stop by a simple plaque in the ground. Shawn bent over to read it. "This is it." I looked down and braced myself for the unthinkable.

ANDREW PETER GOSS

FEB 23 1980

AUG 3 2003

A devil took his body

so that Good could take his soul

Shawn bent over next to me. I felt a heavy sensation come over me. Tears were forming in my eyes. I had never cried as Andy -- not in years. Now I was crying as someone else.

"It's all right, bro. Let it out." He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Lord, accept the suffering of your servant. Relieve his burden, and enkindle in him the fire of Your love. In the name of Him Who died for our sins, let your servant Andy finally feel the peace of mind and of heart that his new life merits as a reward. In God's Name I pray. Amen."

I slowly stood up. As I did, I heard a cell phone ring. I looked around. It was Lita's. "Oh, hi sweetie." She turned to us. "It's Matt."

I looked back to Shawn. "I... I shouldn't be crying. That's not even me anymore. That's just a husk -- an old shell. Maybe not even that, depending on the conditions. It is summer and all."

"Andy," Shawn said as he looked into my watering eyes, "It's never that easy. Death is... well, it sucks. There's no getting around it. You have to set aside everything you were and take comfort in everything you have become. I died and was reborn... and it's not the same, I know, but... when I did, there was a lot I had to set behind. A lot of old friends, like drugs and lying... I had to disown them. Andy, if you went back to your family, they wouldn't know you. We are your family now. All of us."

I looked up at Shawn and smiled. "Thank you."

We hugged. "Come on, bro, let's go back."

As we did, we passed by Lita. She had just hung up, but seemed lost in her own world. "Amy," Shawn said, "we're leaving." No reaction. "Lindsay?" Nothing. "Is everything okay?"

She shook her head. "It's Jeff."

Tuesday, September 23, 2003, 01:15 PM
Washington, DC

Lindsay had entered my room. She hadn't stopped crying since Matt called. I just sat on my bed, covering my mouth, in shock. Last night, at Jeff's final show before he was to enter rehab, he had a cage match against Evan. He went to the top of the cage to try to hit the swanton bomb, but lost his balance. He fell to the outside of the cage and landed neck-first on the railing. He was stuck on life support.

Lita couldn't stop saying "oh my God" over and over again. I sat next to her and hugged her. It was all I could do to keep from crying myself.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"I don't know... Matt said he... he'd call back when he finished talking to Vince. I thought we could save him. I thought we could..."

"Please. We tried. I was there. I don't know what went wrong. This was a fluke. Lindsay, if you could see the look in his eyes when he talked to me, the feeling of wanting to do something, not just for himself, but for Matt and Shannon and... he was ready. It's just so ironic. I can't believe he... I can't."

We sat and cried together. There was a knock on the door. "I'll get it," I said. I opened the door to see Shawn, barely able to hold back tears of his own. "You guys want some company?"

I turned to Lita. She nodded. "Yes. And thank you."

04:30 PM

"Hi Matt." The phone had rung again. By this time, word had spread throughout the RAW roster. Jeff had been a part of the company for five years, and no one forgot what kind of a guy he was. Shawn was leading a prayer group in his room, while Chris Benoit had come in to try to talk us out of the shock. Rob Van Dam even tried to help. "I've been there, man. When Eiji broke his neck... it was hard times... I wanna help however I can."

"I know," I said. I couldn't imagine RVD to be as close to Hayabusa as we were to Jeff, but he was in as much shock as we were. No one could believe that someone so young as full of life as Jeff had been could possibly die young. I couldn't believe it either. Something didn't seem right.

I thought back to what he told Shannon about a blood test. I thought about how his life was in shambles, and his room was a disaster area, even without Isabel having come through. I wondered what the inside of his mind must have been like. He knew we knew about his drugs. He knew he had to warn Shannon because of what Kathleen may have done. And now that all was forgiven, and he was ready to start anew, he crashes during a bit I'd seen him successfully pull off hundreds of times.

"Guys," said Lita, "let's go to Philadelphia. Vince has an idea."

"What is it?" I asked, instinctively.

"Matt's gonna wrestle tonight for Jeff."

Wait a minute. "Is he... dead?"

"No... I don't know... he might be soon. Matt said he had the option of when to do it. He wants to do it tonight."

I looked at Rob. "How fast can you get there?"

"Man, don't you worry. You'll be there by bell time easy. I'll fly if I have to."

"O...kay, sure. Lita, is Matt still on the phone?"

"Yeah."

"Get Vince... ask him to push the show back to 9 o'clock for SmackDown. So we can get there."

"I'll see."

08:59 PM

Philadelphia, PA

We rushed through the back and around the side to a monitor. While there, we saw Paul again. He was trying to conduct the night while working on holding back tears of his own. When he saw us, he handed off to Tom Pritchard and spoke to us.

"Are you two all right?"

"Yeah, we're fine. What's the deal for tonight?"

"Everyone's wrestling from the heart tonight. It's all about Jeff. No promos, no commercials within a match... UPN says they'll clear it all. There's gonna be a video package about Jeff at the beginning. Matt says he..."

Paul began to break down. I had no idea how to handle this. "He what, Paul?"

Matt came up behind me and touched my shoulder. I looked up. "Oh, Matt..." I hugged him. We didn't speak during the full minute we embraced. "Is he gonna make it?"

Matt glumly shook his head. "They say the machine's just keeping the body alive. Tomorrow we're gonna head down to Durham and pull the plug. I... I can't believe I have to do this. He was my brother..."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You wanna go home?"

"No... this is home. I owe it to these guys, and I owe it to Jeff. I wanna make everyone remember him tonight. You know, we joked about living and dying for this... Jeff said he wanted to die in the ring, hearing the cheers of the crowd... I just never..."

"Matt, it's okay. Just... I'm sorry. I'm sorry." As we hugged again, Dr. Tom looked over to us. "Matt, Shannon... you're on in thirty seconds. Let's do it."

02:12 AM

Washington, DC

I sat awake in my hotel room, while Matt slept in the bed next to me. The day had been rough on him, and I could tell Vince didn't understand the gravity of what was going on. Nevertheless, he responded and he gave help the only way he knew how -- by dedicating the show.

I have no idea if the show was well-received by the public. Certainly there were

several standing ovations, from the opening match through to the final moment. When the locker room gathered in the ring, and Hogan led the crowd in a ten-bell salute of Jeff and a final standing ovation, Lita and I were numb backstage. Shannon and Matt couldn't go out at the end, instead staying with us in one last group hug before we began to drive down to North Carolina.

I couldn't help but think of the past two weeks. *We had done everything we could to make Jeff healthy again. Kathleen tried to show him love. I tried to show him friendship. Matt tried to show him discipline. We all tried to show him that we were there for him. And now, just as the message was received, he was going to be gone. It was like we reached him at the last second.*

I looked at my costume hanging up in the closet. I stared at the H in the middle. My eyes wandered to the cape, the tights, and the mask in turn. I closed my eyes and began to imagine swooping in from the rafters, flying and catching Jeff before he fell. If only... if only that act were for real.

I checked myself in the mirror with the glasses on. There was no sign of fading, changing or graying. On the contrary, I seemed brighter than before. I felt sad, yes, but it wasn't my loss. It was as if God knew Jeff would die, and he chose me to help Greg cope, and chose Lindsay to help Amy cope. I tried to sleep. I tried to think of helping Matt. This week would be the longest of his life. The more I supported him, the better we all would be.

I was dreaming.

I was at the abyss, down the long hall that I walked when I crossed paths with Owen the first time. I saw him again. I approached him. "What are we doing here? We already switched."

"I know... but you're not alone." I turned around. Lindsay was behind me. We stepped forward and Owen embraced each of us in turn. "I'm sorry guys. I don't know how this happened, but... I'm sorry. All I know is you guys can handle this. You have to. If you don't... well... Jeff may not be the only one we lose."

"What do you mean?"

Owen sat down and held his head. "My brother was on a suicide watch in WCW. The death of Brian... the Montreal thing... he was a wreck. We've been scared we'll lose him for ages on end. I don't know how he outlived me. But when Brian died... he took it hardest. He was convinced that... Vince knew and did nothing. That's not true. I know it isn't. It couldn't be. Vince wasn't Vince then."

"Owen... please... how did you feel? We need to know."

"Andy, that's just it. I... that Sunday, I was disoriented. I was a zombie. I sleptwalked through my match. But the next day... I... I don't know. I just felt more at ease. I was... It was like I wasn't alone. Like I felt Brian's angel picking me up and dusting me off. Jim -- Anvil -- he felt it too. If it hadn't been for that... I don't think we would've been able to cope as well."

Lindsay smiled. "You're welcome, Owen."

Owen looked up. He was confused. "What? You're... what?"

I turned to Lindsay. "For what? What did you do?"

"I picked him up and dusted him off. Owen, that angel you felt was me. I was assigned to you the next day. I wanted to make sure you could handle everything. A lot was going on... and I helped you, and through you I tried to help your brother. So... you're welcome."

Owen reached over and grabbed Lindsay. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Wait, whoa... you two... do you have a history?" I guess I was a little weirded out, because even as I said these words, I felt I wanted to retract them. But Owen's chuckle set me at ease.

"Yeah, Andy, we've only been working together for four and a half years. I mean, every week, we come here and talk. We have to. It's... it's the only way I can feel complete."

Feel complete? I took a closer look at him. He wasn't complete. There was an area around his chest that was transparent. It was as if someone cut a heart-shaped hole out of his body. But more than that, I noticed he wore a similarly-shaped piece of... something on his wrist. How I missed it before I don't know.

"Owen... what is that?" I pointed to his wrist. He smiled.

"That's part of Martha. Well, metaphysically speaking anyway." He laughed. "See, I wondered why I wasn't whole for a long time. St. Pete told me that sometimes, two people are united by love even beyond death. And when they finally unite... well, they unite. Every so often I visit Martha in her dream... you know, between gigs. And I tell her I'll be waiting for her, and that there will always be a part of me in her heart. Well... this is it."

I turned to Lindsay. "But... but you said marriage was for earth."

She shrugged. "Well, that was my experience. I mean, when I was seeing Terry, we couldn't... when we did, we... I don't know!"

"What does this mean? That I... that there could have been someone for me and I was cheated out of it? Because I just saw myself today, and I thought the worst was over. Dammit, first I visit myself, then a friend of the guy I am dies, and now I find out I'll never be in love. What else can happen today?" My voice was getting louder and louder as I spoke. I didn't even notice the look of fear on the faces of Owen and Lindsay until I was done. I stopped. "What's wrong? Am I...?" I looked down. No I wasn't.

"Andy, it's okay. Get it out," said Owen. "We've all had days like this. You think I wanted to see myself dead? You think Lindsay wanted to read her name at the Murrah Building? How about Greg on the Wall? Seeing yourself... the first few days... you need to be here. This is your shock. Maybe... maybe Jeff's timing wasn't coincidence."

"I don't understand."

"Well... when I first revisited Calgary, it was around the time Ed Whalen died -- he was the voice of Dad's promotion. I was Chris Benoit. I... we all went to the funeral. While I was there, I walked the few feet to visit myself. I had been putting it off for a long time. I admire that you wanted to do it as soon as possible. Anyway... because I'd just been around death, and because I... I'd been dead for so long, I thought I could handle it. I spent the next few nights here... but in life... everyone commented on how strong Chris was, and what a comfort he was to Mom and Dad and to Ed's family."

"Yeah? I... so what does it have to do with me?"

"Well, guys," he said, looking at Lindsay as well as at me, "maybe Matt and his

family will be strengthened by how you are. Maybe you'll be his pillar of strength. I don't know. I hope that's the case, anyway."

I looked at Lindsay. "Let's do it."

"Yeah, let's."

"Thank you so much, Owen. I understand now. I'm ready."

I pulled Lindsay up and we held hands. We walked back to where we came from - a show and a group of people who needed our help more than they knew. I looked over my shoulder at Owen. He was busy touching the piece of Martha that was on his wrist. *If only I had the chance to experience love like that.*

Wednesday, September 24, 2003, 01:13 PM
Duke University Hospital, Durham, NC

This is eerie. This is where I went to school. This used to be my school. I know everything about it, but I can't let on. Besides, I'm not here to reminisce. I'm here to help. Well, if I can help.

A nurse at the front desk led us to just outside Room 611. We looked inside. We saw a jumble of machines waiting on the other side of the door. There was a heart monitor, a respirator, an IV dispenser, and many other things. Somewhere in the middle of it all was Jeff's body -- alive, but not living.

Upon seeing it, Matt and Shannon broke down. Lita reached for Matt and embraced him. I took Shannon and hugged him with one arm. The two cried for five minutes straight.

"Greg," said Shannon, "can we... can we talk?"

Shannon took me aside. Matt saw me leave and looked up. "Don't worry, we'll be back... soon." I honestly had no clue when "soon" would be, but I knew we had to return. Shannon and I walked down the hall. He looked at me.

"I'm gonna look into getting a blood test. I want you to come along."

We walked to the nearest information kiosk. Shannon inquired as to where he would go. He was directed to a room on the third floor. As we headed to the elevator, I stopped. "I'd better tell Matt. He might be waiting on us."

"Sure... tell him... and tell him not to wait. I don't want to see him die."

I walked back to Room 611. Matt and Lita were seated on a bench, still embracing. Matt was crying on her shoulder. I looked at the both of them and stiffened up. "Matt."

He looked up. His eyes were bright red. "Yeah?"

"Shannon's going to go give blood... or something. I don't think he wants to see you pull the plug. He wants me to come along. I..."

Matt stopped me. "It's okay. Do what you gotta do, Greg. I don't blame him."

"Thanks." I turned around and headed back to the elevator. Shannon was jumping up and down, pacing around, and generally having trouble being still. "It's all set. We can go now. But... you sure you don't wanna be there? I mean, this is the last chance to say goodbye."

"I don't want to say goodbye. Not now." The elevator door opened. We snuck in

unnoticed amid the hustle and bustle. The doors closed as I pressed the button for the third floor. Shannon turned to face me. We were alone.

"Greg," he said, "I gotta say this to someone, and I just... I hope you understand."

"What is it?" *As if I didn't already know...*

"Greg... I'm getting this because Jeff asked me to. Because we... no, you wouldn't understand. Forget I ever said anything."

"Shannon, no. You can tell me. I swear, it won't change a thing between the two of us."

"Well... he and I... we were close. I mean... real close. And Jeff seemed worried about me. Which is why I gotta get tested... cuz... I..."

"Shannon, spit it out."

The elevator doors opened. "Later."

We walked to the room and filled out the necessary paperwork. Shannon waited for his number to be called as I watched the TV in the waiting room and read some back issues of National Geographic. After about 20 minutes, it was his turn. A nurse directed us to our room, where we were once again alone. Shannon hopped up on the table and waited.

"Can we talk now?" I asked. The faster he said it, the better.

"Yeah, I guess."

"So... why did Jeff want you to get this?"

"Cuz he was worried I might be sick."

"Why would he think that?"

"I don't know. Unless he... well, he may have figured I gave him something."

"You? What could you give him that would require a blood test? Malaria?"

"No... I mean... it was just him. He was so friendly, and he... he and I have done everything together and... well, one day he talked to me, and we found out stuff, and... I mean, it was just once, I swear! But I didn't think that..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down, Shannon. What stuff? What was once?"

"Greg, I... dammit. I'd better just say it, shouldn't I?"

"Whatever it is, say it."

"Greg, I..." he remained silent for a full minute. I could tell he wasn't sure how Greg would take it. I knew how I would take it. I knew what I had to say. After all, it all made sense now. Jeff was asking Shannon to take a precautionary measure because of what Kathleen had done. It didn't seem like a big deal. All I had to do was wait for him to say it.

Before he could, though, another lady entered and checked Shannon's vital signs and medical history. Soon after, she left to get the nurse who would administer the withdrawal. We were alone again as Shannon was prone on his back, which the nurse recommended.

"Shannon... just tell me. Don't make me guess."

"I've said too much, man. I know you won't like it."

"Won't like what? Shannon, have I ever disapproved of you? I helped land you a job in WCW. We got you into the WWE. We've been there for you every step of the way. You can't say nothin' that would make me or Matt or Amy think any less of you and you know it."

"Yeah I could... I only held out this long cuz Jeff wanted me to. But it's okay now."

You just gotta promise you won't tell. Don't tell Matt, don't tell Amy... tell no one, got it?"

"Yeah... I got it. What is it?"

Before he could reply, the nurse came in with the bag and needle. *This is getting kinda stupid here.* I waited as Shannon's blood was being withdrawn. At the end of the procedure, he thanked the nurse and was told all results would be made available in 15 days. We left and walked back to the elevator. Inside, we were again alone.

"Greg, I... Jeff and I were... we..."

"Come ON, Shannon!" I had to get it out of him. "Just SAY it; we're alone!"

"All right, all right... Greg, I'm gay." I paused for a few seconds to make it seem like it was sinking in. He continued. "Not just that. But the reason I got that blood test is because of what happened when I visited him alone. He and I... we had been going out for a long time. Why do you think I couldn't be around when the plug was pulled? I didn't wanna watch him die. I didn't want to watch the man I loved... leave my life." I still said nothing. "Greg? Do you understand me? Is everything ok?"

I leaned over and squeezed him with my right arm. "Sure. Everything's just fine. You're still my best friend. And don't worry -- your secret is safe with me."

"Thanks, Greg." The elevator doors opened, and we walked out. We returned to just outside Room 611. Matt was making a phone call as we did. Lita was in tears on the bench. I looked inside at the room. The power was off, and a blanket covered Jeff from head to foot. It was over.

Shannon sat down on the bench and tried to console Lita while fighting back his own tears. I walked over to Matt and waited for him to get off the phone. When he did, he simply turned to me and cried. I comforted him as best I could. Before long, we all joined hands together, crying and consoling, unable to remain calm as the hundreds of emotions poured over us.

Matt got up and took one last look into the room. They were preparing to wheel him down to the parking lot, where he would be taken to the funeral home for preparations. Matt just stared into the room, unable to move or speak. I walked up behind him and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Goodbye, bro. I love you," was all I heard him say.

07:22 PM
Cameron, NC

We pulled up to Jeff's house to gather his belongings. Matt had rented a van to handle the moving process. The funeral had been set for Saturday at the Chapel in Duke University -- Matt thought it would be better since it would be a public service. Already he had asked me to prepare a eulogy. I walked in, ready to remove the final evidence of a fallen friend.

As I walked over to his room to grab his clothing and other items, I saw a set of papers on a desk. The top one was sealed in an envelope and addressed to "Greg and Amy." There was a second envelope underneath it from a bank. Under that, in plain manila, was a packet from a local clinic. I grabbed them all and hid them in my personal

belongings. I had the feeling these were things Matt didn't need or want to know.

Evan met us at the house. He was distraught, incoherent, and shaking. I couldn't blame him. He had seen Jeff die firsthand, just a day after Jeff had placed himself in Evan's care, and days before he was to begin anew. I couldn't think about what the rest of his life would be like. He babbled about quitting the ring, about not understanding. He cursed everyone and everything, from Vince to Matt to himself. I had to let him talk.

It took two hours to load everything into the van. From there, it would be a short drive back to Durham, where we would be staying to help arrange the funeral. Before we left, there was a knock on the door. I answered, and two elderly people I hadn't seen before, but that I knew Greg knew, were at the door.

"Hello, Gregory," the woman said. "Is Matthew there?"

"We, uh, we just got here," said the man.

"Come on in, sir... ma'am... let me get him." I directed them to the couch and headed off to Jeff's room. I looked in. Matt was putting away a replica WWE tag title belt that Jeff had received as a going-away present from Vince. He stared at his reflection in it, as tears returned to his eyes. I knew I had to give him the news, then slip outside for a while.

"Matt... your parents are here."

11:48 PM

Durham, NC

As Shannon was off with Evan, Amy and I were alone in the room. I took my glasses out of their case for the first time in days. I looked at them. *They're not of much use now, but... I have to.* I put them on and saw Lindsay do the same.

"I found this... stuff. I don't think Matt was meant to see it. This is addressed to us. Do you want to read it?"

She seemed nervous. "We'd better both read it together."

I opened it. A pair of pages fell out. I examined them. On the surface, they seemed the same except for the name. I handed Amy's letter to Lindsay and kept the one addressed to Gregory. As I read it, I became shaken, then mad, then just numb. I could finally understand why it was addressed to us and not to Matt or Shannon.

I turned to Lindsay, but she seemed paler than normal. I flipped my glasses up. Lita was white as a sheet. She turned to me. I put my glasses back down. Lindsay was trembling as much as I had been. "My God," she finally said. "I don't believe it."

I opened the envelope from the bank. Everything Jeff described was there. Lindsay tore into the envelope from the clinic, only to see everything in order there, too. We exchanged envelopes and scanned their contents. After ten minutes of being in shock, we looked at each other.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered. "I assume... we don't tell. They can't tell. And as long as we don't say anything, Greg and Amy... really don't know. It's better that way."

"Why?"

"Matt... Matt wouldn't understand. He'd be angry. He... doesn't have to know."

Andy, we'd better burn this. We need to keep anyone from finding out."

"If we're going to do that... let's wait until morning. We have time. You're staying alone, and I'm with Shannon. You hold on to everything... I'll come by tomorrow morning, early... it'll be ok."

"Sure."

I got up to leave, then stopped. "We could always let Shannon have his own room. If he doesn't see me..."

"Andy, no. We can't do that."

"No, I mean... just burn it in here. There's no smoke alarm."

"So there isn't. Well, I guess it's as good an idea as any. But... what about when Shannon comes in here?"

"I'll just leave a note on the door from you. You know, saying you preferred this room."

"Right... well... shall we?"

"Wait," I said. I got nervous. "Please... let me read the note, one last time. Just because... it's all that's left."

"Okay."

Gregory,

Whatever you do, do not tell Matt or Shannon about this. It would break their hearts. By now I imagine Shannon has told you our secret. I told him he could. I can't let Matt know about us -- or about me. He doesn't like people like us.

Under this, you'll find a bank statement foreclosing the mortgage I have on this house. Things are worse than you realize. I was living hand-to-mouth, not knowing where my next paycheck actually would come from. I would have to move in with Matt again. I can't do that.

The clinic's note will tell you why. It has the results of the blood test in it. I asked Shannon to get tested because I hope what happened to me didn't happen to him. I shot up with the wrong crowd. They left me with HIV. I've been hiding it for months now. I got word to day that it has become full-blown AIDS.

As far as Matt knows, I died because of a horrible accident. That's all he and Shannon and Evan need to know. I hate to do this to Evan, but it's better they remember me this way. But I can't let the truth go with me.

If things go as expected, I will climb to the top of the cage. I will pose for the crowd. I will wobble on top, mainly for theatrics. I will then fling myself backwards off of the top of the cage. If I place it just right, my throat will drop with full-force on the steel guardrail on the side. My neck will snap. I will no longer be a problem.

I am so sorry that I came to this. I am sorry to burden you with this. It's better this way. My parents won't have to see me wilt. My brother won't just think of me as some queer. Shannon can remember me as brave. I trust you and Amy to be quiet about it. Please let my dignity remain complete.

Goodbye. And thank you.

Jeff

"Lindsay, I don't know what to do any more," I said after re-reading the note.

"What do you mean?"

I sat back down. "Matt asked me to give the eulogy. He's going to expect me to be generous and kind about his brother... and I have to be. But... this... I can't respect him. Do you understand?"

"More than you do," she said. "You see... once a year, we all go on a week-long vacation. It'll be coming up at the end of October, just so you know. Anyway, we visit the spirit realm. We go back to the gates of Heaven... we go to Purgatory to cheer up the souls in their last Recovery... and... we stand outside Hell. And outside Hell are those who took their life."

"You mean... they're not like us?"

"No, they're not. Andy, anyone who tries to play God with himself doesn't get the right to live out his life. He's stuck for eternity neither in Heaven or Hell. He's not alive, he's not conscious... he's just... there."

"I don't understand."

"You will. The next time you see Jeff, he'll be unresponsive. He'll always be that way. He's cursed himself. He won't be alive or dead... he won't even resemble something that was alive or dead. He'll just... be. It's his punishment."

Lindsay's thoughts weighed heavily on my mind. If it was true -- if Jeff really had forfeited his existence -- then he had committed the biggest mistake one could make. But at the same time, he had made his choice. He also wished that Matt and the rest of the world didn't know. And here I was, about to eulogize a man whom the world thinks of as a vibrant, lively hero, but who I know to be a coward and a quitter.

"Lindsay," I finally said, "will you help me write?"

She smiled. "Of course. But first... let's honor his last request."

We threw all the papers into a bin. Amy produced a match. She dropped it in. We watched as the evidence of Jeff's horrible deed crumbled and crackled in the presence of the flame, until like Jeff, there was nothing left of them.

Friday, September 26, 2003, 09:44 AM

Gastonia, NC

Oh my God... I can't believe him!

I was staring at the front page of WWE.com. Everyone was staying at my place so that we could hide from the local press, and from the Hardys' fans. Matt's dad reported that a vigil was being kept outside his house. Flowers were showing up almost daily there. Everyone was showing common concern and consolation. Everyone but Vince McMahon.

"Amy," I called out, "Amy, c'mere." I didn't bother to call in Matt or Shannon, since they would probably do more harm than good knowing. Lita ran into the room and looked over my shoulder. She gasped in horror and anger. We looked at each other, unable to comprehend the depths we were dealing with.

On the front page was the link to the SmackDown results. However, rather than put a picture from within the ring or of Jeff, they showed us. Our group hug, which all of us had assumed was private, was the splash picture leading to the results. The caption consisted of words Matt said to the crowd: "He was one of us."

"What is this crap? Did you..."

"No, I had no idea! I didn't authorize this!"

"Well, I guess we know what kind of demon we're dealing with, don't we?"

"Shameless. So damn shameless." She grabbed the phone and picked it up. "Can I call Shawn?"

"Absolutely." I listened as she dialed. I clicked on the link, only to see the picture above the SmackDown results. The results contained their usual quota of exclamation points, dashes, and other elements -- the episode read like a usual SmackDown recap, except without plot advancement. They even had a match summary at the bottom.

"Shawn? Shawn, it's Lindsay. Have you seen the website?... What?... No way! We didn't do that!... Look, you'd better straighten this out right now, you got that?... Of course not... Yeah, I'll make sure... okay, thanks... bye." She hung up. "The word in the locker room is we staged that."

"The hell we did!"

"I know, I know." She freaked out. "Look, let me get on my -- Amy's -- website. I think there needs to be a separate statement about this."

"All right."

Hello everyone.

First, I want to thank you for your shows of emotion and support during this very difficult time. Matt is particularly distraught right now, and it's taking everything I and the guys have to help him and his family through. Mr. Hardy is particularly grateful for the display of love directed to his son. Please, keep him and Mrs. Hardy in your prayers most of all. They need it.

I want to set something clear right now. If you looked at WWE.com, you would see a picture that apparently closed out SmackDown. I say "apparently" because we ourselves could not bring ourselves to watching the show. However, that photo was not authorized, nor was it staged. It was spontaneous and meant to be private. WWE did not have the right or the privilege to put that on there, much less to act as though we asked them to. We would never, ever take advantage of Jeff like that. Gregory and I, on behalf of the Hardy family, demand that the WWE remove the picture and issue an apology as soon as possible.

I don't want this to be a time of anger. This is a time of mourning and of celebrating the life of a close friend and a great individual. I have been asked by the family to announce that the service will be held in the chapel at Duke University in Durham, NC. The burial site is being kept private. Services begin at noon. We hope there will be enough room for everyone who knew him.

Thank you all.

Lita

05:55 PM

"Greg... we gotta talk."

"What's wrong, Matt?"

"Look, uh... you and Amy have been spending a lot of time together recently... Shannon was saying you were in her room until really late the other night."

"Matt... you don't think we're... oh, come on!"

"I don't know... I'm... I don't know what to believe any more. Evan told me that he... Jeff... he..."

"Matt, come on. What did he say?"

"He's not sure it was an accident."

"What? What is he... how?"

"He just can't understand how Jeff could lose his balance. He's thinking... well..."

"Matt, come on. Does that really sound like your brother?"

"Does what?"

"Matt, how can you not think this whole thing was an accident? Would someone sabotage the cage? Who in their right mind would do that?"

"No, no... worse... he thinks..."

"What, that... that he jumped?"

"...yeah..."

"Matt... no. No. Jeff would never do that. Not the Jeff we know. It doesn't make sense. Why would he agree to turn his life around and then end it? That's..."

"I know it doesn't make sense! But Jeff was... he was weird. He seemed a little gone. I don't know..."

"Matt... if what Evan's saying is true, then your brother quit his life, lied to you about wanting to turn it around, and was too damn scared to face a sober world. That's just not true. Have you ever... ever... known Jeff to want to back out? Do you think he'd lie to his friends? To his family? Can you think that little of him?"

"I don't know anymore..."

"Matt, you've gotta pull together. You're thinking the worst of everyone. You act like Amy and I are trying to start something special behind your back, and now you think Jeff would kill himself? Look... yeah, life is pretty bad right now, but that doesn't mean the worst is true. Amy's my friend, and right now, she's still my friend and nothing more. And Jeff... it was an accident. You remember what he looked like on Sunday night, right? Didn't he..." *hang on, Gregory wasn't there...* "...what did he look like?"

"He seemed optimistic. He... seemed so ready... Greg... oh God... I can't believe it... it's not fair."

"Matt. Life isn't fair. You know where I was when I got the word?"

"You said you were in Washington."

"More than that. We were in a cemetery. We were visiting the graves of some of the sniper victims. I was looking at the last one... the one after he got out. How do you think his family feels? That was no accident, what happened to him!"

"Greg -- what the hell you trying to do?"

"I'm just saying... life ain't always fun. And... and we all get dealt bad hands. But... it all works out in the end. You guys will be reunited. I believe it. And when you are... all this pain... it'll all be a memory."

Nothing.

"Matt? Do you understand?"

"I... I... I guess. Th-thanks. Thank you. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Look, Amy and Shannon are gonna help me write the eulogy, and I... I gotta get it done. Sorry I can't... can't stay more."

"It's all right... I gotta get a head start to the chapel anyway. Thanks, Shane."

"Shane... you haven't called me that in ages."

"I know. I just... I just wish I could get to that time again. When you were Shane, and we... we were together..."

"Matt, c'mon... won't do you any good to wish him back. He ain't comin' back. Please... move on."

He waved me away. "I'll be fine."

I walked into my bedroom and closed the door. I thought about what I had told him. I thought about how I said that Amy and I were just friends, and nothing more right now. I thought about how I told him Jeff's death was an accident. I remembered telling him that the two of them would be together in Heaven. I said everything Gregory Helms would say in this situation.

But just like I'd do tomorrow in the eulogy, I lied.

Saturday, September 27, 2003

12:32 PM

Here goes nothing. I climbed the stairs I'd climbed before as a member of campus ministry. It was from this pulpit I would have read the psalm or the letters of St. Paul. Now, I wasn't myself, and it wasn't a Bible passage. *Here goes nothing.*

"Jeffrey Nero Hardy was my friend. More than that, he was my co-worker, my teammate, my contemporary, and my idol. At just 18 years of age, he had achieved what many men try for decades to get -- and never do. He had performed at the highest level -- on national television. Now, at just age 26, he has been taken from our midst.

I can't pretend to understand why it is that this decision was made. At his age, most men in his profession are barely getting started, or have just made their first appearance on some local network. He reached the top and left it, then left us, all too soon.

It was like his life was -- fast-forwarded. We were at one speed, he was another. Everything about him was fast. He did everything full-pace. He was so energetic.

His energy was contagious. When you were around him, you found yourself able to do and say so much more than you could inspire yourself to do on your own. He

provided a sense of power, a thrill to life, that was entirely his own, yet somehow you felt you were in on it -- like it was your secret. And it was special.

I had trouble finding the words that would explain the true love I had for him. It wasn't like the love his family had. I don't want to imagine how they feel. But it was a special bond you get when you spend your early years together. We influenced each other and supported each other. And I know it wasn't just me, but all of us who knew him.

I didn't want to talk about work while I was here, but one story in particular stands out. When my group -- WCW -- was bought out, I was worried. I was just another lightweight flying act. I didn't think I had it. I was afraid that my dream was over, and that I'd be let go. And in fact, when my insurance policy -- my title that I inherited from WCW -- was taken from me, I was certain I'd be let go.

But Jeff -- and Matt, but I'd like to think mainly Jeff -- talked to my new boss. They mentioned that when I was a kid, I would pretend to be a superhero like I read in the comic books. They talked about how I'd run around with a makeshift cape and save the day. I felt a little embarrassed -- I mean, I was so young -- but, they turned it to a positive. They said I could still do that, that I still had the capability to play such a role and to make it work. They said I could take a silly character in an ultra-serious world and succeed. The boss listened, and he gave me a shot. It worked. To this day I still think they saved me from being fired.

And now... now the guy who helped me more times than he can count, and helped me reach my dream job and keep it -- now he's not here to appreciate what he did. He's never gonna understand how much he did for me. He'll never be able to sit back some day with his wife and children and grandchildren and show them old tapes and say, That's me there. But I know I'll get the chance to talk to his nieces and nephews. And when they see those old tapes, and see me as a star, I can tell them, I'd have been nothing without their Uncle Jeff.

And in a way, all of us are better for Jeff. I don't know of too many people who regret a chance meeting or an autograph and a handshake. Even just a hello... you could see the desire, the hope, the... need to make your day better by his presence. Even in the end, when he needed our help the most... and I can't deny he had his demons... we all do... but even then, you could tell that he wanted you to think of him and not his trouble. And when you thought of him, you almost always smiled.

I'm looking out right now at the crowd, and I see a lot of different people. I see guys from Union Pines, here to see off a classmate. There's people he fought with and against, remembering his life. He's got fans who wanna say goodbye to their hero or their heartthrob. And I see Matt, and Mr. and Mrs. Hardy, who have to see someone younger, with more life to have lived, and bring him to rest.

But we're all here because we remember him and because we were positively influenced. And if Jeff -- if he could see how many people he touched in his life, then I'm sure he'd smile. I'm sure he'd be getting one last thrill out of it.

Jeff always talked about living in the moment, and doing everything to extremes. Today I think we all know, he was an extremely... extremely good person... who did not deserve the fate... life handed him."

WWE.com
10:45 PM

The picture posted earlier on our front page of Matt Hardy, Lita, Hurricane, and Shannon Moore was not meant to be shown, either on television or on our webpage. The participants have asked for it to be removed, so that their grief can remain theirs. World Wrestling Entertainment has complied and regrets the error.

Sunday, September 28, 2003, 03:15 PM
Aboard a flight from Raleigh/Durham Airport to Chicago Midway Airport

Lita and I took adjoining first class seats on the flight to rejoin the RAW crew. Thankfully, the flight we took wasn't very heavily booked, and we had plenty of time and space to talk and be ourselves.

"Lindsay... hey, Lin... um, you ok?"

"Yeah... I'm fine. I just worry about Amy."

"Amy? But you're Amy."

"I am now, but tomorrow I'll be someone else. The things I've done have impact, you know."

"Right... but what have we done? I thought it was an act of mercy to bury the dead."

"It is... it's not that... it's... well, it's Matt."

"Okay, now you're confusing me. First it's you, then it's Amy, then it's Matt... spit it out."

"Well, we've been spending a lot of time together, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I just don't know how Matt feels about that. I mean, he loves me... her. And he's been going through a lot. We all have. We're all just... not thinking straight right now. But I don't know if he knows. He's been hearing a lot of things, and he might be assuming the worst."

"Of us? Why?"

"Evan."

"I don't understand."

"Well, I think Evan's figured out about Jeff."

"Yeah, I heard the same thing. I guess being in the ring with a guy makes it hard to doubt your senses. But... Matt will believe what he wants to believe, and Gregory and Amy and Shannon will convince Evan he's thinking too much. Right?"

"I guess..."

"You don't sound too confident."

"I'm not. Evan worries me. Soon as I land I'm calling Paul up and letting him know about it. I think Evan may be in a delicate state right now."

"How so?"

"Well, how would you be if you were in his place, watching him fall off the top of a cage and snap his neck? Wouldn't you be a little... well..."

"Traumatized? Yeah, I guess I would. I never thought of it that way."

"Well, that's how I'm thinking about it. He's in trouble... I never got to see him... I can only assume he's... he's saying these things because he doesn't want to believe."

"I don't understand."

"Well... if he sees Jeff lose his balance and his life, then not only does he feel uneasy, and numb, but he kinda loses hope. I mean, if Jeff never got the chance to fix himself -- if God never let him fix himself -- then what does that say about Jeff, or about God? But if he thinks that Jeff flung himself, and that he did it on purpose, then Jeff was in control all along. He had reconciled, he had gotten in everyone's good graces, and he went out on his terms. Which sounds better to you?"

"I don't know, which sounds better to you? That Jeff was a victim or a coward? That he wanted to face his demons and ran out of time, or that he took the cheap way out and conned everyone into thinking he was a hero? When you think about it that way, it's pretty obvious."

"Obvious to us because we deal with life and death. It's our job to think that way. Evan... he's... he's human. Humans feel differently. You remember that. You always tried to rationalize and change the world around you to fit what made you feel best. Soon enough, Evan will come around."

"Fine... but what about Matt? Will he come around?"

"Matt already thinks it was an accident."

"No, I mean, to us, to -- to Amy and Gregory. Do you think he's jealous?"

"Matt? Let me think. I gotta see what Amy thinks of Matt."

"Okay... uh... that's weird. Man, I don't know if I'll ever feel right accessing their minds. It's like I... I'm ransacking their house or something."

"Hey, it's what we gotta do. The trick is to forget it."

"Forget it?"

"Yeah -- forget the things that aren't common knowledge. It's really not that hard to do. Now lemme work." One minute of silence followed. "Okay, well... Amy thinks Matt doesn't suspect anything about other people. Yeah... I mean, they're friends, with or without us."

"I know, but... we were awfully close. How will they explain it? What if they let the note get out?"

"One, we burned it. Two, we made a pledge not to tell that they'll honor. Three, half the time they won't remember."

"Why won't they? They experienced it!"

"Okay, their brains will remember, but the rest of them will be convinced it couldn't have happened. If you were to ask Tammy Sytch about a one-night stand with Bret Hart, she wouldn't remember doing it. You know why? She didn't. I did."

"Shhhh -- don't want anyone giving us funny looks."

"Relax... I've done this before. Anyway, I don't know if they'll remember the note, but if they do, they'll also keep Jeff's request. They'll remember all of it or none of it."

"That's a bit of a relief. By the way -- how'd you get the stuff out of Amy's mind?"

"Oh... that's nothing. You just gotta try to recede a little."

"Recede? What do you...?"

"Well, you know how you pushed yourself into Recovery?"

"Yeah..."

"You can do that here, too. You just pull back a little. Humans do it all the time. Ever just zoned out and let everything around you turn into a blah blah blah and a mix of colors?"

"...I think so... but I never remember talking to anyone else when I did it."

"Silly boy. That's because there wasn't anyone else. It was just you. But now, there is someone else. I mean, did you see how I was when I was trying to find out about her thoughts?"

"Yeah... you just kinda stared forward. You didn't seem to be concentrating or anything. You just were blank. I mean, you blinked, but that's it. I could've waved my hand in front of you and I don't think you'd have noticed."

"Yes, I would have, and thankfully you didn't do that. It would've just slowed down the process. Point is, you get enough of a nothing going, enough inertia, and you can actually recede a little. And when that happens, you don't see as the person."

"Really? What's it like?"

"You're actually in a room with the spirit of the guy or gal you are. You can talk to them."

"Wow. That's awesome! Let me try it."

"No! Don't do it unless you have to. Most of the stuff you need is readily accessible in the data portion anyway. It's only the secrets and dreams you need to dig for."

"Secrets? Dreams? Then why'd you have to go ask Amy how she felt?"

"Because she never thought about it. I was checking all around and she... it never crossed her mind that Matt would see you as a threat. That's probably a good thing, too."

"Yeah, sounds like there's total trust for both of them. So Matt's okay, and Shannon's okay, but we gotta work on Evan. How are we ever going to do that?"

"We can't, really. I mean, we can't solve ALL the world's problems. We're here for Vince, first and foremost, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he's in more trouble than anyone realizes, and we have to do something to help him. I don't know what to do. I've never exorcised a demon before. None of us have. We have no clue how to do it."

"But you saw Brian near the end. Didn't you try something?"

"We tried a few things. We tried a lot of prayer. We tried having him drink holy water we took from a church. We tried placing a crucifix medallion on his necklace. Nothing worked. He just vomited the water and ripped off the necklace. And... and the prayers... we heard laughter. Whatever was in him was really strong."

"I see. I guess I'm glad we caught Vince early on... I mean, while there's still time to think of something."

"Andy, I don't know if there is."

"What? But... you said Jake... he was..."

"I said that it takes any length of time. We're not sure which demon this is. It could be an anti-saint, someone who became honored in Hell for his actions. It could be some run-of-the-mill satyr, some Pan-like demon, that just occasionally causes things to go wrong. Maybe it's one of Satan's top devils. I don't know. I didn't get a good look at it last week, and obviously not this week either."

"When will we know? Does Owen or Greg...?"

"I don't know. I don't think Owen does. Greg... Greg has to know. Maybe he's seen it before. I'm not sure. I'm just not sure."

"Damn. If only we could do more."

"Andy... we did plenty this week and every week. Do you know how many people you made feel better with that eulogy? The whole group was crying. I saw Christian and D-Von in the back, borrowing tissues from each other. They wanted to thank you for giving them something to remember him by. Matt thanked us for the last thoughts -- he said they were beautiful. Andy, you don't know what you can do until you do it. You can never know what little thing will make someone's day."

"Please. We're wrestlers. Let's not kid ourselves. We can go out and praise God all we want -- look at Shawn -- but at the end of the day, we are phony."

"Stop thinking like that! The people on TV -- that we play, that they play -- they're phony. They're very phony. They're pure fiction. Triple H -- you think Paul Levesque is that kind of power-mad egomaniac behind the scenes? You think Glen Jacobs wants to commit arson? Does Steven Williams drink beer all the time and get his jollies by attacking innocent strangers? And that's just RAW; there are equal examples over on SmackDown! Bottom line, the WWE is fiction. The wrestlers are real. And we are as close to reality as it gets. When someone on TV changes their stripes, it's temporary and meaningless. When someone backstage tries to influence things, it is short-term important but long-term trivial. When we try to change people, we are changing them at the foundation. Don't you see? You're more important now than you've ever been."

"I am?"

"YES! So stop acting like this is all a show. You've been here two months already; you should know it isn't! What we do is real! There's only two people who know about us, Shawn and Paul. Everyone else -- we're just another mysterious way in which God works."

Silence. "Am... Lin... I don't know if I wanna think of myself as a plot device."

"You're not. You're a prime-time player. And you're special. Don't forget that."

"Thanks. You're special too."

"Yeah, I know." She smiled, then seemed to have something click. "Hey, not here, ok? Look, you know we can't. Talk to me later."

"All right. How will we get to where the RAW guys are? We might be at the wrong hotel."

"Tomorrow, Lita will call Shawn's cel phone, and the two will drive over to Rosemont together. In the meantime, we have each other."

"Just like always, eh, Lindsay?"

"Yeah... that's the nice thing. Even though we don't have ourselves for more than a week or so at a time, we always have each other. I like that."

The plane began to descend.

11:34 PM

We got off the elevator on the 5th floor and returned to our room. I hopped over

to the far bed and turned on the television, hoping to catch a Heat report, or anything else. Lita had gone into the bathroom to wash the makeup off of her face.

"You ok, Lindsay?"

"Yeah... just getting ready for bed, that's all." I heard her open her bag in the bathroom and ruffle around in there.

"Can I, uh, help you find anything?"

"No, I'm fine."

I continued to watch. Heat was being replayed on the TV station. They were showing highlights of Lita's return to RAW, and they hyped the tag match for tomorrow. Michael Hayes made a note of asking if Lita would be able to compete given the tragedy in her life. *Good grief. Vince is shameless.*

Lita emerged. I did a double take. She was wearing only a T-shirt and her underwear. I gulped hard. This was something I hadn't planned on her doing.

"What's wrong?" She then looked down. "Oh, this. This is how she always sleeps. Don't worry about it." I was slow to respond. "Come on, you've seen more skin from her on those calendars. What's the big deal?"

"Just that... um... actually..." I paused. "You know, I wanna try something." I reached into my suitcase and shuffled things around.

"What are you doing?"

"Just fixing the view," I replied cryptically. I moved a few clothes and my costume around until I found my glasses. I slipped them on and turned around. "There we go."

Lindsay laughed. "How do I look?"

"Better than I expected," I replied. I got up off the bed. "Much better."

"Wait," she said. She hesitated, then picked up her own glasses. "There we go. I guess there's no harm in just looking."

I stepped back, confused. "Looking? I thought you..."

"What? Hey, look, I already learned the hard way. Shawn's nowhere near us, and I'm not going to risk dying."

"But it wasn't that. I just... Lindsay, I respect you. And you're a wonderful person. I don't want to jeopardize you, and that's not what I had in mind. I just wanted to see how you felt about me. I guess I know now."

I sat down on her bed. She smiled. I thought I heard her giggle. "No... you don't know the half of it."

She sat down next to me. I looked at her and blinked a few times, nervous.

"Lindsay, I... am I forcing this?"

"No, not at all. Hey, when I first saw you I wondered who you were. When I saw the picture in the paper, I cried not because you were dead, but because I thought I felt a connection to that guy. I still do. I can't say what it is -- but there's a hunch that you were put here for a bigger reason than because of Vince. Like, we had to meet. How else could I explain the two of us being put together without Kathleen around? Maybe I'm thinking too much."

"I don't know... maybe this is something you can't think about. You can't rationalize. I mean... I never met you in life. And here in death, you... you've been so nice to me, that I... I appreciate that, and I appreciate you."

"Thank you, Andy."

She moved in. I felt a thrill as I closed my eyes. We remained that way, embracing and sealing our feelings, for well over a minute, the longest and most wonderful minute I'd felt since before I died.

As she pulled away, she said, "Good night, honey. And sweet dreams."

I floated over to my bed -- or at least, it felt like I floated. I jumped in and turned off the television. As my eyes closed, I felt a smile on my face that couldn't go away.

Monday, September 29, 2003, 07:30 AM
Chicago, IL

The sound of the alarm woke me up. As my eyes opened, I saw the wall I was facing. *Strange -- I fell asleep staring into her eyes... oh, crap... I'm not Hurricane any more. Of all the days to change.* I rolled over and turned off the alarm, then stretched a little. In the other bed, I saw a small guy, not facing me, seated and putting on shoes or socks -- I couldn't tell.

"You gonna be ready to go?" he asked.

"Hell yeah," I replied as I reached for my glasses. At least, I tried to, but I saw two pairs there. One was the pair I was used to, but the other was a prescription pair. *Oh, great... this'll be fun.*

I grabbed them both and worked my way through the haze that was my vision. I set both pairs down on the counter in the bathroom and looked into the mirror. I couldn't figure out who I was, but I saw something that seriously narrowed it down -- a dark skin tone.

My mind raced. *Who could I be? Come on, you knew so much about wrestling and everyone in it -- how many dark or black guys are there in the WWE?* I couldn't pull the name, and I tried not to think too hard. Whoever I was, their mind hadn't cleared all the fog yet, and it was affecting my ability to think. I reached for a pair of glasses and put them on. I saw myself. *For once, the wrong pair. Although this pair of glasses seems to work almost as well as 20/20 anyway... too bad I can't wear these all the time.* I switched from one pair to the other as my roommate called to me.

"Hey, don't forget, the big wedding's this weekend. We're all invited."

"Bro, I wouldn't miss it for the world!" *Why am I talking like this? What is... oh, wait a minute...* I put on my other glasses. *Well, of course.* I realized I could pull just about any precedent I wanted, because I'd been there. I could argue whether something was good for business because I'd seen most of it. I was an old hand. I was a respected individual. I was a prime time playa.

I was Theodore Long.

TO BE CONTINUED