

PROLOGUE

Sunday, August 3, 2003. 10:55 PM.

I was at the Exxon gas station near Rolling Road in Burke, VA -- not 5 miles from home. As I got out of my car, I nonchalantly turned off the radio. I had heard enough about how John Lee Malvo, aka the "Beltway Sniper", had escaped from prison that weekend and that FBI agents were asking everyone to be vigilant. *Everyone knew what to look for. Besides, how much could you do with a bright orange jumpsuit? Kinda ruined the stealth, you know?*

I went to the pump and selected unleaded. I saw the light of the station reflect off my white T-shirt. Washington was always so damn hot in the summer. Sometimes, I kinda wanted to know when the relief was coming. But with fall would come a return to college. *Ugh. I just couldn't win.*

I woke up in my bed, in a cold sweat. I had no idea I was dreaming... I certainly seemed awake. Maybe a few minutes of walking around the room would clear my head.

I got out of bed, seeing myself wearing the shorts, socks, and shoes of my dream. Now, I know that crashing in what I had on wasn't unusual, but I usually took my shoes off at the very least. This I honestly couldn't explain. *Did I go drinking last night? And why didn't I hear any noises?*

Wait a second, what time is it? I thought. I looked back over my shoulder to where my clock radio would be. It wasn't there. In fact, my nightstand wasn't there. Nor was my dresser. Heck, my ROOM wasn't there. *Maybe I'm still dreaming,* I thought. *Yeah, that's it. I'm still dreaming. But why would I jump from pumping gas to being in my bed in a strange... blank... white... room...*

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Nothing.

"Am I alone? Can anyone hear me?"

Suddenly, a bright light glared to the left of me. I turned away instinctively, although my instinct also said that, once I got used to the light difference, I wouldn't see anything bad on the other side of the light. I waited a minute or two for my pupils to adjust. While I waited, though, I heard a voice...

"Andrew Goss... Be not afraid... Come forward..."

Strange, I'd never heard anyone with that voice before. It was fatherly... but it wasn't my father's voice. I stood up instinctively, stepping onto the floor and walking in the direction of the voice. My eyes had finally adjusted.

A man in a grey tunic stood in front of me. His hair was white, with a full beard and mustache also white. In his left hand was a book, and in his right was a keychain with giant keys on it. It was an image I had conjured up before, but why it would come to me in a dream was beyond me. Then I looked past the figure and saw a gate, 50 feet high, in the background. My eyes returned to the man in front of me, transfixed.

"Do you know where you are, Mr. Goss?"

"Sure I do. I'm in a dream. A very bizarre dream. Somehow, my mind has pieced

together my car, my bed, and a man with a book. Is this something Freudian?"

"I'm afraid this is no dream, my child. This is all too real. Do you know who I am?"

This is real? I've got an old man in a robe in my bedroom? Wait, I'm not in my bedroom! How'd they move my bed up here? Come on, Andy, think, THINK! Where have you seen this man before?

"You know, you look a little like the images of St. Peter in my school chapel. It would explain the book -- with the names of the Good and the Evil -- and it would explain the chain -- those are the keys to that gate there, and beyond the gate is Heaven. But for me to be seeing you would require my death. As you can see, I'm very much alive."

"You are right about who I am. But the rest shows you have much to learn. Look at yourself."

I looked down at what I was wearing. It was the same white T-shirt I had on at the gas station -- at least, it *was* a white T-shirt. Now it was splattered with hues of pink, red, and brown. I put my hand on one of the brown stains that hadn't dried yet. It was motor fluid. *But when did my shirt get like this?*

I put my hand to my head as I thought. As I pushed my hair back, my index finger began to poke inward. Instantly, all my attention was on that. I moved my finger inward and outward. It could pass through where my forehead should have been. It was like I had a hole in my head.

Wait a minute. The motor fluid... the pink and red... the hole...

"Shit. I'm dead."

"Please. There's no need to be coarse. Yes, my child, you have passed on. The man you heard about, John Malvo, made you his next victim. Soon you will be known throughout the region. But this will be of little concern to you unless you wish to be there."

"Be there? But... St. Peter, sir... I can't go back. I've paid my time on earth. I'm due for my reward -- whichever it is."

"A common misconception, Mr. Goss. You see, the Lord measures out each man's time on earth to influence the events around him. No man outlives his time, but some do not reach the limit in their assigned body. You are one of those. According to my Book, you are due for judgment at the age of 73 years after birth."

I did quick mathematics in my head. "So I have 50 years of being stuck in limbo?"

"Not in limbo." His smile re-assured me that, whatever was to happen next, I would be in good hands. "You see, those who are not due for judgment, but who are not alive on Earth, are destined to wander the earth as the internal guardians of the living. They will spend time controlling their moves, speech, and thoughts -- within a certain degree. Their mission is to save the souls of others who are on a path of personal Destruction."

I had to think about what was said. *Now I knew I had to be dreaming, right? I mean, that made almost too much sense. But I was taught that there would be no reincarnation.* I thought if I waited him out I'd wake up. Or, at the very least, he'd tell me this was a test and give me judgment.

"Okay, sir," I finally said. "Assuming for the moment that all this is true -- and I'm not sure what to believe any more -- who have you assigned me to?"

"In what sense? Who you will be, or whom you will save?"

"Save. Let's start there."

"I thought you would. I chose someone for you that I think you'd take a personal interest in." *A personal interest? Me? I couldn't think of what it could be. Would I be helping out my parents, my teacher, my classmates? How about an old crush I had? Maybe I was to save Malvo himself. Now that would be weird.*

St. Peter walked to a podium in front of the gate. He pulled out a giant box with files so dense I couldn't tell where one ended and the next began. Something occurred to me all of a sudden as he was going through this. *If this is the St. Peter, and this is the gate to heaven, where is everybody?*

"Um, sir... why is it just us?"

"You mean, where are all the newly departed? Well, most of them have lived their natural life. Those don't report to me, despite what you've been told. They are placed in front of the tribunal over there."

I turned to my left. A line longer than I could count of older people was snaking around the background. Each person, one at a time, stood in front of a bench. Behind it stood eleven men, dressed much like St. Peter, who reviewed folder after folder of information and debated the cases. I assumed they were the Apostles.

"Here we are. I think this reclamation will be perfect for you."

I examined the picture on the front of the folder. There was no mistaking the visage. His gray-black hair, his cocky smile, those ears and eyes that had seen one battle too many -- this man was familiar to me indeed. No wonder St. Peter gave him to me.

"Do you know him, Mr. Goss?"

"Of course I do. This is Vincent Kennedy McMahon, a 60-year-old entrepreneur and self-made millionaire. His company, World Wrestling Entertainment, is a global industry and has become synonymous with professional wrestling in the United States. He's a household name."

"He's also a lost soul. We have 6 other people working on his case -- 4 like you, and 2 intermediaries. The intermediaries have been told to expect you."

"But... how will they know who I am? How will I know who they or any of my co-workers are?"

"We've planned for this. The intermediaries will explain further. The question is, do you accept the challenge?"

This is where I was expecting to wake up. When I paused for a full minute and nothing happened, it finally set in -- *maybe I was dead. Maybe this is St. Peter. And maybe I should say yes and avoid going to hell.*

"I'm in."

"Very well. When you wake up tomorrow morning, you will not be yourself. You will be -- and no matter who you become, you will always be -- "

"Wait wait wait... no matter who I become... does that mean I change people?"

"Yes. The intermediary will explain. As I was saying, you will always be a member of the World Wrestling Entertainment community. It is our plan to reclaim Vince by having those next to him help him see the error of his ways."

This is heavy stuff, I thought. I looked back at my bed -- but it wasn't there anymore. I was at the point of no return. Take a good look, Andy. You won't be yourself for quite some time.

"Are you ready?"

"I guess so, but... um..."

"Oh, right, of course. Your wound. Allow me."

St. Peter leaned forward and placed a key from his keychain on the site where the fateful bullet exited my skull. I felt an intense pressure on my head, as though it would implode from the force of the touch. After ten of the longest seconds I have ever experienced, he pulled the key away.

"Now you are ready, my son."

I barely had time to feel my forehead. He fixed it, all right -- my whole body felt as it had at the gas station. The whole area went white, a kind of blank I wasn't used to. I felt myself being whisked through a nothing -- not even the nothing directly associated with space. I couldn't even feel my body.

Then again, I told myself, maybe I don't have a body to feel.

The white blinked out and became black. As it did, a slow crescendo built. A sound, repetitive, staccato. It sounded almost like an alarm.

I woke up in bed with a start. The alarm was coming from my right. I jerked my head over there. It was just a clock radio... but not the one I was used to. Besides, that was on my left, not my right.

I turned it off and got out of bed. I noticed a second bed next to me with a figure lying in it that I could not identify. I looked down and saw I was dressed in a WWE shirt with American flag motif -- one which I never remember getting off of the ShopZone. I also had on shorts that came to my knees -- longer than I'd ever worn. *It was definitely an upgrade from the "blood-soaked" T-shirt. But where was I?*

I looked around. *Oh, of course, this is a hotel room. Whew. But wait -- that wasn't Dad or my sister in the other bed. That much I knew. And I don't remember having been on vacation. So if that gas station and St. Peter business was a dream, why was I having amnesia? I need some water.*

I grabbed one of the glasses off of the dresser. I heard a snort from the other bed. I quickly turned around -- and my neck twinged. *I must've slept on it wrong*, I thought. But no, this almost seemed like limited mobility. Like I was recovering from an injury.

Undaunted, I walked into the bathroom. I didn't want to disturb my roommate any further, so I closed the door completely with my left hand. *Wait a second... why did I have my left hand free and my right hand occupied with a glass? I'm a lefty!* Whatever. Things were just weird this morning. I'm on a vacation I don't remember taking. I had a dream that left me dead. I have a roommate I don't recognize. And I'm about to flip on the light, because it's really dark in this bathroom.

"AAAAACK!"

My shout must have been heard elsewhere, and even if it hadn't been, the glass shattering on the floor definitely was. What startled me was the sight of someone in the mirror above the sink staring back at me. It was my height and weight, all right, but that's where the similarities ended. He had long blond hair. I had regular brown hair. He had perfect teeth. Mine were too small. He had a necklace of some sort. I never wore jewelry.

On his hand was a wedding band. I was single. But more than that, the face I saw confirmed to me that I wasn't dreaming, that I was dead, and that I had been assigned to save Vince's soul.

The door opened behind me, and a shorter man entered the room. Actually, to be more precise, he was much shorter -- by nearly a foot. His Hispanic skin stood out in contrast to my pale white color. His eyes, a bright blue, stared at me in a look of concern. He spoke, but it was an American voice.

"Adam! Adam! Are you all right?"

Quick, regain your bearings, Andy. I'm guessing telling him the story wouldn't do you a damn bit of good right now.

"Yeah, thanks, Rey. I just banged my neck on this here" -- I quickly pointed to the towel rack, which was situated just right -- "and the shock caused me to drop my glass. You wouldn't think someone like me would be so clumsy, eh?"

Eh? Did I really just say that?

"Don't worry bout it, Adam. It's all right. Just watch your step. Man, I thought you were hurt real bad. Man, just take it easy. And don't forget your brace."

"Right. Thanks, Rey."

It was true. Everything was true. Today I was to begin the long, slow process of reclaiming the soul of the man who provided the best entertainment for me.

And I was going to start as today, this week, as Edge.

FIRST WEEK

Monday, August 4, 2003. 2:33 PM.

We had arrived in Kelowna, BC, a day early for the SmackDown taping event. As we all met in the hotel lobby, Stephanie McMahon and Paul Heyman stood in the front and got everyone's attention. I sat down in the back, still trying to adjust to the huge neck brace I was forced to wear. *Going around with a badly injured and healing neck may have been no fun, I thought, but it beats being dead by a mile.*

"Okay, everyone, you know the drill. Tomorrow, I want you all at the arena by 3:00. No exceptions. Velocity begins at 7, and it's followed by SmackDown! at 8. First matches will be around 6:30. Make sure you're on time. If you're late, and you miss your match, that's 30 days in the doghouse. You know that."

To her credit, Stephanie didn't sound nearly as annoying in person. Also, she certainly was more attractive than I remember giving her credit for. The soft blue eyes -- McMahon eyes, to be sure -- seemed to show genuine concern for everyone she had been placed in charge of. If circumstances were different, I might have treated her to lunch or dinner. But she was off the market.

For that matter, so was I, I thought as I touched my wedding band on my left ring finger.

Heyman spoke up next. "Anybody who wants to make the trip over to Vancouver with me and Stephanie, let us know as soon as this meeting's over. We're going to leave here around 3:30 PM. Heat starts taping at 5, as you know. Remember, RAW is LIVE, so they're going to be businesslike over there. No interaction off-camera. If you want to watch, we'll be an off-camera locker room together. The show ends around 8:15, so the stars should be available for conversation later. Got it?"

Everyone seemed rather bored by these announcements. I guess this was the usual drill, and they were just waiting for if there was anything special.

"By the way, guys, I want to warn you," said Stephanie. "My dad has been talking to Hulk Hogan again. Apparently, Hogan has had a bit of a change of heart and would be willing to work for us. He doesn't expect to be main event, and you know how graceful he's been backstage. I'll let you know if anything develops."

Rey turned to me. "Good news for you, isn't it, Adam? You get your idol back."

"It would be nice," I replied. Deep inside, I was excited. But this was neither the time nor the place for such emotion.

"Any questions?"

None.

"Okay, then. See me for the trip to RAW. Otherwise, go unpack."

Most of the SmackDown! wrestlers went to the elevators. A few, such as Chris Benoit, Billy Kidman, and even Rey went to talk to Heyman about going to RAW. I waited around a while, trying to decide whether to see RAW or not, when I noticed Stephanie putting on glasses as she went to Paul. *That's strange. Stephanie doesn't need them, does she? And why wasn't she wearing them during the meeting?* Then, just as quickly as she put them on, she took them back off. *Good idea. After that last meeting, disguises would be futile anyway.*

I turned to head to my room. I figured I'd get a chance to see the RAW broadcast

on TSN anyway, right? Besides, I had to unpack my stuff and figure out what my role was within the WWE, and within the mission. Strangely, I had yet to see Vince himself during my new life. *He was probably at RAW anyway. Besides, best not to rush into things.*

"Adam, wait! Paul and I want to speak with you."

It was Stephanie. She motioned me over to where Paul was standing. Together the three of us went into a secluded conference room. I noticed there were no security cameras around. Further, a giant mirror was hanging behind the head of the table. I'd never seen a set-up like this.

"What's wrong, guys?"

Paul spoke for both of them. "Nothing's wrong, Andy. We just needed to clarify a few things."

"Okay, what is it? What do you want me to do f... wait, what did you call me?" I nearly blew my cover. Acting like my name was Andy and not Adam was something I didn't want to do under any circumstances.

"Andy. That was your name, right?"

"What are you getting at? Are you feeling ok, Paul?"

"I'm just fine. See, I know who you are. I also know who you were. Peter's told me everything. I hope you are paying attention, because what I have to say is very important."

Then it dawned on me.

"You're the intermediary he spoke about, aren't you?"

"Yes I am. After I lost out on the Invasion and was told to take time off, I had a vision. The angel came to me and told me that I was to use my natural charisma and powers of persuasion for the force of good. He told me he was sending people to help reclaim Vince McMahon, and that I was to be their contact for him."

"You believed this?"

"Whether I believed it or not, it's true, isn't it? That's why you're here. That's why I'm here. We have a mission, not to be taken lightly."

Well, that's one intermediary. But why is Stephanie here?

"And you, Stephanie. Are you the other one?"

"No, I'm not. I'm like you. That's why I'm in on this meeting right now. I need to meet you."

"But how did you know who I was before Paul said anything?"

Paul interrupted. "Well, she had some help. Did you see her put on a pair of glasses for a few seconds?"

"I did."

"Well, all Fallen Angels -- that's what you are now -- get a pair. It goes with them from body to body. Otherwise, you are to keep it by your side at all times. Here's your pair. Look at the mirror."

He handed me a bulky pair of glasses -- they almost seemed like a novelty pair, missing the nose and eyebrows. They were identical to the pair Stephanie had slipped on. I took them and opened them up. I started to put them on when Stephanie spoke up.

"No, no. Face the mirror first. It's better for everyone if you do it this way. It's especially better for you."

Well, if you say so, I thought. I turned to the mirror, glasses in hand. I saw Edge

looking back at me -- a sight I was going to need a long time to get used to. I slowly put the glasses on as I kept my gaze fixed on the mirror. As they entered my line of sight, the image changed. When I didn't wear them, I saw things as they seemed -- I looked back at Adam Copeland. When I wore them, I saw things as they are -- my reflection came back to me.

"So this how you found me, Steph--"

I had turned around to talk to her, only to find she wasn't there. Paul was, but the person next to him was a woman I'd never seen before. She was about my age -- well, about what my age had been -- and had bright blond hair. Her build was much sligher than Stephanie's in many ways, and her nose was petite, almost as if it had been artificially reduced.

I panicked. *Who was she, how did she get here, and what happened to Stephanie? I thought she and Paul were the only ones in on this. Now someone I'd never met was seeing me -- well, seeing Edge -- wearing weird glasses and calling her Stephanie.* This could never do.

"Don't panic, Andy. I'm still here. Take the glasses off." That was Stephanie's voice coming out of her mouth, all right.

I did as the woman instructed. Instantly, Stephanie stood before me again. *Oh, that's right, I thought. She's 'like me'. The blond-haired woman was another Fallen Angel.* But Paul, who was the intermediary, looked exactly as he was. This would take a while to get used to.

"I'm never going to get used to this. It could take me months, and I still won't think of myself as Adam Copeland."

"That's okay, Andy, because you won't be for long."

"What do you mean, Paul?"

"Every Monday morning, when you wake up, you'll find yourself in a new body, controlling a new life. I don't know who you'll be right away, though, so you'll..."

"Wait... don't you have glasses?"

"Sure I do. But I can't wear them all the time. It would confuse me. That's the point of the meetings. Back when we were placed on the same show, Stephanie and I became the backstage leaders. I convinced her that each Monday we would go over the business of SmackDown! and discuss what everyone's role would be. After that meeting, I try to slip on the glasses so I can figure out who my charges are. This time, I saw her pull them out, so I figured it was being done for me."

"So if you didn't see me, how did you know who I was?"

"Well, Lindsay here -- that's her name -- came to me and told me that she saw a Fallen Angel she didn't recognize in Edge's body. I knew right away that it was the new charge I was told would enter our team last night. Since I knew who you were, I told her to get you so we could have this talk. Everything clear?"

"I guess so... um... shouldn't we be heading back outside? I mean, it has been a while."

"Oh, that. Time means nothing. When I opened the door to this conference room, did you notice me use a special keypass?"

"No."

"Well, I did. It's something that I and the other intermediary have. Basically, it

opens the door to this room you see here, no matter where in the world we are. It allows us to discuss things off the clock. If I have special orders for you, I'll bring you here. Got it?"

I paused.

"You know it'll take time for me to figure this all out."

"I know. You have tonight backstage to talk to me about it. I signed you up to head to RAW with Stephanie and me. If you have any questions, you can always ask to talk to us in here."

"Thanks, Paul. I'm sure it will be a pleasure working with you."

"No problem. Now let's get settled. We have about an hour before the caravan leaves. I want you to ride with me and the other two Fallen Angels. We'll discuss plans there."

He walked to the door and opened it. He held the door open as Stephanie walked through it. He motioned for me to follow.

So much information, so little time to digest it, I thought. Well, I hope my bags are still there when I get back to the lobby.

3:41 PM.

We were ready to hit the road in Heyman's rental car. Paul and I were loading things into the trunk as Stephanie climbed into the front seat's passenger side. After everything was loaded, Paul told me to get in, and that he needed to find something back in the lobby. He seemed rather secretive about it. *Must be code for the mission, I reasoned, but we're all here, aren't we? Wait, he did mention there was one more.*

I slid into the back seat and pulled out my glasses, which I made sure to keep in my jeans pocket. Since everyone involved was in on this secret, I saw no reason to hide them. Besides, the uncomfortable bulge in my pocket was something I couldn't get used to, not to mention I was getting tired of telling people that, no, I wasn't particularly happy to see them.

I waited until most of the other parties had left, then put on my glasses again. I saw Lindsay in the front seat, scanning over some papers as part of being Stephanie. *I can't imagine what it must be like to be used to this by now. Not having an identity for longer than a week at a time, working to help a man who never listened to anyone, and having to answer to Paul Heyman. I don't know what the worst part is.*

Paul emerged from the hotel with a second woman. This one was extremely young -- I would wager about 16. Her fiery red hair would have stood out more were it not for the freckles on her face. She was slightly built and obviously athletic. She climbed into the car next to me, and as she did, I noticed the car list over to the right. *Huh. She didn't seem that heavy.*

Paul climbed in the driver's seat and turned around to make sure everyone was set. When he saw me wearing the glasses, he seemed a bit perturbed. "It might be better for you to take those off, Andy. We all know who we are now."

I did as he said, then put the glasses back in the case. I looked back to the front seat. Paul was putting the car into gear and peeling out of the hotel parking lot. Stephanie

had put her papers away and leaning back to relax. I turned to the girl next to me -- only she wasn't quite what I remembered.

"Yikes!"

"I told you you'd be better off not wearing them."

No kidding I was. Suddenly, I was face to face with the WWE champion himself, Brock Lesnar. He looked even more menacing in person than on TV. His muscles were clearly visible, even through his oversized shirt. All in all, he bore absolutely no resemblance to the girl I saw enter the car.

"Hey, relax. I'm not going to hurt you. It's just an image for TV."

"I'm... I'm sorry Brock. I freaked out. You're not like you... I mean, you don't..."

He laughed. "Those glasses deceived you, didn't they? I know, I got a funny look from Steph-- er, Lindsay this morning. I can say that, right, Paul?"

"Seems all right. We're all alone."

"Okay. Yeah, Lindsay did a double take when she saw me carrying this glass case this morning. Kinda funny, isn't it, seeing a little teenage girl inside a big man's body?"

Certainly better than the other way around. "But isn't it hard adjusting to being a guy? I mean, there's so much different stuff between the genders."

"Wait, you're not... hang on..."

Brock reached into the pocket of the seat in front of him and got out his glass case. He pulled the glasses out and put them on.

"Hey, who are you? I don't think I've seen you before."

Paul chimed in. "Oh, right. I forgot introductions. Kathleen, this is Andy. He just joined the force last night. Andy, this is Kathleen."

We shook hands, but Brock -- er, Kathleen -- seemed to be in thought. "Andy... last night... hmmm... hey, Lindsay, you got today's Daily Mail up there? I wanna check something."

Oh, no, I thought. Here comes the sympathy. I did not sign up for this.

I saw Stephanie hand the front page of the newspaper back to Brock. He had by this time removed his glasses and replaced them. I buried my head in my hands as he turned open the front page.

"Oh my God... are you that guy?"

She pointed to a headline that read: SNIPER CLAIMS NEW VICTIM; MAN, 23, GUNNED DOWN AT GAS STATION.

"Yeah. I am. I... look, don't bring it up, ok?"

Brock said nothing. I heard a choking sob from somewhere. It wasn't my voice, and it sure wasn't Adam's either. I peeked through my hands to see Stephanie pull out a handkerchief and dab away something.

Paul seemed somber compared to a minute ago. "I hate this part. It's always hard welcoming someone new in. I was hoping Lindsay could keep together... I'm proud of you for doing so until we were here. If you want to get it out of your system now, it's ok. I understand."

Stephanie looked up at Paul. "Can I move to the back?"

Brock was now seated up front. We were at a gas station along the way. I was hoping this wouldn't delay us much. Stephanie had slid in and immediately given me a big hug of consolation. She seemed carried by emotion. I didn't know what to say, except to be practical.

"I'll be fine. I'm better now. Just help me adjust as you can."

"I hope so. Were you scared at all?"

"No. To be honest, I never felt a thing."

"That's good." She squeezed even harder.

"Hey, whoa... I may be alive, but my neck..."

"Oh, sorry..." she giggled. I guessed the mood had been lightened enough that we could get back to normal -- *well, whatever that is now*. But still, I had a million questions, and only fifty years to get answers.

Paul spoke up after a few minutes of silence. "Okay, gang, let me explain this to Andy so there's no confusion... and to remind you two of the rules. The deal is that we are supposed to lead by example. I'm the only one who can preach and try for a direct conversion. Well, I and the other guy. Your job is simply to help the people you are live a healthy, happy, and holy life. If you do that, then we believe Vince will follow in our footsteps. Got it?"

"Wait, Paul, just wondering." *Actually, I'm just hoping you don't get mad at this question.* "What makes you think that Vince will ever change? I mean, are you sure this isn't a lost cause?"

"Kid, nothing and no one is a lost cause until their time on earth expires. Remember that. Anyone can repent at any time. Never lose faith in the love and forgiveness of the Lord."

Hearing these words coming out of Paul's mouth was a bit of a shock. I never really associated him with being religious. Then again, he is Jewish... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Should we leave these glasses in the car?"

"That's probably a smart idea. We'll all be heading back in the same ride anyway. Basically, even though Vince is our main target, I want you to remember that any man or woman saved is a mission accomplished. So the more you can show people the proper way of life, the better it is. If anyone seems ready to reform, send them to me or to the other intermediary."

Brock spoke up this time. "Paul, you've been telling us about this other interm... whatever for weeks now. Who is he?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you who he -- or she -- is. See, the rule is that we who are living are mortal. You can't trust others. Technically, you can't trust me to stay the course. But know this: if you get transferred to RAW, you will meet someone with my role. If I leave the WWE, someone will assume my role on SmackDown!. The very nature of our business requires that Vince needs multiple people to tell him of the News."

Damn, he's serious. No way he leaves this mission on his own. Right? I mean, he did say we couldn't trust him...

"Wait, Paul, I'm confused. Are you saying that you may quit this mission?"

"Andy, I'm not saying I'd quit. I'm saying I would be replaced. I replaced someone before me. Strange as it sounds, Jerry Lawler used to be in my shoes. But when he placed

the value of his wife ahead of his business, DDP was asked to take his place. When he couldn't handle it, the job fell to me. The split of the rosters forced another to join me. Basically, what's important isn't who I am, but what I am -- your boss. You report to me every Monday, and any difficult questions are my field."

"Lindsay, what is he talking about?"

"Well, I'm not at liberty to say. The big thing is no one must know who isn't in on it. That's how we succeed in our mission. We make it seem like these are everyday people being good."

"Exactly," Paul added. "And by the way, don't bother talking to the King about his work. He won't remember it. It's a special precaution."

"Wait," I said, rather confused. "You mean he's brainwashed?"

"That word has a negative connotation, but basically, he had it removed from his conscience. But anyway, it's vital you don't tell him. Your spot opened up because another person dropped his guard and had to be transferred to another mission. We don't want that to happen again. We've put too much time and effort into this case. Do you know how long Lindsay here has been working?"

I turned to Stephanie, confused. "What does he mean?"

"I'm not your age. I died eight years ago. That's why I'm so used to this. But even then, there were people here ahead of me. Apparently this project started way back in 1993 when Vince was at his lowest point. I remember hearing people describe what it was like to watch him during the trial."

The trial?

"You mean... this is all because the government wanted to arrest him?"

"No! You're mixing up causes again!" Paul seemed rather angry with this. "The government was aware of the bad things he'd done with drugs, sex, and general apathy towards ethics. This mission began then because he came THIS CLOSE to ending his life, and we had to take drastic action."

Sorry I asked.

"Look, I didn't mean to get upset... I just get very defensive about my calling. I've been trying for so long to fix things around here. Anyway, the point is that Vince is no more or less a priority than anyone else. He is our primary target because he is the source of some of the sinful behavior. He is the role model. If we fix him, the rest will follow. But if we can't fix him, understand what I said earlier: anyone we can get is just fine."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. Now, anything else?"

I didn't need any more clarification. My mission was clear: reverse the course of the WWE before it plunged straight into hell. Thankfully, I was not alone. I don't know how hard this would've been if I had been one against the world.

I found myself fixated on one thing, but not really knowing how to articulate it. It kind of bothered me, but I didn't know why. Maybe it was just the shock from seeing tiny Kathleen turn into big, bad Brock. Or maybe it was because I was told that I could be anyone any week. Still, I had to ask.

"Um, Paul?"

"Yeah?"

"Am I restricted in any way as far as who I could wake up and be?"

"No... not that I know of."

"So, in theory, next week I could find myself as Stephanie?"

"Oh. I see what you're driving at. Yes. Yes, you could be anyone, man or woman, among the WWE's team. One week you could be Triple H, and the next week you could be a ring crew worker. One week you could be Ric Flair, the next week you could be Billy Kidman. Heck, anyone from Linda McMahon on down is subject to possible takeover -- well, except Vince himself."

That caught Kathleen's attention. "I wondered why I'd never drawn him. Paul, why can't we just be Vince and take over from within?"

Paul sighed quickly. He seemed a little nervous saying this. "Well... I'm surprised you don't know by now... I mean, Lindsay can tell you, right?"

Lindsay seemed uneasy. "I think it's better if you do, Paul. You're the one who gets the updates."

Paul was silent. It was as if he were searching for the right metaphor to help bring about the picture. "You see, Kathleen, it's like this. Every one of us has a soul. That soul can be perfectly healthy or partially so. If you repent and adopt the Lord, chances are it's in good shape. Every time to commit a wrong act, it drops a little in health. If it gets too sick, it becomes a dark soul. You guys can't go there."

"Yeah, but why not?"

"Patience, Andy. See, right now your existence is possible only because the soul in your host body is dormant."

Host body? Great. I sound like a parasite.

"A healthy soul can remain dormant for some time. It gets its energy from you and your deeds. If you were to enter someone with a dark soul, it would drain from your deeds to the point where nothing would be left for you. Your soul could become dark from feeding the other soul so completely. And right now, since you have no body life, your soul is your being."

There was silence as we contemplated these words.

"So if we ever become dark ourselves... we stop being Fallen Angels..."

"...and your sacrifice would put you in Hell. We can't have that. So for your own safety, it's best that you remain with people who are healthy on their own."

I turned a wary eye to Stephanie.

"Yes, she's fine. All the stuff the Internet says about her is pure rumor. She's no more or less guilty of personal bias than anyone else in her decisions. Besides, is it her fault she's fallen in love?"

"Is it?"

"No. But that's a story for another time. Now, Brock, pull out that map. I'm getting close to the turn-off for Vancouver."

This is so overwhelming right now. I need someone to sympathize with, but there's no one here I can talk to without being dragged to another time... or to Hell. I feel so crazy right now. I gotta take a walk.

"Adam... where are you going?"

"Oh, it's you, Paul. I just need a walk. Need to clear my head a little. Been a long day."

"Here, let me go with you. Follow me."

I had a feeling he knew what I needed to clear my head about.

We stepped out the door of the GM Place and into the back entrance, marked AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Outside, we saw Chris Nowinski and Rodney Mack arrive in Nowinski's Buick. *Even on the road, he lives a high life.*

"What is it, Adam... or Andy?"

"Andy. Paul, I just have a lot on my plate right now, and it's gonna take a while before I can be of much use."

"Nonsense. Every day, every one of us are of a lot of use. Kid, when I first started with this, I thought I was a lousy man for the job. I mean, Dallas Page was brilliant in his role. How could I top that? But you know, Peter told me that what was important was in the details. That's where love shines through the most."

"Love. I wish I knew."

"You still thinking about Stephanie?"

"Well... sort of." I looked nervously at my ring finger.

"Look, kid. Love can be many things. There's three types of love: Familial, Friendly, and Personal. We are here to give friendly love. The world is our friend, and we have to reach out and show them that friends are those who make you better. It's a big load, but you have the support of the Most Powerful Being to help you. Come on, we can discuss this more during RAW."

"But, wait... I thought you said we would be in a locker room with the other guys during RAW."

"Not really. Most of the time, we're doing a house show right now, so the guys in the back are rarely able to catch RAW. Now, they think I have VIP seating with Linda and Vince backstage. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Tonight I don't."

"So we're with everyone else, are we?"

"Not tonight. See, right now Steph and Brock are interacting with everyone, but when the show starts, they'll be with us watching from our own private backstage locker room."

"I'm confused."

Paul reached into his shirt pocket and whipped out the keycard he had used in the hotel earlier.

"That works here?"

"It works everywhere. Now, come on. There's still an hour to burn before RAW hits the airwaves."

"But what about Heat?"

"It's just the matches. Everyone mingles and warms up during them anyway. Don't worry. You'll fit in. We have faith in you, Lindsay and Kathleen and I. We know it can work."

Something in his hand being around my shoulder was re-assuring, almost as much as the smile St. Peter had given me back in the ether. For the first time since I became Edge, I was focused and ready. I knew my mission. We headed back through the door we came out of.

I was startled at first by round after round of explosions. I ducked my head as I entered, still thinking of the hole that had been put there just two days ago. Of course, that was 4000 miles away, but what was this?

"What happened?"

"That?" Paul chuckled. "That was just the pyro. Heat tapings must be underway. It's apparently showtime."

Ahead of me were members of the RAW roster. I could see Brock and Stephanie among them, along with Benoit, Rey, Kidman, and O'Haire. They all seemed to be watching from a monitor just behind the curtain.

You're right, Paul. It's showtime.

MONDAY NIGHT RAW
August 4, 2003, 6:00 PM
Vancouver, BC

I was backstage by 5:50 PM. Paul led me to a door that was marked "EXIT" near where we had talked earlier. He produced his card, slid it in the doorjamb, and opened it. *Yeah, right. This is going to lead to the conference room...*

Well, I'll be darned. It DID lead to the conference room. That card does work just about everywhere.

Brock -- er, Kathleen -- was already in the room, in the front row. Paul took a seat next to her and encouraged me to sit in the back. I hopped onto the table and spun to face the closed-circuit television. Our other party member was nowhere to be found.

"Paul, where's Lindsay?"

"She'll be here. She's a McMahon -- it's not as easy to slip away."

"Actually, while it's just the two of us rookies, I wanted to ask... um, how can we be these people when we don't know what they know?"

"I don't understand."

"Yeah, I wondered the same thing, Paul -- I mean, if I'm supposed to do an interview right now with WWE.com, how do I keep from sounding stupid?"

"Oh, that! Okay, Kathleen and Andy, I knew I forgot to explain something. You see, a lot of the stuff you do is done automatically. If you need to pull ideas out, they don't come from your mind, they come from that person's. In a way, you're mostly an observer."

Both of us let out a sigh of relief.

"Wait, then how do we change Vince or anyone else? I mean, I'm injured; I might get sent back to OVW before the end of the week."

"You wouldn't be assigned to Adam if you were, Andy. As for how to change Vince in your role, it's like I said; you gotta make sure you steer your person towards the right. You are their conscience and their soul. You cannot handle the details, but you can paint the big picture. Trust me, though; with a guy like Vince, it is the Big Picture that matters."

"Okay, that's cool. I guess. I mean... I'm still a little nervous cuz, you know, to me these guys are still all larger than life. I watched these people. They're celebrities to me.

It's hard for me to fathom being one of them."

"It takes a while. You two will get used to it, though. I'm certain. Now hang on a second; I'll go get Lindsay and we'll start the show."

I was wondering how she was going to get in. But wait -- what if she's stuck backstage when the show starts?

There was no time to think of that. The recap was on.

One World Leader -- WWE (Bischoff/Austin)

Highlights from last week, including the "upset" win by Chris Nowinski and Rodney Mack over Booker T and Goldust when Nowinski pinned T after a shot from the facemask. Also shown is Jim Ross's return to RAW and his decision to ask police to let Kane go.

We hit the opening credits!

"What happened?"

"I don't know! The screen just stopped!"

"Can you fix it?"

"I'll try..."

I headed to the back to see if any cords were loose. Everything seemed perfectly in order. I began to unscrew the connection to the wall and try to put it in different sockets in the back.

"Anything?"

"Still a blank."

"Darn. I hope we're not missing anything important."

I began to try various switches. Nothing seemed to produce any noise from the television monitor. *Oh, great, Paul's gonna be so mad. We're here by ourselves and we're missing the show. I can only imagine how far along we... wait a second...*

"Have you heard anything outside?"

"What do you mean?"

"Explosions. Cheering. Shouldn't RAW have opened with a bang?"

"We're not in the building... are we?"

"I don't know. I hope Paul gets here soon."

I kept struggling with the different settings. Each time, Brock -- er, Kathleen -- told me the picture wouldn't change. Time seemed to be standing still as I worked more frantically than before. But I ran out of time. The door opened, and Paul and Stephanie walked in. Stephanie had put on her glasses as she entered.

"Andy? What are you doing back there?"

"The TV's not working. Something's frozen."

Paul laughed. Kathleen and I turned and faced him, confused.

"Oh, remember how I said this room was off the clock? I took the liberty of making sure we wouldn't miss anything as we headed back."

Lindsay laughed heartily. "So basically, it took us exactly as long as it had to to get

back here!"

Good thing it didn't take longer... or is it?

"What would've happened if you hadn't been back in time? I mean, would the world have screeched to a halt? Would you be in two places at once? What?"

"We're here now. That's what's important. No one can see us. Look, I don't expect you to understand all this. Just know that we're isolated here, and that our lives are not ruled by earthly matters. Remember, when you're here, you're free to be yourself. Now, we have a show to watch."

Kathleen began to speak. "But the TV is..."

Just like that, the picture returned and was in motion again.

"Oh... okay..."

We all sat down to watch together as the credits finished.

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Aug. 4 / 03.

- Live from Vancouver, BC.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Jerry Lawler**.

- Opening interview: The Highlight Reel with **Chris Jericho**. Our special guest is **Christopher Nowinski**, fresh off of his win over Booker T. Footage of the match is shown on the "inordinately expensive JeriTron 5000" and conveniently edited to make the result seem clean and the match one-sided. JR is appalled, of course. Nowinski sucks up to Jericho, then claims he should be I-C champion. Yeah, right. Jericho asks the question I posed last week -- what's Teddy Long doing going after a black guy? -- and Nowinski basically calls Booker an Uncle Tom, noting how he smiles and dances his way to the ring. Nowinski tells Booker to stop being in the establishment. Let me repeat that: Chris Nowinski, a Harvard grad, tells Booker T, a Houston street urchin, to stop being in the establishment. Now THAT'S a good heel line. **Booker T** of course charges in -- Jericho tries to introduce him -- and pummels Nowinski, including a shot across the face that I'm sure will mean the goofy facial appliance will be back. Booker challenges Jericho AND Nowinski to a match. Great way to start the show.

"Hey, Paul, I just thought of something."

"Yeah, Andy? What is it?"

"If I were to put these on while watching TV, would I..."

"No. The glasses only work on the people, not on their images."

- The **Dudley Boyz** and **La Resistance** are seen having a standoff over the six-man later. But it's all a Nefarious Plot™, because **Kane** is right behind the Dudleyz and mauls both of them. He gives La Res an evil eye and they promptly wave a white flag at him in a

funny bit. Of course, after Kane walks on, La Res get some French licks in. So to speak.

- **Goldberg v. Rico**. Rico is allowed to get some prancing and kicking in, but Goldberg quickly powerslams him to end that. **Miss Jackie** gets involved, allowing Rico the advantage... for one or two moves. Time of the inevitable: 2:27. Better than the usual squash. *1/4 **HHH** tries to attack and gets fought off.

- **Kevin Nash** lays out a challenge to **Randy Orton** for SummerSlam. If this actually goes anywhere, I hope Kev does the right thing. I mean, I know that he allowed a tainted victory, but that was on RAW in a handicap match. I'm not asking for much to say that Orton should win the feud, am I? Anyway, **Ric Flair** walks by and runs Nash down. "You don't have the 16 titles I do, although you certainly tried to get them." Oh, TAG. Bottom line is, we have a main event.

My eyes were wandering during the commercial breaks. I didn't know why. It suddenly occurred to me that I was seated above and behind everyone else in the room. *Uh-oh, I hope they don't notice and get upset. I mean, last thing I want is to get off on the wrong foot.*

"Um, Lindsay? Do you want to switch? The view's better up here and... well..."

"Is it? Let me see."

She got up and moved to the table. I started to slide off to create room, but she motioned for me to stay. *Huh?*

"There's room for both of us."

I guess there is, actually. Man, I have to relax. Besides, she's been dead so long she probably thinks nothing of it.

"Is something wrong?"

Crap.

"Um... not really. I just didn't think we could both fit... that's all..."

"Okay. If you say so."

- Women's Title: **Molly Holly v. Ivory**. Molly attacks to start and begins armdragging. Dropkick gets two. Ivory escapes and counters a trip outside by sending Molly into the steps, but Molly reverses. Back in, it gets two. Ivory works in a carpet muncher for two to reverse momentum. Suplex gets two. Molly flips out of a German suplex and clotheslines Ivory for two. Ref takes a bump off an Ivory crossbody, and **Gail Kim** charges in. Kim hits a ropewalk into a rana on Molly before exiting. Ivory covers for the pin and the title at 4:29. Hm, that's a little early to be getting the belt off of Molly... oh, wait, here comes another ref to inform the official of shenanigans, and it's a DQ. So that's where the cow's been hiding nowadays. Match was nothing special, and I'm not exactly looking forward to the three-way this sets up next week. 1/2*

- Meanwhile, **Chris Nowinski** gloats to **Teddy Long** that the match will be a 3 on 2 instead of a 2 on 2, because it was never mentioned what kind of tag match it'll be. **Stone Cold** hears this and declares that the third spot on the face team is open for whoever wants to fill it. That might not have been the smartest idea...

- **Kane and La Resistance v. Dudley Boyz and Rob Van Dam.** Big brawl to start, and the ECW alumni win that easily. La Res head for the hills, while Kane no-sells everything. Finally, 3D puts him down enough to get him to roll out of the ring. **Dupree** charges in, but RVD cuts him off with a Van Daminator (no chair) for two. **Bubba** hits a powerslam for two. Wazzup Drop, but while they fetch the tables, Kane press slams Bubba back over the top rope and chokeslams **D-Von** on the floor. Ouch. Back in, Dupree gets two as Bubba is YOUR face-in-peril. Kane demands a tag and tosses Bubba over the top rope and through the aforementioned table at ringside as we take a commercial break. When we come back, **Grenier** is hitting the chinlock. DDT gets two. Dupree comes in and the two hit a double suplex for two. Figure Four by Dupree, but RVD saves. Kane takes off after RVD, chasing him to the back as we get La Res v. Dudleyz. Grenier with a crossbody for two. Bubba gets a Samoan Drop out of nowhere, and RVD returns from the back (having apparently eluded Kane) to get the hot tag. It's BONZO GONZO as RVD single-handedly smokes both members of La Res, but Kane returns and boots RVD down. Le Crepe gets two, as D-Von saves. The match breaks down while Kane gets hit with the Wazzup Drop, but he sits up. Geez, everything must've been fried in the fire. Dupree is dumped, Kane is busy with the Dudleyz, and RVD frog splashes Grenier for the pin at 11:53. Pleasantly peppy match ruined by the general inexperience of the frogs. **1/4

- Meanwhile, **Evolution** holds a meeting and declares themselves the best ever. **HHH** gives **Flair** a pep talk, and **Orton** asks to soften up **Goldberg** next week in a match where I can't see a point in jobbing either man.

- **Chris Jericho, Christopher Nowinski, and Rodney Mack v. Booker T, Goldust, and a Wrestler to be Named Later.** We start 3-on-2, or more accurately 5-on-2, as **Jazz** and **Teddy Long** are at ringside. You know, I used to refer to **Justin Credible's** ECW entourage as being the cast of "Rent", but legitimately this is pretty close to being the truth on the heel side. I mean, all we need is a gay guy with AIDS. But we've already seen **Rico** tonight. Maybe if Goldust does a heel turn. ANYWAY, faces clean house to start as Nowinski intentionally avoids Booker. Booker has Mack in the Book End, but Jericho hits the springboard dropkick to break it up. Goldust comes in with the Flip Flop and Fly on Nowinski as the ref tries to bring order. Eventually, Goldust and Jericho start the match proper, and Goldust gets a powerslam for two. Jericho hits a low blow, but Goldust responds in kind as he drops down in pain. Cute. Goldust then falls on top for two. Curtain Call is set up, but Mack clips Goldust. Jericho falls on top for two, then works the leg as Goldust plays Ricky Morton. Nowinski hits a half-crab as the sirens blare and **Scott Steiner** joins us on the face side. Well, it was either Steiner or **Hurricane**, realistically. Mack slams Goldust down for two. Mack punches the leg of Goldust, which allows Nowinski to try a figure four, but Goldust cradles for two. Shattered Dreams is implied but never delivered thanks to Jericho. Lionsault hits the knees, but Team Black cuts off the tag. Booker enters, allowing a double flapjack into a DDT by the heels. Nice. Jericho gets two. Faceplant gets two. Jericho stands Goldust up and clips him for two, totally heeling it up. Mack in, but a legdrop misses, hot tag Steiner. Clotheslines, suplexes, slams, and pushups follow, in no particular order. Jericho tries to get a beltshot on Steiner, but he

whiffs and gets hit with the Steiner Flatliner. However, Teddy Long has the ref's attention, so Nowinski (not the legal man, but who cares at this point) hits him with the facemask and gets the Double Arm DDT for the pin at 7:44. Nowinski is probably not ready for Booker T at this point, but he's getting there. **

- "Main" event: **Kevin Nash** v. **Ric Flair**. No Evolution at ringside to save us. Nash tosses Flair around to start, as Flair sells for five. Outside, they brawl some. Back in, the brawl some more. Nash frames the elbow in the corner, then stalls. Flair Flip is successful, but Flair goes up and gets slammed off. Nash hits Snake Eyes, but picks him up at two. Jackknife is blocked by a low blow, then a kick to the leg. And NOW, whoo... we get a clip from Flair. JR mentions the quad injury. I can only hope that's karma. Flair works the leg like only Flair can, leading to a try at the figure-four, which gets blocked. Nash gets a big boot, but that hurts the leg even more. Ah, the All Japan sell, I see. Flair gets the figure-four, but Nash immediately reverses. Flair makes the ropes. Evolution shows up, and **Orton** hits the RKO to get Flair the pin (with feet on the ropes) at 6:55 of hell. DUD 3-on-1 is broken up by **Goldberg**, who chases away **HHH** while Nash is left 1-on-2. Orton gets the big chairshot to send him down, end of show.

The Bottom Line:

Kev was given yet another shot to see if he could make some sense on top, but he couldn't even draw heat, much less money. Clearly, HHH/Goldberg is the way to go here, and fortunately next week that's the big focus. Until then, though, I'm less than optimistic.

On the bright side, Smackdown's on Thursday.

RAW left me with a sour taste in my mouth. All along the car ride back to the hotel, we discussed the problems with the night's show. Lindsay was in an awkward position of having to defend HHH as Stephanie while criticizing HHH as Lindsay.

I didn't pay much attention to the conversation at hand. It was only 8 PM, sure, but for some reason I seemed rather listless and lethargic. I couldn't maintain much interest in anything as my eyelids were growing heavy.

"Adam, are you ok?"

"Yeah, I think so. Just tired... I don't know why..."

"Let him rest. He's had a long day."

"Okay, Paul. Whatever."

I didn't wake up until we were in the hotel parking lot. As everyone else went out to celebrate the night in British Columbia, I trudged up to bed. As I reached my hotel room, I heard Paul around the corner. I stopped.

"Andy, can you talk?"

"Sure. Is everything ok?"

"Yeah, look... Lindsay was telling me that you seemed nervous around her. Is anything wrong?"

"Well, I was seated above and behind her on that table. I could have looked down Stephanie outfit if I wanted to."

"Oh, is that it? I thought it was something serious."

"Isn't lust an offense?"

"Kid, I've worked with more people than you know. Some human elements never leave. Remember what I said about the three kinds of love? That exists for you, too. But you gotta be careful -- now more than ever, you have to learn how to act on any emotion you have. You cannot let anger or lust or pride blind you. If you do, you're gone. You have no body, and you'll have no soul. I don't like losing people. So play it safe. Look, I'll see you tomorrow, ok? We can keep talking about it then."

"Thanks."

I went into my room and prepared for bed. Within minutes of turning off the light, I was fast asleep. *I guess it's easier when you don't have a body to be restless.*

WWE SMACKDOWN!

August 5, 2003 taping, 5:00 PM

Kelowna, BC

While Paul and I -- who were still officially off television at this point -- headed to the locker room backstage, I observed Stephanie, co-ordinating activities and shouting last minute instructions in the less-than-charming voice she uses to get attention. My mind still spun from Paul's words from last night. *Are emotions normal in the afterlife? I know she mourned me, but that was an automatic response. Could she show personal feelings? And what of it? We're nothing.*

I rounded the corner and was ready to sit down for the show when I bumped into Eddie Guerrero. His US Title sat proudly over his shoulder as he paced nervously across the hall. He hadn't seen me, but when we bumped, he gave a rushed I'm sorry and went back to walking. Something was up.

"Eddie? Is everything ok?"

"Oh, Adam, is you. Man, I don't know if I wanna go out there tonight, man."

"Why not? You're the champ now. You're a big-time star. You can move merchandise."

"No, no, no -- you don't understand. They want me to do a program with the Undertaker."

"Really? That's wonderful news!"

"No, it's not!! Look, don't tell him I said this, but -- you know the stories, right, esse?"

"Stories?"

"Yeah, about how, you know, you gotta get on his good side for him to do you any favors in a match... that thing?"

"Eddie, come on. You saw what he did with Cena at Vengeance. What are you concerned about?"

"Look, I don't expect you to understand. You're WWE from Day 1, like him. Like

Cena, too. Don't you get it, buddy? I've been around the world! I've never really had a home. I've been in WWE, WWA, WCW, Ring of Honor, ECW, New Japan..."

"Okay, okay. So you're worried he won't see you as legit, is that it?"

"Yeah!"

"Eddie, come on. Mark doesn't play those kinds of games. It's not about where you've been, it's about how long you've been there. He knows you're a veteran, and he knows that going strong with you will only help his career and yours. Besides, do you really think he'll ask for your title?"

Eddie looked at the US Title on his shoulder. "Yeah... I guess it is too small for him."

"There you go. So relax, Eddie. Get a few matches with him, and the two of you will start clicking. Trust me. Anything else bothering you?"

"Not really, man. I'm kinda excited, actually. See, I get to wrestle twice tonight."

"Oh, you're on Velocity?"

"No! I mean, twice on SmackDown!"

"Wonderful! Good luck, man. I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"Thanks, homes."

Eddie walked off, a bit of a lighter spring in his step. I turned around to see Paul had overheard the entire conversation. He stood emotionless for a few seconds. *Did I do something wrong?*

"That's how it's supposed to be done, Andy. You were nice to him, and you made him feel better. Kindness travels. He'll pay it forward."

Whew. I walked with him to the locker room. All the stars were in the back awaiting their cues. We had a second locker room that was the "official" one for taping skits and so forth. Kurt Angle and Brock Lesnar were in that locker room together, preparing for their bit.

Before the show started, Tony Chimel informed the audience of the main event -- A-Train and John Cena vs. Brock Lesnar and Kurt Angle. It sounded exciting, but at the same time, I think we all knew which team was going to win this one. I also knew that Eddie and Taker was getting set up tonight, and apparently both of them would get some serious air time. Eddie would, anyway, what with being on two matches and all.

"I call dibs on the front row."

I turned around. It was Matt Hardy, smiling like the kid he was. He hopped a few rows of chairs and took his seat. *Man, I wish I could do that. Oh, well. Maybe in the future when I'm someone else.*

- The SmarKdown! Rant for Aug. 7 / 03, taped Aug. 5

- Taped from Kelowna, BC.

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

- Opening match, US Title: **Eddie Guerrero** vs. **Tajiri**. Tajiri attacks in the aisle to start,

clearly showing he learned his lesson's under Eddie tutelage. They brawl on the outside, where Eddie decks the ref with the US Title (clearly aiming for Tajiri). Tajiri climbs the car and dives off with a rana to the floor. Back in, Tajiri sets up The Kick, but Eddie is ready and ducks it. The two go into a cruiserweight sequence that ends with Eddie tossing Tajiri in, Tajiri handspringing out, Eddie catching Tajiri and going for a German, Tajiri flipping over and landing behind Eddie, and Eddie getting the German instead. Sweet choreography here. The ref is finally coming to, so Eddie dumps Tajiri and follows out with a tope suicida, knocking out Tajiri and the referee. Eddie acts all innocent, then tosses Tajiri in. Flapjack by Eddie. Gory Special, but Tajiri isn't close to tapping. He slides down into a backslide that gets nothing because the ref is out. Both men up and brawling, and Tajiri mists Eddie (cheat to win backfiring?) and hits a missile dropkick. Eddie bails, so Tajiri follows with a WICKED baseball slide and brings him back in. Into the Tree of Woe, but as Tajiri slides in, Eddie pulls himself up (safe!) and Tajiri kicks the pole (out!). Eddie works the leg as soon as he's untangled. The referee crawls back in just as the figure-four is hit, but Tajiri makes the ropes. Eddie pulls him back with a GIANT SWING OF DOOM (ten revelations), then gets dizzy and stumbles into the ref. It could happen. Everyone's down as we take a break. We come back with Eddie applying a half-crab after Tajiri has made the ropes and taking all five seconds to break. Eddie continues stomping the leg for two. Dragon screw is blocked, and they tumble into the ropes, where Tajiri hits the Tarantula in a complicated sequence. He breaks, then tries a suplex from the apron to the floor, but Eddie pushes Tajiri into the hood of the car. Eddie, completely distraught, tosses Tajiri aside and makes sure the Low Rider is ok. As the ref checks on Tajiri's leg, Eddie grabs the hood ornament and aims for Tajiri, but he misses and the poor ref gets it. He's even kind enough to blade off of it. Back in, Tajiri gets a monkey flip and a running dropkick on Eddie, who falls into the turnbuckle. As Tajiri pantomimes for The Kick, Eddie takes off the turnbuckle pad. Tajiri's kick hits the STEEL bolt, and Eddie slaps on an ankle lock (with the feet on the ropes, just to be THAT MUCH MORE HEELISH) for the tapout at 22:43. And that was just the opening match. ****1/2 Eddie fakes a handshake, then clocks Tajiri with the belt and runs for it.

- During the Break footage shows **Tajiri** chasing after **Eddie**.

- **Vince McMahon** joins us for a while. He promises that **Zach Gowan** will learn how to be an everyday wrestler TONIGHT in a match. He says that **Stephanie** and **Sable** have the night off (big boos) then declares the SummerSlam main event: **Brock Lesnar** v. **Kurt Angle**. He basically guarantees a screwjob. So what else is new?

- Elsewhere, **Brock** and **Kurt** wonder.

- **Rey Misterio** v. **Charlie Haas**. Pre-match vignette establishes that Haas is out to redeem his team's honor. Rey Rey has **Torrie Wilson** with him, so I guess **Billy Gunn** is out long-term. Haas goes to the mat to start, but Rey ducks out and gives him a headscissors. Haas bails, so Rey follows with a somersault hilo as **Shelton Benjamin** joins us at ringside. Lots of flying around here. Back in, Rey hits a slingshot legdrop for two. Haas slows him down with a headlock and tries to work the mat, but Rey has none of it

and slips underneath with a dropkick. Rey goes for a Thesz Press, but gets caught as Haas hits his end of the finishing sequence for two. Something's a little off here. Haas tries for a single-leg crab, but Rey wiggles into an enzuigiri for two. Shelton hops up on the apron, so Rey 6-1-9s him in the back, sending him flying into a chasing Haas. West Coast Pop finishes at 5:35. These two don't work as well singles as they do tag. **3/4 **Billy Kidman** charges in and tries for a save, but the World's Greatest Tag Team beat him down to get their heat back. I can't wait for SummerSlam, eh?

- Elsewhere, **Tajiri** has finally caught up with **Eddie**, but it was all an Evil Trap™ because **Big Show** awaits around the corner to deliver a chokeslam. Well, that'll learn him.

- **Zach Gowan** v. **Spanky**. Lockup, and Spanky goes for a monkey flip. He tries a headlock, but Zach elbows out and hits a standing dropkick. They trade leg lariats before Spanky clotheslines him down for two. Zach hops up during a cross-corner whip, but the moonsault press misses. Spanky gets two. Sliced Bread #2 is blocked, and Zach hits a dropkick and springboard legdrop for two. And just as this match gets a good groove, **Vince McMahon** breaks it up by destroying Zach with a chair for the Sportz Entertainment Finish at 2:51. Darnit. *3/4 Vince tells Zach that Lesson Number One is: it's Vince's ring, and he should beg to be in it. Spanky attacks Vince from behind (drawing a frightening face pop), but Vince lays him out too, then says they'll both be in action next week as punishment. Vince makes it perfectly clear he doesn't want Zach in the ring, and will demand his contract on a silver platter. Geez, someone's roiding out tonight.

- **Matt Hardy** v. **Chris Benoit**. Matt Fact: Matt like straight bacon. Hey! You American hick bastard! Benoit must have seen this because he starts CHOPPING HIM LIKE A DOG to send him outside. Benoit tosses him back in, but Matt catches him and takes over. Side Effect gets two. Clothesline and DDT get two. Benoit reverses a second DDT into a Northern Lights for two. Matt gets a drop toe hold, but while trying an STF, Benoit catches his arm and reverses to the Crossface. Matt makes the ropes. Benoit starts to go up, but Matt meets him and superplexes him for two, reversed **Dynamite Kid** style for two. Benoit hooks the Germans, but Matt blocks the third with an elbow, and switches it to the Twist of Fate for two. Matt heads up, but Benoit follows mid-yodel and tries for a superplex of his own. This time, though, **Shannon Moore** trips Benoit and Matt falls on top for the pin at 6:44. I smell a rematch. I also smell some payback. *** Hardy and Moore share a lesson in Mattitude on the way back.

- **Tazz** leaves the commentary table as **Tajiri** runs to the ring, gesticulating madly. Apparently they speak Japanese in Brooklyn, because Tazz figures out that Tajiri wants **Eddie Guerrero** and **Big Show**... along with his mystery partner. Uh-oh. Eddie and Show accept, then charge the ring, getting a few licks in before **Undertaker** makes the inevitable save.

- **Eddie Guerrero** and **Big Show** v. **Tajiri** and **Undertaker**. Not that I object to Eddie and Tajiri on my screen twice, but couldn't this have waited for next week? Big brawl to start, and the heels retreat. Taker soupbones Eddie in the corner, then tags in Tajiri and

lawn darts him kick-first into Eddie for two. Tajiri kicks his brains in for two more, but Show saves. Eddie pulls Tajiri outside and catapults him into the steps to make him **Ricky Morton**. Well, of course. Show comes in and legdrops him for two. Slam gets two. Eddie hits his slingshot senton (which he somehow forgot in the first match) for two. Show back in, but a blind charge misses, allowing an enzuigiri. Hot tag Taker, soupbones abound. Eddie breaks it up with a missile dropkick, while Tajiri has Show in the Tarantula (!). Eddie kicks Tajiri's exposed head to break, but Show falls on Eddie and Taker gets two. Funny. Taker gets the big boot and chokeslam, but the Last Ride is blocked by the POWER OF THE PUNCH and Eddie falls on top for the pin at 7:18. Not as horrible as I expected, given that all four guys were wrestling one match too many. ** Faces clear the ring afterward so Taker can pose for the fans. I seriously hope Eddie goes over Taker at some point, but that's just me.

As the match ended, Brock and Kurt walked to the ring. Meanwhile, I heard a commotion from the aisleway. It sounded like Taker and Eddie arguing. I listened in.

"I'm telling you, Steph, he couldn't handle it out there."

"Couldn't handle it? I just wrestled for 30 minutes tonight and I can't handle it?"

"I had to work twice as hard just to make the match presentable!"

"YOU try wrestling two times in one night."

"That's not the point. You were given the opportunity, and the fans didn't like to see it."

"The fans were sick of Big Show, not me!"

Stephanie had heard enough. "Guys, please! Look, this isn't the time or the place to discuss this. The two of you are feuding out there and that's that. I'm not going to call this off. Taker, didn't you hear the crowd boo when Eddie won? That's good! He's the heel! Trust me, if we do this right, you won't have to win the feud to get over!"

"Listen to her, esse!"

"Eddie, please, I can handle this."

I put my glasses on -- no one saw me anyway. Eddie and Taker looked the same. Lindsay was a picture of fright, though. She clearly felt in over her head. Her blonde hair, which I usually saw up in a bun, was coming loose. Her face was contorted to indicate an intense desire to be anywhere else in the world. For one split second, I forgot all about the mission and wanted to step in and be her knight in shining armor. Then I heard something that changed everything.

"Gentlemen, please. Stop it and get back to the locker room RIGHT NOW! We need the room for Brock and Kurt to do their sketch."

I heard the voice, unmistakably. That gruff tone, the deep sneer implied in every word, curling with a desire to inform anyone who could hear it to pay attention and respect the authority -- it all meant only one thing. Vince was talking to them. Certainly, the three of them turned in the same direction, as if facing Vince. But I didn't see him.

I removed the glasses. There he was, consoling Stephanie and passing on tricks of the trade. I put the glasses back on. Lindsay was listening patiently, although clearly nervous, to seemingly no one. She pushed an invisible hand off her shoulder, then returned to the dressing room area. *That's so weird. Where does Vince go, anyway?*

Lindsay saw me as she headed back and motioned for me to remove the glasses. I

quickly did so.

"Careful, Andy, we could get caught!"

"Sorry -- hey, are these defective?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, when I was looking at you just now, with them on, it was Lindsay talking to no one. I know you were talking to your father and all..." *Man, this dual identity thing is creepy!* "...but where was he?"

"I can't explain here. Ask me later. Come on, we gotta stick around to watch the main event."

- Meanwhile, **Kurt Angle** tries to exchange tips with **Brock Lesnar**, who clearly doesn't know what to make of it. Brock accuses Kurt of selling out to **Vince McMahon** and taking the title with him.

- Main event: **A-Train** and **John Cena** v. **Brock Lesnar** and **Kurt Angle**. Cena and Brock start, and Cena gets a suplex and clothesline. Brock catches a second try and throws Cena across the ring, then does the same to A-Train. F-5 try is blocked, and Angle comes in to even the sides. Cena tries an F-U, but Angle lands on his feet and kicks Cena in the face. Order is restored as Brock clotheslines Cena and tosses him for a tag to A-Train. Kurt tags himself in and suplexes A-Train out of his boots for two. A-Train blocks a second try and avalanches him to make him face-in-peril. Cena in, and he gets a dropkick for two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. A-Train hits the Train Wreck for two. He tries a bicycle kick, but Angle grabs for the Anklelock. Cena uses a chain as Brock accidentally distracts the ref to break. Cena comes in with a Patriot Missile and Protoplex for two. German suplex is reversed into the rolling Germans, but Cena tries for a Diamond Cutter out of it, only to get shoved into the ropes. They collide on the rebound, double KO, hot tag Brock. A-Train gets tossed around for our pleasure, but Cena's up and they try a double suplex. Brock does the Big Show reversal as Angle disposes of Cena. Brock has the F-5, but Angle tosses Cena back in, and Cena keeps rolling to clip Brock. A-Train falls on top for two. Meshugganator gets two. Cena in with a German suplex for two. Tornado DDT, but Brock tosses him to the outside. Angle tags in and throws Cena back in. He goes for the moonsault, but before we can find out if it would hit (hint: no), Brock gets knocked off the apron by an A-Train pump kick, crotching Angle. Cena pulls him off and hits the F-U for the pin at 9:13. Didn't see that coming, did ya? *** Brock and Angle try to smooth things over as we end the show.

The Bottom Line:

Well, the opening match pretty much makes this an automatic thumbs up from me, and the later events didn't do much to sway my opinion. The interview segments were kinda dull, but that's because talking's not the strong point. Cut back a little on pushing a single storyline, though; we don't need people wrestling twice when there's so much talent as to justify the roster split.

Until next week, BUY THE BOOK! Again!

I was one of the last ones to leave that night. Paul and Stephanie were helping to organize cleanup, so my ride would be a little late. I saw Brock (Kathleen) in the corner. I put my glasses on, since no one was around. She was exhausted, almost in tears.

"You okay, Kath?"

"I... I screwed that match up... I was so nervous... it was my first match."

"Relax, girl. You did fine. I didn't even remember it was you out there."

"Really?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it. Besides, if anything's wrong, Stephanie and Paul will clean it up in post-production, ok?"

"I dunno... I mean... I was just so nervous. I've never been out there before."

"Wait... never? You mean for your first match they have you be Brock Lesnar?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. That's... why?"

"Mr. Heyman said that it would be easier if I was out there with Kurt. He could cover for me."

"Well, I don't think you needed covering. I mean, you weren't the worst person in the match at all. Look, I don't think you did anything to blow your cover. Don't worry about it, ok? Next week, you'll have a lower profile match. Maybe I'll be out there to help. Who knows? Just remember: everything will be fine."

Kathleen looked up at me. I could tell she wanted to accept my words, but that deep down, her fear was getting the best of her. I didn't know what else to say to her.

"Look, go ask Paul if you can sit in when they check the tape for air. I think he'll help you see how you did. Will that make you feel better?"

I was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"I'll be right back, Brock."

I winked at her and put my glasses away. I went to the door and opened it. Eddie was standing there, ready to go. He seemed a little upset.

"Listen, Adam, I..."

"No need. I heard the whole thing. Look, I... um..."

"It's like I said! He doesn't want me to look good! How am I going to make something of this chance without his help?"

"Give yourself time. Give him time, Eddie. Respect doesn't happen overnight. Look what happened with me! You remember back after X-7 when he won the tag belts from us? Yeah, some boost that was to my career. But I got over it, and I went on to better things."

"That was one match, esse. This is a feud we're talking 'bout."

"Okay, fine. Ask Kurt Angle how his feud with Undertaker affected him."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Taker pretty much made Kurt look weak in the buildup, he beat him cleanly in the blowoff, and next month, Kurt's in a hot program with Triple H and main eventing SummerSlam. Look, Eddie, you don't need to win everything. Undertaker's just one guy. He's not the most important thing in your life, is he?"

"He's the most important thing on this job!"

"No! The most important thing on this job is the public! If you go out there, and you entertain those fans, and you give them what they want, then they'll respond to you. It doesn't matter what Undertaker does. Just do your thing. Got it?"

Eddie seemed puzzled. "I gotta think on it, homes. I dunno if I wanna go through with this."

"Well, get some rest. You had a long day."

Eddie shook his head, then shook my hand. He walked off toward the exit just as Paul and Stephanie arrived. Paul pulled out his wallet.

"Let's go, gang. There's still time for dinner. Who's hungry?"

Sunday, August 10, 2003, 7:45 PM
Wichita, KS

The bell was about to sound. The house show was about to begin. In my first week in the WWE, I had seen some very strange sights. I had seen an argument backstage between two icons of wrestling. I had seen the figurehead of the company as a disembodied voice. I had seen a 300 pound man covered in tattoos turn into a 16-year-old girl with a freckly face. *If I'd known life after death was this much fun, I'd have gotten here sooner.*

There was a ton of discussion backstage about my deciding to accompany the boys over the Midwestern swing. A lot of people thought I would be dead weight, not able to contribute much. Paul and Stephanie, not to my surprise, had argued that I would be a worthwhile road agent, and could add to the shows in a pinch. Well, this was that pinch.

I hadn't seen Lindsay or Kathleen all day. I didn't know where they were. My only contact had been through Paul. Needless to say, I was starting to get a little nervous. After all, it was 15 minutes to showtime, and I was flying blind. To say I had stage fright would be a bit of an understatement. Thanks to some mismatched time stamps and some late arrivals to the Midwest -- some people weren't getting in until SmackDown! on Tuesday - - I, Edge, was to get the crowd fired up to start the show. I was also expected to help later on.

Ten minutes to showtime. *Darnit, where's Stephanie anyway? It's not like her to be absent like this.* As I warmed up just outside the locker room area, pacing up and down and thinking of what to say, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Eddie again.

"You seen Calloway, man?"

"No, I haven't. I think he's joining us in St. Louis. Why?"

"Dammit! Man, I wanted to discuss the SummerSlam match with him. I haven't gotten any indication as to how it'll go yet. I'm getting nervous!"

"Eddie, what have I told you? Just chill out! SummerSlam's two weeks away. You gotta focus on your Benoit match tonight. One thing at a time."

"I know, I know, it's just... well, I think I might've pissed him off, man."

"How so?"

"Well, I was complaining about the match we had on SmackDown!, and about

how he said I wasn't carrying my weight, and... well, he was right. No two ways about it. He was right. But I fought him, because I had pride."

"Nothing wrong with standing up for yourself, is there?"

"I don't think so, homes. But when it gets to the point that you lose reality, then you know, man, you wonder if you've made the right decision. I mean, the reality was, I was wrestling twice. I shoulda been happy for that. I was happy for that. But I..."

He paused. I could tell he was torn up inside. I didn't blame him. Sure, on the one hand, he'd been made the focus of the last show. But, on the other hand, he was being steered to Undertaker, a man he thought was wrong for his wrestling capability. Did they balance? Cancel out? I had no idea, and more importantly, it seemed he didn't either.

"Adam, sorry I'm late... how do I look?"

It was Stephanie. She had clearly gotten here in a hurry. No use asking her what took her so long. I gave a perfunctory glance at her outfit.

"Like you always do. Just fine. Don't worry. The thing is... how do I look?"

"I dunno... the neck brace doesn't match the rest of your outfit."

"Very funny. Now, we got five minutes. What am I supposed to do?"

"Just go out there, play the crowd, talk about when you'll return, and I'll take care of the rest. Oh, and be prepared to do something later on."

"Right... no problem."

"Welcome, everybody, to another wonderful edition of the SmackDown! brand of World Wrestling Entertainment. We're here, of course, as part of the JVC Tower of Power tour, and we would like to thank our sponsors at JVC for their wonderful support. Now, Wichita, before we begin, I've been told that the General Manager wants to make a special announcement. So, without further ado, here is the General Manager of SmackDown!, Stephanie McMahon!"

Eve's All Grown Up plays as Stephanie makes her way to the ring to a good ovation.

"Thank you, Tony. Well, I know I'm not the star here. I'm merely here to bring you the greatest brand of sports entertainment you will see anywhere. And part of that is in the people who have given their bodies and their hearts to please you. In fact, I have a special surprise for tonight. Wichita, how would you like to see a man return to SmackDown! who hasn't been seen in a long time?"

The crowd cheers, and a few people chant Hogan. *Yeah, just my luck, I'm a letdown.*

"No, no, no -- sorry. Hulk Hogan isn't here tonight. However, I know someone who you've cheered just as strongly and supported for just as long since the brand extension began. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you... EDGE!"

Never Gonna Stop started. As Rob Zombie's voice hit the PA system, I emerged from the curtain. I couldn't quite move as well as I'd seen Edge move -- partly because my neck restricted things -- but it didn't matter. The crowd had quickly gotten over their disappointment at the lack of Hogan and given me one of the loudest ovations I'd heard. I felt like I was walking on air as I ran across the stage, yelling along. I then sprinted to the

ring and did the slide-in. *Man, I can't believe this! This is mind-numbingly awesome! Never gonna stop, YEAAAAH, never gonna stop! Scream if you want it! Cuz I want it more!* I took the mic from Stephanie. She told me to keep it quick.

"Thank you. Thank you all. It's great to be back in the ring in the WWE. I haven't been seen on television in months, and to be honest, I wasn't sure it was worth coming back."

Crowd boos. *Palm of my hand, baby.*

"But after hearing your support, and reading countless cards, letters, e-mails... lemme tell ya, I can't wait until this brace comes off and I can fly again!"

Crowd goes crazy.

"And most of all, being out here tonight... hearing the crowd... well, I feel like a rookie all over again."

In sooooo many ways.

"So, stay tuned. Keep watching. And you never know. Someday I might totally make it back to the ring. And the WWE will once again reek of awesomeness. Thank you!"

The music started again. I climbed all four turnbuckles before heading to the exit. Along the way out, I held the ropes open for Stephanie. She acted flattered, then stepped through them. We left together.

As soon as we got backstage, I turned to her. "Now, is there something else?"

"Just one thing. I'm going at it with Sable tonight. Now, I want you to get involved in the finish."

"How?"

"It's a catfight thing. A-Train is going to run me over, like at Vengeance. Only this time, he'll get caught and the ref will be distracted. I want you to come in and take out Sable."

"With what? A chair?"

"Is there a move you can do with the brace on?"

"Well... can she take a spear?"

"Perfect! Then you put me on top and send Albert out. He'll be on the apron. You knock him off, then slide out, and that'll be the finish. Just wait with Albert. He'll help with the rest."

"Sure. No problem."

Just before the match began, Stephanie and Sable were backstage discussing the finish. I could tell that the idea was going over well, and Sable even smiled at me. *She's older than you are, she's older than you are, she's older than you... were... damn, that's right, I don't age...*

"Hey, Adam... don't hurt me too much, ok?"

"No problem, Sable."

Stephanie's music started and she walked to the ring. As she waited, Sable turned to me and kissed me on the cheek.

"Don't worry about me."

The match -- okay, what passed for a match -- began. As I watched, A-Train and I spoke about the finish.

"Count to five seconds after I come out, then sprint."

"Right, Train. But what if I outrace you to the ring?"

I cracked a smile. He wasn't amused.

"Never mind."

Heyman was riding shotgun with Vince on headsets. Both of them were shouting orders to the referee about timing and pacing. Then, Vince said the words.

"Let's bring it home. Go, Matt!"

A-Train took off. *One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four, one thous...*

"Go, go, go, go!"

"Yes, sir!"

I was off. In the ring, Train had just made it through the ropes while the referee was checking to see if Sable was injured. True to form, Train squashed Stephanie in the corner. Immediately, probably on cue from the back, the referee turned around and started yelling at the Train. I made it into the ring as Sable slowly stood up and smiled at the audience, her back to me. *When she's sideways, go.*

She turned around slowly, showing herself off. She reached the moment where more of her face than her back was to me. I lunged. The spear made full contact. Sable folded up like a chair to the head. Flashbulbs went off all around me. A-Train saw my interference and stayed on the apron, desperately trying to get Mike Choida to turn around. Meanwhile, I grabbed Stephanie and placed her on top of Sable, then turned my attention to the monster. A well-placed clothesline sent him out, and I used my momentum to leave the ring at the same time. I bounced over the top rope, used my hand on the apron for balance, and landed on my feet -- something I'd seen the real Edge do before. *Wait... I am the real Edge.*

Back in the ring, the ref counted the pinfall. One, two, three. Neither woman moved. All Grown Up played over the PA. The crowd cheered. I celebrated on the outside. On the inside, I was too euphoric to pay attention. I had just set foot in a WWE ring. Wow.

I climbed back in as Stephanie was getting to her feet, slowly. The ref and I helped her up, then we raised her hands in victory. She draped her arms around me and gave me a thank you hug. This time, as we walked out, she held the ropes open for me. I accepted, then helped her down off the apron. We walked side by side to the back.

Sunday, August 10, 2003, 11:54 PM

On the road to Kansas City, MO

Paul was busy watching the road. Stephanie was in back with me, planning Tuesday's TV show. I tried to help, and considering I could be Andy and not Adam in the car, she listened -- well, a little. Sometimes, her Steph-sense overrode my ideas. Brock was up front, meanwhile, listening to tunes on his own. *We're essentially alone back*

here... I guess now's as good a time as any to discuss something that's bugged me since Tuesday.

"Hey, Lindsay... why couldn't I see Vince with the glasses on?"

"Oh, yeah, I've been meaning to tell you... You know how when you put them on, you see through a person's exterior appearance and into their soul?"

"Well, yeah, but most people appear the same. Isn't it just us who look differently?"

"Not really. Some people's souls are sick, or gone. Vince's is dead right now. It's our job to get him to bring it back to life."

Our mission just got tougher.

"How do we do that?"

"He must become born-again. We've done this before, with other people. You know, there was a time when the champion of this company was like Vince?"

"Who, Kurt? Brock up there?"

"No... I mean the guy who was champ then. He had a back injury and an almost fatal addiction to painkillers. But after years away from the industry, I went out there -- disguised as X-Pac -- and I talked to him. I told him he was ruining his life. I didn't want to see him just waste away to nothing. I told him all about my life, and about how being grounded in faith kept me sane in the ring and out of it. He listened to me. I could tell he was ready to listen. It was a Sunday that day, so I took him with me and with Lawler -- yeah, it would've been Lawler -- to a church meeting. Two months later, I saw him signing autographs and looked into my glasses. He was a new man. He had been reborn."

"Wow. Who was it?"

"Shawn Michaels."

"You mean... you saved HBK?"

"Well, not me alone. A lot of people played a part without my help. And I took a huge risk. I risked being transferred off of Vince's case if I went too far. But he listened. It worked. So it can be done, Andy. You just have to believe."

"Okay... I think I can believe." *I have to. I've only got an eternity to see it happen.*

"Um... something I just wanna say... while I have the chance..."

"Yeah? Is everything ok? Andy, you did fine out there tonight. And you'll do fine for us when you get in the ring. You were a natural. Paul has a lot of confidence in you."

"But he doesn't decide where I go... does he?"

"Mostly? No. But if he feels something special is needed, he can pray for it, like the rest of us can. Sometimes our prayers are answered. Like when I heard that we were getting you this week, I asked to be Stephanie so that I could show you the ropes. I wanted to be in authority so that no one would question when you came up to me for advice."

"Wow. Thanks. But... did you do this for Kathleen too?"

"Sure. Only I didn't get my way then. The other guy was Stephanie."

"Guy?"

"Hey, some day you'll have to be a Diva. It's not as pleasant as it sounds. Just warning you."

"Yeah, I've heard that." *I hope she doesn't see how nervous I am around her.*

"I'm sure you've also noticed the lack of respect we get."

"Well, you won't hear any of that from me. Especially toward you."

"Thanks."

I reached for my glasses. I'm not sure why. I just felt better seeing who I was really talking to. *Besides, she's better looking than Stephanie anyway.*

"Okay, you two, we're almost there." *Leave it to Paul to break things up.* "I wanna have one last meeting before we end the week."

We sighed in unison. *It was as if she didn't want our conversation to end either. Maybe I'm reading too much into this...*

We grabbed our bags out of Paul's van and entered the hotel while he went to park. It was almost midnight. I began to pace up and down. *If this meeting isn't quick, we might as well not have it!*

"What's wrong, Andy?"

"It's almost midnight. Soon it'll be Monday again."

"Huh?"

"Don't we become someone else every Monday?"

"Ohhhh... no, it's not like that. The change happens as we sleep. And you will sleep. Don't worry."

Paul returned with his bags and the card in his hand. He slid the card into the elevator door and motioned for us to follow. The doors opened to the conference room.

"Okay, guys, I just wanted to make sure we were all clear on how things went. You all did a good job this week. Nothing special, but usually it doesn't require anything special. Andy, your stuff with Eddie was good work. Kathleen, you and Kurt -- same thing, good work. You two are gonna do just fine as Fallen Angels. Now, Lindsay... I know you were busy, but you had the closest connection to Vince this week and you didn't take advantage of it. Now, I realize you were working with Hunter, and that's fine, but you gotta remember, our big target is Vince right now. Okay? Now, if there are no questions, you all head to your rooms, and I'll see you tomorrow -- whoever you are. I gotta stay in here a while and work a few other things out."

We left the conference room. We were all staying on the same floor. As Stephanie had a room to herself, I walked her to it. At the door, I nervously said goodbye. Tomorrow we'd meet again for the first time.

I turned around and headed back to my own room, my thoughts spinning. *Had I done a good enough job? Was I still too human? Could I last more than a year doing this? What did Paul think of me? What did Lindsay think of me? Why am I fussing over this? And, who am I?*

It was this last question that troubled me most. I had no control over what personality I had to imitate from one day to the next. I guess when St. Peter said this job was right for me, he meant it. If an ordinary person had been picked, there's no telling how bad it would have been. They couldn't be all these different people without raising suspicion. But it didn't ease my pain to know that someone up there thought I was ready for an afterlife like this.

I opened the door to my hotel room. Rey was watching ESPN for the sports news. I sat down next to him as I removed my shoes and socks.

"You gonna turn in, Adam?"

"It might be smart. I don't wanna do anything stupid."

"Okay, man. Good idea. I was gonna go to bed soon too. Don't forget, man, 4 o'clock tomorrow at the Arena."

"Yeah, I know. I'll be there."

Rey turned the TV off. I slipped into bed and turned off the light.

I was awakened at 9:30 AM by the clock radio. Whoever my roommate was now, they were clearly out of the room, probably eating breakfast. I slowly opened my eyes, trying to gauge my surroundings. The room looked the same, so I figured I was in the same hotel room. I reached over to turn off the radio, which was blaring hip-hop. *Strange, I didn't think Adam liked rap... oh, wait, I'm not Adam.*

I looked around for my wardrobe. While getting dressed, I glanced at the dresser and found a set of glasses up there. *Are those mine?* I grabbed them off the dresser and put them on. *There's only one way to find out.*

I walked slowly over to the bathroom to continue my morning ritual. I turned on the light and looked into the mirror. I saw myself -- my true self -- staring back at me. *Oh, that's right. Paul said the glasses would be waiting for us.* Relieved that everything seemed to be going to plan, I slowly reached for the glasses. I was more nervous now, knowing I didn't know my identity, than I was just after my death, when I didn't know that I was someone else.

I closed my eyes and removed the glasses. I counted to ten, then opened them. I saw a man staring back at me that I had seen a few times before. He was taller than Adam, and more importantly, he was an active wrestler. His short brown hair was the same color as mine had been, but a very different style. His muscles were obscured by a green and white jersey, but it was clear he was of a solid build.

I took a deep breath. *Well, now I know. This is going to be even harder than last week. I just hope I can live up to it.*

It was time to try and find Paul and let him know that I was now John Cena.

SECOND WEEK

Monday, August 11, 2003

12:00 PM

The roster staggered out of their hotel rooms, bags packed and ready to begin an early trip to the Kemper Arena. With everyone checked out for the day, Stephanie called the attention of everyone to the front. *I should talk to Lindsay up there when this is over. Wait a minute... I'm not Edge, so odds are Lindsay's someone else too. And Kath... oh dear. Mondays are going to be loooooong days.*

"Okay, people, listen up. The SmackDown! brand had a wonderful weekend. The house shows were well-received by everyone, and Eddie and Benoit put on one hell of a match for the US title."

The room gave a round of applause.

"Now, we have one more show tonight before the TV event in St. Louis. We're gonna try to get a few things in line for SummerSlam and for No Mercy. Everyone knows where we're going with SummerSlam, right? Now, just because you're not in SummerSlam doesn't mean you should dog it. We're watching you all the time when you're in the ring. Good, honest effort will lead to appearances on Velocity and SmackDown!, and they could even land you on No Mercy. Remember: we'll have double the slots that time around, so we can get the best performers and the biggest draws on without trouble."

Chris Benoit raised his hand.

"Yes, Chris?"

"Has there been any talk of a RAW vs. SmackDown! match at SummerSlam?"

"We are discussing that right now. The particulars are being worked out, but there's a good chance it'll be added. But that's for later on. Now, as for tonight's show, we're going to try to mix things up a little. Paul, would you do the honors?"

"Sure thing, Steph. Okay, listen up people. We're gonna have 8 matches tonight to counter RAW. If your name isn't called and you want to get a head start on going to Saint Louis, go ahead.

Our opening match is going to be John Cena going against a local guy from WLW. That's Harley Race's Missouri-based promotion. John, this'll be an exhibition for you. Practice your rap.

Second, we will have Doug and Danny Basham take on the team of Zach Gowan and Spanky. I want Zach and Brian to get some chemistry together for SmackDown!. Zach, it's your win.

Up next would be Shannon Moore vs Ultimo Dragon. Guys, you're getting lots of time, so tear the house down. Dragon will win this.

Okay, last match before the intermission is APA vs World's Greatest. The boys in the back have been saying all four of you are doing very well, and this is a practice match for SmackDown!. Tonight, though, no title change. You know that.

During the intermission, I want everyone around to sign autographs in the arena. The guys in the last match and the next one, though... you guys are exempt.

Okay, we're opening the second half with Chris Benoit against Rhino. You two can decide who wins, and either way is fine. You're getting 15-20 in the ring, so pace yourselves.

We're going to have ourselves a four corners match next. It'll be elimination rules. It's Rey Mysterio, Billy Kidman, Matt Hardy, and Jamie Noble. Noble, you're out first. Kidman, you're next. Matt, you go third. Rey, you'll keep the title.

Okay, in the setup spot I got Stephanie McMahon against Sable in their cat fight. Same finish as in Wichita, people. It went well there.

We're gonna finish with a six-man. Brock Lesnar, Kurt Angle, and Undertaker will be on one side. We got Big Show, A-Train, and Eddie Guerrero on the other. Eddie, you and Taker don't meet in the ring. Train, you're tapping here to Angle.

Okay, that's the show tonight... any questions?"

"Yeah, Paul, I got one."

"What is it, Mark?"

"You know I'm not that good when I go back to back. I mean, I wanna save the best for TV. Can I beg out?"

There were a few grumbles from the roster.

"Mark, you don't have to do much. I mean, if you want, Brock and Kurt can do a lot of the match. In fact, the six of you come see me before the show and we'll map the match out just to play it safe. Anything else?"

"Yeah, how much time are we getting?"

"For you guys? Well, you need three falls in the match, so I say get it down to you and Matt in about 10-12 minutes, then you two have 7 minutes to yourselves. Any others?"

I had one.

"Yeah, who exactly am I facing?"

"Actually, it's an old ECW buddy of mine named Chris Chetti. He's the #1 babyface in the promotion right now."

Oh yeah, I remember him. He had some dancing gimmick near the end. As it turned out, I wasn't the only one who remembered him.

"Hey, Paul, man, why didn't ya tell me? I haven't seen him in months!"

"I thought you knew, Tazz."

"No... maybe he wanted to surprise me. He's weird like that."

A pause.

Paul continued, "Okay... anything else?"

Nothing.

"All right, guys. We'll be discussing tonight's main event and tomorrow's TV show when we get there. That's why I want people there so early -- I'm going to be headed over in the first car as soon as we're done. See you in the arena."

The crowd dispersed. A few people went to their room. A couple went to Stephanie and asked for directions to Moline for RAW. Undertaker was corralled off to the side by an eager group of autograph seekers. I waited until the crowd thinned a little, then went to Paul.

"Excuse me, Paul, but are these yours?"

I took the glasses out of my pocket and showed the case to him.

"Get your stuff and go to the car. I'll meet you there. And from now on, that's procedure."

"Well, I mean... if I drove here, won't that cause problems?"

"No one drives here alone. We got vans for this. I'll explain later."

I waited in the back left seat of the car, where I was last week. I figured, *Hey, if everyone goes where they were, it'll be easier to organize this.* As I put on my Walkman and listened to Eminem's CD, I saw Eddie Guerrero approach me. I turned off the CD and reached for my glasses.

Eddie climbed in next to me and saw me pulling my glasses out. He smiled.

"Hey, man. What's up? Used to being Cena yet?"

I shook my head. "Not on a Monday afternoon, Eddie." I put the glasses on and saw Lindsay's face smiling back at me. "Er... Lindsay."

She laughed a little. "Don't worry about it. I have to do this all the time. It's so frustrating, but it's a part of our life."

"Yeah, so I've heard." *Um, does she know who I am?* Eddie put his glass case in the pocket on the passenger's seat. *Well, she does now.*

"Ah, Andy. I thought so."

"Where's Kathleen?"

"Oh, she's probably talking to Paul right now, esse."

We laughed. "Lindsay, did you just call me esse?"

"Yeah. I guess I'm getting in character."

"All right... man, I'm so excited. I get my first match tonight!"

"Relax, Andy. It's an exhibition. You got more important things to practice -- like your routine."

Routine! I forgot! "Oh, crap, they're expecting me to rap. Gimme a sec, gotta think of my lines..."

"Don't! It's much better if you're going on your own. Just think about possible rhymes for your opponent. Everything else will be all right. Trust me, I've done this before. It's not as hard as it looks."

"You sure?"

"Yeah... man, I was impressed with how you handled things last week. Eddie came up to me and told me you were a help with his Undertaker worries."

"Well, they're not his worries right now, they're yours."

"Yeah, I know. I need to think about this. I mean, I know Taker's very protective of himself. He's kinda scared right now."

"Of what? He's a legend!"

"He's old. There are a lot of people out there and in here who think he should ride off into the sunset. I've heard them talk. They don't like him. They think he's selfish, jealous, senile, political... I don't believe it. Well, I don't think he's malicious anyway."

"But I... you know I saw them argue with you. I don't think he believes in Eddie. Now you have to deal with his insecurities first hand for a week."

"That's fine. Don't worry about me. I'm the expert here, remember? I'm the senior member of the Angels -- all of us, SmackDown! or RAW. You worry about your own assignment. You're in a big position right now."

As we spoke, Paul emerged from the hotel room. I almost didn't recognize the

person with him. He looked like he was in high school, not in the WWE. I grabbed my glasses to make sure this was Kathleen. *Yup, that it is. But who's...*

Kathleen was stopped on the way to the car by Zach Gowen. The two had a conversation. I removed my glasses to get a better look at him. It still wasn't coming to me. I probably would've never thought of it if Paul hadn't gotten impatient and honked the horn.

"Brian, come on! We gotta get going!"

Brian? Oh, right, Brian Kendrick! Spanky! Now the guy looked familiar. Wasn't he on TV just last week? How could you not remember, Andy?

"Sorry, Mr. Heyman. We were talking about the match tonight."

"There's time for that at the arena, you know that."

"Sorry, sir."

"It's all right. We're off now. Nothing to worry about."

We didn't talk much on the way over. It didn't matter. The arena was only a few minutes away anyhow. I enjoyed the ride in silence, accompanied only by "Sing for the Moment" and my attempts at figuring out how to work an obscenity into my speech.

I spent the first hour or so watching the main event wrestlers practice the ending. Big Show was to grab Brock in a chokeslam, but Angle would dropkick the two together, then catch Show in an Angle Slam on the rebound. But that would leave him on the ground, so Eddie would be ready to frog splash him. As Eddie would be rolling away, though, Taker would hit his chokeslam, but walk into the Baldo Bomb from A-Train. Brock would return and pick Train up and hit the F-5, but Show would return and chokeslam Brock from behind. Angle, who by this time would be up, would German suplex Show out of the ring, then catch A-Train in an ankle lock for the submission while Taker would grab Eddie and prevent the break. *Just your typical average main event tag match ending.*

As I watched, I felt a tap on my shoulder. A guy I never recognized was standing there, holding a tote bag and a security clearance. He was small, but well built.

"Excuse me, are you John Cena?"

"Yeah. What's up, bro?"

"You seen Tazz anywhere? I wanted to surprise him."

"I dunno if he's gotten here yet. He might still be in the hotel. I'd come back closer to showtime."

"Well, we were going to meet around 2 for lunch... I haven't seen him..."

"Hey, Kid!"

It was Taker's voice. He had seen us talking.

"Who, me?"

"No, John, the guy next to ya. We're working here. Only wrestlers allowed in the arena right now."

"I am a wrestler."

"I've never seen your ass before. If you are, you ain't been with us long, have you?"

"I'm not with you. I'm..."

"CHRIS!"

We all jerked our heads to the aisleway. Tazz was there, dressed in his usual fine-tailored orange-themed suit. *I always thought he looked like a pumpkin seller in that outfit. I don't know why.*

"Petey! How are ya, cuz?"

Petey??? Cousin?!?

"Never bettah. I see you've made nice with ol' Big Evil here. Hey, Mark, it's ok. This is Chris Chetti. He's getting a shot tonight."

"Oh. Hey, my bad, kid. You can stay."

He's really not much on apologizing. I don't really get that. As Tazz and Chetti walked off to lunch, I decided to head to the back and see how Kathleen was doing.

When I arrived in the locker room, the place was a usual collection of antics and music. Were it not for the work of the refs and other road agents, everything would have been anarchic. Still, I couldn't find Brian anywhere. It was a little disconcerting. *Maybe he's off with Zach, or out getting lunch. I wouldn't presume anything yet.*

There was a knock at the door. Edge poked his head in. "John Cena here?"

"Yeah." *I'm pretty popular right now, aren't I?*

"Paul wants to talk to you."

Uh-oh.

I walked back toward the ring area. As I did, I heard shouts. I couldn't recognize them at first, but they were definitely coming from the ring.

"Somethin's wrong, Adam."

"No kidding. C'mon, let's go."

We ran to the entranceway, nearly knocking over Chris Benoit and Rhyno from behind as we turned the corner.

"Sorry, Chris. We were..."

"Yeah, so were we."

"Well, come on!"

All four of us ran to the entrance and down the aisle. As I headed to the ring, I surveyed the situation. Taker was being held back by Show and Train, while Eddie was staring a hole in him. Paul got between the two of them and tried to restore calm, while Brock and Kurt had bailed. Paul, Taker, and Eddie were all yelling.

Chris and I were the first ones in the ring. Chris went straight to Eddie and tried to talk sense into him. I went up to Paul and grabbed his arm.

"Come on, Paul, we gotta get out of here."

"No, no! Not now!"

Meanwhile, Eddie had broken through Chris and was ready to tackle Taker. I grabbed him and threw him back into the ropes. Rhyno and Edge went to Brock and Kurt, who now that I saw it seemed rather perturbed. I grabbed Eddie and held his face close to mine so that we could talk in private.

"Dammit, get a grip! You're gonna blow this!"

"He's trying to hurt me! He keeps changing the match on me!"

"That's not important! Just try to work with him!"

"He's being a self-righteous asshole!"

"And you're losing touch! You can be replaced and you know it! Look into my

eyes! Focus on your job!"

Eddie's anger seemed to manifest itself completely in his eyes. I never saw fire before. But now, something worse was happening. His eyes seemed to be going wild. I had to take drastic action.

"Look, Eddie, let's grab a lunch. We're all just cranky. Hey, Paul," I turned around and shouted. "PAUL! Let's just call it a break and eat. Maybe we'll be better with full stomachs."

"All right. Fine. Mark, go think about it over lunch. Maybe you'll feel better."

As Eddie and I walked to the restaurant, I pulled my glasses out of my case. I put them on and looked straight at Eddie. I saw Lindsay there, but something wasn't right. She seemed rather tired. Rings of some sort were forming around her eyes. But something else was much more startling than that.

"Eddie, look at me."

She turned to me. Her face went from anger to a sort of calm. I didn't know if she saw the fear in my eyes.

"You look different. Is something wrong?"

"Excuse me?"

"Put your glasses on."

"I don't have them."

"Here, use mine for now."

I took them off and placed them on Eddie's face. He looked at me, then took a look down at his hands. He did a double-take. I saw him hold his hands up in the air and stare at them. He then looked down at the rest of him. His eyes grew wide in panic. He quickly returned the glasses and put them in my hand.

"Oh, no. Paul... PAUL! Where is he?"

"I don't know. We left without him."

"We gotta go back. Thank you so much for this."

Eddie began to sprint back to the arena. I chased after him, unsure of what to expect next. We passed by Paul's car, and as we did so, Eddie slammed on his metaphorical brakes.

"Wait... is the door open?"

"I don't know. I locked mine."

He ran around and pulled on the driver's side door. Paul's car alarm went off.

"Great. Now he'll be mad at us."

"No, no. I'm trying to get him out here. Look."

As luck would have it, Paul was emerging from the arena at that moment. He heard the alarm going off and knew it was his car -- after all, all the other vehicles were company vans. He jogged over to the car and hit a button on his keychain. The alarm stopped.

"What's going on? John, what's wrong?"

"I don't know. Eddie here just panicked and ran to your car."

"Eddie, is this about the match? Because I said we'd drop it until after lunch."

"No, no, Paul, it's worse. I'm... I'm fading."

Paul's face went from anger to concern in a heartbeat. He quickly unlocked the door and reached in for something. He came back out with a container, shaped almost like a genie's lamp. He handed it to Eddie.

"You know what to do."

Eddie nodded. He removed the stopper off the "hole" in the front of the lamp. He blew hard into it. I went for my glasses, but Paul saw me and stopped me.

"Don't do it. You'll give yourself away."

After blowing into it three times in a row, Eddie stopped. He blinked a few times. Then he looked at the container he had and handed it to Paul.

"Thanks, esse. I needed that."

He walked on to lunch, seemingly oblivious to me and to the conversation we had had. I went to catch up, but Paul grabbed my wrist.

"Don't bother. She's not there."

"What? Where'd she go?"

Paul pointed to the bottle.

"She's there."

As bell time came close, I looked around for the rest of the crew. I ran into Eddie Guerrero, adjusting the US title on his waist and admiring himself in the mirror.

"Eddie... you feeling better, man?"

"Hey, Cena. Yeah, homes, I guess you were right. I just needed to eat. Well, I also got some oxygen from Paul."

"Is that what that was in that thing?"

"Yeah. It's a miniature oxygen tank. You breathe into it and out of it, and it just goes right to your brain. It makes you calmer because you gotta breathe real hard to get the air, and you can't be angry when you're taking deep breaths, you know, buddy?"

"That makes sense." *I guess it's pointless to tell him why he really was taking deep breaths.*

"Hey, John, you better get in position. You're first!"

"Oh, right. Thanks man. Word."

"Man, you already in character? That's wild."

I shrugged as I headed to the door. When I arrived at the entranceway, Chris Chetti and Paul Heyman were there.

"There you are, John."

"Relax, man. I've got time."

"Yeah, but it's not like you to be late."

"Sorry, Paul. I won't do it again."

"I'm sure. Okay, the bell rang. Chris, you ready?"

"Yes I am, Mr. Heyman."

"You can call me Paul now. Okay, I'll let them know."

Paul spoke into the headset. "Ring the bell."

The place cheered as the bell rang. Tony Chimel went through the usual rules and

regulations. I wasn't paying much attention. I was busy working on my lines. I wanted it to be just right. House show or no house show, I was going to do this.

Chris walked through the curtain to a small reaction. I jogged in place, much like I'd seen Brock do, while I waited for the music.

Word Life! *I'm on.* I marched through the curtain and flashed the hand sign to the crowd. To my surprise, I got some serious cheers. I walked to the ring and posed again. The cheers were louder. *Man, I'd better have something special planned if I'm going to be a heel. Well, here goes.* I took the mic from Tony. I was on.

"Yo, yo, yo, cut it.

So, kid, you're gonna fight me -- what's your name, Chris Chetti?
You're in over your head, I'm gonna eat you like spaghetti.
I got the best damn words, and the best damn moves.
And when it comes to winning matches, I'm always in a groove.
I'm the future of the show, I'm the man of the hour.
And just like Mark McGwire, I got Cardinal power!"

The crowd booded a little. I wasn't done, but I walked over to Chris and whispered in his ear, "Jump me before I get to the cuss word." I resumed my rap.

"This kid right here is an example to all the fools in the back.
Unlike the Chiefs' defense, I won't cut anyone no slack!"

**That* worked.*

"Is that all the hate you got? Says a lot about Kansas City."

I stared at Chetti and winked. I promptly turned my back and braced myself.

"I've seen a lot of your town, and this place is really sh--"

Whack! The fight was on. I fell into the ropes and threw the mic out of the ring from the impact. I took the shots from behind and tried to get to my feet. Chris was pounding away at my upper body. He whipped me into the ropes and put his head down on the rebound. I gave him a kneelift for his trouble. He flipped onto his back, and I dropped down and did some ground pounding.

The referee pulled me off of Chetti, and I shot him a dirty look. He yelled at me about closed fists as I stared in anger. All this was just to give Chetti time to get up. I turned to him and went into a lockup. I easily backed him into the corner and waited for the ref to start counting. When he reached four, I made motions for a clean break, then popped Chetti one in the face. The crowd didn't approve. I smiled and punched him a second time. I then grabbed the middle ropes and hunched over. Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Five times my shoulder hit his stomach. I looked up and saw he was a bit short of breath, so I backed off and hit the hand sign to keep the crowd's attention.

Chris had staggered out of the corner and gotten his bearings. I walked in with a

double-axehandle, my body language making it obvious he was supposed to cut me off. Fortunately, he did. I doubled over in pain. Chetti quickly flipped over top of me, but I wasn't close to ready yet. I punched him down from underneath me to break up the sunset flip. I then dropped down on him with my full weight and posed. The ref got to two before I felt my arms being hooked. He had flipped me over for two. I stood up and clotheslined him down, causing him to add a twist to the selling.

I smiled at him. I picked him up and put him in the atomic drop position. I jammed down once, twice, three times. I saw his eyes roll into the back of his head. "Sorry," I whispered as I set him down. Apparently the drop was a little too atomic.

I went for the cover and got two before Chetti got his foot on the ropes. I looked at him with rage as I picked him up. I tossed him into the opposite corner and followed in with a huge clothesline to the back of the head. He stood in the corner, the turnbuckle keeping him up. I picked him up and scaled the turnbuckle. I looked out to the crowd, then threw him backwards as I fell.

The next few seconds were a little dizzying for me. Apparently, when I landed on the slam, I forgot that I was on the top rope. As a result, I slid back to quickly and landed on my shoulders and neck. My vision was a little scrambled, and the ref checked on me. I responded to his signal that I was all right, then climbed to my feet. I ran and legdropped Chetti, then covered for two.

I picked Chetti up and whispered, "you ok?" He nodded as I drove a knee into his gut. I threw him into the ropes and caught him on the rebound. I landed a huge spinebuster, and the sound of hearing him slam the mat for added effect gave me a small adrenaline rush. I covered but only got two.

I got up and signalled to the crowd with my hands. I heard the ref say, "Bring it home." I stood over Chetti and waited for him to get onto his knees. He grabbed my legs and hand me in a slingshot. I got thrown throat-first into the top rope and staggered backward. He grabbed my trunks from behind. I fell over backward, obliging my part. He got two before I kicked out. As we stood up, he dropkicked me to the ground and climbed to the top rope. He went for a crossbody, but I caught him and held him. I spun him to his feet and grabbed a fireman's carry. As I did, I told him, "Finish." I posed for the crowd with Chetti on my shoulders while flashbulbs went off. After a few seconds, I flipped his feet over my head and landed on my side, laying him out in the ring. I had hit the Death Valley Driver -- or, as he called it, the F-U. I covered and got an easy three count.

After the match, I grabbed my hat and chain and climbed the corner, posing for the fans. They were booing me pretty well, so I figured I did something right. As I headed to the back, I looked over my shoulder. Chetti was slowly rolling onto his feet. *Good, he's not hurt.* I hit the hand sign one more time before disappearing behind the curtain.

"Good job, John."

"Thanks, Paul."

"Hey, bro, go easy on him out there."

"Sorry, Tazz. He's all right."

"Good job, man."

"Thanks, Brian. You gonna be all right out there?"

"I hope so."

"Stay strong, bro."

I headed to the locker room, taking one last look over my shoulder. Chris Chetti had finally staggered to the back, looking a little worse for wear but basically like I expected. I stopped and headed back to him.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

"No, no. I'm fine. Thanks for the match, man. It was great being in a WWE ring."

"Hey, no problem. Sorry about the atomic drop there, man."

"Oh, that. Nah, Petey here's done worse to me over the years. If I can survive a drop on the head from him, I'll survive a shot to the nuts."

We laughed together. "C'mon, Chris, I'll get you some dinner."

"Thanks, man, but Petey and I are gonna head to St. Louis together."

"All right. Catch you around. Thanks for being here."

"No, thank you for letting me do this."

He headed back to where Tazz was as I walked to the locker room. Chris Benoit met me at the door.

"Good going, John. You really felt it out there."

"Thanks."

August 5, 2003, 1:15 AM

Outside St. Louis, MO

Brian was in the front seat with Paul, looking rather the worse for wear. He had tried a plancha onto the Bashams in the match, but Kathleen, having never been Spanky before, underestimated the power he had in his legs and nearly overshot the "brothers". Thankfully, Doug caught his upper body to prevent any damage, but the legs hit the ground hard as Danny couldn't reach them. Brian's left leg took a hard shot to the floor.

"It's just swollen. I don't think it's broken or anything. You gotta be careful out there. If I'd known you were Brian, I'd have kept you off the show tonight."

"It's ok, Mr. Heyman. I don't want you to do something for me."

"Hey, sometimes I have to do things for you people too. Like I did today."

"With Lindsay?"

"Yes."

Do I speak up now? I mean... I was scared. I don't know what's going on. I'll wait until we're alone.

We pulled up to the entrance to the hotel. I got my things out of the trunk of Paul's car and went to the front desk. My key was waiting for me. I walked with Paul and Brian to the elevator. I didn't speak. I didn't really want to. My thoughts were with Lindsay.

Where did she go? What did Paul mean when he said he had to do it? I can't imagine how she feels right now. And why was she so faded when I saw her?

Could that happen to me?

I got off on the fourth floor and walked to my room. I slid my key in and opened the door. The lights were on, and the TV was set to some movie. I couldn't hear what exactly it was, but it sounded like a romantic movie of some sort. I set my stuff down and

went into the bathroom to wash my face off.

"Is that you, John?"

"Yeah."

"All right. You don't mind if I watch the end of Sleepless in Seattle do you?"

"Guess not... but isn't that a chick flick?"

"Eh. It's a good movie."

That voice... Where had I heard it before? I climbed into the first bed and looked over. It was Dean Malenko, former wrestler turned road agent.

"Hey, what time you getting up tomorrow?"

"I guess about 8:30 or so. You?"

"Probably later. I might not get much sleep."

"Something on your mind?"

"Well, it's about the match tonight. I was worried that I stiffed him too much."

"Relax, man. I saw the match. I've done worse in the ring. Shhh... they're in New York now."

I lay down in the bed and turned off my light. *I guess even wrestlers have a soft side.*

Tuesday, August 12, 10:24 AM

St. Louis, MO

The roster once again filtered down the stairs, but this time instead of heading to the lobby, they went to a giant auditorium. I walked through the double doors and took a seat in the middle rows, making sure to get a good view. Up in the back, I noticed Billy Kidman and Torrie Wilson arrive and take seats in the last row, next to each other. *Some things never change.*

We were gathered to watch RAW together and dissect the "opposition". Stephanie and Paul had taken their spots on the stage, where Paul was busy equipping the video projector and Stephanie was chatting with various workers about tonight's show. I searched for Brian somewhere in the crowd, figuring that Kathleen would want to sit by someone she was more comfortable with. *Or is it that I feel that way? Why am I so nervous this morning? Was it what happened yesterday, or that I was going to wrestle on TV tonight?*

My train of thought was broken by the sound of someone sitting down next to me. As fortune would have it, Kurt Angle chose to sit in my row, and now the only thing between us was an unoccupied chair. I decided to lean over and talk to him.

"Kurt, how ya doin'?"

"Oh, John. Didn't see you there. I'm fine, how are you?"

"I can't complain. I wanted to talk about tonight."

"Oh, you got the word, then?"

"About our match? Yeah."

"Yeah, I was hoping you'd bring it up. See, they're telling me that the big story is with me and Brock, and... I mean, I don't wanna dismiss you..."

"No, no, that's fine. It's not that. It's that I'm -- well, things have been going around in my head, and if I'm not into tonight's match, I want to apologize in advance... I'll try to be professional."

"Yeah, that's fine... I mean, I still get nervous sometimes too."

"Oh, okay. That's cool. Um, did you have anything in mind for the finish?"

"Actually, yes. See, Brock's supposed to be involved in the match, so basically when he comes out, the finish begins. Now, what they're telling me is..."

But he got no further. Stephanie called for everyone's attention.

"Listen up, people! I wanna show you how our competition's doing. We need to see what it is we have to top, you got it? Now, if you think these guys put on a bad show, that doesn't give you the right to slack off tonight! I want everyone to work hard out there, and I want you to give it your all. Remember, we're talking No Mercy slots on the line as well! Paul, would you start it up?"

Paul nodded. The lights went out, and the credits rolled.

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Aug. 11 / 03.

- Live from Moline, IL.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Jerry Lawler**.

- Opening interview: The Highlight Reel with **Chris Jericho**. He declared it a travesty that he's not wrestling tonight and DEMANDS that somebody do something about it. Yeah, me too! He then introduces **Kevin Nash** as his guest. You know, between the respective hairstyles and goatees supported in the ring right now, we could open a salon. Although I'm sure Jericho's beard would demand creative control. Nash talks about his SummerSlam match and how no one can beat him. Except, of course, for everyone who has. Jericho asks about an upcoming movie role, and Nash credits his natural good looks for it. Remember that for later. See, I can live with Nash being funny right now, because heaven knows he's a better talker than he is a wrestler. **Randy Orton** interrupts (geez, even the interviews have run-ins nowadays), but Poochie fights him off. Jericho tries to intercede, so Nash punches him down, then threatens the "indescribably expensive JeriTron 5000" with a chair until referees restore order. Good interview, bad angle.

- **La Resistance** take time to butcher the French National Anthem, as per their contract. Allow me to channel CRZ for a second... First to speak during the anthem is -- JIM ROSS! SHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAME! Anthem goes (:17) before it is interrupted...

- **Rene Dupree** v. **D-Von Dudley**. Slugfest to start, and Dupree bails and dances. Back in, D-Von hits a slam, but a piledriver is reversed by Dupree, back into a sunset flip by D-Von for two. Dupree dropkicks him down and hits the chinlock. D-Von gets up and slams him off, but a flying headbutt misses. **Sylvan Grenier** tries to lead a "VIVE LA FRANCE!" chant to keep the crowd interested. DDT for Dupree gets two. Gutwrench

suplex gets two. Up top, but D-Von catches him in a superplex for two. Grenier starts some heel shenanigans, and Dupree uses the FLAG OF DEATH and a figure four to get the win at 3:41. This is chemistry? *1/2 **Bubba Ray Dudley** tries to intercede, but the French get a beatdown. It's pretty obvious they're being set up for the squash here, which is fine by me. Send them back to OVW.

- I'd be remiss if I didn't note **Chris Nowinski's** stellar give-and-take with **Theodore Long** here, as he nearly blows his alliance by saying that **Rodney Mack** is being used to soften up **Booker T** in tonight's match. Long: "Oh, I see. The brother does whitey's dirty work." Nowinski: "No, no, no! I'd be honored to face Rodney Mack if need be, really I would!" Nowinski's con act is kinda transparent, but it's good television.

- Women's Title: **Molly Holly v. Ivory v. Gail Kim**. Three-way catfighting erupts to start, much to the delight of the crowd. Ivory gains control by kicking away at Molly for two. Gail Kim flies off onto both with a bodypress for two apiece. Molly uses her spinning arm wrenches and controls Gail for a while, but Ivory dropkicks both of them and suplexes Gail for two. Ivory hits the carpet muncher, but Molly hits a seated dropkick to the back of Ivory's head and covers Gail for two. Gail hits the rana for two on Ivory, then two on Molly. I think it's well established that she can do a rana. Molly clotheslines both challengers and goes for a double-arm suplex on Gail, who stops it mid-move and hits a DDT for two. Ivory hits a Samoan drop on Gail for two, with Molly breaking via an Oklahoma Roll on Ivory for two. This is a kinda long match. Gail does the ropewalk into a bodypress on Ivory for two, then ranas Molly for two, with Ivory dropkicking Gail to push Molly on top for two. Gail actually does some Matrix-like moves, tossing Ivory into the turnbuckle and running up the ropes and down Ivory's back into a rollup for two. Crowd appreciated that. Molly dives with a crossbody on both for two, then the Molly Go Round finishes on Kim at an amazingly long 8:24. I guess they wanted to see if the women could go 10 minutes and sustain a match. They can't. *1/4

- Meanwhile, **Jericho** storms into the GM's office, where **Stone Cold** is, of course, drinking a beer. Cute aside: **Eric Bischoff's** picture is being hung upside-down. Jericho DEMANDS Nash in the ring TONIGHT, and Austin ok's it... for next week. And he says there will be a special referee. Jericho isn't happy.

- Intercontinental Title: **Booker T v. Rodney Mack**. And somewhere, Malcolm X cries a little. Booker opens up a serious can of whoop-ass on Mack, as the cast of "Rent" cheers on from ringside. Mack bails, so Booker decides to unload a pescado on everybody. Nice. Back in, Mack with a low blow and a slam for two. Mack punches him down for two. Blackout, but Booker walks up the ropes and reverses for two. Axe kick sets up the spinaroonie, but **Jazz** has the ref distracted and **Nowinski** runs in with a belt shot. Mack gets two. JR, of course, sold it like it was the finish, but does ANYONE think Rodney Mack is going to win? Anyone? At all? Mack delivers a hot shot for two. Booker catches Mack off the ropes, Book End, goodbye at 4:35. Nowinski beats him down for fun as Long fumes at the decision. This storyline has me going, with about six levels of irony in it. Of course, it's the WWE, so I'm sure they're all unintentional. **1/2

- Backstage, **Evolution** finds **Kevin Nash** talking about **Jericho's** challenge and mugs him with anything they can find. KICK WHAM PEDIGREE on the concrete, and Nash blades. Sort of. Figure four by **Flair**, and while Nash is stuck in the hold, **Orton** bends over and... and... no... he wouldn't... oh no... don't do this to me...
NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! YOU CUT NASH'S HAIR! DAMN YOU! Where am I going to get my material from now? Besides, Nash is like Samson -- take away the hair and there's nothing left!

- World Title: **Triple H** v. **Goldust**. Okay, this might be fun. **Flair** attacks on the outside to start, but Goldust slugs him away. HHH follows out, and Goldust eats the stairs. Back in, HHH USES THE KNEE~! for two. Goldust catches the knee on a second try and hits a punch to the back of the knee, sending **Lawler** into convulsions about the old quad injury. HHH shrugs it off and fights back with a facebuster for two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. Goldust regains control with the MAIN EVENT SLEEPER REVERSAL SPOT OF DEATH, and the crowd pops for it. Huh. HHH makes the ropes. Goldust hits a sliding punch for two. Butt butt gets two. HHH goes low to regain control, and we hit the chinlock while the SPLIT SCREEN OF DOOM shows **Randy Orton** doing a nice trim to **Kevin Nash**. See, that's a good way to use a resthold -- when something more important is going on that you want the crowd to know about. Goldust powers out and hits Flip Flop and Fly. Curtain Call gets two. Atomic drop sets up a powerslam for two. HHH goes to the eyes and hits a clothesline and kneedrop for two. HHH Snake Eyes Goldust for two. Crowd did NOT appreciate that. Goldust backdrops out of a Pedigree attempt (see, Trips forgot the KICK and WHAM, so it had less effect), and a corner charge produces a clothesline and bulldog for two. Back into the corner, and 10 punches has HHH reeling. Shattered Nuts is teased, but the ref blocks it and Flair unties HHH. Goldust tosses Flair in and sets HIM up in the corner, but HHH blocks that with a reverse DDT for two. Back suplex gets two. The ref tries to untie Flair, so HHH bops Goldust with the handle of the sledgehammer and gets the pin at 10:35. Goldust should be commended for carrying HHH here. ***1/4 Flair, of course, celebrates his near-brush with sterility by breaking out the Flair Flop.

- Main event: **Randy Orton** v. **Goldberg**. Goldberg gets the full entrance here, but after that last match they got a lot to live up to. And who ever thought I'd say THAT about a **HHH** match? Goldberg squashes Orton all over the place, but a low blow turns the tide. Orton hits the old Play of the Day for two. He charges for a clothesline and gets speared. Trips runs in, so Goldberg slugs at him. He misses when HHH ducks, then HHH jumps off the apron and trips Goldberg. Now he's mad. He exits the ropes, but Orton brings him back in with a reverse suplex for two. This match is all over the map here. Orton is bumped on a second spear attempt, so when Goldberg goes for the jackhammer, HHH clips him and Orton falls on top. Ref is still out, so HHH hits KICK WHAM PEDIGREE, and Orton follows with the RKO for the pin (!!) at 5:48. Goldberg, ever the sportsman, knocks HHH out with a chairshot so vicious I almost hope he sent him to the retirement home alongside Bret Hart. Actually, given the way the matches progressed tonight, can we send Goldberg there instead? 1/2*

The Bottom Line:

Well, they're doing a good job of building up the matches for SummerSlam, I'll give them that. HHH/Goldust broke about seven laws of physics and thermodynamics and had me thinking that Rhodes is a miracle worker, but then I forgot all about it in the stupidity that was Orton/Goldberg.

Is it too late to change the title match? It is? Darn.

The show ended. Paul brought up the lights. *Well, it wasn't a bad show... but it just seemed... I don't know.*

Stephanie turned and faced the audience. "Well, that's what we have to beat. Does anyone have any ideas for matches tonight? We have two slots open."

A voice I couldn't quite make out called out from the back. "Who's already on?"

"Okay, we got... John Cena against Kurt Angle, Zach Gowen and Spanky against Big Show and A-Train, Charlie Haas and Shelton Benjamin against the APA, and Rey Mysterio against Billy Kidman."

Sean O'Haire stood up. "I'd like to go tonight, so if anyone thinks they're willing to take me on on short notice, I'd be glad to do it."

"I'll go for it."

"Thank you, Chris. Okay, that's one spot left. Any takers?"

I couldn't resist. "Just the one on the bike!"

Stephanie cracked up. The rest of the room gave out polite laughter, obviously wishing that joke was left unsaid. Paul, meanwhile, had a brainstorm.

"Actually, we need to have Taker or Eddie on tonight. How about Taker goes against Rhyno?"

"All right, that should work. So we're all set, then?"

"Just a minute."

It was Undertaker himself.

"If I'm goin' against Eddie for a title at SummerSlam, I gotta be a good challenger, don't I?"

"Don't worry, Taker, we'll work on that. We got three hours before the sheet's final."

"Just making sure, Steph."

"Oh, for crying out LOUD!" Eddie's outburst caught me off-guard. He stared at Undertaker, almost intent on puncturing him with his glare. "You're so damn worried about your credibility? You're the fucking Undertaker! You don't need to win! Can't you get it straight and take a loss for once in your life? What's wrong with you, man?"

Chavo was sitting next to him, trying desperately to restrain his uncle by use of his arm brace. Rhyno, meanwhile, walked up to Eddie and got straight in his face.

"This isn't your fight, Guerrero. Let me worry about my wins and losses. You worry about yourself!"

Stephanie's eyes were wide. *Wow, that's not acting. She really does have those types of facial expressions.* "Eddie, please! If you have a problem, you discuss it with us in private! I don't need to have you disrupting things. Now, do you want to be on SmackDown! tonight or not?"

Eddie stood, still staring at Undertaker as he sat down. Chavo and Rhyno stood on either side of him, clearly trying to calm him down. I was scared. What had happened to Guerrero? He was a man possessed.

I buried my head in my hands and just listened.

"Now, does anyone else have anything to offer about tonight?"

I heard Spanky's voice in the back. "If it would make things better, I'll let Eddie take my spot."

There were chuckles from around the auditorium. I listened for Stephanie's kind response, but instead heard Paul.

"Brian, you're a face and he's a heel. I know what you're trying to do, and it's not necessary. Just worry about your match, like Rhyno here said. Got it?"

"Yes... sir..."

More laughter. *I hope Brian's playing this up.*

"Is that all for today? All right, everyone, see you at 4 o'clock in the arena." With that, Paul adjourned the meeting.

We were in the conference room. I pulled my glasses out to get a correct view of the people I was talking to. Kathleen was practicing handsprings and other flips on the table. Paul was seated at the head, while I stood by the door.

"Guys, I wanna talk to you about what happened yesterday. I should warn you, it might happen to you sometime, and when it does, come see me immediately. Do not try to wait this out -- it's not in your best interest."

"Okay, Mr. Heyman."

"Sure, Paul."

"Now, I'm sure you've noticed Eddie's behavior has been very violent recently. I'm afraid he might be weakening. The jealousy and the anger towards Undertaker has taken its toll on him. I want the two of you to make that a priority and leave me to deal with Mr. McMahon for now."

"Hold on, Paul -- weakening?"

"Yes, Andy. If you were to look at him right now, he'd be faint. That's why Lindsay was faint -- Eddie's soul was dying from the poisonous anger, and Lindsay was finding herself sacrificed. That's why I had to bail her out. It happens sometimes."

"But I thought we were in control while we were in someone."

"Yeah, Mr. Heyman. Don't I make Spanky do whatever I want?"

"Most of the time, yes. But there are elements of evil out there. Human nature is weak, and it can succumb to temptation. If you guys behave the right way, you should be fine. But if you think you're losing control, talk to me about it."

"But, Paul, where is Lindsay?"

"I told you. She's right here in this." He held up the so-called oxygen container

from yesterday. "You see, the fastest way to get her to recover from the darkness inside Eddie was to get her to leave Eddie. I'm not saying a bad assignment was made. These things happen. Eddie was just fine on Sunday, but he's obviously starting to crumble. So I held this up and had Eddie breathe into it. That allowed Lindsay to escape from inside him."

"But how? I couldn't leave John right now even if I wanted to!"

"Actually, you could. These things are gates to the outside. They simulate what happens overnight before Mondays. When Eddie breathed into it, he was allowing the portal to open and giving Lindsay an escape."

"So if I were to do that with a jug of water or something..."

"No, not quite, Kathleen. Those are man-made objects."

"And that lamp thing isn't?"

"Right, actually. When I took over, I was given one of these for emergency use. Yesterday was an emergency. You saw how mad he was, didn't you?"

How could I forget? Those eyes seemed to burn with a fire I'd never noticed before. It was almost as if they were being consumed from within.

"Can we see her? Is she all right?"

"I can't let you see her now. You have work to do. If either of you were to leave your bodies now, you'd be stuck inside this thing until Monday morning. You're both too valuable to have that happen. Now, don't forget the plan. I expect you to work on it. But be careful. Don't be obvious. He's not in the mood to hear the obvious. Trust me."

Silence reigned for about a minute as the words sank in. Even Kathleen had stopped moving around and was standing still, realizing the magnitude of the task. Finally the silence got to me. I had to say something.

"All right, Paul. Now let's get to the arena. I think I can do this."

"Yeah, me too, Mr. Heyman. I'm ready."

"All right. Let's go."

Tuesday, August 12, 2003, 07:53 PM
St. Louis, MO

Velocity was just finishing up. In about five minutes, the opening matches of SmackDown! would begin. A lot of the boys were talking smack, practicing promos, and discussing the finishes to matches. I didn't see Kurt anywhere, and I knew Chris Benoit and Sean O'Haire were in the on-deck circle, ready to open SmackDown!. I figured I would just walk around a bit off-camera, if only to see if anyone had seen Kurt somewhere.

I exited the locker room and passed the entranceway. Paul and Stephanie were on the headset, watching a monitor and occasionally giving an instruction. Chris and Sean were psyching each other up, while the technical director had his finger on the switch that would (presumably) set off the fireworks and get the ball rolling.

I continued walking. A second locker room was backstage, with a Divas sign hanging over it. I moved past that one immediately, as tempting as it was to look inside by

mistake. Now wasn't the time to satisfy any temptation. I had a finish to book.

I walked down a flight of stairs to the service lobby. Spare parts from production lay everywhere. In one corner, I saw pieces of the hockey boards the Blues used. *Another dead end.* I was about to move back up a level when I heard some sniffing. I looked over to investigate.

"Brian? What's wrong?"

"I'm scared."

"Why?"

"I didn't wanna let Mr. Heyman down."

Mr. Heyman? Ahhhhh, this is Kathleen talking and not Spanky.

"What's this about? You can tell me."

"No... you wouldn't understand. Just leave me alone!"

Oh. She doesn't recognize me.

"Kathleen, you can tell me. What happened?"

"It was Eddie. He's really bad. I tried to talk to him... I wanted to get him to apologize..."

"Oh, dear. What happened?"

"He yelled a lot. He kept saying I didn't understand and that I was just another fanboy of his. He wouldn't listen to anything I said."

"What did you say?"

"I just... I... I told him I didn't wanna see him mad. I told him Taker was a nice guy. I wanted him to just say he was sorry and try to work something out."

"You heard what Paul said, didn't you? You gotta be careful. Eddie won't listen to the truth. You have to work your way around it."

"You mean... I gotta lie?"

"No, you don't have to lie. It's not like that. You have to be... diplomatic."

"I'm not good at that. I just want people to be friends."

"Well, how did you get to be friends in life?"

No answer. I looked into the eyes. Something was wrong. It seemed like such a reasonable question.

"Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"No."

"Because of my friends."

She/he doubled over and sobbed. *Where's Paul when you need him? I don't know if I can handle this alone.*

"Do you want to talk about it, Kath?"

"I... What good would it do? It happened. I'm dead! I'm gone! I have no body anymore. I'm stuck in the middle of nothing, away from my mom and dad, my family, my school... And I have to do it year after year after year... I'll never go to college, I'll never get married, I'll never have kids... I'm ruined! I feel like I'm already in Hell!"

Oh no, not her too... I searched frantically, finding Brian's tote bag on the floor next to him. I opened it up and pulled out her glasses.

"You're okay. Everything's ok. You're not in Hell."

"I don't know... I don't know..."

I put my arms around her and cradled her in comfort. All these things I had just taken for granted were still bothering her, a month into her new life. I still wondered what she meant when she said her friends brought her here. Many gruesome thoughts poured through my mind. I tried hard to shove them aside. I couldn't let her troubles become mine. I already had the WWE locker room's troubles to worry about.

"Am I interrupting anything, boys?"

I pulled off the glasses and turned. It was Kurt Angle, standing and staring at us, his eyebrow cocked in an expression of disbelief and confusion. I turned back to Kathleen, but with the glasses off, Brian was now in my arms. *This doesn't look good, does it?*

"Hey, wrestlers are people too, Kurt. I was just consoling Brian here. He's not sure if he can go tonight cuz of the knee."

"Oh, come on, Brian. You'll last. Geez, stop crying like some girl over it."

"Kurt, don't do that. That's not cool."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm just havin' fun with you, Spanky. You're gonna be fine. C'mon, I'll help you up."

"Wait... let me get my stuff organized."

Brian picked up the tote bag and began to walk to Kurt. I noticed that the glasses Kathleen was issued were still on the floor, next to the case. In all the confusion, she must have forgotten them. I grabbed them and followed.

We headed up to the entranceway. Charlie Haas was standing there, waiting to run in on the Cruiserweight match. The crowd was raucous for the match. I checked with Paul to make sure things were fine where he was, then walked with Kurt and Brian back to the locker room. Along the way, I slipped the glasses on. Both Kurt and Kathleen were fine.

I removed the glasses and entered the locker room. The shower was running, along with the television. Shelton Benjamin was pacing up and down, waiting for the cue from somewhere. Brian hesitantly went back to his seat, waiting alongside Zach, Show, and Train for their match. Kurt pulled me into the hall, where Brock was waiting.

"Okay, guys," he said. I wanna talk about the finish to tonight's main event. Brock, you got a preference as to how to run in? Vince says he wants it to be a tap."

A tap? Why?

"Wait, Kurt. If Brock's running in, is a submission really necessary?"

"Hey, I don't make the rules here. I just relay them."

"Where's Vince? Let me check with him."

"Don't bother. If he changes his mind, I'll take the hit, ok? Now listen..."

"Whoa, whoa, Kurt..." now Brock was interrupting. "Why do you think it's so easy to just have me run in? I mean, we gotta get a ref bump, right? Or else I've just cost you the match!"

"Don't worry. If we bump the ref, he'll bump. Now... how are we going to set this up?"

"How about this," I suggested. "Let's make the story that Brock saves the title. So we have the ref bump, the match proceeds. I get the F-U set up, and Brock chop blocks me down. You land on top of me and roll into the ankle lock for the win."

"Ok, that's cool."

"Yeah, I can do a block. Wait, ahead or behind?"

"Get me from in front, Brock. I'll be right by the ropes so that I'm not looking for

it."

"All right. Let's go with it."

"Great."

"See you tonight, Kurt."

I headed back to the hallway to cool off and focus on my rhymes before the match. For whatever reason, I had no interest in seeing the rest of the show for the time being. I had no doubt we were tearing the house down, and besides, I was too nervous to see anything right now.

There's such a difference between going on first and going on last. Last night I was expected to warm the crowd up; now I'm sending them home. This is it. This is the main event. Well, at least somebody up there helped me out by pairing me with Angle again. I hope I can live up to who I am.

Brian and Zach had just finished their match with Show and A-Train. Contrary to her fears, Kathleen was able to hold her end quite well. She bounced around like a pinball for the two giants, and even redeemed herself from last night, using the top rope like a gymnast uses the vertical bar to spin and land on Train on the outside in a somersault Thesz Press.

Meanwhile, Vince McMahon had made his presence felt, declaring that Zach and he would meet at SummerSlam with Zach's contract at stake. In addition, the tag match was set, another Vengeance rematch. This time, though, I had to think results would be different. After seeing the crowd disapprove of the finish in Denver, I knew the titles had to change.

Wow. Denver. That was while I was still alive. It's so weird. It was only three weeks or so ago, and it seems like ages. It's as if my life was a dream... and I only have my reality to fall back on. But my life wasn't a dream.

I lived. I know I lived. There's proof that I lived, lying somewhere under the ground back in Virginia. I have friends who weep, and a family that grieves. I made headlines all over North America. But all that... the person in the story... it just doesn't seem like me.

But who am I? I'm a ghost. I'm an angel without wings. I'm a guiding light. I'm not a human being. I'm not Andrew Goss anymore, that's for sure. But I'm not anyone else, either. I was Adam Copeland. I will be John Cena for the near future. After that, who knows? Where can I land?

Home is where your heart is. I guess the body is where your soul comes to rest. But I can't rest. In a sense, I'm the ultimate homeless being. The only constant I have -- the only way of knowing I'm even a "me" anymore -- is through others who are in my state, who need to recognize me as a being to validate their being. Could we all be lying?

Wait. There's Paul. He's real. He's flesh and blood. He's a validation for all of us. Even as I was talking to St. Peter, I knew I existed. I could think, touch, see, and feel. Right now I can interact, emote, comfort, hurt, enrage, console, laugh, and heal. If that's not living, I don't know what is.

But what of Eddie? Or Vince? Is Eddie less alive because he is troubled? It

doesn't make sense. He's more alive. He has a body that is his own. But Vince? Vince is almost animalistic. There is no soul, no connection to the world I roam. As of now, when he dies, he dies. And I'm here to change that.

But I gotta work on Eddie first. Don't I? Am I cheating the mission? No, I'm under orders. And Eddie certainly needs all the help he can get. He brushed Kathleen aside like she didn't matter. He almost killed Lindsay completely. His wrath is unfounded, I'm sure. But how do I get him to return to where he belongs?

"John! Come on! You're on deck!"

I was snapped out of my deep line of thought by Paul yelling throughout the corridor. Kurt must've heard it as well, because he jumped out of the locker room and joined me, stride for stride, as we headed to the entranceway. Along the way, we passed a weary Ron Simmons -- an afterthought in a brawl that erupted in the tag title match. We both arrived just as Rey and Kidman filed through -- tired after a long day in which they appeared in a large amount of the segments.

"John, you ready?"

"Yeah, I think so, but the music's not up."

"Look, I don't know what's wrong with you, man, but you're slacking off a bit this week. Don't make us de-push you. I don't want to have to do that."

"Yes, Paul."

"All right. That's better. Now, Kurt, is the finish set?"

"Yes it is, Paul."

"Excellent. Okay, on the music."

We waited. Why they bothered with commercial space on a taped show was beyond me. The big screen played the WWE Rewind of last week's main event, and the pin that got Cena his big title shot. Now, he couldn't even do it.

Word life! I strutted through the curtain flashing the hand sign as the crowd was split on how to respond to me. I slid into the ring and took the mic from Tony Chimel.

"Yo, yo, yo, cut my music, cut it.

It's the time of the night when the stars come out to shine,
And the one that'll glow the brightest is gonna be mine.
Kurt Angle thinks at SummerSlam, he'll be facing Brock?
Well, Angle, sit back and be prepared for a shock.
I'm better than any Olympian, I'm a thug from the street.
You can't top my skillz, and you can't top my beat.
You think you'll beat me tonight? Well, I got some bad news.
This is a playoff match, and you'll choke worse than the Blues.
You know I'm ten pounds of cool in a five pound bucket,
And if you're not down with that, I got two words for ya..."

The crowd did the rest.

Angle's music played throughout the arena. He appeared from behind the curtain and on the entrance stage. He paused and appeared to get in the zone as the crowd chanted "You Suck" in unison at him. I kept my game face on as I removed my hat and chain, not even aware of the fireworks that went off for the champion. I looked down at

my Celtics jersey. 00. Robert Parish. The Chief. Known for his durability. And tonight, I was going to try to go the distance with the best in the sport.

He entered the ring and did his twirl to the crowd before removing his medals and placing them in the corner. The referee removed the WWE Title belt from around Kurt's waist and held it aloft. Kurt took off his tracksuit and faced me. The bell rang. *Here we go.*

We locked up and struggled for about ten seconds. He called for "whip, reverse, tackle me" in the lockup. I backed him into the ropes as we danced in the ring. The referee called for a clean break, but of course I didn't provide one, sucker punching Kurt in the stomach before trying to send him for the ride. Kurt reversed and stood firm, waiting for me come in. I lunged forward and hit him with my shoulder, causing him to crash to the mat. I followed with an elbowdrop and a headlock.

I held the headlock on as Kurt squirmed a little. He placed his arm around my waist and rolled away from me. I followed and wound up on my shoulders for one before rolling back. Kurt stood up and tried to throw me into the ropes, but I held on. A second try, and I found myself headed for the corner chest-first. I took it, then staggered back into a German suplex. *Watch the head!... okay, got the back first, good.*

I stood up quickly and stared at Kurt. Another lockup, and this time no instructions. I backed myself into the corner, and Kurt followed. He broke cleanly, so I charged into him and knocked him over, then mounted UFC style for some pounding. He grabbed a fist and went into an armbar, then as I shoved him aside, he tried an anklelock. I rolled through and sent Kurt to the outside. As he stood there, I ran the ropes and dove after him, barely clearing the second strand in a body not used to that sort of thing.

On the outside, we took a few seconds to get set up before I picked Kurt up. I tossed him back in the ring and stomped him for a while before flashing the hand signal to get the crowd back into it. I picked Kurt up, but he rolled me into a small package for two. He picked himself up, but was bent over long enough for me to hit a sunset flip for two, reversed for two. I tried again with a cradle for two, but Kurt kicked out and flopped on top for two. I hit a backslide for two, but Kurt flipped over and reversed it into a sunset flip for two. We both got up, and I gave him a double leg trip, flipping over on top for two before Kurt bridged out and turned the whole thing into a neckbreaker. He twirled for the crowd, who gave him a great reaction.

I slowly got up as Kurt applied the pressure with clubbing blows. He tossed me into the turnbuckle, where I landed back first. I staggered out, straight into an overhead toss from Angle. He picked me up, but I hit a low blow and a spinebuster on him. I covered and got two.

Kurt stood up slowly, and I kept the pressure up on his back with a powerslam. I ascended the ropes and waited for Kurt to stand. When he did, I threw myself at him for a crossbody. As we crash landed, I heard him say, "Flip". So I worked with him to turn the crossbody over and put him on top for two. We both stood up, and I clotheslined him down.

I pounded the back in an attempt to get him worn down and to buy some time. I didn't know what to do next, but I knew it had to be spectacular. I remembered the house show the previous night and picked Kurt up. I scaled the turnbuckles and looked out to the crowd. There was a buzz in the air as they waited for the next move. I tossed Kurt

over my head with all my might as I fell backwards, more slowly than the previous night. This time my timing was on. I wound up tossing him halfway across the ring and landing perfectly on my back. I stood up and stared out into the crowd, then covered Kurt. It was only two.

I gave my best look of disbelief, then took time to argue with the referee. Kurt crawled to his feet and rolled me up from behind for two. I kicked out and slid to the outside, daring Kurt to follow me. When he did I punched him as he slid out and prepared to toss him into the steps. He reversed, but I slammed on the brakes before I hit the stairs. I pointed to my head -- *yeah, aren't I smart?* Well, Kurt was smarter, slamming my cranium into the post. He rolled me back in and headed up top.

His back was to me, and I knew I was going to be relied on for the timing. As he vaulted off backwards into the air, heading straight for me, I rolled in the direction of the turnbuckle. His moonsault crash landed him on the mat. This time I stood up and went to the top rope, slowly ascending and hoping Kurt saw me. He did, and he popped up after me and tossed me halfway to the opposite buckle with a suplex. His straps came down as he yelled to the crowd, who had been cheering him on. As they did, the ref came over to me and said, "Go home."

Kurt picked me up, and as he did, I relayed the message to him. He tried for an Angle Slam, but it was obvious to me he wanted me to land on my feet. When I did so, I charged straight into him with a clothesline. Kurt ducked, and the referee took the pain. Kurt tried to slam me down, but I slid out the back and tossed him over my head in a German suplex of my own. I went outside at that point. *Hey, I'm a heel. I'm not allowed to look like I was going to win cleanly.*

I threw the timekeeper aside and grabbed the belt. Back in the ring, Kurt was staggering to his feet. I could see him motion to the back to stay away. Apparently, not all signals had been connected. I got on the apron, and without stepping in the ring, ran across it at Angle. He took the shot right in the mouth and fell to the canvas. I quickly tossed the belt aside and climbed into the ring.

I gave one last hand signal so they knew whose side to cheer. I picked Kurt up in a fireman's carry position. As I did, the crowd cheered. Brock came racing down the aisle. I made sure to face the other way to start. I started to spin around, as if letting the whole audience see my victory. As I turned in Brock direction, he did the chop block. I crashed face-first, dropping Angle onto my neck. Brock left as quick as he had arrived.

Everyone was down. The referee made the first movements, then Kurt, then myself. Kurt rolled down my body as I tried to pull myself up with my arms. As my chest was completely off the ground, I felt a pressure on my foot, like it was being held back. The Angle Lock! I began to scream in pain and flop onto the mat. I tried to crawl to the ropes, but I was nowhere near them. After about 20 seconds, I made the tapping motion on the mat. I would not win today.

Kurt celebrated with his title as I rolled out of the ring and to one knee on the outside. Oddly, the Angle Lock didn't really hurt, but I had to look like I couldn't put weight on my foot. As I looked up, I saw Brock Lesnar staring at the ring, pointing and making the belt motion. I stared back at him, whether or not I was on camera, and mouthed the words, "You screwed me!"

The music stopped. The show was done filming. I slowly got up to my feet and

hobbled past Brock to the back. As he passed me, he made a motion like he was going to punch my lights out. I flinched, causing me to stumble and crash off the ramp. The crowd laughed. I laughed, too. The thing was well padded. I eventually crawled onto the stage and to the back.

Brian and I were the last two in the locker room. Paul and Stephanie were going over the post-production as I showered off. Brian was all packed and ready to go.

"Hey, Andy?"

"What's up?"

"Nothing personal, but could you choose another nozzle to shower under? I'm still a little weirded out by seeing a naked guy."

I laughed. "All right, Kath. I'll move." I switched off the shower I was standing under and moved across the way to another one, turning it on. "Can you see me now?"

"No, you're good."

"All right. How do you put up with it when you have to get cleaned up?"

"I don't want to... I just usually make it quick."

"Don't other people complain about your smell?"

"Well, no one did today, and I just stayed in my stuff after the match."

"All right, then. You can shower now. I'm not gonna jump you or anything."

"It's not that! It's that I'm... well... I'm not ready."

"All right."

"I mean, you're not going to be ready when you become a girl, are you?"

I'd better not answer that one.

I finished washing off and got my towel on. I went to my locker and grabbed my street clothes, then stood behind a set of locker doors and changed. When I was done and everything was packed, I closed the door.

"All right, kid, it's all yours."

"Thanks."

I stepped outside to find Stephanie and Paul talking about how the Undertaker/Rhyno finish came off. I walked up to Paul and told him I'd meet him in the parking lot. When he consented, I headed for the stage door.

I walked to the car. In the distance, I heard a rumbling. It was from a motorcycle. I looked in the direction of the noise and saw Undertaker revving up his ride.

"Hey, Cena!"

I went over. Taker was dressed in a helmet and his costume. He was chewing something as he talked. I didn't get a close enough look to see what it was; besides, the lighting was terrible.

"What's up, Taker?"

"Good job out there tonight. You and Kurt had a good one out there."

"Thanks, Red. Hey... you and Rhyno tore the house down too."

"Yeah, we were all on tonight... especially Eddie."

"What do you mean?"

"That chairshot he gave me after the match was a doozy. I know I can take a shot

like that, but, MAN! It was like he was trying to hurt me!"

"Well, maybe he was."

"What?"

"Mark, you know that Eddie doesn't trust you. He thinks you're going to make him look weak as a champion. Already they're stalling his main event push until they see how he goes with you. He's heard the tales. He's heard what you do. I think someone's gotta talk to him."

"Don't look at me, man. If that's how he feels, I ain't gonna get through to him. If he tries to shoot on me, I'll take him out. I gotta protect myself. I've been in this business too long to have someone steal my thunder."

"That's just it. Do you really think he can steal it?"

"You ain't been around like I have. You don't know. You can put a man down without even trying. It's a tough world, kid. You'll learn that someday. When I say I will protect my yard... that's not just the Dead Man talking. That's Mark Calloway. I need it."

"But--- you're a legend! You could retire right now and your status would be intact."

"That's just it. I could retire right now. But I don't want to. And I don't like people trying to push me out. Kid, when I told you that you had a chance one year ago, I meant it. Look where you've gone so far. You're the future, kid. But that future isn't gonna come to you on a silver platter. You gotta grab it, and hold onto it, and never -- NEVER -- act like you don't care. You know as well as I do that I give all I can every day. So what if I ain't a luchadore? So what if I don't always do submission holds the right way. I'm bustin' my ass out there. I'm trying to get everything I can out of my run. Just wait, kid -- the minute you're satisfied, you'll be on your way out."

"But what about Eddie?"

He paused for a moment and spat whatever it was he was chewing onto the ground. I didn't bother to look, but from the sound of it, it wasn't gum.

"Eddie's a man just like me. He wants his day in the sun. He feels the time ticking away. But see, he's heard all the wrong things and concentrated on all the wrong ideas. People have told him some nasty things. I heard Vince say he was too small. I heard HHH say he couldn't relate to the crowd. When he and Chris came over from WCW, they were outcasts. He's felt like an outsider from Day One. But you know, if he wants to act macho and threaten me, it ain't no skin off my nose. There's only one man who decides the outcome, and it ain't me. So I gotta trust in that man, and let him steer me to glory. I gotta get going, kid. Good talkin' to ya."

"Yeah, you too, Mark. See you this weekend."

"Maybe!"

He drove off to wherever his next destination was. Was he headed to a bar? Was he going home to Houston? Maybe he'd be in the hotel. I didn't know. But I understood how to handle Eddie.

I thought of his last words. *"There's only one man who decides the outcome, and it ain't me. So I gotta trust in that man, and let him steer me to glory."* Sounds like it had a double meaning. It's almost like I was meant to hear that. Yeah, it makes sense. God controls the universe. If I let him lead me the right way, I'll succeed. He's the booker of life. And I gotta keep Vince from doing the ultimate job.

I walked back to Paul's car. He and Brian hadn't arrived yet. I looked into the front seat. The lamp was there, sitting on the passenger side. *Poor Lindsay. She must be lonely in there. I mean, I guess this has happened to her before, but it can't be pleasant. Unable to talk to other people, unable to interact... her very life put on hold. This must be a private Hell.*

The door to the arena opened. Three figures emerged. They waved and went their separate ways. One walked off to the remaining van. *Stephanie*. The other two were headed here. The larger one -- *must be Paul* -- pointed something at the car. The alarm was disabled. As they arrived, I waited for Paul to unlock the doors.

"Shotgun!" called Brian.

"No fair, you!"

We spent the time arguing over who should sit in the front seat, laughing and joking and trying to be human all at the same time.

Friday, August 15, 2003, 01:44 PM
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

While most of the brand was in Minneapolis on tour, a handful of us stopped off for a little publicity campaign in the border town. Paul Heyman was his usual charmer, setting the stage for the party. Of a bit of a surprise was how busy I was. I sat with Eddie Guerrero, and a steady supply of autograph hounds meant I was quickly developing a cramp in my hand. *I haven't used a pen this much since my senior thesis.*

To my surprise, we were getting a favorable reaction when we were introduced. It wasn't that we were stars -- Big Show and Vince McMahon were booed as they were mentioned. We simply were riding the line between face and heel. At least, we were onstage. Backstage, Eddie was riding it too -- which was the problem.

"Eddie... you talked to Mark about your match?"

"Don't bring it up."

"Whaddya mean?"

"I don't wanna talk about it."

"Why not?"

"We're in public, man. Keep your game face on."

"So after we're done?"

"Yeah, fine, sure. Just keep signing."

I worried I was getting close to blowing my cover with all these questions. Fortunately, they were coming out of the mouth of a second-year pro at the big time, asking a long, LONG time veteran who had been on the main stage somewhere in the world since he was 20. *Hopefully, he thinks it's a rookie mistake.*

I signed on in silence, alone with my thoughts about Eddie's pain. *Suppose Mark was right. Suppose Eddie thinks he doesn't really "belong" here. What can I do to change it? As Cena -- not much. As Andy -- perhaps less. I guess it depends on who I am from one week to the next. But Eddie -- he's always Eddie. He's always seeing himself as a nobody. No, that's not right. He's a Guerrero. He's a Mexican legend... so why is he so*

nervous about America?

I'd been signing pictures for the last half-hour. It was always the same, "To <name>, Word Life! John Cena". Hey, at least I personalized them, which was more than some did. Thankfully, it wasn't always pictures. One person gave me a WWE T-shirt to sign. Of course, it was a black T-shirt.

"Eddie, you got a metallic marker?"

"Yeah, over here. Why?"

"Got a shirt to autograph."

"Ah, right. One of those. Yeah, you get to sign some weird things sometimes."

"Like what?"

"Well, I sign shirts, papers, programs, pictures..."

"Yeah, but you kind of expect that, don't you?"

"You ever signed a hat?"

"Okay, that's a little unorthodox."

"Austin told me in his prime he would sign cases of beer."

The crowd laughed with me on that one. *We might be on to something here.*

Should I get in character completely?

"Yo, you ever signed the hood of a Chevy, man?"

"Homes, it was no Chevy. It was a primo Beetle down in Puebla. They everywhere down there -- the old type, too, amigo."

Oh, this could get good.

"Smooth. Goin' old school."

"Das right, esse. Like my Lo Rider."

The crowd was applauding. They loved it.

The session continued. With about five minutes to go, the line began thinning. We saw many others waiting in line behind a white tape for RAW stars and hometown heroes Trish Stratus and Christian, who were scheduled to come in after us. Eddie and I had exchanged the metallic marker several times as various random items came forward. *Well, at least nothing weird has happened.*

Then one fan came forward. She didn't have anything in her hand, but she leaned forward and seemed excited. Eddie's line was even taking notice.

"Can I... help you?"

"Could you autograph me?"

Say WHAT?

"Uh... like, where?"

She pointed to her chest. "Right here, baby."

The crowd let out a roar of laughter. It probably helped that I gave a double-take upon hearing the request. Even Eddie was laughing. She played it up to the crowd, cheering me on as I sat there dumbfounded.

"Eddie... what do I do?"

"Thank your lucky stars and sign her boobs, man."

"O...kay... erm, which one, ma'am?"

"It doesn't matter. Just put the pen on it, man!"

I really hope Paul doesn't see this. I stood up and leaned over to her. I held the marker rather tenuously, trying to sign without touching the surface. However, she

grabbed my other hand.

"Maybe you should steady the writing surface, hotstuff."

Okay. Don't blow anything, man. You're only in public, at an autograph session, trying to fulfill the request of a woman who has just put your hand under her breast. I'm sure if I thought really hard about it, I could come up with a more awkward situation I've been in. Maybe.

"Um... do you want me to make out with someone... I mean, make it out to someone?"

So much for not blowing it.

"They say I'm Latino Heet, man. You dog, Cena!"

"You're not helping, Eddie."

"So... uh... I feel I should at least know your name."

"Jessi."

"O...kay..."

I carefully wrote my autograph message on her. I tried to keep it on her body proper, but she insisted on being felt by the felt. Finally, I thought of a way around this. I wrote, "To Jessi, WORD LIFE!" above her chestline. But that still left the signature. I had long since removed my hand from her, and I wasn't about to put it back. Then I thought of an idea.

"Kneel down, Jessi. I'll use the table to keep things steady."

As she did, she removed her shirt.

"What's that for?"

"So you can make it real big."

Oh dear. I complied reluctantly, putting "John" on the left and "Cena" on the right. She stood up and turned around to the mostly male crowd, cheering herself on. *Congratulations, lady. You just set women's rights in Toronto back about five years.*

"Thanks, Johnny!" She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. As she did so, I saw her drop something on the table. I couldn't tell if it was intentional at first, so as she put her shirt on, I called to her.

"You dropped something!"

"No I didn't!"

Aha. She wants me to have this... paper. Hmmmm.

I stuffed the paper in my pocket and signed some more autographs. The whole time, Eddie kept laughing at my experience with inexperience. I just wanted to crawl into the conference room and stay there until Monday.

As Trish and Christian approached the table, Eddie and I took our leave. We walked back to the WWE tour bus. Eddie kept harassing me about Jessi. I kept trying to change the subject, which may have been my first mistake. I had to find Paul. *Did I do the right thing?*

I stepped away from the bus and waited outside. My fingers fiddled with the piece of paper in my pocket. *What was it? As if I didn't know. Wait, if that's what I think it is... then she... oh dear. Maybe I should've lost the paper. Oh, no! Maybe I...*

I quickly pulled out my glasses and looked around. No one was near me. I checked the bus. The surface was sufficiently reflective. I slipped my glasses on. There I was, in full. I looked at my hands. I looked fine. There was no sign of weakness.

"Eddie told me what happened."

I put my hands down to find Paul standing before me. He gave me a disapproving look. I quickly removed my glasses and put them away.

"Oh, Paul... I... well, I mean..."

"Look, you know if you handled it well. Thing is, you'll run into people like that again. It's not in your best interest to follow up with ringrats like that. They're bad news."

"Oh, come on, Paul. Not all female wrestling fans are like that."

"That's not the issue. The issue is, that girl was. She's a temptation. She's bad news. Don't follow up with her right now. Tonight, you're staying in."

"Okay, Paul. Probably a smart thing to do anyway. Not like there's much in Canada after 8 o'clock anyway."

"There is, actually, but... trust me, problem people are all over. Just stay in when we get to the hotel."

"Right."

I unfolded the piece of paper in my pocket. Just as I suspected, it was a phone number. There was also her name, "Jessi", written on it -- with a heart to dot the i, of course. *Ugh. Maybe Paul's right that she's nothing but trouble. I mean, anyone who flaunts herself like that can't be all good. Still...*

"Can't I just check her out?"

"I wouldn't do that. You might not come back."

"She's not a psycho. She won't kill me."

"No, no..."

He whispered into my ear.

"John will come back. You might not."

"Paul... I'm just going to talk. Is there any harm in that?"

Paul rolled his eyes. "I guess you wanna learn the hard way, don't you? Do what you have to do. But if you need me, come straight back, you got that?"

"Yes, Paul."

I entered the bus. Eddie was sitting in the back, reading a book. I sat down next to him as Brian bounced a ball off the wall of the bus in the front.

"Eddie... can we talk now?"

"Oh, sure, John."

"It's about your match with Mark... see, I ran into him after the TV show in St. Louis, and..."

"...look, I know. He told you I was too small for him, and that the time of people like Shawn being credible is over, right?"

"No, that's just it. He doesn't buy that crap."

"Doesn't buy it? He's the one who started it!"

"Eddie, have you ever heard him say anything about you?"

"Dammit, John, you know how he thinks! Who won at Vengeance, you or him?"

"That's not important..."

"Of course it is! He has to win the match! That's the way he is!"

"So why do you have to win the match?"

"Because I don't want to be his victim! I've been a victim everywhere, John! I went to Japan, and they wouldn't even bother to use my real name. I was Black Tiger. Do I look

black to you? But I'm just some foreign weirdo over there, so who cares? I went to WCW, and I was a star. I was battling the NWO for the US title! But I was expendable in the end, and back in the shuffle I went! I went to the management and asked how I could get back on TV, and you know what they told me? Be a Mexican! Be some Cesar Chavez type! The front office didn't give enough of a crap about me to give me a second dimension! You know how much support I got from them when I broke my leg? NONE! You know how cool they thought the Filthy Animals were? They stuck Billy Kidman in there because a bunch of Latinos can't get over on their own!"

"That's the past, Eddie! That's not here! WCW is DEAD! Turner's not in your life! Dillon's out on the street, and Bischoff has no more power than you do! Eddie, this is the WWE. This is new life!"

"No, John, mi amigo. It's no new life. It's the same shit as before. I came here, and I was labelled as a Radical. Yeah, they sympathized with me, but I knew the score. Vince wanted Benoit because he was the WCW Champion, and we were a package deal. He didn't want anything to do with me! With Dean! With Perry! We were extras! They put me with Chyna because HHH didn't think I had it on my own. He called me Chyna's crutch! What an arrogant son of a jackal that bastard is! But I showed him. I showed them all! I became a star, as big as Chyna was!"

"That's great, Eddie! You've proven them wrong. You proved Vince wrong!"

"I proved NOTHING!"

"If that's the case, why'd he let you back? Why is it that when you checked into rehab, and he gave you a release to sort yourself out, he said -- and, dammit, this was the talk of OVW at the time -- he said you were welcome back when you were clean and sober?"

"The fans. That's why. If the fans didn't care for me, I'd be nothing. But they missed me. They missed me when I was in Ring of Honor, and when I was in the WWA, John. I heard them in Vegas, and in Philly. I forced Vince's hand, but... I'm a sideshow."

"Eddie, this is your chance! You can break out of the sideshow! HHH isn't here any more; it's your game. Mark isn't like the other guys. He only plays politics at WrestleMania -- I've seen him backstage as long as you have!"

"Are you that naive, esse? It's not backstage! It's in the damn ring! Look at what he does to talent! Test last year -- a big star in the making! He runs into Taker, and it's all GONE! Or look at DDP during that InVasion!"

"Eddie, please. The man follows orders. DDP -- I watched that on TV -- I watched what he did. What DDP was accused of -- he had to get beaten to a pulp. Even he will admit that."

"And Andrew? What did he do?"

"Seems to me he was going to bounce back just fine. So the Canadian thing failed, fine! He got a second chance with Scott Steiner, and Stacy Keibler! Besides, you've fought him. Is he really that good?"

"Well, ok, he's probably not at my level."

"Exactly. I think Mark will listen to you."

"No way. No way that man will listen to me."

"How do you know if you haven't tried?"

"Have you heard the man? He doesn't like me! He has some grudge against me!"

"Well, good grief, Eddie, if you cursed me out and told the world you weren't fond of going against me, I'd be upset at you, too! Now listen to me, Eddie. You have a lot of talent. You have fans. You have the US title. You have a wonderful golden opportunity. Taker can make you famous! And I know -- I KNOW -- that if you do your part, he'll do his part, and you'll be happy for it. Eddie, you know that as long as you have that title, you're going to win over Undertaker! This is your slingshot to the main event! Don't let your anger prevent you from getting that last step!"

"Main event, my ass... I got demoted! I'm in the midcard now!"

"Why?"

"Vince told me I didn't belong in the upper mid. He thinks I'm not ready."

I paused for about ten seconds. I wondered if there was more he had to say. I knew what I said next would be difficult, but it had to be said.

"Eddie... you're not acting stable. You don't have the demeanor necessary to be the flagship. I was OVW champion for a while, and I got the title because Corny said I was mature enough to handle it. That's what you need, Eddie -- you gotta be mature! You have to be ready to be a main eventer. This behavior -- this -- rage... it won't get you anywhere. Look at Steiner. He came in with a chance to be a star, but he and HHH got in an argument. They wouldn't work with each other, and Scott's stuck in midcard. Last I heard, he's off the road right now. Is that what you want to be? Stuck in the middle of a pain you can't fix because it's all in your mind?"

Eddie was only half-listening. I was afraid I was losing him.

"Eddie, listen to me. Please. Just talk to Undertaker. Or, look, I'll get him to talk to you. He's here with us anyway. Along the way to Hamilton tomorrow, the two of you can work things out. Just... please... try."

He still seemed unwilling to do anything. I could tell, though, that his anger was subsiding a little. Maybe now he was willing to hear the truth. Finally, he spoke.

"Man... you rookies are all alike. You and Brian... and Team Angle... all alike. You think things are fair. This is wrestling. We are in it for ourselves. And Undertaker's a survivor. He demands respect. You see what he did to Sean O'Haire in the InVasion?"

"I think he's learned his lesson. He doesn't have the push. Eddie, come on. Be mature about this, please. You're scared, I know, but... so is he."

"Him? Scared? Of WHAT?"

"Of being seen as washed up. Now, listen, I know how good you are. You can make anyone look good in the ring if you want to. I'm telling you that if you do that with Taker... if you work yourself numb... if you challenge him to take it to the next level... he'll thank you. He really will."

"Fine. For you, I'll try. But I don't think it'll work. Just telling you now."

"Thank you, Eddie. It's all I ask for."

Paul boarded the bus with Undertaker soon after. He nodded to the driver. Brian put the ball down and sat upright. The bus doors closed, and we began the trip to the hotel.

"Say, John... how'd you get here, man?"

"I went with Paul."

"You got space for another?"

"You'd better ask him. It's his car."

"Oh, right, sure, man. I just wanna talk to you and Paul some more about this... I think... I just want a booker's voice."

"You know, Mark's right there, if you want..."

"No... not now... it's too soon for me."

04:45 PM

"Hey, Jessi? It's Cena."

"John! How are you?"

"I'm cool. Hey, listen... why you want me to call you?"

"I wanted to know if you were busy tonight."

"Well, not really... why?"

"Well, I was thinking, you know, if you wanted to... oh, man, I'm so nervous..."

"You wanna do somethin'?"

"Can we?"

"I don't see why not. I mean, you certainly left an impression on me. Hey, I can take you to meet some of the boys. Maybe you can join us for dinner."

"Oh, that would be wonderful!... wait, can I?"

"Hmmm... I better double-check. Paul... you know, Paul Heyman?... he's co-ordinating the whole thing. Hang on, he's right next door."

I set the phone down and knocked on the door between us. Paul answered.

"Hey, Paul... I think I got this whole thing figured out... how bout if the girl joins us for dinner? We could give her some merch, pose for a photo... you know, innocent stuff like that?"

Paul smiled. "Brilliant. Tell her to meet us downstairs at 7:30, ok?"

"Right."

"Oh, and Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"Way to handle this. I should've trusted you."

"Thanks... I gotta get back on the line."

I went back to the phone. "Jessi?"

"Hm?"

"It's good with us."

"All right! Woohooo!"

"Yeah, just meet us in the lobby of the SkyDome Hotel at 7:30. We'll be eating in the restaurant downstairs. Be prepared to pay for yourself, but we'll get you some merchandise for taking home. Oh, and you can bring a camera too."

"Great! I'll see you at 7:30 then!"

"Excellent."

"Bye, Johnnie."

She made an exaggerated kissing noise into the phone.

"Bye."

I hung up. *I hope that settles it.*

07:35 PM

Paul, Brian, and I waited in the lobby for Mark and Eddie to come down. I was worried that they were arguing upstairs, but there was nothing I could do. Jessi was due in to arrive soon.

"Brian, could you call my room -- Eddie's with me -- and see if they're still up there?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Heyman."

Brian went to the courtesy phone around the corner. A few moments later, the elevator door opened, and Jessi stepped out. At first I was captivated by her outfit. A brilliant green one-piece ensemble covered her tiny frame. The sleeves accentuated her slender arms. She couldn't have been taller than 5'7, if that, and the outfit made her seem in better shape than I had seen outside of the locker room. I was pleasantly surprised.

"John!"

She ran to me in her heels and gave me a big hug. I looked at Paul and shrugged. *I don't know what's going on, but it can't be bad.*

"Jessi... you sure are excited to be here."

"Well, of course... I looooooove the WWE. You guys are so awesome, and now I'm getting to have dinner with you! Oh, this is wild!"

"Um... Jessi, this is Paul Heyman. Paul, this is Jessi."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Thank you. Oh, wow... is it just us?"

"Well, no... we're waiting on a few others."

Brian returned from the phone. "Eddie says he will be down in a few min... hello."

"Hiiiiii!"

Evidently, we forgot to tell Brian we'd be having friends.

"Who's this?"

"This is Jessi. She's a big fan of John's."

"Oh, okay. Hello, Jessi. I'm Brian Kendrick."

"Brian..."

I felt I had to step in. "He goes by Spanky on TV."

"Oh... Spanky! You're so cute in real life! Wow!"

She gave him a kiss on both cheeks. *Maybe I've passed her on. Either that or she'll take anyone she can get.*

"So, Brian, is Mark coming?"

"Nah. He had plans already to ride ahead to Hamilton."

"All right, that's fine. So we're just waiting for Eddie."

"Eddie? Eddie Guerrero's gonna be here, too? This is SOOOOOOOO cool! Oh my God, they'll never believe this!"

Eddie can't get here soon enough. Either that or I hope Jessi composes herself.

The elevator opened. Eddie Guerrero sauntered out. As soon as he saw Jessi, he laughed. He then went up and hugged her before turning to John.

"Bro, looks like you got a stalker, man!"
We all laughed and went in for dinner.

10:15 PM

After a night of eating, laughing, and posing for various forms of photographs, everyone was ready to head upstairs. I stayed behind to say goodbye to Jessi. I thanked her for the time together and said that I hoped I'd be seeing more of her next time we were in Ontario.

"You're welcome. And thank you... so much..."

She stared into my eyes. I saw something there I didn't know how to react to. It was a sort of need that I couldn't categorize. It was impersonal and strong. It was a sight I had never noticed before.

She hugged me around the waist and buried her head in my chest. She looked up at me. Again I focused on the eyes. They were hard to understand. It wasn't the fire I had seen in Eddie's on Monday. It was a different, more inviting sense. But it was fire nonetheless. I didn't know how to place it. Maybe if we talked some more I would know.

"Can I walk you to your car?"

"Oh... I'm staying here on business, as it turns out. Small world, isn't it?"

TOO small.

"Yeah, that's wild."

"However, if you want, you can walk me to my room."

"Sure."

We took the elevator up to the tenth floor. While alone in the elevator, she kissed me. I played along, strangely not feeling any sort of emotion other than fear and confusion. I couldn't understand it. *Was Paul right? Is she bad news? Should I leave now for my own survival? And is that alcohol smell on her breath just a little strong?*

We arrived at her room. She opened it and stopped at the door. "Thank you so much. You're wonderful."

"Thanks. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Hang on... there's something I want to give you, actually."

"A present?"

"Sure. Come on in... let me find it."

I entered her room. As I sat down on the bed, she excused herself to the bathroom, where she said she had hidden the present. As I waited, I felt my glasses in my pocket. I pulled them out and looked in the mirror. There I was, staring back, still full. So far I was just fine. *I must be letting my imagination run away with me. Besides, I am in control.*

"Close your eyes, John."

I did as I was told after putting the glasses away, although I began to suspect the worst. I heard the sound of footsteps toward me. I felt a hand on my shoulder. She had slid behind me on the bed and had her arms around my neck.

"Okay, open."

I did. I looked down at her hands. She had nothing in them. I quickly looked into

the mirror, but I already knew what I was going to see. There she was behind me, with her head resting on my shoulder and her arms draped on my chest. She moved my hand behind me. I felt skin. In a panic, I turned around.

"How do I look?"

She was lying on the bed. Her smile showed an expectancy of acceptance. Across her chest was a bright red ribbon with the words "For You" on it. A bow rested on her left shoulder, and the ribbon flowed, like a sash, down to her right hip. That was all she had.

"Oh... I... I'm sorry."

"What's wrong, John? Am I not good enough for you?"

"No, no -- it's n-n-not that. You see, I -- well, I have a girl already."

"Oh, she won't know. Come on, just once. You can live a little."

"Trust me, I've lived enough."

I began to make a move for the door. I heard her pout behind me. *I can't turn around. I have to get out of here before anything happens. Do I have my glasses? Yes, good. I can escape.*

I closed the door in a hurry behind me and ran to the stairs. I rushed down two flights to the eighth floor, where we were all staying. I got off and jogged to my room. As I got there, I saw a mirror outside by the elevators. I got my glasses and looked into it. There I was, bright as ever. I had survived temptation.

I walked slowly to my room. As I got to the door, I saw a note hanging from it. I took the note off the door and read it.

"John,

Told you so.

--Paul"

Yes you did, Paul. Thank you.

I crumpled up the note and carried it in with me. Brian was watching HBO on the television. He smiled when I got in.

"Hey, Andy. How'd it go?"

"Better than it might have."

"What do you mean?"

"She wanted to bed me. I got away before she could."

"Yeah, probably good thinking. We can't take any chances."

"I know. Well, I guess tomorrow is another day."

"Yep. Ready to go to Hamilton?"

"I can't wait to get out of here."

Sunday, August 17, 2003, 12:47 PM

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

We arrived in Hamilton, prepared to continue the swing of the Ontario tour. All throughout the night, I couldn't get the thoughts of Jessi out of my head. *I know I did the right thing... but could I have lasted a little longer without anything going wrong? I wish I knew.*

As we went to the arena, I saw Eddie Guerrero and Undertaker sharing nervous looks out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't tell if they had conversed, or if they were trying not to. Eddie seemed to be a bit calmer, while Taker held his blank expression that had carried him to multiple title victories. I couldn't tell anything. It was weird.

My mind flashed back to Jessi again. The thought of her lying on the bed, presenting herself as a gift to me... it was a thing I would have been thankful for 100 times over in high school and college, but that I never got. At least, I believed I would have been thankful for it. I couldn't remember one way or the other -- I knew that, even as little as a month before I died, I had desires. But I never tried to act on them, mostly out of self-consciousness. Now, I had all the confidence in the world, and I still didn't act.

What if I had? What if I allowed to her to repay me? Would I still be here today? I can't imagine... no, the problem is I can imagine, and it's going to cause trouble for me.

While waiting for the rest of the crew, especially my opponent for the day in Tajiri, my mind wandered back to that night. *No, don't go there. It can only be bad.* I felt myself actively pulling away from it, but also seemingly watching it against the back of my eyelids like a Cinemax movie without the remote control. I was remembering seeing her without a shirt in the autograph session. I visualized the big hug in the lobby, and looking into her eyes, seeing the blue fire that I now knew was lust. I was forced -- almost against my will -- to watch the kiss in the elevator, only this time feel a physical attraction attached to it. I saw her invite me into her room, the bed waiting there, and then the last glimpse. *Why am I replaying this right now? Am I asleep?*

But it got worse. Suddenly I was seeing myself making a move for her, removing the ribbon. She was reaching across my back and pulling at my shirt. *Why is this happening? I don't want to see this!* She was moving my hands around her body as she brushed against me. I saw her kiss me again, longer, stronger, then again on the neck, then lower than before. *No! Stop! I'm in control! I must stop this!* I watched helplessly as she lowered herself all the way and began to adjust my belt. Thousands of emotions were overloading me -- desire, fear, want, caution, love, lust, regret, frustration, courage, stubbornness. I needed one to rise above the others. Finally...

"John! John!"

I sat upright. Paul was staring at me, maniacally wide-eyed, with Brian just over his shoulder. I looked around. I was in the locker room. My clothes were still on. It was all a vision.

"Paul, I... I..."

"What happened? Are you all right?"

"Yeah... I just... she... it..."

"Kathleen, go outside and help Taker and Eddie with their practice. I'll handle this."

"Yes, sir."

Brian ran out of the room. I was still hyperventilating. Paul stared into my eyes, checking for some sign of damage.

I reached for my glasses. "Where's a mirror?"

"Don't bother. I can tell you're fine."

"Are you sure? Those images... they were so real..."

"I know they were. I told you you should've avoided her altogether. But don't

worry. It didn't happen. Just keep your mind focused."

Focused. I can't focus. Not now.

"Paul... remember how we talked about seeing Lindsay?"

"Look, now's not the time for that. You have work to do!"

"Paul, I can't... John's mind is cluttering my signals. I'm stuck replaying it. He's obsessed. If he hasn't damaged me already, he will soon."

Paul reached into his pocket and pulled out a glass case. He opened it and put on the glasses. He held my head steady and stared into my eyes.

"You're right. He will soon."

"Am I fading?"

"No, no. But your pupils aren't pure anymore. That's the sign of a strong temptation. Usually, the eyes are the first thing to change. The pupil changes color when you are in trouble."

Of course! The fire I saw!

"I think, since you're new at this, it might be best if we gave you the day off."

"But Kath--"

"I'll take care of her. Relax. She's not on the card anyway. She and I will take off ahead of time to Sarnia. I'll see you there."

"Okay, Paul. Okay. Now, please... let me out." *And hurry. I'm feeling a fire within me.*

Paul opened his tote bag and produced the container. He placed it in my hands.

"Now listen. Place your mouth over the little hole here. Breathe in deeply, then start to exhale into the container. As you do this, you'll find yourself becoming detached of John. Take advantage of this! Try to push yourself into the container! It's gonna feel weird at first, but you have to get used to it."

I took the container. "Are you sure this is ok, Paul? I'm nervous."

"Andy, I believe in you. I see the trouble in your eyes. You need to escape."

"Okay."

I placed the container to my lips. I waited a few seconds to regain my thoughts, but they wandered back to the hotel room. Quickly, I breathed in. As my lungs filled, I felt light-headed. The images of what might have been were getting stronger. I blew into the container with all my might. I began to lose feeling in my legs. I was visualizing her lying back on the bed, inviting me into her embrace. I breathed in again. I could barely keep sitting up. I exhaled. My arms no longer held the container, but it stayed up. I could barely hear Paul's words of encouragement. I kept breathing. I heard a sigh that I had never heard before, and somehow I knew it was meant to be Jessi's. My vision was glazing over. My lungs were no longer my own. I felt myself pitching myself forward. All was black.

I woke up again in a blank room. Or, at least, I thought it was a room. I tried to look around. No clock was present, nor was there any decoration at all -- just green everywhere. I tried to stand up, but had trouble moving my body. I couldn't even see if I had one.

"Lie still for a moment, Andy. You need to regain your strength."

There was no mistaking the voice. I tried to move my eyes to find her, but she wasn't in my field of vision. And yet, I had a strange feeling that if only I could move, I would find her.

"Lindsay? Is that you?"

"Yeah."

"What happened? Where am I?"

"You're in Recovery. Don't worry -- this sort of thing happens all the time."

Recovery. I needed out worse than I imagined. "How bad am I?"

"You're all right. You're not faded at all."

"What time is it?"

"I don't know. You never know in this place. It must be Sunday -- and I think it's after midnight."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because whenever you Recover, You're only awake for a few hours at a time every day. I've been counting the days."

"Wait... you just got up?"

"We're usually dormant in here. It's better this way. Why are you here, Andy?"

"Friday night, this woman came up to John and started making the moves on him. I let him walk her to her room. She..."

"Okay, I know the rest. It happens to everyone their first time. Kathleen was here her first two weeks with all the temptations. It's okay."

"Why can't I move?"

"There's nothing to move. We don't really exist right now."

"What?"

"We have no body, just our souls. We don't occupy a space or a time in here. We just are."

"So that means -- I'm nothing?"

"No. You're still something. You're something very special."

"When do I get to come back?"

"Tomorrow. You'll be alive again."

"What do I do now?"

"Now we just wait. Within the hour, we'll get some semblance of feeling back. That'll be the signal that everything is ready."

"Doesn't this bother you? You've just lost an entire week of your life."

"Andy, it would've been much worse if I had lost everything. Eddie was out of control. His anger was getting the best of him. I had to get out. I did the right thing. I have no regrets."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you regret getting out?"

"No. I don't. I made an important decision. My body was failing me. All I could see were images of that woman and what might have been. It was making me want. I almost felt inhuman. I wanted it to stop, but I couldn't make it happen."

"Yes, we all have that. You were feeling detached from yourself?"

"Basically, yeah!"

"That's a sign you're not in control. That's the sign you take to mean you need to get out soon."

"Why didn't you get out sooner? I remember seeing the fire in Eddie."

"I couldn't because I wasn't controlling Eddie. Literally, if you hadn't seen me, I might not have noticed until it was too late."

"How did this happen, Lindsay?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did we get put in bodies that were more powerful than we were?"

"Most bodies are. Fallen Angels only have so much power. We can guide, but we can't entirely control. We make decisions, but not reflexes. It's our fate. The only thing we know is that we'll never be put in harm's way on Monday morning. The rest is in our hands."

"I'm scared."

"I'm sure you are. I was scared the first time, too."

"The first time?"

"I've been in here many times. Probably we wind up needing time off at least once a month."

"Once a month? I don't know if I can stand lying still for that long."

"You have to. The only other option is Hell. No one wants to go there."

I began to feel a small amount of movement in my body. I tried to bend my head. I saw myself lying on the ground in the bloody outfit I wore when I got shot. *She's right. We're just us now.*

"Lindsay? Can you... move? I mean, you're healed now, right?"

"Yeah, I am. Let me get up."

I heard movement next to me. I couldn't lift my arms past the prone position. She stood over me and entered my line of view. She was quite the sight. She looked like she was dressed in a women's professional outfit. Her light green shirt stood out against both the black outline of her suit and the darker green of the container. But this wasn't the most frightening feature she had. The worst part was her head.

She was cradling it in her arm.

"Wow, he got you good, didn't he? Right between the eyes."

I was able to move my arms now. I lifted my right hand to my face, placing it on my forehead. Sure enough, the hole had returned.

"Yeah, he did... but you... what happened?"

"Remember how I said I had died eight years ago?"

"Yeah?"

"I died on April 20, 1995. I was working in Oklahoma City on a government project. I remember hearing the blast from the truck while I was working at the computer. A piece of the window came flying out of the pane and headed right at me. As you can see, it did a little damage."

A little? You look worse than I do! "Yeah, but -- why are we... I mean, Peter healed me, didn't he?"

"That was cosmetic. That was so you wouldn't keep looking at a hole in your head. It was necessary for the mission. But in here, we are what we were. This is how I

was when I died. It's how I'll always be in here."

She turned her head so she could look at herself.

"Admiring your fashion taste?"

"Well, it is nice to be able to see how I am. But all the same, I don't like being reminded of the fact that I couldn't even get a decent burial."

"You couldn't?"

"No. I don't know if I was ever found. My body probably was burned in the heat from the explosion. It wouldn't surprise me if my DNA was part of a museum somewhere."

"That's an awfully macabre thing to think."

"No worse than knowing your picture will be presented to a grand jury, who will be forced to hear in detail how your skull was shattered."

"I hadn't thought of that."

I tried to get up. My legs were moving now. I rolled onto my stomach, then pushed myself up. I turned to face Lindsay, who was attempting to balance her head on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry if this scared you."

"No, no -- just a little disconcerting, but I think I could get used to it. Not that I want to be here often."

"I know. Although sometimes I come here for time off."

"You can do that?"

"Sure. When you work all day and all night, sometimes you have an identity crisis. You need time to be yourself, and to do things to establish who you are."

"Who are we?"

"We're people. We have a humanity. That's the most important thing."

She gave up on her head and placed it on the ground as she sat down. I sat down in front of her and picked her head up.

"This is so weird. This is your identity."

"Well, yours isn't much better."

As she spoke, I felt a poke going through my head. After it left, I looked up in time to see her body lean back, with her arm returning from an outstretched position.

"Lindsay?"

"Yeah?"

"Even in two pieces, you're a wonderful person."

"Thank you."

I handed her head back to her. I noticed her eyes beginning to close. At the same time, a wave of energy seemed to be sapping from me. I leaned back and spread out on the floor. My eyes shut on their own.

The alarm went off at 10:00. I awoke, as if from a dream. The announcers on the radio were talking about how it was Monday in Sarnia, Ontario, and how the WWE was making a visit tonight at the Sports and Entertainment Complex. *I'm back just in time.*

I noticed a calendar on the bed next to me. It read August 18, all right. On the

bottom was a handwritten note: "SummerSlam Week -- turn it up." I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. *Whoever this is, he is very concerned about saving the best for the big stage. I admire that.*

I struggled to my feet, feeling sore from the previous night's action. Whoever I had become felt like he had been in a 30-minute war. I struggled for the glasses, but as I reach for them, I noticed my arm. It was covered in ink, almost completely from shoulder to wrist. I looked at my other arm and saw the same thing.

I grabbed the glasses and put them on. I had a feeling who I was already, just from the preponderance of tattoos, but I needed to adjust first. I walked to a mirror and looked into it. There I was again, complete, whole, and without injury. The Recovery had worked.

I removed the glasses. I wasn't surprised by the face staring back at me. What I realized, though, was that this was the man I would have to be for seven days. If nothing went wrong, then the night of SummerSlam I would be entering as him. And that meant that the problem that was haunting the backstage for the past month now rested squarely on my shoulders, for me to make good or to destroy.

Two weeks ago, I was dead. Now, I was a Dead Man Walking. I was Mark Calloway -- the Undertaker.

THIRD WEEK

Monday, August 18, 2003, 01:55 PM
Sarnia, ON

Ho hum, another meeting. Somehow I don't feel as up to it this time. The group filed into the lobby for the big weekly meeting. There was a buzz in the air as I walked in. I searched out where to go, and decided to stand in the back. As I stood there, Eddie moved a few rows forward. *Looks like it's going to be a long week.*

"Gentlemen, your attention please." It was Stephanie again. She seemed nervous. I found something in my shirt pocket -- a shade for regular glasses to turn them into sunglasses, with a hinge to flip them up and down. I slid it onto my special glasses and put them on, flipping down the shades to look like Big Evil.

"Excuse me, everyone -- we're ready to begin..." It suddenly made sense why the nerves. Kathleen was Stephanie this week, and clearly wasn't ready for a role of authority. Her voice was too silent to get people's attention, and truly, some of the people hadn't heard her. Then again, I'm a locker room leader now, aren't I?

"Hey guys, pipe down!"

They all turned around to face me.

"Now, Steph here has seems to have a bit of a bad throat, so I want y'all to keep quiet and listen to her a little more. It's a big week, you know; this is our first reunion pay-per-view, and we wanna show RAW up. If we work hard at this, I'm sure we can get the book to get the duke in the Brawl. Got it?"

A few cheers of affirmation went up.

"I can't hear you guys!"

They all cheered.

"That's right. Now Steph... what's the story?"

"Thank you, Mark. As he said, this week is SummerSlam. We have four matches on the SmackDown! brand, and all of you know what they are. Now, I've been in talks with Daddy, and he's working on finalizing the order in which everyone will go out. However, I wanna tell you right now that we don't get the last match. Triple H and Goldberg will go on last."

There were a few mutters in the crowd. From what I could tell, people seemed almost resigned to this as a reality. I heard Edge lean over and tell Rey, "They are the money match, after all."

"Now, guys -- within our matches, I was thinking of not putting Brock and Kurt on last. For one thing, two world title matches would be overkill. For another, and this was a decision that Daddy made, since there will be a heel turn during the match, we will have put it in the middle so that the SmackDown! fans can leave with a good feeling about the show and a smile on their face."

She beamed as she punctuated the point. The group laughed. I chuckled too.

"Now, tonight, we have our last off-camera show before SummerSlam. For this show, we don't have anything advertised, so if people wish to find opponents based on the pay-per-view, or their styles, you can do that. We'll fill out the card at the end. Paul, do you have anything to add?"

Paul took the floor. "Thank you, Stephanie. There is one match that I'd like to have tonight. The six-man from last week got great reviews, and the fans really enjoyed it. I'd like to put that on again. I know it caused a lot of backstage trouble, but I think we can fix it this time. Would the people in the match see me after this meeting ends so we can go over the particulars."

I heard a groan come from Eddie's direction.

"And cut the negativity! This is a big show, and we want everyone to put politics aside and work their asses off. Remember, Stephanie and I have the book, and we can punish you if you act up."

Paul paused for 10 seconds to let the gravity of his words set in.

"Now listen. That match won't be the main event. For the main event, since we're in Ontario, I'm putting Stephanie and Sable out there. That way, Edge will run out and get the big pop at the end of the show. Can you handle it, Adam?"

"Yeah, no problem, Paul. I got it covered."

"Excellent. Now, does anyone have any questions about SmackDown! or SummerSlam?"

"Yeah, Paul... who's in the interpromotional match?"

"We haven't entirely decided yet. A lot of that is going to be a reaction to what RAW's writing team decides. I'm talking to them right now, but they haven't tipped their hand. They say they will on RAW. As it is, we have paired up each person on the RAW list with someone in this room. That way, we will have a team assembled as soon as they give the word."

"Can I see that list?"

"No."

"Hey, Paul... why was I called off of announcing halfway through the show last week?"

"Oh, sorry, Michael... we plan to film a few skits with you having been called into Stephanie's office. The story is that you will ask her for a favor, and throughout the night, we'll see if this is accepted. You're going to be off SmackDown! this week, but back for SummerSlam. You'll know more then."

"You're phasing me out?"

"No, no, no -- trust me. You will appreciate what we have in mind."

"Does that mean I'm goin' solo?"

"Nope. Josh is getting the call."

Everyone mumbled. Josh was a nice guy, and he definitely had a future in the business. However, he was nowhere near ready to handle SmackDown!, and the Velocity boys had complained a few times about his handling of their matches.

"Relax, guys. It's a one-shot thing. Cole will be back for SummerSlam. Trust me, guys, you'll like the way we pull this off. Vince is putting his personal attention into this."

Gee, I'm shocked.

"Now, Stephanie and I will be around for the next hour or two before we all head to the arena. We'll be filling up the booking sheet for tonight and working on the show for tomorrow. I want people to come up with good matches, because it's in your hands. Consider this a favor. Stephanie, back to you."

"Thanks, Paul. Are there any questions for this week?"

None more.

"Okay, guys... come see us about tonight, then."

I gathered my bags and went to the parking lot. I had to put my stuff in the van before I forgot and found things stolen. Just as I reached the door, I heard Paul shout at me.

"Mark, get over here."

Oh, right. The match.

The six of us gathered in a semi-circle around Paul. It must have been a funny sight, seeing four giants and two athletes surrounding the short fat guy in the middle. It might explain why Paul asked us to sit down.

"Okay, guys, I'm changing the ending around to the match. Since we don't have to worry about sending the fans home happy, I think we'll surprise them here. The heels can have the win."

Show and Train did a mock celebration.

"Now, hang on, guys, it's just a house show." Paul's sarcasm showed he was in on it. "However, I'll allow you guys to decide who gets over on whom. Any ideas?"

We huddled up. Everyone looked to me first.

"Okay, guys... No offense to you, Paul, or you, Matt, but Eddie's the one on SummerSlam in a big match, so I think he should get the victory."

"Seriously, esse?"

"Seriously. And I'll tell ya what -- you can get it on me if you want."

"Mark, I can take the job. I'm not the champion."

"Brock... you're in the title match. I'm the one lowest on the card here. It's best this way."

"How do I get it, man? How do I get it? Is it clean?"

"I dunno. I haven't thought about that. I mean, I assume so... but if y'all think otherwise, lemme know."

"Hey, Eddie... you Cheat 2 Win, man. Do it here, and it's as good as clean anyway."

"You sure, Trainman?"

"Yeah. It'll work."

"Thanks for understanding, guys. All right, let's go over the finish at the arena. I think that little piece of metal you got there will do just fine, Eddie. Everyone cool?"

"Wait, Mark... are we doing formula?"

"Of course."

"Who plays who?"

"Well, I think we can take turns and stretch this out."

"Stretch it out? Mark, you know I can't go long in the ring."

"Paul, don't worry. It'll be in stages. Besides, there's three of you. If you're tired, tag out. We're the ones who have to worry about endurance. Y'all are the heels -- make quick tags."

"All right."

We broke the huddle.

"Paul... we're set. Eddie's gonna hit me with the belt for the pin."

"All right, Mark, if that's fine with you. You want to do something to get your heat

back?"

I looked over at Eddie. He rolled his eyes as he heard Paul's question. Show and Train were simply looking at me, as if expecting me to agree to something.

"Ya know, I was thinking of busting out a dive at SummerSlam. I could do that."

"Okay... if y'all can set it up, y'all can get it down. Are you all going over in the same van?"

Everyone else nodded.

"Paul... I got my own ride."

I pointed to my sunglasses and flipped up the shades.

"I see. Well, hang on... I think I can fix that. Let me get back to you. I might ride with you guys. Anyway, y'all get your stuff together and be in the arena at 4."

The meeting adjourned. As it did, Eddie approached me.

"Pardon me, homes... did you say you were going to dive at SummerSlam?"

"Yeah. I figure, hey... this is a big match. Not every day you wrestle a Mexican legend. Why not make it a memorable match?"

"But they'll remember you, man! Don't try to steal my thunder, you hear me?"

"Relax, Eddie. I wouldn't dream of it."

"Good."

04:01 PM

I waited outside Paul's car. Kurt and Brock were headed to Van #1, while Show and Train were playing catch in the lot. Paul was inside, setting up the order of the matches for the night. I looked around for my fellow Angels.

Josh Matthews came out. His bright red hair -- recently dyed -- stood out from his blue SmackDown! jersey. He walked with a deliberate pace to the car and motioned for me to step away.

"What's goin' on, Josh?"

"Paul says there's a change of plans. You're going with him in the 1 Van today. Got it?"

"Well... sure... no problem. But I'm kinda waiting to meet someone, ya know?"

"I know. I'm the someone. Now, go on in. Paul will be out in a few minutes."

I slipped on my shades. *Lindsay. Shoulda known.* I bent over to her level.

"Hey, man... just tell me next time."

"Not in public. You know that."

I took my stuff and tossed it into the back of the van. I climbed on in. Stephanie's stuff was in the front row of the van -- well, it was more of a minibus the way the seats were arranged. It looked a lot like the one we took through Ontario, actually. *Ugh. I don't need to think about that. Wait... I'm not. Oh, of course... I wasn't there for all the trouble. Heh.*

I went to the middle row and spread out. Eddie was in the back with Kurt, while Brock sat in the row behind me. I turned around to face him.

"Hey, Les -- you don't think Eddie's gonna do somethin' stupid, do ya?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's been actin' awful unlike him lately."

"Yeah, I've noticed. I dunno. I think he'll get over it. I mean, he's just nervous or somethin, right?"

"I think it's more than that... but whatever. If he gets himself back into gear, we'll all be better for it."

Show and Train wandered on to the bus, followed by Paul and Stephanie. Show took a seat opposite Kurt, while Train sat across from me. The driver got in and peeled out of the parking lot.

"Guys, gather up. Let's talk about the match."

The five other moved forward and around so we could all hear each other. I leaned in and thought of the particulars.

"Okay, here's what I'm thinking... for the match, we do a big ol' brawl to start, right? Now, I'll be the face in peril for the first go-round. I'll tag in Brock, he'll get some stuff in, but then he's face in peril for the second go-round. Kurt, you get the hot tag, but that doesn't last long. And then the big segment is on Kurt. I think five minutes at least on him, maybe ten. We'll really build this up. Kurt, you tag me in, I go to town, things break down from there. So far so good?"

They all gave their assent.

"All right. Now the finish. Any ideas for details?"

Kurt spoke up. "Are we gonna do the finisher trainwreck again?"

"Gee, esse, I dunno... I mean, the finish is the beltshot, right? How we work that in?"

"Wait," said Brock, "I got a better idea."

"Yeah?"

"Taker, you set Eddie up for the powerbomb, ok? Then Show grabs him around the throat, but Angle gets behind him and gives him the Angle Slam. But that causes him to crash into me and send us both out of the ring. Train comes in and Derails Angle, so Taker gives Train a dragon sleeper, but the ref is clearing Angle out, so Eddie sneaks in and pastes Taker for the win."

"Hey, man, that's awesome!" yelled Eddie. Show just looked at me, as did Brock.

"All right, let's run with it. Now, I think that can set up the post-match stuff too."

"How so, man?"

"Well, Matt... hmmm... it's like this. Eddie gets the full face time for the win, then moves out. As y'all come to, Brock and Kurt get into an argument, right? I step in between the two of you to calm it down. Then Train and Show run in and attack them and toss them out. The four of you slug it out on the outside, and I'll leap in and wipe you all out. Can you handle that?"

"I think so. Yeah."

"Do we need to practice this?"

"I'm cool."

"Me too, Mark."

"Yeah, no problem."

"I can go with it."

"Sounds straightforward."

"All right. Now, we're almost here. You sure all of you can handle this?"

"Actually..."

"Yeah, Show?"

"Can we work on the finish a little?"

"Sure, that's fine. No problem. Let's go."

The van pulled to a stop at the entrance. Everyone got off, but as I stepped off the bus, Stephanie pulled me back. She and Heyman were looking at me.

"Something wrong, guys?"

"No, no... just wanted to make sure you knew who we are. This is Kathleen here."

"Thought as much. Why do you think I calmed 'em down for ya?"

"Thanks."

"Hey, it's what leaders are for. Y'all set with the show?"

"Yeah, you guys are second from the top."

"Excellent. Let's go."

09:14 PM

Dead Man Walkin'!

The crowd exploded in cheers as flashbulbs went off. I sat on the motorcycle and prepped the motor. Brock and Kurt were standing on either side of me. I looked out at the curtain, parted before me. The noise was stunning. I looked up.

"Stand back, boys."

I put the pedal to the metal. The bike lurched out onto the stage. I paused as I heard Josh Matthews give the intro. I stared left and right, then revved the motor some more. My opponents were in the ring, staring at the entrance. I rode down the aisle and did my lap around the ring. After it finished, I put the bike in park in the aisle and waited.

Kurt Angle's music began as the crowd cheered some more. The "You Suck" chants, by now an affectionate saying, rang throughout the arena. *I can't believe it. This guy's more over than I am now.* He stood at the entrance and pointed to the air. His fireworks went off behind him. He walked to ringside and stood beside me. We both waited.

Brock's music started up. He was receiving cheers as well. He jogged in place on the stage, then walked down to meet us. He stopped, then nodded forward. We walked to the ring, Brock in front, Kurt and myself right behind. Brock jumped onto the apron, setting off his pyro. As he did, Train ran forward. *Oh, it's on.*

I slid in and made a beeline for Show. Kurt ran at Eddie. Everyone slugged everyone else. Show and I exchanged right hands. I backed him into the corner and began boxing him down. The crowd was cheering as I heard repeated thumps behind me. I just assumed Kurt had tossed Eddie around and kept going. After a while, I grabbed Show's hair and turned around. "Brock!" He was ready. I tossed Show at him, whereupon Brock caught him and threw him overhead. The crowd cheered. Everyone regrouped, with the heels going to the outside.

I slid out after them, expecting others to follow me. However, I was isolated, 1-

on-3. As Show and Train put the boots to me, Eddie climbed onto the apron. Show finally rolled me back in, and I saw the trouble -- the referee had begun restoring order at just the wrong moment. *Of course.*

I lay out by the side of the ropes, where Eddie slingshot himself in with his senton. He picked me up and began suplexing me. Once. Twice. On the third try, I blocked. He tried again. I blocked again. I then grabbed him by the throat and held him for the chokeslam, but as I turned, Train hit me with the pump kick. Back down I went.

Eddie tagged the Big Show in. Show sent me into the ropes and followed with a clothesline. He backed me into a corner and faked a clean break before hitting an overhand chop to my chest. I doubled over in pain. He clubbed my back. I hit the ground. He yelled to the crowd, who booed him.

I slowly pulled myself to my feet. He sent me into the ropes. I ducked the rebound, but got nailed with a boot on the second try. Show brought in Train, who picked me up for his Trainwreck, but I slid out the back. I tried to whip him into the far ropes, but he reversed. One round was ducked, but the second time I launched myself at him and hit a flying clothesline -- something "I" hadn't done since the Phenom days. *Heck, might as well go all-out for Eddie.* Train and I were both down, but I managed to roll into the corner and find Brock's hand. I tagged him in.

Brock started punching Eddie's lights out in the corner. A whip into the ropes was followed with a huge spinebuster. Train ran in but got caught with an overhead suplex. Kurt ran into the ring to dispose of Train over the top, but that got the ref's attention. *So what else is new?* In the chaos, Big Show tossed Brock into the air with a gorilla press, then threw him into the turnbuckle. Eddie took over as Show stepped out.

Eddie began to stomp down Brock. He picked Brock up and tossed him into the turnbuckle chest-first, then caught him with a German suplex on the way back. He bridged for two. Eddie set up a rana on Brock, and after some teasing of a powerbomb, he managed to get it off for two. He set Brock on the turnbuckle and followed up. He yelled something in Spanish at me, which I took as a cue to come in. As the ref escorted me out, Show came in behind Eddie and lifted him up on his shoulders. From there, Eddie and Show delivered a stack superplex on Brock. Show rolled out and Eddie covered for two.

Eddie argued the count cadence with the referee, then dragged Brock over to the corner. He climbed the top turnbuckle and slapped his chest. Kurt ran over to the corner and grabbed Eddie's tights slightly. I knew what was coming. Eddie dove off the buckle, flailing his arms around, as Kurt pantomimed shoving him off. Brock was overshot by a good two feet. Both men were down again, but Eddie crawled over and caught Brock's foot.

Brock turned around and tried to stand up. Eddie tried to drag Brock over to his corner. After a few seconds, Brock tightened up his muscles and kicked Eddie all the way to the heel corner. Show tagged in, but too late. Brock lunged and found Kurt's hand.

Kurt charged in and dropkicked Show immediately. Show staggered backward, so Kurt landed a second dropkick, and a third one. On the third one, Show fell into his corner, where Train tagged himself in. He charged at Kurt with the pump kick, but Kurt ducked and grabbed Train's waist. He delivered a German suplex, but held on. A second German suplex hit Train, but again, he picked Train up right away. He struggled for the third one, but Train began backpedalling and squashed Kurt in the corner. Both men were

hurt, but Train managed to stand back up and bodyslam Kurt down.

Show came in and legdropped Kurt, covering for two. He picked Kurt up and pressed him against the ropes, then tossed him across the ring, where Kurt skimmed on the mat and slid out. Brock and I got off the apron and stood on either side of him to help him up, but Train came around and tossed me into the barrier, while Show shoved Brock away. Show then picked Kurt up and bearhugged him into the post on the outside. He tossed Kurt back in, then tagged Eddie in.

Eddie smirked at the crowd and began to put Kurt in a surfboard-type maneuver -- *I never could keep these Mexican submissions straight*. Kurt screamed in pain, but refused to give up. As he lay on Eddie in the submission hold, he shifted his weight to put Eddie's shoulders to the mat, forcing a break after a two-count. Eddie picked Kurt up and gave him a backbreaker. He covered, but it was only two.

Eddie proceeded to lock on the Gory Special in the center of the ring. Again, Kurt screamed in pain. The referee was checking Kurt and had his back to the heel corner. Show stepped over the rope, causing me to lunge in and try to cut him off. Instead, the ref cut me off, and I was forced to watch Show put his mitt around Kurt and choke him down. Finally, Eddie let go, then went behind the ref as I exited the ring and slapped his hands together. He slid outside, and Show was the legal man.

Show began to pick Kurt up, then placed his hand over Kurt's face. Kurt began to stagger while in the clawhold of sorts. He dropped to one knee, then to both. After a while, he slumped over onto the mat. Show kept the pressure on. The ref dropped to count, but Show picked Kurt up. However, as he did so, his hand slipped down Kurt's face. Soon after, Show hollered in pain. I couldn't see why until he did the full turn. Kurt was biting Show's hand!

The referee began to count, and Kurt let go, but he was staggering. Show wrapped him up in an abdominal stretch in the heel corner. He reached back and held his hand out. Eddie grabbed it. Kurt screamed louder. Then Train came behind Eddie and grabbed Eddie's feet. It was a real sight to behold -- Kurt being held by Show, who was using both his teammates as a lever, with poor Eddie the rope connecting his giant teammates.

Eventually, the ref heard Eddie yell in pain and called for a break. Eddie let go and flew straight into Train. Kurt, meanwhile, hiptossed Show and collapsed. Everyone on the opposition was down. Kurt was slowly making his way to me. Show was going to tag, but had nowhere to go. He pulled himself up and saw Kurt already halfway across the ring. Brock began to get the crowd involved, as I leaned between the top and middle ropes, clutching the tag rope while making the distance Kurt had to travel as short as possible. Eddie climbed back onto the apron and tagged himself in. He charged, but Kurt made that last lunge and tagged my hand.

I climbed the rest of the way in as Eddie begged off. I kicked him as he knelt there, sending him flying back into the corner. He used the ropes to pull himself up. I pummeled him in the corner with rights and lefts, then twisted his arm. "OLD SCHOOL!" I climbed the turnbuckle and slowly walked the ropes toward my corner. I came down with a clothesline that flattened Eddie. Then, for good measure, I nailed both Train and Show off the apron.

I went back to Eddie and chokeslammed him down. I signalled for the Last Ride and put Eddie in position. Show hauled himself over the top and stomped to me. He

grabbed my throat. Meanwhile, Brock was cutting Train off by the ropes. *Here we go...*

Kurt ran around behind Show and set him up. He flipped Show over his shoulders as Eddie and I fell in a heap to the mat. Show flew across the ring in the Angle Slam, but landed into Brock, sending all the two of them out of the ring. A-Train, who had sidestepped the collision, turned around and picked Kurt up as he yelled. He powered Angle down to the mat. I stood up behind A-Train and waited for him to turn around. When he did, I grabbed him by the throat and mouthed at him about respect. I then picked him up and threw him down. I signalled again for the Last Ride. This time, I picked A-Train up. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the referee trying to get Angle out of the ring. Then, right in front of me, I saw Eddie charging. I bent over to grab Train so that my face was at his level.

THWACK! I felt Eddie smash the belt into my face. It was harder than I imagined it would be. I fell down and didn't move. Eddie grabbed A-Train by the foot and dragged him out of the ring, then tossed the US Title into the aisle. He covered me as the ref turned around. One, two, three.

Eddie's music played as he taunted the crowd. He climbed the turnbuckle as the crowd began booing and cheering him -- some of both. He walked out of the ring as I rolled to the ropes and tried to pull myself up. His music stopped as he left. In the ring, Brock was staring at Kurt. The two began to shove each other. I headed over and got between them. As I did, Show and Train got back in the ring and attacked them.

Another slugfest erupted. This time, our numbers allowed us to get the better of it. Kurt sent Train out, then followed after him. I whipped Brock into Show, which allowed him to clothesline the giant to the outside, taking himself with him. All four men brawled with each near the end of the ramp. I judged the distance. *I think I should be able to make that.* I ran to the opposite ropes, bounced off, timed my steps, and jumped.

The flashbulbs went off all around me as I hung in the air forever. The four men turned around and lifted their arms. I had judged it just right -- I was sailing right at them. I landed in four pairs of arms, with eight hands wrapping themselves around me. Everyone fell backward and hit the ground. I rolled off and took in the sounds of the crowd. *Holy cow. That was a fun ride. I gotta remember to be a Cruiserweight next week.*

Tuesday, August 19, 2003, 01:00 AM
Detroit, Michigan

Eddie and I were seated together in the back row. Everyone on the van was talking about what a wild ride it had been for the group that evening. Kurt couldn't get over the dive right at the end. He kept saying, "Guys that big shouldn't fly like that!" Show was amazed he had gone so long in the ring in a match. "I haven't ever been out there that long before."

"Sure you have -- remember the Robin Hood match?"

Everyone laughed. "Man, that was a joke and you know it. They just cut it up between ad breaks."

"Yeah, I know, Show. Just yankin' yer chain."

"All right, Taker."

Eddie turned to me in the back. "Say... Mark... I wanna talk about the match on Sunday."

"Yeah? Is anything wrong?"

"Well, I just wanna say I think... um... if you can do that with me, I think we'll be all right. Thing is... I just hope I don't lose anything from the match, ya know?"

"Hey, Eddie, I know. I'm worried too. Tell ya what, let's make a deal. You help me look good, and I'll help you look good. Can ya do that?"

"I'll do my best."

"Great. We'll practice a few times in Phoenix before the show, ok?"

"Sure. That would be great. I just hope you don't short me, man."

"Short you?"

"Yeah... I mean, I know I'm small, and I'm not a WWE guy, really, and people think I don't try to work the party line... I do, man, I do... but..."

"Eddie... you've been wrestling longer than I have. I should be taking orders from you in this match. Just because I've been at the top for so long doesn't mean I dunno how to bring someone up with me."

"Yeah, but... I mean, I'm not really the kinda guy you like giving and taking with..."

"Eddie, come on. Have you ever heard me say anything about you?"

"Not directly, no."

"All right. So wait until I open my mouth before you think I'm after you. Okay?"

"Yeah... sure."

"All right. Hey... make sure you get some rest tonight. You and me, we got a huge showdown tomorrow. You gonna be ready for it?"

"I hope so."

"All right. No problem."

I dragged myself down the hall to my room. I was exhausted -- more so than I'd been with Cena or Edge. *I didn't realize being 40 was this brutal.*

I opened the door. No sound. I walked in. No lights. I turned on the light and looked around. There were two beds, but both were made. *Well, I'll be damned. I'm good enough to get a single!*

I set my stuff down and crashed on the bed, setting the alarm for 9:00 AM. I didn't even have to undo the covers. I was exhausted, but it was a good type of exhaustion from an effort well done. *If I feel this way after Sunday, I'll know I'm all right.*

Tuesday, August 19, 2003, 10:22 AM
Detroit, MI

As we entered the auditorium to watch RAW, I passed by Chris Benoit on the

side. He was having a conversation with old friend Eddie about SummerSlam, but there was something in his voice that indicated he was upset. I pulled off and sat down behind them.

"Hey guys, how's it goin'?"

"Hey, Taker. Not so good."

"What's wrong, Chris?"

"You didn't hear, man?"

"No. Was I supposed to?"

"I guess not. Um... it's Jericho."

"What about him?"

"He tore his calf muscle last night during a match. He's out until at least WrestleMania, probably longer. Poor guy won't even be on TV for a while."

"You mean, he can't even limp out for the Highlight Reel?"

"No, man. It's too dangerous to fly. He's going to Birmingham for rehab."

"Damn. That sucks, man. Hope he's all right."

"Yeah... next time we're in town, we should go visit."

"Sure. Hey Eddie, what have we got for tonight?"

"I dunno, man. I think they're having us talk."

"That oughta be fun."

"I wouldn't say dat so fast, esse. I mean, you 'n' me fill a segment? Can we do dat?"

"Don't worry, Eddie. It'll be just fine. I mean, you and Benoit did a whole segment together."

"Yeah, but we had a history, man! What about us?"

"You have a history, I have a history. Work with that. I mean, why not take our worries and make them the story?"

"Well, I guess... I'll just do what works."

We couldn't continue the conversation any further, because Stephanie had the microphone.

"Okay, gentlemen -- ATTENTION PLEEEASE!"

Everyone stared in confusion at her, thinking she had gone into her act. I hadn't heard that kind of screeching out of Stephanie in weeks. I would've figured she wanted to save her voice.

"Paul, are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then let's get started with the show. After it's over, we'll announce procedure for tonight's show."

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Aug. 18 / 03

- Live from Grand Rapids, Michigan.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross**, **Jonathan Coachman**, and **Jerry Lawler**. Coach replaces Good Ol' near the end of the show when Kane is making his appearance.

- Highlight Reel: **Eric Bischoff** appears on the show and announces that he's in charge tonight. Well, I should hope so, since he is the GM and all. He declares that **The Rock** will show up for the main event, and can even pick his opponent. He then announces the return of the Inter-Promotional Brawl™, featuring the best RAW has to offer. And himself, of course. **Jericho** naturally assumes he'll be on the team, and is told he will make captain. They both make fun of **Kevin Nash** with regards to tonight's big match. Good little businesslike segment.

- Opening match: **La Resistance** and **Test** v. **Hurricane** and **Dudley Boyz**. JR tells us that the two teams will officially meet at SummerSlam, as if we didn't know how that would turn out. Seriously, does anyone give the heels a hope in hell? Housecleaning to start, and **Grenier** takes the Wazzup Drop. Test boots **D-Von** during the dance, getting two for Grenier. **Dupree** in, and La Crepe gets two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER follows for two. **Bubba** runs in and distracts the ref, allowing Test and Dupree to do the old T&A double team for two. Dupree dances, so D-Von hits him low, hot tag Bubba. It's BONZO GONZO as everyone hits everything in succession until Grenier tags D-Von with the FLAG OF DOOM for the pin at 5:12. Good match, but too short to be worthwhile. **1/4 They seriously need to get the titles off the French though.

- Backstage, the **Rock** ARRIVES! He is told he can pick any opponent, and he chooses **Kane**, oddly enough. Hmmmmm...

- **Randy Orton** and **Triple H** vs. **Rob Van Dam** and **Goldust**. We find out that both faces have been added to team RAW. Good, they needed to be on the card anyway. RVD beats on Orton to start as the announcers mention the match from last week between the two guys on the apron. Van Dam's enzuigiri gets two. Goldust in with a sliding punch and butt butt for two. HHH lines up and gets a clothesline, but USES THE KNEE~! to make Goldust the face-in-peril. Funny how that works. Trips gets a facebuster for two. Kneedrop gets two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. Orton in, and the Play of the Day gets two. RKO is blocked, Goldust hits the powerslam, hot tag RVD. Van Dam kicks anything in a five-foot radius, then hits Rolling Thunder on Orton for two. HHH slams down RVD, but Goldust clotheslines him. Orton takes Shattered Nuts, but RVD gets tossed off the top by HHH, and KICK WHAM PEDIGREE finishes at 8:14. They're not even TRYING to hide the politics anymore, are they? **1/2 **Goldberg** runs in and gets decked with a sledgehammer. Well, at least Trips should do the job at SummerSlam, right? Right? RIGHT?

- **Booker T** comes out and talks about his past. He says that he's been fighting people who thought he wouldn't make it to the top for years, and now he's proven them all wrong. He calls out **Chris Nowinski** and DEMANDS a confrontation TONIGHT. Ah, but Nowinski says that he's honoring the contract and will wait for SummerSlam. Booker chases after him, only to get beat down by the cast of "Rent" and left lying.

- So let's review here. We have **Booker T**, product of the streets and successful black guy,

against **Chris Nowinski**, Harvard graduate and pretty much the definition of an Ivory Tower resident. Backing Nowinski up are **Rodney Mack**, **Theodore Long**, and **Jazz**, three black people who claim the world is out to get them and believe that Booker T is a symbol of racism. So, behind the leadership of Nowinski, they attack Booker, leading to the visual of a white guy telling three black people to beat up a black guy in the name of racial equality. And the announce team doesn't even NOTICE. If Long weren't such a great heel, this would be BEGGING for Nowinski to get turfed out. Sadly, the likely conclusion is to put the title on home-grown Nowinski over WCW import Booker, because GOD KNOWS Vince McMahon needs a clean-cut white boy to be the poster child for the secondary title. Such a great story and it's going to be ruined. Sigh...

- **Goldberg v. Ric Flair**. Time of the entrance: 2:38. Time of the match: 1:19. 1/4* **HHH** makes sure Goldberg doesn't get over or anything.

- **Chris Jericho v. Kevin Nash**. BUT WAIT! **Bischoff** announces that **Stone Cold** never said who the special referee for this would be, so he introduces **Randy Orton**. Jericho attacks from behind to start, but Nash no-sells and gives Jericho snake eyes for two. To Orton's credit, he isn't fast- or slow-counting yet. Nash beats Jericho down, but Jericho ducks the framed elbow and hits a facejam. Suplex and ARROGANT COVER~! get two. Nash goes for the boot, but Jericho catches his leg and tries the Walls. Nash makes the ropes and bails. Outside, Nash meets the steps. Jericho returns to the ring and tries his springboard dropkick onto Nash as he re-enters, but he legit injures his leg on the liftoff.

- If you'll excuse me, I have to spend the next ten minutes in mourning.

- Okay, I'm done. *sniff*

- Back to the match: Well, we can't count on Nash improvising, and Orton doesn't nearly have the experience to book on the fly, so Nash climbs in and crawls on Jericho for two. We hit the chinlock as all three desperately try to salvage the match. Even **Lawler** and **Coachman** note that Jericho might be hurt. Back up, Jericho elbows out and flies at Nash, but eats boot. Poochiebomb is tried, but Orton clips Nash and Jericho falls on top, getting the very fast three at 6:25, about 2:00 of which was after the injury. The announcers are torn between putting over Jericho for his guts and noting that he won cheaply. Orton takes a chair to Nash's leg to give the EMTs a reason to come out and attend both men. Decent Nash match until the leg injury shot everything all to hell. *1/4

- Backstage, the **Rock** gives a mega-extended promo hitting all his old catchphrases so that **Jericho** can have time to be helped to the back. Of note: Rock calls **Kane** the "Kentucky Fried retard" and makes several burn jokes, but when **Kevin Kelly** tries to inform him of Kane's mental state, Rock just acts like the Rock and keeps cutting him off. It's a good setup, but will they deliver?

- Main event: **The Rock vs. Kane**. No match, as Kane charges the ring as soon as he's set free of the restraints and beats on Rock six ways from Sunday, using chairs, the ring bell,

the steps, and anything else not nailed down. He even beats up a police officer and whacks Rock a few times with a nightstick. FIVE straight Tombstones on a chair finish the slaughter before the cops can subdue Kane long enough to lead him away. They cut the show off early, since I assume they would have Rock do a stretcher job here, but after Jericho's legit injury plans might have changed.

The Bottom Line:

Well, if a show's suffering, get the Rock on it! They now have a ready-made angle for Unforgiven's main event, but the SummerSlam build-up has been ok at best. The Brawl is a nice concept, but it'll depend on how much time it gets. And I dare anyone to claim HHH doesn't play politics after watching his tag match.

Does anyone care who wins the main event? Anyone? At all?

A murmur ran through the roster. Jericho's injury looked bad on TV, and very few people had heard of it. It was clear something was wrong -- his right calf looked like it had bunched up near the top, clearly out of proportion compared to the left.

"It's as bad as it looks, people," said a somber Paul Heyman. "He's flying in for surgery with Dr. Andrews tomorrow. I don't know if he'll ever be the same wrestler he was."

We all paused and thought about it. I realized that Taker had been quite lucky throughout his career. Physically, he hadn't suffered any major injuries. Sure, there was the torn groin muscle, but that was it, really. Even then, he was starting to return to form, slowly but surely. The matches with Austin, RVD, and Cena over the years had been spectacular, and his ability to control a psychotic brawl was never in doubt. I wondered, though, if things would go haywire when Eddie and I got in the ring. *Could he brawl with me? Could I match holds with him? What would happen?*

"Okay, guys, here's the plan for tonight's show. I want you to listen up. We're going to set up a match for next week on tonight's show. Now, I realize that a lot of you aren't on SummerSlam who would like to be. So we'll give you a tryout tonight. I'm having a four corners tag match, where the winners will face the tag champions next week. I want the FBI, the Bashams, Mattitude, and the APA to meet with Paul after the meeting to discuss particulars. Also, our team for the brawl is going to be Big Show, A-Train, John Cena, Chris Benoit, and myself. We're going against Rob Van Dam, Goldust, Hurricane, Eric Bischoff, and Jericho's injury replacement, whose identity I haven't been told yet. Along those lines, Benoit will qualify for the final spot by beating Rikishi and Rhyno in a triple threat match, while the other three of you will face Brock Lesnar and Kurt Angle in a handicap match for the main event. Meanwhile, I want the two tag teams to split up and do two singles matches. Tell me who faces who and I'll go from there. Finally, Daddy will cost Zach Gowan a match against Jamie Noble, then get in an interview where they set forth the stipulations for their match. Everyone got that? That's the match schedule for tonight. Now, Paul, would you handle the story developments?"

"Sure thing, Steph. Okay, apart from the McMahon/Zach thing, which he's working on right now, we will have a series of vignettes with Michael Cole and Stephanie McMahon. It will be revealed that Cole gets his favor granted, but not what that favor is. Josh, you and Tazz are on tonight. I expect you to hold up your end of the bargain. Meanwhile, Eddie and Taker, you two will be given a segment to build your match up. After that segment, Eddie will attack Taker backstage and yell about keeping the US Title. Is everything clear?"

"Wait, Paul..."

"Yes, Eddie?"

"Does this mean I'm losing at SummerSlam?"

"No. No decision has been made there. We're going to see how everyone's doing before we set the final results. You know that's the drill, Eddie."

As he sat back down, I tapped him on the shoulder.

"The America West Arena is ours from Thursday to Sunday for setup and practice. Meet me Saturday afternoon at 2 o'clock and we'll go over some stuff in the match. Got it?"

"Sure thing, esse."

Paul resumed. "The other segments will be video packages about Zach Gowan against Vince McMahon and Brock Lesnar against Kurt Angle. Are there any questions? Everyone satisfied?"

"One second, Paul. Should we tell you how we're splitting up now?"

"Hang on to that, Rey. After we're done."

"Okay."

"Any questions about tonight or about SummerSlam?"

None. Stephanie resumed control.

"Okay, guys, listen up. We will arrive in Phoenix tomorrow. Our charter leaves at 1:35 PM. I don't want anyone to miss the flight. Got it? You have a fan festival on Thursday at the America West Arena from 9 AM until 6 PM. I want everyone there to sign autographs and be in character. Got it? Now, Friday and Saturday are your days, but be at the Arena on Sunday by 12 Noon local time. The fireworks go off at 5 PM. We are on Pacific Time, remember. I don't want any excuses. All right, guys, let's get ready for tonight."

The meeting adjourned. I headed out to the lobby to put my stuff in Paul's car. As I did, Eddie stopped me.

"Mark?"

"Yeah, Eddie?"

"I'm scared, man. Just don't make me look bad."

"Eddie..."

"Yeah?"

"Me too. Help me out there."

We were in the conference room. The Joe Louis Arena was just outside. Kathleen was lying on the table, spread out. Lindsay and I sat next to each other at one end. Paul

was on the other end.

"Guys, I know last week was rough. Both of you had a hard time, and I'm sorry it happened. I just wanna remind you that this week, you have to be on your guard. We can't have everyone freak out."

"Why this week in particular, Mr. Heyman?"

"Because it's Summerslam. The whole roster is going to be together in the back. There will be difficulties, I assure you. I need you in your role -- and you in yours, Andy -- to help us keep order backstage. You two are seen as locker room leaders. Don't add to the trouble."

"What about me?"

"Lindsay, you're going to be backstage doing interviews, announcing, and so on. You'll be too busy. It's too bad in a way that you are where you are now, because I could use an experienced hand to guide things. Hopefully the RAW guys will be on top of things."

"That reminds me, Mr. Heyman -- who are the RAW guys?"

"I don't know."

"No, no, no -- I think Kathleen means, who are the Fallen Angels over there? As in, will she meet them? I can handle this."

"Okay, Lindsay."

"Kathleen, we're not supposed to bring our glasses in with us to SummerSlam weekend. Basically, now that we all know who we are, I think it's best if we just be ourselves. This is a chaotic weekend, and more so than any other, we have to be in secret. Remember, Kathleen: they must not know that we're here at all."

"At all? But I'm front and center!"

"I know you are. But you can't let your guard down. You have to stay in character all the time. If you need a break, find Paul and he'll take you to here. You got lucky this week. You and Paul can sneak off here any time, and people will just assume you're discussing booking."

"Actually, Lindsay... um... it was more than luck."

"What do you mean, Paul?"

"Well, I prayed that she would get Stephanie this week."

"What?"

"Why, Mr. Heyman? You know I can't--"

"Kathleen, please. I did this for just the reason Lindsay said. I know you get nervous a lot and need time off. Last week, how often did we come here to cool our jets?"

"Every day."

"Exactly. But you can't do that this week. We could barely do it last week. And haven't there been times when I've told you to tough it out for a while?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay... but you don't have to get tough love this week. If you want time to be yourself, just find me and I'll drop you off here for a while. It's easy."

"Thank you."

Paul started to get up. "Come on, guys, we got a show to get to."

"Hang on, Paul..." I put a hand on Lindsay's shoulder as I spoke. "...we'll be out in a second.... if that's okay?"

"Well, it is. This room's off the clock. But don't take too long... we can't mess up your sleep cycle, especially yours, old man."

He winked. Kathleen and Paul left the room. As the door closed, Lindsay turned to me.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just wanted to talk to you."

"Yeah? What about?"

"Well, I kinda feel a little silly right now... especially bout yesterday."

"Yesterday? Andy, nothing happened yesterday. Is this about bailing out? You did the right thing."

"No, no... I was just thinking about our conversation in there. Especially... the last couple of lines..." *This is going to sound weird no matter what.*

"I don't remember them. What were they?"

"Well, I said that you were a wonderful person... even in two parts. It was kinda corny, I know, but... well, Lindsay, I..."

"Andy, stop right now. This can't do us any good."

"What?"

"Andy, I noticed it the first day together. I know how you feel. I mean, I'm flattered, but the fact is right now we're in no position to be distracted like that."

"Distracted? We're in the conference room. We can be us, right?"

She didn't answer. She simply looked away, as if trying to find a far-off memory somewhere.

"Lindsay? What is it?"

"We can't always be us, even here. We can still fade, or be destroyed. I don't want to tempt you, especially since it put you in Recovery last time."

"But that wasn't me. That was John Cena! Come on, Lindsay, why can't we just talk about it? I just wanna know how you feel."

She said nothing. She seemed almost paralyzed by the emotion. *Oh no... what have I done?*

"Lindsay? Is something wrong?"

"It's not you. I'm just remembering another guy."

"From your life?"

"No. From here."

"I don't understand."

"Andy, you're a great guy. You were wonderful to me last week. I like you. I can't deny that. But I don't want to risk anything else, because you'll end up like... like he did."

"Who? Like who?"

"It was someone else on the case. This had to be five, six years ago -- they all blur together. No, wait, I'm sure it was early 97, actually. We had been asking our intermediary to give us time alone -- like now. We spent more and more time together. We fell in love. Not who we were, but US -- WE fell in love. It was wonderful."

"So what happened?"

"We wanted to share our love somehow. We tried faking fading at the same time, but with me... well, you know... we just couldn't get romantic. Then one week I woke up and found I was Tammy... Sunny. It was the first time I had been a woman since we

realized we were in love. I searched him out. Now was the perfect time."

"So what was wrong with that?"

"We couldn't be married! Marriage is an earthly thing, not a spiritual one! The next morning, I put on my glasses and found myself lying next to a regular person instead of the guy I fell in love with. I looked at myself and I was barely there. I got dressed and ran out immediately. I had to spend a month in Recovery for that. I destroyed him... and I nearly destroyed myself too. I don't know why I was spared... I've asked for answers, but no one has any."

"Sunny Days."

"What?"

"Nothing, I was just--"

"No, it's all right, I heard. Yes, he was Bret Hart. The rumors were true. Another Angel let it slip while he was Shawn Michaels. He got transferred immediately, but it was too late. Everyone knew, and Bret's anger still burns today."

"Oh, my. So you..."

"With one act, I may have left two people in Hell. It's something I have to live with."

She bent over and put her face in her hands. I was at a loss for words. I touched her shoulder and stood there. The seconds seemed to tick away, even though I knew we weren't within time. She tried to regain her composure.

"Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't ever want that to happen to you. Just promise me -- promise me you won't let it come to that."

I took a deep breath. I never thought I was opening a can of worms by talking about this. *I just wanted to express my feelings in a safe environment. Well, now I have... and I wish I hadn't. All I did was hurt her again.*

"Trust me, Lindsay. I love you too much to put you at risk. I want you to be with me always in Heaven... I wouldn't dare keep you out."

"Thank you..."

"Lindsay... are you saying you... that you..."

"No. Not yet. We've only known each other a few weeks. And I don't think you truly love me either. But I think you're a great guy. I want you to know that. I'm just scared you'll do something you'll regret."

"Thanks."

We hugged.

"Come on, let's go."

Tuesday, August 19, 2003, 07:14 PM
Detroit, MI

I waited in the locker room for Eddie. Outside, I could hear Stephanie and Paul going over last-minute additions to the card. In one corner, Brock and Kurt were

discussing their match with Big Show. Elsewhere, other people stretched out and loosened up, ready for the last event before we all headed to Phoenix.

"Mark... sorry I'm late."

"Oh, hey Eddie. You ain't late. I just wanted to see if you were ready, man."

"Yeah... about tonight... what do we say?"

Good point. What DO we say?

"Eddie... I'm not the kind of guy who needs to know everything in advance. Just let me start, and you can follow up. If we can't work off of each other... well, I'd be damn surprised."

"You believe?"

"I do. Now c'mon, Eddie... I hear they want us in the parking lot for a little something."

"Oh yeah... let's go."

07:31 PM

"All right, Mark, listen up."

It was Kevin Dunn, doing double duty as production co-ordinator for both SmackDown! and RAW. He was giving last minute instructions to both of us on what to do during the sketch. Trouble is, we were 50 feet away from each other and on moving vehicles. I had no idea how this would come off.

"Mark, here's the drill. You're going to be headed out of here when Eddie cuts you off. The two of you get in an argument, then he fakes smoothing it over until you turn around. Cheap shot, belt shot, drive off. Got it?"

"Easy."

He grabbed his megaphone. "You ready down there, Guerrero?"

A honk came back.

"He's ready. Okay, guys, quiet on the set... places... and... ACTION!"

I drove up on the bike. I was cruising along as the Lo Rider sped in front of me. I slammed on the brakes and nearly tumbled off of the bike. I got off and set up the kickstand.

"Hey, man, what's your problem?"

"Oh, Taker, sorry man... I didn't see you. I guess I should give a legend more room, eh?"

"Don't patronize me, boy. Just watch yourself. You got that?"

"Yes, sir, yes, Undertaker..."

"That's better."

I turned around to get back onto the bike. As I flipped up the kickstand, I felt a blow from the back of my head. I tumbled forward, but I was already tangled in the bike. I crashed over and moaned in pain.

"Oh, shit... Mark? Mark, you ok?"

"Cut!"

Eddie ran towards me. He seemed genuinely upset.

"Mark, Mark... you ok brother?"

"Dammit, I'm fine. I was selling."

"What?"

Kevin ran into the scene.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah, Kev... I just caught him off-guard, that's all."

He sighed audibly. "All right... ok, let's do it again, Take 2! Places!"

09:22 PM

Dead Man Walkin'!

I emerged from the back on my motorcycle to a cheering crowd at the Joe Louis Arena. I raised my fist to them, accepting their cheers, although at the same time I heard some people booing me. While lapping the ring, I heard a "Taker" chant grow louder and louder. I thought I heard Tazz mention that the Undertaker would always have his fans.

I entered the ring and hit my poses, to the delight of the crowd. *Okay, buddy, mic's on, we're playin' live... don't mess this up.*

"Now, people who know me know that I'm not a man of talk. I believe in settling differences with an old-fashioned fight. Recently, I've had my differences with that punk Eddie Guerrero."

The crowd cheered and booed, both loudly.

"Yeah, I know... some of you, you think he's got a point. You see him out here, and he wears his gameplan on his sleeve. Ya know what? I admire that. I respect a guy who lets you know how he's gonna beat you, then beats you anyway. But I don't respect an attitude. Eddie, I don't know how things are down in Mexico, but here in the WWE, you gotta earn your stripes before you roar like a tiger. And Eddie, I don't see you earning a damn thing with your attitude."

I paused for a second crowd reaction. The cheers were getting louder, but so were the boos. One thing was certain -- the crowd liked it.

"Eddie, if you wanna impress me, don't talk about being a champion -- I've been a champion more times than you've been in title matches. I've held 12 pieces of gold around my waist, boy. I've been to the top of the #1 organization on this planet. Now I think you can get there, but if you think beating me is the way to it, then this Sunday at SummerSlam, I'll give you a rude awakening. I'll show you..."

Viva la Raza!

Eddie Guerrero emerged -- walking, for once -- as the crowd again gave the loudest mixed reaction I had heard. I began to think his time was soon. He walked past my motorcycle, giving it a perfunctory kick on the way. He strolled into the ring and played to the crowd. I made sure to shoot him an icy stare for disrespecting my bike. He got a second microphone, and the fun really began.

"Undertaker, man... you like to talk about your past a lot, don't you? You like to live in the past, esse. Well, guess what, bro... that's because you are the past. You have no future in this business! I'm the next generation's prototype, Taker. I am the man that 20

years from now will be seen as the trendsetter! You may have a lot to talk about when it comes to your success, but it's all in one place! I've done it all, baby! I've done more than you can begin to imagine!"

"Stop right there, Eddie. Just stop. Don't you know who I am? I am a 4-time World heavyweight champion. I'm on the short list of Undisputed heavyweight champions in history. I was selling out arenas while you were still setting up rings. I was headlining Pay-Per-View events while you were still a nobody making a living off your daddy's name down in Mexico. I'm a living legend, Eddie. I ain't gonna let anyone steal my thunder."

"You think I'm worried about your thunder? You think I'm worried about the Undertaker's reputation? I didn't win this title here on reputation, bro. I won it in the ring! And you may not like how I won it, but you gotta understand... as long as I have it, I'm not losing to some over-the-hill has-been like you! Yeah... you can ride a Harley to the ring and act all macho, but at the end of the day, you're still an old has-been trying to cling to glory with everything he's got!"

I stared at the crowd for a while. *This is my moment in the sun, and I'm milking it for all it's worth, man.*

"Am I? Is that all you see here? Well, tell ya what, Eddie... bring it at SummerSlam. Put your gold where your mouth is. When all is said and done, I don't see you walking away with anything more than a beating. But hey... you wanna try me? You wanna step in my yard? You wouldn't be the first to see I can still bring it. And I guarantee you won't be the last."

We began an uneasy staredown. We posed for the cameras and the promotional videos. Eddie was a foot shorter than I was, so I made sure to keep my distance. I thought I heard Lindsay, in her role as Josh Matthews, going into hype mode, asking if the Guerrero legend would reach the highest level at SummerSlam. I waited.

"You want a piece of me? Undertaker, I don't back down from NO ONE! I'll see you at SummerSlam. And when I'm done, esse... you'll be left with a new understanding that you were... and I am!"

Eddie's music began again. He walked off as I stared at him. He pointed to the US Title belt and kissed it. "This ain't never leaving my side!" he screamed. I merely shook my head. I was hoping to convey what I was sure people were thinking at home: Eddie just doesn't know what he's getting into.

10:45 PM

I was packing my stuff up and heading for the parking lot when I ran across Eddie's nephew, Chavo Guerrero. His arm still in a sling, he looked like an average human and not the WWE superstar who helped propel SmackDown! to the spot where the wrestling was. He pulled me aside to speak. I gulped.

"Hey, Taker... um, Uncle Eddie won't say this, but... uh... I gotta tell ya..."

"Yeah? What is it, Chav?"

"Well... he had the time of his life out there. He's ready for Sunday."

"That's wonderful!"

"But one thing... just for me, uh... you know, he's been getting a lot of calls and letters from home, and from the boys in lucha."

I chuckled. "They're looking forward to this, huh?"

"Well, yeah, but... they kinda see him as their biggest star. They want him to be the man in the WWE, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah... we all want our friends to do well."

"No, no, you miss my point... see, he thinks he has to look good. He feels like it's not just for himself, but all of Mexico. I mean, he looks at what he's done, and how he's cheated all the time, and he's worried he's making his people look bad to get money. But... if he can go all out, and come out smelling like a rose, against the Undertaker... a US icon..."

"I think I get it, Chavo. He feels if I beat him, he'll let his country down."

"Yeah... so he's been going kinda crazy, man. He's been on a short fuse, you know? I keep telling him, man, don't think too much of it, you know, Grandpa's legacy is set, the family's legacy is set... but he doesn't believe it. He thinks he can be El Santo or Mil Mascaras with a big win. You know, up with them."

I blanked.

"You know who they are, right?"

"I've... heard of the names. Wasn't Santo a B-movie star?"

"Yeah, but he got that by being the most popular luchador in history! You know how Rey never wears his mask down there? That's because the mask is your symbol! When you lose it, it stays lost, and when you first lose it, it's the biggest defeat in Mexican wrestling. Well, ol' Santo never lost it. Ever. This is like you never losing at WrestleMania, only ten times bigger. The man went everywhere with it. He was buried in it, man!"

"Okay... and I met Mil before... he was a cocky little..."

"Because in Mexico, he earned that right! And that's the right Uncle Eddie wants. He really thinks he can be the biggest crossover name in lucha libre! And as far as he's concerned, this is his litmus test. You know how many people say he'll be an icon if he wins?"

"You're kiddin', right? I've heard the boys in the back. They love the guy."

"Taker, it's more than that. It's more than respect. This is the moment of truth for him. He wants this to be the thing that makes him a superstar."

"Really... is that so?"

"Yeah! And he'd never tell you this, but... like I said, he's under pressure, and... well, do you think you can help him along?"

"Chavo, I already wanna help him along."

"You do?"

"Yeah. For too long I've been concerned with how I look onscreen. I've been through so much I thought I had to grab power by the short hairs and make it beg for mercy! But at the same time... I dunno... Do you get me?"

"Kinda... but please, Taker... just so you know what he's facing."

"I understand, man. Thanks."

"No... thank you."

He walked away. *So now I not only have to make Eddie Guerrero realize his anger is unfounded and that there's more to life than being in the ring, I gotta watch out*

*for an entire country watching at home on Pay-Per-View.
Damn.*

Thursday, August 21, 2003, 08:59 AM
Phoenix, AZ

"Welcome - to - AXXESS!"

With those words, the doors opened to the general public, and it was time to make ourselves celebrities. I was seated next to Chris Benoit at an autograph table, where we were scheduled to be for the next three hours. The crowd buzzed with the thought of having the stars of RAW and SmackDown! back together for the first time in three months.

Axxess was quite a sight. There were games and activities almost everywhere. You could pay money to get merchandise, or you could do a broadcast with a WWE voice. Autographs flowed from pens like wine from a bottle. There was even a running WWE.com camera where Dr. Tom Pritchard and Kevin Kelly interviewed the stars.

I tried to keep myself focused, but I found myself looking around for Eddie. I wanted to talk about our match. Vince had approached me last night and told me I was booked to win. I refused, saying it would be better to hold off the final victory until No Mercy. Vince gave me a sideways glance as if to tell me this was unlike me, then said he'd take it under advisement. I could only imagine what he told Eddie, and I wanted to reassure him I'd stood up for him.

01:15 PM

With my tour of duty on Axxess complete, and my fluff interview with Kevin and the Doctor going on the site, I decided now was as good a time as any to take time off backstage. The McMahons set up a place for us to talk about our matches or to escape the fans. Personally, I just wanted to walk back there and order lunch.

I entered the door and went up to the counter. After receiving some good old-fashioned spicy Tex-Mex cuisine, I tried to sit back at the table and enjoy it. The noise of the outside was far away, replaced by the familiar clanging of pots, pans, utensils, and minimum wage employees. At the table down the way, Dean Malenko and Bruce Prichard were sharing old road stories. *That's my future -- well, his future.*

The door opened. John Cena was excited, almost out of breath. He turned to me immediately, a look of fear and surprise in his system. "Man... she's here."

"Who?"

"That girl from Toronto. She won't leave me alone!"

"The groupie? She's here now?"

"Yeah... I didn't know she had tickets here."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know... but this is one problem I'm glad I have!"

"Hey, John? A little advice. Don't encourage her."

"Noooooo need there, Taker." He winked as he headed to the lunch counter. *Oh dear. What have I gotten him into?*

02:33 PM

I headed back out to Axxess for a while. *If this is a celebration, then I want a part of it!* I wandered over to a section of cardboard cut-outs. The sign said "How Big are the WWE Superstars?" I looked at each one. *Wow. These must be kinda short, cuz I'm pretty much the same height as their Undertaker. Oh, wait...*

Suddenly, the crowd around me seemed to grow quiet. It wasn't my presence -- they had been asking me for autographs just minutes earlier, and I was happy to oblige. I looked around. There, standing behind me, was a giant of a man. He was nearly my height -- no small feat -- and wore a bright red outfit. But the most striking thing was his face. It was entangled in a permanent snarl, with eyes that could barely be seen through and a bright bald head resembling that of a man doomed to the electric chair. In this setting, he looked dangerous. In reality, I knew he was harmless.

I walked over to him. His eyes never left mine. Flashbulbs went off everywhere. I was pretty certain someone was taping this for the Heat pre-show. Neither one of us talked. We just stared. Finally, I let out a smirk.

"Bro", I said, speaking to Glen Jacobs -- Kane -- "what's gotten into you, man?"

He kept staring forward, then spoke, but in a whispered roar, almost like someone trying to hold back while still showing the hatred. "You did this to me! I should destroy you now!"

Some of the younger fans were shrieking to their parents. The older ones were bracing for a fight. I stood my ground.

"Go look at yourself in a mirror," I said, trying to remain calm. "What I did to you isn't a problem any more. And if you don't like it -- well, put the damn mask back on. But don't go blaming me."

"Accept me! Accept the man you tried to destroy!"

We stared. Fans could sense the electricity. I saw Vince out of the corner of my eye. He was smiling gleefully. He could sense the dollar signs. *I think he's found a match for WrestleMania.*

Before anything could happen, I saw a squadron of men in blue come up behind Kane. They grabbed his arms and tried to wrestle him to the ground. I took advantage of the situation and walked on. This wasn't the time or the place to further this feud. That would be later.

03:48 PM

"Taker, man... whaddya think of Vince's match?"

It was Malenko. He had met me backstage to make sure I got the word.
"What's the plan?"
"Well, right now they're saying there's going to be a ton of run-ins. Basically, no-DQ, refs getting tossed all over the place... and there's a big ending Vince won't fill me in on. Of course, with the stakes so high, I'm not surprised."
"What stakes? It's just Zach's contract."
"Weren't you there?"
"I wasn't paying much attention. I had vignettes to film. What do you mean?"
"The other end of the Double or Nothing. Zach said he wanted to repay the favor to the man who got him his contract."
The man... who got him... wait...
"Hogan?"
"Yeah! If Zach wins, Hulk Hogan's reinstated with full wrestling rights and responsibilities!"
"B...b...Hogan doesn't work here!"
"Not yet he doesn't. I hear they're talking to him right now. The deal could be worked out by Sunday."
"And if it isn't?"
"Well... they'll just send Zach off to OVW for a few months."
"Wow. That's huge."
"Yeah, it is. I don't know which way they're goin' with it. Just that they want a lot of people involved."
"Like me."
"Yeah... talk to Vince tomorrow. He'll fill you in."
"Thanks, Dean."
Hulk Hogan. Some people just don't go away.

04:29 PM

I was tired. I'd practically been on my feet all day. If the next three days were anything like this, I would be in bad shape for my match. I was almost planning on sleeping in Friday -- but obviously, Vince's plan changed everything. Now, I was just hoping for some time alone. I walked to the backstage area.

As I sat there, I contemplated the emptiness of the place. No one else was sitting down. The lunch people had long since left for the day. Everyone else was having too much fun outside. I was alone with my thoughts.

At least, I thought I was.

Then I heard a funny noise. It was coming from a door on the other side of the room. It sounded like giggling and whispering. I inched closer to the door. I couldn't quite make out the voices, but it sounded suspicious. *No one's allowed back there. Those could be thieves.*

I listened closer. There was a lot of rustling around. I distinctly heard a zipper being opened. A female voice -- a familiar one, though not immediately placeable due to

the thickness of the door -- said, "What have we here?" and laughed. *Thieves! They're going to steal proceeds from the show! I gotta act fast. Unless they're armed, no way they'll wanna mess with me.*

I pounded on the door. The voices became more frantic. I heard a lot of rumbling around back there. I knocked again. The female voice yelled, "Just a minute!" *Now I know I've heard it before...*

The door opened. Torrie Wilson answered.

"Oh, it's just you... I thought it might've been Vince..." she laughed. Meanwhile, Kidman was busy putting his shirt back on. It didn't take me long to figure out what was going on. I smiled.

"Just save it for the hotel room, kids. You try in public, and you will get busted."

"But... but we weren't doing..." she blushed... "Okay, fine." She giggled and pranced out. Kidman was by now back in his uniform and heading for the exit as well. He stopped and looked at me.

"You had to interrupt, didn't you?"

I just stared. *Guys, you're lucky you weren't arrested! I'm not the bad guy here!*

05:37 PM

I found Eddie. He was over by his Lo Rider, which he said the WWE would auction off on its website. He saw me and immediately got into character.

"Hey, esse... what you doin' here, homes? Ain't it past your bedtime, old man?"

I got in on the act. "Don't piss me off, Eddie. I'm comin for ya."

Eddie turned it up a notch. "Oh yeah? I'm so scared of a has-been like you!"

I charged. Security stepped in between us. We yelled randomly at each other as we tried to fight our way through the blue shirts. The crowd cheered rabidly. Several "Taker" and "Eddie" chants started. *I hope Vince is listening.*

"I'll see you on Sunday, esse!"

"It'll be your funeral!"

Friday, August 22, 2003, 04:55 PM

Vince called us all into the meeting. Seated around the table were myself, Brock, Kurt, Show, A-Train, Stephanie, Paul, Cole, Tazz, Matthews, Zach, referees Brian Hebner, Tim White, Jack Doan, and Mike Chioda, and Vince. Vince was, of course, at the head of the table, with Paul and Stephanie on either side.

"Gentlemen... and lady... I bring you here to discuss my match with Zach Gowen on Sunday. Now, as you may have heard, it will be no disqualification. That means, of course, that I want for there to be maximum involvement. The referee will be taken out of commission, as will many referees during the night. The ones that aren't won't want to take part. But there will be a finish. Trust me. Now, as for the wrestlers, all of you are to

run in. I'll let Paul decide on the order as he sees fit. The key is this: all of you are to cancel each other out. I want the finish to be as chaotic as possible, but in the end, I want the win to be picked up by either my or Zach's individual effort. Is that clear?"

We all nodded.

"Now, I want to go over some of the procedure for your individual matchups. Big Show, A-Train... the two of you are in the Inter-Promotional Brawl with Stephanie. It's your responsibility to make sure she doesn't get hurt in there. She's my daughter, and I've put a lot of love and time and effort into her. I don't want anything destroyed."

I noticed something as he spoke. He was looking in Stephanie's direction -- sort of. *Is he... where are his eyes... he isn't... gross!*

"Now, Brock and Kurt. I'm going to be involved in your match. You know the drill there -- just like X-7. I hope I don't need to go into any more details."

"No, sir. Everything is fine."

"You sure this is going to work?"

"Yes I am. Your heel turn is going to go over really well."

Ahhhhh... so that's when they're doing it.

"Now, as for you, Undertaker... you requested against a win over Eddie Guerrero. I gave you time to formulate a good reason. What is it?"

This was my turn. I had 60 seconds to convince Mr. McMahon that I could do better than his plan. *Would he even listen? Was he just humoring me?*

"Well, Vince, I've been listening to the fans. They're cheering Eddie Guerrero on like crazy now. I think we can't help but have him be a cool heel type -- almost a face. And my match -- well, we each got our own fans, and this is a breakthrough opportunity for Eddie fans to be vindicated. Basically, what I'm saying is, it doesn't help anyone to have me win the US Title, but it does Eddie a world of good without harming me to have him defeat me, however the result. Do you understand?"

"I see... are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Well... I don't think it has to end here, Vince. See, Eddie's been telling me that he's getting a lot of fan mail from Mexico. They see this as the epic encounter of a lifetime. A top US wrestling icon against a top Mexican wrestling icon... it's money in the bank! I just don't think we need to stop the feud yet. I'd like to keep working with him."

"Really? Because we had plans for you after SummerSlam..."

"Would it ruin too many things to have me keep up with him?"

"No. I guess not. Paul, I want you to work on an inconclusive finish. There can be a winner, but I wanna set up a rematch."

"Yes, sir."

Paul smiled at me as he wrote it down. *I think I just did good.*

Saturday, August 23, 2003

02:15 PM

Eddie's car was situated in the aisleway. The two of us were going through the motions in the ring. Eddie looked into my eyes and stopped.

"Somethin' wrong, man? You don't seem your usual self right now."

"Well, Eddie, I'm... worried."

"Why's that?"

"I talked to Vince... I'm trying to get our match set for a rematch, but I haven't heard from Paul yet. I hope he has a good plan."

"Well, I'm sure things will be fine, Taker. You didn't work for him back in the day. The man can deliver."

"I hope so. Cuz I don't wanna look too bad out there."

"Me neither, man. But... dude... you're the Undertaker. You got nothing to worry bout, do you?"

I sighed and slumped in the corner.

"Eddie, c'mere a sec."

He sat down next to me.

"I've seen tons of people come and go in this organization. Every time a new guy arrives, he brings this air of excitement to him. After a while, it dies off, and he becomes another guy. Sometimes you get lucky and you remain special. Look at Brock Lesnar. Sometimes, you get a renaissance after being a nothing. Look at HHH. Sometimes you just remain another in a long line of freaks inside this circus. But I know that when you first get here, people like you, and when you stay too long, people grow tired of you.

I never thought the Phenom would take off like it did. I guess there was something about me... the way I stood unfazed against any and all offense, or the way I could send a chill into someone's spine just by looking at them. I remember my first appearance, up in Hartford. The crowd was dead silent, but I saw their faces. It was a good silence.

But you see, that was 13 years ago. In thirteen years I ain't never left this company. I've stayed with Vince through everything. Hell, I had every reason to leave at times. While you were tearing up ECW with Malenko, I was programmed against some worthless wrestlers who couldn't fight their way out of a paper bag after five minutes. I was the biggest star they had -- not just in my eyes -- but Shawn and Bret had Vince's ear. Now I don't blame them, but it made me upset, you know?

When I roared out on the bike for the very first time, with the American Badass theme playing -- I was a new man. I thought I could survive on my name and my legend. But times aren't like that anymore. I hear the whispers. The experts are telling me to step aside. The boys in the back think I play politics. I try to be a locker room leader, but you know what I sound like. I don't wanna be seen as selfish. But when Vince tells someone to put me over, they don't question it."

"Wait... Mark... so why did you fight for me?"

"Why? Because you're my superior. You started before I did. You've been all around the world. People root for you on four different continents. You're... you're a legend. I respect that. You had the hard road up."

"Nah, man... it wasn't like that. I have a home in lucha. If everything else fell apart, and I was blackballed from the WWE, I could always go to Mexico and earn a king's living there. Mi padre, Gory, bless him, didn't want us to live on his existence. So after I had done a year or so down there, I went to Japan to finish my craftwork. This is my life as much as it is yours. I don't want you to do anything for me. I want to earn respect on my own."

"No... I don't buy that."

"What do you mean, esse?"

"You may want to earn my respect, but I saw how you've been behaving. You're paranoid that you don't have it. Well, I'm telling you, you do have it. And tomorrow, you'll see how strong it is. I promise. Now, you wanna continue?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Wait up, guys..."

It was Paul. He walked to the ring with a purpose. In his hand was a set of papers. He stopped at the car and began to look over the notes.

"Okay, guys, here's the deal. Vince wants this match to be memorable enough to make the fans want more. I got a plan along those lines. Eddie, you'll have some rubbing alcohol hidden in the back seat of the car. Mark, during the match, you two spill to the outside, and Eddie will spit the stuff in your eyes."

"Ew! What if I swallow it, Paul?"

"It'll be water, Eddie. Come on. Anyway, Mark, you stagger around for a while, then walk to the referee. We'll play that you can't tell one guy from another, and you give the ref -- lessee -- Brian Hebner -- a tombstone, got it?"

"Okay... is he fine with that?"

"Yeah, he trusts you. That'll put the ref out of commission, and you two can go anywhere you want."

"You mean -- we get crowd duty?"

"That's right, Eddie. Now, Vince is giving you a bit of time for this, so don't let him down."

"How about my dive, Paul? Thought of that?"

"Actually, yes. I wanna show you something. Come here."

We exited the ring. Paul went to the front of the car.

"See this, Mark? The roof is going to be made of stunt metal. It'll give really easily. And the glass will be candy glass. No problems there. See, what Vince had in mind was..."

"Wait... are you saying that's my landing area?"

"Yup. You come off the top rope -- walk it if you have to -- and try to dive on or at a prone Eddie. He moves out of the way, and you wipe out the front of the car in the process."

I hesitated.

"Can you do that?"

"No, that's not it... it's that... I don't want my stuff to be the reason people remember this match."

"Wait, I got it..."

"Yeah, Eddie?"

"You know how there's gonna be a crow's nest up there?"

"Yeah..."

"Listen to this..."

And we proceeded to plan out stunt after wild stunt, trying to be the show-stealer of the night.

Sunday, August 24, 2003, 04:45 PM
Phoenix, AZ

We all gathered in the back. A dozen writers were shouting a dozen things into their microphones. The area was total chaos. Out in the ring section, Rodney Mack and Garrison Cade were having the warmup match. All six announcers were at their places. Billy Kidman and Charlie Haas were preparing a series of ladders for inclusion in their match, in a stipulation added on Heat. I was alone in the back.

"Hey, God... if you can hear me... I just wanted to ask you to lemme do a good job tonight. I think I can get Eddie to be good again. But I gotta show him he can trust me. Now, I only got one shot in this body left. I'm so close. Please, God... let me do my best, and help me make him look like a million bucks. I wanna do my job the best I can. Thank you."

I crossed myself and stood up. I walked to the camera crew, who was ready to shoot film of me shadow boxing in preparation for the match with Guerrero. As I did so, I saw Vince approaching out of the corner of my eye.

"Taker... I just wanna say good luck out there, and... put on a good show."

"Sure, Vince... you know I don't let ya down."

"Yeah, but... well, I'm just worried about putting Eddie over too much."

"Why's that?"

"Well, don't tell anyone I said this, but... I don't think the little bastard's got it in him to be a star. The fans won't accept him, cuz he's not like them."

"What the hell do you mean, Vince?"

"Well, I mean... he's not WWE material. The guy's a Mexican legend, but that shit doesn't fly in America. Let him do his gymnastics elsewhere. You just make sure he knows his place around here."

I started to understand his message. He didn't like Eddie because he was small, athletic, and Hispanic. This was unacceptable.

"Vince... I've been your man for goin' on 13 years here, and I haven't ever done something that was bad for business. I ain't about to start now. He and I want to go till No Mercy, and I wanna make sure you get the buyrate. Now, if you'll excuse me, I got a promotional shot to take. Please, Vince. Give Eddie a shot. He may just be the right guy."

Vince bit his tongue. I could tell he wasn't used to being contradicted. He started to storm off, then paused. He turned around.

"Dammit, Mark... you've been good to me. Don't screw this up. I want you to be the man. If you can't have the US title, make sure that runt gets the beating of his life."

"Vince... we ok'ed a rematch, didn't we?"

"This is my company. Now, I want you to produce."

He walked off. *All my planning may just go for naught. How do I make him trust me and make Vince like the results? And does it matter? We're live. What can he do if I make him look good? I don't know.*

I threw punches into the air. The camera light came on, and the camera panned left, away from the shadows and toward me. After a few jabs and uppercuts, I pulled my

straps up and walked to the dressing room.
I arrived as the opening credits rolled.

August 24, 2003, 5:00 PM
Phoenix, AZ

The FBI warning flashed onto the screen. Right after it came darkness... then...
A series of clips appear with St. Anger playing in the background. They show HHH staring at the sledgehammer, as if drawn to its power. They show Goldberg in a fit of rage from WCW, spearing an unidentified guy with a beard through a cage wall. They show Vince McMahon pounding on Zach Gowen, and the rage in Spanky's eyes as he watches. They show Brock Lesnar and Kurt Angle unable to get along and facing each other. They show Eric Bischoff fuming. They show Eddie Guerrero leaning over Undertaker and yelling at him. The final image is of Vince McMahon laughing maniacally as his voice plays, yelling, "This will end... RIGHT... HERE!" It echoes and fades to black.

And now, World Wrestling Entertainment presents...

SummerSlam!

Fireworks explode throughout the America West Arena in Phoenix, AZ. The cameras pan around to show signs everywhere. The crowd noise is deafening as Lindsay -- in her disguise/assignment as Josh Matthews -- gets the opening call.

"On a cool desert night that belies the scorching heat of Arizona, the careers and the lives of many WWE superstars will be changed drastically tonight! We welcome you to the America West Arena! Welcome to SummerSlam! I'm Josh Matthews along with Jonathan Coachman, and we have the honor of being your MCs for tonight. Good ol' JR and the King get the RAW matches, while Michael Cole and Tazz will bring you the SmackDown! matches. Coach, I know we come from different sides, but I think we both agree that the big showdown is between the World Champion HHH and the always dangerous Goldberg."

"That is right. HHH and Goldberg have been on a collision course for months now, and tonight at SummerSlam, they will finally meet in a match for the ages. But let's not sell the SmackDown! side short, because they feature a WWE Title match that is a rematch of WrestleMania XIX, when Kurt Angle once again defends against Brock Lesnar. Plus, Vince McMahon will either be rid of Zach Gowen once and for all or will have to deal with Hollywood Hulk Hogan once again!"

"Don't forget, Coach, about Randy Orton of Evolution squaring off against Big Daddy Cool Kevin Nash, or about the match we have the pleasure of calling, the Inter-Promotional Brawl! Who will be Y2J Chris Jericho's replacement?"

Fireworks head to the stage as Saliva's remix of "Get the Table" plays over the PA

and the crowd cheers. "Well, Josh, it sounds like the action is ready to begin, so let's throw it to our RAW crew of Good Ol' JR and the King!"

Bubba Ray and D-Von Dudley emerged from the back, carrying a table painted with the French tricolore. JR and the King talked about how La Resistance has been getting the advantage of the Dudleys at every opportunity, and how the American fans in Phoenix would love to see a title change tonight.

The decidedly French music of La Resistance plays. The crowd begins booing severely as Rene Dupree and Sylvan Grenier emerge, dressed in matching gold and black outfits with berets. They stop to view the table and scoff at it. They both roll in and wave the flags high as they wear their belts around their waists. Bubba and D-Von don't bother to wait for the bell, attacking immediately.

All four men brawl to start, with the Dudley Boys clearing the ring. Grenier is nearly hit with 3-D thirty seconds in, but Dupree pulls him out and D-Von follows. This allows La Res to double-team D-Von on the outside. Back in, Dupree tosses D-Von shoulder-first into the ringpost and rolls him up coming out of it for two. Dupree tags Grenier in, who stomps on D-Von and applies an armbar. D-Von tries to spin out of it, but Grenier switches to a hammerlock. He takes D-Von into his corner, where Dupree slaps him around a few times, then dances for the crowd.

Grenier kicks D-Von down and gets a legdrop for two. Dupree comes in and continues the armwork with an armbreaker into a wristlock. D-Von elbows out, but when delivering a lariat uses his bad arm, causing no damage to Dupree. Dupree continues the attack by stomping on the arm a few times before doing a five armdrags and dancing again. Dupree gets Bubba's attention, distracting the ref while La Resistance hit a double DDT, allowing Grenier to switch in and get two. Grenier goes up top, but D-Von catches him and delivers a superplex. Both men are down, but Dupree gets the tag and cuts D-Von off. D-Von shoots a double-leg takedown, rolls over the top of Dupree, and tags in Bubba.

Bubba clotheslines down anyone French upon entering, then ducks a double clothesline from La Res. He punches them back and forth until both are out on their feet, leading to the inevitable noggin-knocker. Off the ropes, Bubba hits a double shoulder-tackle, sending Grenier to the outside. Dupree is slammed down as D-Von climbs the ropes. Dupree's legs are held open as Bubba yells "WHAZUP!" with the crowd. One diving shot later, and D-Von performs last rites, only to be interrupted mid-cross by Grenier.

Everything breaks down as the Dudleys try to beat on Grenier. Dupree struggles to his feet and winds up being in the right place at the right time, as he trips Bubba during the buildup for 3-D. It wouldn't have mattered, since D-Von's arm gives out, allowing Grenier to fall on top for two. Bubba grabs Dupree and lifts him up on his shoulders as Grenier is tossed out of the ring by D-Von. D-Von heads to the top rope, but before he can dive off with the Dudleyville Device, Dupree rolls up Bubba for two, which D-Von saves. D-Von picks Dupree up and delivers the Saving Grace for two. FINALLY, Grenier runs in, trying to hit Bubba with the belt, but Bubba ducks and Dupree gets it. D-Von covers as Bubba hits Grenier with the Bubba Bomb, and three seconds later, **the Dudleys win the Tag Team titles of RAW.**

In the back, I applauded the result. *It was an okay match, but I think I can top*

that. I looked around during the break as Kevin Nash and Randy Orton headed to the ring. Sitting to my left were the participants in our Tag Team Title match. Haas and Rey were in quiet thought. Kidman had a look of anticipation on his face, as if he felt this was his time. Shelton was staring dead ahead, his eyes focused on the television screen to the exclusion of any other thought. Torrie, though, was seated next to Kidman on the far end, paler than any makeup had ever made her. Something terrified her about tonight.

On the other side of me was an empty chair, then Molly Holly. The WWE Women's champion was dressed in casual attire, far from her white and black ensemble she wrestled in. Her face was blank, paying attention to the show, but seemingly disinterested. Her hands were clutched around her title belt in both a desperate and loathing manner, if such a thing can be said about a grip. I noticed her eyes. They seemed not to be blue or green, but rather gray. A very pale shade of gray at that -- almost as if contact lenses were involved.

I flipped on my shades and looked again. Molly was still there -- I think. But instead of being a person, she was a shadow. There was an outline where she was before, but inside no features, merely a silhouette. She seemed almost two-dimensional, as if someone had taken her space and time out of her and left her a picture in a frame.

I took the shades off and got her attention. "Moll... something wrong?"

"Hm? Oh, no, I'm fine."

"You seem worried about somethin'. Like someone will steal your belt."

"Oh, no... you see... I just feel more comfortable with it on my lap, thanks."

She hastily returned to watching the show. *She doesn't want to talk to me. She doesn't seem to want to deal with anyone. I'm not sure she wants to be here.*

Evolution's music hits the PA system as the crowd boos the first arrival of RAW's top stable. Randy Orton, dressed in his usual in-ring attire, flexes and poses for the crowd, as if to say, "Yeah, I'm a great guy and you hate me, but tonight, I'll still be a great guy." He is seconded by Ric Flair, who as always is in a luxurious three-piece suit that appears to cost more than the entire front row made in a week.

The horn sounds and the harmonica starts. Kevin Nash strides to the ring as the crowd gives him a mixed reaction. He walks with purpose, but also with a sense of an overriding concern. Something in his body language says he would rather be anywhere else in the world than Phoenix. *That's odd. I thought he liked to perform.*

After the bell, Nash and Orton lock up. Orton backs Nash into the corner and proceeds to chop at him. Nash oversells at first, almost to a comedic extent, before playing it serious as Orton continues on offense. Orton gets a suplex for the first two-count, followed by a headlock sequence. Nash whips him off into the buckle and catches him for a back suplex. Nash then sends Orton into the corner and hits the elbows, including his Picture Perfect shot, before Flair trips Nash on the outside. As Nash is distracted, Orton low blows him and hits the Play of the Day for two. Orton hits a neckbreaker for two, then goes to the chinlock.

Nash powers out, just in time for Orton to club his back again. Nash reverses a whip, however, and gets a sidewalk slam for two. Snake Eyes in the corner sets up a powerslam attempt, but Orton rolls Nash through it for two. Both men get up, but Nash hits the big boot. Nash goes for the Jackknife, but Randy Orton shoves him out of it and into Charles Robinson. With both men down, Ric Flair enters the ring with a chair. He

swings, but Nash ducks and boots the chair back into Flair's face. The distraction's enough, however, as Orton gets the RKO on the chair (which has fallen to the mat), then clears the debris in time **for the three count and the victory.**

That was decidedly nothing. I guess they figured that match wasn't going to be good, so they positioned it low on the card. As I sorted thoughts in my mind, Pat Patterson walked into the room.

"Rey, Kidman, Haas, Benjamin... let's go."

Kidman kissed Torrie good-bye as all four headed to the ring. Torrie waved good-bye, but still seemed quite pale. As she sat back down between myself and Molly, she tried to strike up a conversation with Molly, but had about as much luck as I did. *No wonder. It all sounds like nervous chatter.*

As Josh Matthews and Jonathan Coachman recap the highlights thus far, the ring crew sets four ladders up, one by each side of the ring. A highlight package is shown on the PPV of the Vengeance match and how it leads directly to this outcome. A segment from Earlier Today on Heat shows Sable making this match a ladder match, including the words, "There is no way anyone will remember the Dudley Boys or La Resistance when you're done."

The camera focuses in on the tag belts as we hear Michael Cole and Tazz for the first time that night. Both sound nervous. Tazz makes a note that Cole is "not really dressed for the location -- what's with the extra layers?" Cole simply dismisses it and focuses on the match.

The silhouette of Rey's mask appears on the Tron. Soon after, Rey is vaulted to the stage from underneath. He begins to point first at the ring, then at the belts above it. He high-fives fans on the way to the ring, but stops halfway through. Kidman's music hits as the man from Allentown walks slowly to the ring. His eyes never leave the ring.

Torrie leaned over to me. "Mark... I'm scared."

"Why? Look at Kidman there. He ain't scared."

"I've seen that look. He's trying not to think about it. It usually means something bad."

Championship-style music hits the PA and the crowd begins to boo. Rey and Kidman roll into the ring and face the entrance, as Charlie Haas and Shelton Benjamin come out in their matching maroon singlets. Both men yell at the crowd a little, then jog to the ring. All four men stand in different corners as the referee makes sure each is clear on the rules. Their eyes never leave the prize.

"Mark?"

"Yeah, Torr?"

"Will he be all right?"

"I think so."

All four men charge the center and begin brawling. Haas takes Rey down in a headlock, and the two begin a chain-wrestling sequence. Benjamin clotheslines Kidman out of the ring, where he lands on a ladder. In the ring, Haas hits a German suplex on Rey, then guillotines him on the ladder. Benjamin returns to the ring and hits the leapfrog choke on Rey. Kidman is back in and grabs Haas in the Tommykaze. Shelton hits a superkick and dives out of the ring for a ladder. Rey recovers and somersaults over the top rope to Shelton, kicking the ladder into Benjamin's ribs. Back in the ring, Kidman pounds on Haas

and climbs to the top rope, leaping off with a Frankensteiner. Finally, Rey brings a ladder into the proceedings, and the crowd begins to buzz.

Kidman grabs one end of the ladder, and the Filthy Animals deliver a battering ram into Haas's stomach. Benjamin grabs Rey from behind, pulling him off the ladder. Benjamin and Kidman play tug-of-war with the ladder, but when Benjamin lets go, Kidman flies back into the corner, spearing himself. Kidman drops the ladder, but as Benjamin leans over to pick it up, Rey delivers a Fame-Asser onto said ladder on Benjamin. Haas enters with a second ladder, knocking Rey in the head with it, but Kidman dropkicks Haas's leg and causes Haas to fall face-first into his ladder. Now Kidman tries to set up a ladder, only to have Haas German suplex Kidman while he's holding the ladder, causing the ladder to fall on Kidman on the way down.

Haas helps Benjamin up, but Rey leaps off Benjamin's back and rans Haas out of the ring. Kidman now sets up a ladder by the corner, but Haas tosses him straight into a Benjamin superkick. Haas then climbs the ladder as Benjamin goes to pick up Kidman and set up for a Doomsday Device. However, Kidman slides off Benjamin's back and onto his hands and knees, allowing Rey to hit Poetry in Motion into Benjamin's back, sending him flying into the ladder and knocking the out of the corner into the ring, with Haas falling to the mat. Rey gets the other ladder in the ring, and he and Kidman set them up and try to climb together. However, Benjamin knocks both ladders over into opposite ropes, sending both opponents to the floor.

"Oh, no! Billy!"

Torrie was freaking out. Molly looked over at her.

"Do you want to take a walk?"

"No... I'll be fine... I'm just scared..."

Haas is up first and figures he has a free ride, when Rey enters with a third ladder, swinging and knocking over Haas's ladder. As Rey sets up a ladder, Benjamin does the same. Kidman returns and pulls Benjamin off his ladder, and both Filthy Animals climb. They're nowhere near the belts, though; instead, they hit stereo rans on Haas and Benjamin from the tops of the ladders. Kidman is up first, but his attempt to climb the third ladder (for a visual, they are all next to each other now) is thwarted by Haas, who German suplexes Kidman off the ladder, then suplexes the ladder onto Kidman.

Rey is up and dropkicks Haas out of the ring. Benjamin hits a tilt-a-whirl on Rey to knock him down, then grabs the ladder off of Kidman and sets it up. Kidman is up on the other side, and the race is on. At the top, a slgufest erupts. Rey climbs a side ladder and clotheslines Benjamin off the center ladder, but he winds up taking the whole ladder down with him, as Kidman rides the ladder to the ground. Haas, meanwhile, returns with the fourth ladder, and when he tries to set it up mid-ring, Rey blocks. So Haas clubs Rey with the ladder, then tries a second time. This time, Kidman dropkicks the ladder into Haas's face. Benjamin is back up now, and he and Kidman both grab ladders at 10 paces, swinging them like broadswords at each other. Benjamin and Kidman are next to opposite ropes, so Haas drops Kidman throat-first onto one rope, while Rey 619s Benjamin through the other. This sets up Rey to deliver the West Coast Pop onto the ladder on Benjamin.

All four people and all four ladders are down. Haas is the first in, and he sets up the two ladders as before. Benjamin is up next, and Haas has a brainstorm. He grabs one

end and instructs Benjamin to grab the other. The WGTT climb opposite ladders and set the ladder up in the middle as a bridge. Rey knocks Haas off of his ladder, while Kidman grabs Benjamin from behind and drags him down, leaving the ladder bridge precariously balancing on top. Benjamin gets mad and clotheslines Kidman, then drags him to the fourth, prone ladder. He tries to powerbomb Kidman on the ladder, but that goes about as well as expected and Kidman reverses to a facebuster onto the ladder.

Torrie jumped out of her seat. She was clearly into the match a little too much. "Molly, take her outside."

"No, no, no... I'm going to be fine! Really!"

Molly stood up. "I don't think I am." She walked out, very businesslike, as if she were taking Torrie's bullet.

Kidman tosses the fourth ladder out of the ring, then climbs a side ladder, causing the bridge to come apart and land on Haas, who was coming over to cut him off. Rey runs over and hands Kidman the side ladder again, then climbs the other ladder as Kidman holds his end steady. Rey attempts to walk the bridge, but Benjamin jumps up and grabs him, landing him groin-first on the ladder bridge. Kidman descends his ladder as Rey falls off, taking the bridge with him. Rey untangles himself as Haas climbs a ladder. Rey charges, and Kidman alleyoops him into a rana on Haas. Kidman catches the ladder and goes to re-establish the bridge by himself. He succeeds in setting it up, but every time he tries to cross, the bridge collapses. This continues until Benjamin throws him off the ladder, leaving the bridge standing.

Benjamin and Kidman head outside the ring while Rey and Haas are inside it. Kidman pulls the fourth ladder into a corner, away from the bridge. Benjamin rams him into the post on the outside, and the two battle near the Spanish announce table. Kidman blocks a direct shot, then tosses Benjamin onto the tricolore table, which has been sitting around ominously since the opening match. Kidman sees this and re-enters the ring. He climbs the fourth ladder and stares down at Benjamin, prone on the table.

Torrie's eyes grew wide. "Oh, God... I can't look." She buried her face into my outfit, since that was the nearest black outfit. The entire locker room was standing up. Somewhere, I heard Paul Heyman's voice yell, "Oh no!" Stephanie shrieked in fear.

Kidman leaps into the air. He backflips in midair and comes down, not onto Benjamin (who moves out of the way), but onto and through the tricolore table, which utterly shatters on impact. The crowd is stunned, then breaks out in a riotous cheer. Back in the ring, Rey and Haas are climbing opposite sides of the ladder bridge, both trying to knock the other off with the bridge. Benjamin sneaks into the center of the ring and jumps up. He grabs the ladder bridge from underneath and pulls himself up through the ladder. He then slowly stands up on the bridge and grabs the ring onto which the belts are connected. All three ladders give way, and Rey and Haas crash to the floor. Benjamin pulls himself up very slowly and grabs both belts, then drops down. **The belts come unhooked, and Benjamin crashes to the mat, barely missing the ladder, with both belts in his hands.**

The crowd is too stunned to boo the champs. Everyone is down, as the ring resembles a cross between the Home Improvement set and Jonestown, Guyana. Referees flood ringside to check on all four men. Benjamin and Haas stand up first to celebrate. They limp off into the locker room. Slowly, Rey picks himself up off the mat as referees

pull Kidman out of the wreckage of the table. Kidman rolls into the ring and slowly to his feet. Both men look around at the ladders, and at what might have been, as the crowd gives them a standing ovation.

The locker room partially emptied as 10 different people prepared for the next match. Torrie pulled her head out of my shirt long enough to look up. "Is he... is he all right?"

I nodded. "He survived."

Torrie nodded comprehension and relief. She sat down, her nerves too fried to respond. *Heck, I don't blame her. If the love of my life just did something like that, I'd be a little freaked too. Man, they're gonna be sore tomorrow.*

I walked into the back hall. Haas and Benjamin were slowly walking to the back. I paused in front of them. "Boys," I said, "welcome to immortality."

I caught up with Molly as she stood by the entranceway with a large group of superstars in position for the brawl. She stood off to the side, as if wanting to try to view the match without anyone noticing her existence. She was dwarfed by the mass of humanity around her -- heck, she was a foot or so shorter than Goldust, who himself was only the 5th or 6th tallest of the group of wrestlers gathered around (myself included). I went to speak to her, but Stephanie cut me off and pulled me down to her level.

"Andy," she whispered, "I'm nervous. How do I follow that up?"

"Don't worry, Steph," I said out loud so that we wouldn't draw attention. "You don't need to kill yourself out there to get over. Just be yourself -- you'll be fine."

Eager to escape from Kathleen's grasp, I moved closer to Molly, who saw me coming and stepped aside. I didn't know how to handle this, so I simply took a spot next to her on the wall. She kept facing forward, her arms clutching her Women's title belt to her chest. I tried to think of a good conversation starter. I figured the anonymity of the crowd around us would be a help.

"You really like being Women's Champion?"

"Hmm? What?"

"You hold the belt near you like it's your life."

"Oh... no, it's not that... I just don't want to lose it. We're responsible for our own possessions, you know."

"So leave it in the locker room. People can find it there."

"Oh... yeah, I guess... um... excuse me..."

She started to run to the locker room. I gave chase.

"Wait, wait..." I said as I grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Don't touch me like that!"

"Like what?"

She hesitated, almost as if she'd said too much. "No, I'm sorry. I was just surprised."

"Molly, it's more than that. What's gotten into you? Three months ago you were happy, smiling at everyone and wishing people good luck. Now you're almost a wallflower. What's changed?"

"Nothing. Nothing important, anyway."

"Come on, you can tell me. Don't you trust me?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, all right. Just... smile a little. Have fun. It's SummerSlam, and you're the Women's Champion."

In the background, we heard Eve's All Grown Up playing in the arena.

"The match is starting," she said, almost robotically. "Let's go in and watch."

I followed.

Stephanie McMahon comes out with Chris Benoit as Josh and Coach get set to call the action. On their way to the ring, they pass Rey and Kidman, who are just now getting helped to the back. They applaud as the two head back, and the entire crowd joins in. Then, the duo continue to the ring.

Big Show's music hits and, after the brief pyro, he and A-Train emerge. They slowly make their way to the ring amidst a series of boos. Matthews notes that this will be an interesting match because a lot of these people are not necessarily friends. As if to emphasize the point, Train stares down Benoit before Stephanie separates the two.

With the words Word Life playing over the PA, the crowd goes into their mixed reaction for John Cena. With everyone else in the ring maintaining an uneasy alliance, Cena asks for the microphone.

"Yo, yo, yo, cut it--"

But before he can begin, I'm Back starts up and Eric Bischoff smugly walks out. He's not alone, however; the injury replacement, Test, is standing right behind him. Test steps over the top rope and immediately looks A-Train in the eye as Josh casually drops Trish Stratus's name, surprising everyone in the back who didn't know he pays attention to history.

Stand Back! Hurricane makes his entrance, posing as he walks down the aisle. He climbs into the ring and hits one last pose before joining his teammates in the RAW corner. The movie music begins soon after as Goldust goes through his long entrance routine. The letterboxing and gold strobe lighting stand out against the green of Hurricane's costume and Cena's jersey as they begin the fight. The fight? Yes, they're not waiting.

Goldust charges the ring to get involved, but the size and the bulk advantage shifts the weight to SmackDown!'s team. Amidst all the chaos, One of a Kind starts up and RVD sprints in to clean house. Kicks go flying as Show and Train fall out of the ring, followed by Cena, Test, Stephanie, and Goldust. With everyone down on the outside, Hurricane dives onto the top of all of them. As they get up, RVD follows with a somersault plancha. Back in the ring, Bischoff and Benoit battle until Benoit sends Eric flying over the top onto everyone on the outside. Benoit sees the pile, runs the ropes, and dives through them, getting all nine pins on one shot.

Everyone slowly returns to the general vicinity of the ring, where Hurricane and Cena start the match proper. The lockup leads to Cena powering Hurricane into the corner, then punching away at him. Cena whips Hurricane across the ring, but the charge misses and Hurricane gets in a Shining Wizard for a quick two. Cena tags in Stephanie, but Hurricane refuses to fight. Bischoff demands a tag in and gets it, showing the crane pose to Stephanie. Stephanie slaps Eric, who kicks her all the way across the ring. Benoit and Cena charge in to protect her, drawing in RVD. RVD cuts Cena off, but Benoit chops Bischoff down to size, then picks him up for a snap suplex. Test cuts him off as the whole tag concept is sort of a lost cause. Eventually, it's RVD and Benoit in the ring.

Benoit throws RVD chest-first into the turnbuckle, then bounces him out with consecutive suplexes. Benoit climbs for the headbutt, but Hurricane knocks him off the top straight into a kick from RVD. Goldust gets the tag and powerslams Benoit for two. He tries for the sliding punch, but Benoit catches the arm and flips him over, attempting the Crossface. Test breaks that up by grabbing Benoit's neck and lifting him up, but that opens him up for A-Train's pump kick. Meanwhile, Goldust tags in Hurricane, who dives off the top onto Benoit for two. Benoit clotheslines Hurricane down and brings in Cena.

Cena lifts Hurricane up and climbs the turnbuckles, looking for the super fallaway slam. Hurricane tries to turn it into a cross-body, and the result is neither as both men are down. Cena is up first, and he tosses Hurricane over his head and to the outside. Goldust enters and hits an inverted DDT on Cena, then tosses him over the top, only to have Show come in and boot him down and out. With that, RVD dives onto Show with a kick of his own, sending Show rolling out and bringing A-Train in with a pump kick. Coachman observes that the tag rules are getting scrambled up in this match.

Train picks RVD up and hits Snake Eyes in the corner, getting two. Train tags in Cena, who kicks away at an open RVD, then picks him up for an F-U. RVD reverses to a crucifix for two. He tags Test in, and Test clotheslines down Cena, then hits the pumphandle slam for two. Hurricane returns and gets a standing rana for two. A crossbody hits for two. Goldust is tagged in and goes for Shattered Dreams in the corner, but Show pulls Cena out of the way and Goldust's leg hits the turnbuckle. Cena tags Benoit in, who applies the Sharpshooter, prompting Bischoff to make the save. Benoit tries to re-apply it, but Goldust rolls him up for two, reversed by Cena for two, reversed by RVD for two. Show and Test get the tags, and a slugfest erupts. Show wins it and doubles Test over with a chop before slamming him. A legdrop gets him two before Cena tags back in. Cena climbs to the top rope and waits, but when Test gets up, his diving clothesline is blocked by the Big Boot for two. Bischoff demands in and hits a superkick for two. He slaps Stephanie, who slaps him back, distracting him and allowing Cena to roll him up for two before the match totally breaks down.

Everyone quickly enters the ring for a brawl as the ref loses track of the legal men. In the chaos, Hurricane choke slams Benoit, only to get it back from Show, who gets hit from behind by the Curtain Call from Goldust, who gets slammed in the F-U from Cena, who gets hit with an enzuigiri from RVD, who is Derailed by A-Train, who is speared down by Bischoff, who gets Pedigreed by Stephanie, who is picked up for a pumphandle slam by Test, only to have Benoit grab him in the Crossface before anything happens. Test tries to hang on, but **the pain is too much and he's forced to tap out.**

"Ha! Pay up!" Ron Simmons had turned to Bradshaw with the hand outstretched. Bradshaw reached into his pocket and produced a \$20 bill.

"All right, all right," he said. "Now go get the beer."

"Right on, bro," said Simmons.

I looked around for Eddie. I couldn't find him. I stepped outside for a while, only to see him around the corner, having a discussion with McMahon himself. I couldn't hear anything, but the discussion seemed rather heated. I stepped in and tried to interject.

"Guys, what's the deal?"

"You tricked me, Taker! You said I could trust you, esse, and now you gonna squash me out here?"

"I never said that!"

"The hell you didn't! Senor McMahon says you not gonna give me anything!"

I turned to Vince. "Vince, I thought..."

"Dammit, I gave orders. Do you want to follow my orders or not?"

"Don't put me on the spot, Vince. I told you we're having a rematch, and I wanna build to the rematch. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have some spots to work out."

"Hey! Come back here! Don't you remember who I am?"

By this time, Paul Heyman had interceded and was pulling Vince back. Eddie and I headed around the corner, into privacy.

"You lied, hombre!"

"No! I did not. I don't give a damn what Vince says. I'm gonna wrestle my match, and if he fires me, it'll be his own funeral. You got that?"

"Look me in the eyes and tell me I can trust you!"

I stared directly into his eyes. I saw the fire again, but this time, it was stronger than before. It was a fire fueled by rage, but also by a feeling of treason. This time, though, I knew how to end it.

"Eddie, if I screw this match up, I will retire on the spot. Count on it."

The blaze around the eyes lessened. It began to return to a normal eye color. Eddie's face relaxed. He extended his hand.

"Alright, Mark," he said. "I'll trust you."

Back at ringside, Harvard's theme music played over the PA system. Teddy Long led all his troops to the ring, headed by Chris Nowinski, who drew the assignment tonight. Rodney Mack and Jazz hit the pose behind Nowinski, and Teddy Long was thuggin and buggin around the ring, showing off his charges.

As soon as Booker T's voice yelled the Can You Dig It Sucka over the system, the crowd went ballistic. JR and King talked about whether Booker T was furthering racial stereotypes or being his own man, while T posed on the entranceway and sent up the flames. Nowinski's teammates left the ring, as Booker hands his belt to referee Nick Patrick. The proceedings begin.

After a lockup, Booker T backs Nowinski into the corner and gets a clean break. Nowinski reverses quickly and batters Booker with lefts and rights, then charges in with a shouldertackle. Booker moves, but Nowinski slams on the breaks, pointing to his head. As he turns around, though, Booker kicks him in the face, knocking him down. Nowinski is back up, though, and Booker punches Nowinski in the facemask. However, Nowinski doesn't flinch and Booker begins to shake his hand in pain. Nowinski slams Booker's hand into the turnbuckle, then gets an armdrag and an armbar while jawing with fans. Booker flips Nowinski out of the armbar and clotheslines him down, but Teddy Long gets up and takes a punch from the bad hand, slowing Booker down and allowing Nowinski a suplex for two.

Nowinski holds Booker's arm up and punches his damaged hand a few times before applying a hammerlock. Booker elbows out, but Nowinski keeps a hold of the hand. Booker pulls him in with the Book End, but his hand is so hurt he stumbles off by the ropes to rest. Rodney Mack climbs up and drops Booker's arm over the top rope, causing Booker to stagger around and allowing Nowinski to hit a double-arm DDT for two. Nowinski applies a knucklelock on Booker T in an attempt to get him to submit, but

Booker dives for the ropes, slingshotting Nowinski to the floor.

Nowinski fakes an injury, drawing the referee's attention. Back in the ring, meanwhile, Jazz swings a chair at Booker's weak hand, hitting the forearm and causing more damage. Back in, Nowinski applies an armbar and goes for a hammerlock slam, but Booker slides down Nowinski's back and hits an inverted DDT. He bounces off with the biiiiiiig kneedrop for two. As they stand up, Nowinski headbutts Booker's arm using the facemask, then tries for a short-arm scissors. Booker powers out, so Nowinski hits a judo takedown instead for two. Nowinski tries for a hiptoss, but Booker clotheslines him down with the other arm instead. From there on out, it's all Booker T, as the axe kick, spinarooni, and leg lariat **get the job done and help him retain the I-C title**. Rodney Mack gets a Book End for good measure after the match.

Pat Patterson appeared backstage. "Brock, Kurt, you're next. Taker, Eddie -- get your rides."

Huh? Already? Isn't this early for the match? Oh, yeah, that's right, the heel turn. They probably want to send the fans home happy.

I walked out of the locker room and went backstage. I looked for my bike, which Kevin Dunn had positioned right next to a monitor. Eddie walked over to his Lo Rider, which was situated off in a corner of the arena. Before getting in, he ran back and found me.

"Mark... let's go make Vince eat his words."

"I'm with ya there, man."

We pounded fists, and he was off again. I settled onto the bike and watched.

The opening chord of Brock Lesnar's rock anthem plays, causing the crowd to cheer wildly. With no indication yet as to who will turn, Michael Cole and Tazz speculate that the crowd will cheer both men. Brock jogs in place, then marches down the aisle. He leaps onto the apron, setting off his pyro, after which he steps into the ring and jogs some more.

Medal starts up as the crowd cheers a second time. The You Suck chants rain down on Kurt Angle as he arrives in the arena proper. Red, white, and blue pyro go off behind him. He gets to the ring and rolls in, twirling for the crowd. Referee Tim White -- back after a long absence -- takes the belt and holds it up for the crowd. Brock and Kurt shake hands. They begin preparations as the bell rings.

The two combatants circle each other and lock up. Kurt gets a single leg takedown and attempts to bridge Brock's back onto the mat, but Brock wiggles out and returns to the top position. Neither man can maintain the edge for more than five seconds before Kurt gets a half-nelson and rolls over Brock's back, putting Brock in the lower position. Kurt attempts to turn it over, but after 30 seconds of fighting, Brock escapes and takes the offensive, getting the mount and wrestling Kurt to the mat. Kurt flops in an attempt to squeeze under while Cole and Tazz play up the amateur background of both men. Kurt finds Brock's leg and tries to flip Brock over, but Brock blocks and finds himself sitting on Kurt. He attempts to roll Kurt over, but Kurt blocks and has Brock in a predicament. Brock's shoulders fall to the mat, earning Kurt a few two counts, before Brock reverses the leverage and gets a 3/4 nelson, earning a two count of his own. Kurt escapes and gets a front chancery, but Brock squirms it around to a chinlock and rolls Kurt's back to the mat. Kurt attempts an armlock leglock into an Oklahoma roll, but Brock blocks it and tries

to roll Kurt onto the mat. Kurt takes the momentum and balances on his head and arms, putting Brock's shoulders to the mat for two. Brock escapes and tries to get Kurt in a fireman's carry, but Kurt grabs the ankle. Brock rolls through and grabs Kurt's ankle, and both men tumble into the ropes, causing a break and ending the amateur portion of the match.

The production crew panned the crowd, showing a standing ovation. I applauded, too. *It's rare that shoot wrestling looks good in fake wrestling, but here was a fine example.*

Both men stare each other down. Kurt goes for a waistlock, but Brock pounds on him to take over. He grabs Kurt by the waist and beats him overhead, hanging on and repeating it. Brock rides Kurt to the mat and tries for a German, but Kurt reverses and tries for more amateur wrestling. This time, on the escape, Brock clotheslines Kurt down. Kurt slowly gets up, confused. Brock charges, but Kurt ducks and Brock hits the turnbuckles. Kurt rolls Brock up for two, but Brock grabs Kurt and throws him halfway across the ring. Brock follows in and stomps Kurt down as Cole notes that Brock is the aggressor in the match.

Brock slams Kurt down and climbs the ropes, waiting for Kurt to stand. Kurt does so, and Brock shouldertackles him for two. Kurt slowly gets up and rolls up Brock out of a vertical suplex for two. Brock angrily tosses Kurt into the corner and delivers some rib shots to him. Kurt gets tossed from corner to corner, but pops up onto the second turnbuckle and jumps back onto Brock with a tornado DDT, but Brock blocks it, so Kurt turns it into a vertical suplex, hitting three in a row. He whoos to the crowd and pulls down his strap, at which time Vince McMahon emerges.

Angle is confused by McMahon's appearance, causing him to turn around into the F-5 for two. Brock gets irate, then goes for his bearhug, but Kurt fights out with a swinging neckbreaker before Brock can lock his hands. Kurt waits for Brock to get up, then delivers a belly-to-belly throw that sends Brock to the outside. Kurt waits for Brock to get back in, but as Brock stalls on the apron, Kurt suplexes him back in and delivers a Dynamite cradle for two. Kurt heads up top, but before he can miss the moonsault, Brock comes up from behind and delivers a German superplex for two.

Angle gets picked up by Brock, but he finds the strength for a Northern Lights suplex for two. He positions Brock for the Olympic Slam, but Brock's feet hit Tim White on the way up. With the ref down, Angle goes over to awaken the referee, but Vince jumps into the ring and makes motions to indicate he'll be the referee for now. Angle is suspicious, but goes along with it, covering Brock for a long two. Angle asks about the count, so Brock rolls him up for a regular-paced two, which the crowd thought would be the finish. Angle ducks a Lesnar clothesline, then tries a cradle from behind, only to have Brock block it. Angle charges straight into an overhead suplex by Brock as Tim White recovers.

He attempts to get Vince out of the ring, missing Brock covering Angle for what would be a three. Brock gets the referee's attention, only to have Kurt dive at him from behind and apply the Ankle Lock. Brock gets himself pulled as far away from the ropes as possible, leaving Angle with his back to the ropes. Vince cracks Angle with a chair, which the referee doesn't see since he's checking for a tapout. Both men are down. Brock gets up first and gingerly picks Angle up. One F-5 later, **and Brock Lesnar is your new**

SmackDown! champion -- but under unusual circumstances.

Brock looks uneasily at Vince McMahon. He then looks back at the title, then at McMahon. The camera catches him saying, "Thanks." He and Vince hug, and Brock leaves on his own. The crowd is in shock as Vince begins to yell at Angle. He then stomps Angle down and applies an Ankle Lock of his own. Angle climbs out of the ring and looks at Vince, his face that of a man deceived.

Man, we gotta follow that? Dang. That'll be hard. The crowd's deflated, and probably worn out, too. How can we hope to compete now?

Within seconds, I was to find out. Pat looked at me and said, "Two minutes." I watched the video package for our match, detailing the idea of respect and tradition. Cole's voice billed it as being "about more than the US title; this is about being in the elite." Tazz's voice echoed, "I think both men feel the main event isn't big enough for the both of them."

I waited. *One month ago, I was sitting in a bar in Virginia watching the Undertaker go against John Cena in Denver. Now I'm in Phoenix, and I am the Undertaker, and I'm preparing for the biggest experience of my afterlife. If I fail Eddie here, I may fail the mission, and my own existence could be forfeit. If I give Eddie what he wants, Vince will take it out on an innocent man. God, help me figure out what to do.*

"Okay, Mark, fire it up."

I hit the ignition and revved the motor. Since I could no longer hear anything over the sound of the engine, I kept my eyes fixed on Kevin Dunn for the cue. He signalled five seconds, then four, then three, two, one. I took off.

I burst through the curtain and could hear the roar of the crowd over the engine and music. I struck my chest and raised my fist in the air. As I saw people in the crowd return the signal, I rushed forward on the bike, doing a full lap. I parked the bike sideways in the entrance way, a little deeper than normal. *I hope nothing goes wrong with this stunt the production guys were talking about.*

VIVA LA RAZA was shouted through the America West Arena. I stood in the ring and waited, judging the crowd reaction. From what I could tell, both of us were "tweeners" for this match. Eddie Guerrero emerged in his Lo Rider, moving the hydraulics near the entrance. However, he gunned it one time too many, and the car rolled over my bike, crushing it. Eddie got out as I rushed to the wreck. No sparks, no flame -- *okay, time to kill Eddie.*

As Eddie checked the bumper of his car, I stomped his back repeatedly. I picked him up and tossed him into the stairs, then into the ring. The referee signalled for the bell as I backed Eddie into the corner. "You <whack> do <whack> not <whack> mess <whack> with <whack> my <whack> bike <whack>!!" I yelled as I pummelled him in the corner. He begged for time as I backed up, then hit me with a low blow and a sunset flip for one. As we both got up, he continued the offense with lefts and rights. I was sent flying into the corner, and Eddie sent me back out with a monkey flip, on which I almost didn't get full rotation. *Man, I didn't know I was this immobile.*

I stood up and was hit with a rana for two. Eddie played to the crowd, allowing me to grab him from behind and toss him over my head. I whipped him into the ropes and bounced off the other side. We met in the middle when I did a flying clothesline. *Okay, now what?* I picked him up and whispered, "Do something." I set him up for a slam, but

Eddie dropped out the back and caught me with a DDT as I turned around. Eddie picked me up and suplexed me to the side of the ropes, then scooted outside and hit the senton back in for two. He picked me up and went for German suplex, but I elbowed out and delivered a bulldog.

I rolled him over and rubbed my forearm in his face. I pulled him up, going for a spinebuster, but he grabbed my head for a DDT, and the resulting stalemate put us both down. We both slowly got to our feet, where Eddie charged me. I ducked and pulled the rope down, and Eddie flipped over the top and stumbled onto his Lo Rider roof. *Here goes nothing.* I climbed the turnbuckle and began slowly to walk to the center of the ropes. *This is harder than I thought without an arm to guide me.* I judged the distance and put all my strength into it. I dove straight forward, going for what would be a spear if Eddie were upright. He moved, and I crashed through the car roof and into the front seat. As the crowd groaned in sympathy pain and chanted Eddie's name, I pulled something out of the passenger seat. It was a razor blade. *Well, he knows what to do.*

I sent the blade over my forehead. I felt the blood rush down the front of my face. *Have I cut too deep??* Eddie grabbed me out of the car and dragged me to the hood, slamming my head into it. I looked through the liquid in my hair and saw Eddie's face, a little uneasy. *I did cut too deep.* He picked me up and whispered, "You ok?" I answered by reversing the clutch into a suplex onto the hood. "Yeah, you're fine."

I returned to the ring and let the crowd see my face. An "ECW" chant broke out at the sight of the blood, replacing the "Holy Shit" chant from the initial crash. I looked on the Tron and saw the replays of the crash and the suplex. After that, I exited the ring again and went to Eddie, who was crawling into the back seat of the car and had a bottle in his hand. He took a quick swig and waited as I got closer. I picked him up, and he sent the water flying onto my face and eyes.

"Blinded", and in pain from the "alcohol" on the open wound, I staggered backward around ringside. I bumped into the guardrail by the ring, then turned around. Out of my squinted eyes, I saw the referee approaching. I took a wild swing in his direction, and he ducked. I then picked him up, and with the ref yelling, "Wait, wait, Taker, no," I set him up on the outside for the Tombstone. I delivered, as the crowd gasped in horror. *Go time.*

I rolled the referee back into the ring and tried to cover him. Eddie raced in after me and jumped on me with a double axhandle. I quickly turned to where he was and tried to wipe the blood away. He charged with a second axhandle, but I caught him and back body dropped him over the top. I followed him out, and Eddie ran into the crowd as I gave chase.

He worked his way over to a production tower, which had padding all around the bottom, but which itself was 10-15 feet up. Eddie started to climb up the side, but I dragged him off and punched him a few times to get him staggered. I grabbed the goozle, but Eddie kicked low to block. He resumed climbing up to the top, and by the time I regained my senses, he was in the crow's nest. I went for the stairs to chase after him, but he met me with a chairshot, staggering me down the rest of the way. As I walked down, he continued to pound me with the chair. He ripped at the wound to make it open more, then hit one final chairshot before climbing back up to the top. He signalled for a frog splash, but I sat up. *Not yet, Eddie...*

I climbed up the side of the tower, but Eddie was waiting. As I pulled myself over the railing, he hit another chairshot to the back, causing me to teeter on the rail. He went to dump me, but I hung on by one hand. I grabbed the chair out of his hand with the other, but he dropkicked it into my face. I flew off the tower and onto the padding below. *Wow. That didn't hurt so bad.* Ten seconds later, Eddie perched on the railing and frog splashed onto me off of it. *That did!*

He showed off to the fans, who began to chant "Holy Shit" again. As the EMTs headed over to where we were, Eddie shoved them aside one by one. I grabbed the stretcher they had brought to me and jabbed it into Eddie's back, causing him to stumble. I picked the stretcher up, adjusted my grip, and swung. Eddie jumped backwards five feet and landed on another security railing. From there, we brawled back out of the crowd and to ringside.

Brian Hebner had yet to move in the ring. I grabbed Eddie against a post and spoke to him on a wide shot. "Gimme a false fall," I said. "For Vince." He nodded, then kicked back to break out of the choke hold. He slugged me down on the outside and worked on the ribs and the cut, sending me headfirst into the railing. I made sure as I fell down to run the cut over the edge of the railing, causing blood to fall into my eyes again. *The things I do for entertainment.*

Eddie threw me back in and followed up to the top. He slapped his chest and signalled for the frog splash. As he dove off, I got the knees up. I looked and saw Brian Hebner was still down outside. I rolled on top of Eddie and hooked the leg. The crowd counted to 10, but it didn't matter. I then slithered outside and tried to revive the referee. It didn't work. Meanwhile, Eddie had made his way to the top rope. He dove and nailed me with a crossbody into the guardrail. He then grabbed the dented hood ornament off the car and returned. *Oh, no... he's not gonna...!*

He was. He began to jam the ornament into the cut. Pain shot through my head as I yelled. After a while, Mike Chioda came down and ordered Eddie to stop and put the action back in the ring. Eddie argued with him, so I grabbed the ornament out of his hands and swung. Of course, Eddie ducked, and Chioda got it head-on. He even bladed.

Eddie ran into the ring as I stalked him. He begged for time, but I wasn't going to fall for it twice. I let him get it out of his system as I raised the ornament into the air. He charged at my legs and clipped me down, then punched me repeatedly. He knelt on top of me and yelled some Spanish to the crowd, but that gave me the opening to grab the goozle again. I stood up and delivered the choke slam as Chioda got into the ring. I signalled for the Last Ride as Chioda went straight for the timekeeper. I picked Eddie up, and as I flipped him over, the bell began to ring. **Chioda had seen enough and thrown the match out.** *See if I care.*

As I lifted him up, he slid down my back and spun me around. He hit a rana and went for the El Paso Lasso. I kicked him off and caught him in the Tombstone position on the rebound. I then bent backwards as Eddie lifted me up. I balanced myself upside down and braced for the worst. Down came my head on the mat. Eddie had tombstoned me. He went to the ropes to celebrate, but I sat up again. He stared at me, then charged. We started an immediate slugfest that had no conclusion as a dozen people came in from the back to break us up. No dice, as Eddie slid out of the ring, and I flipped out after him. Officials went flying left and right as we headed to the back.

We kept throwing punches backstage until we heard Vince's voice yell, "Okay, enough, enough!" We both stopped and looked at him. He bit his lip and appeared upset, but it soon melted a little. "Boys, that was a damn good show. I think we got ourselves a cage match for No Mercy!"

I looked at Eddie and smiled. "Well, Vince, I couldn't have done it alone."

"Yeah, Senor," Eddie added. "and Taker pushed me like I wanted to be pushed."

"Eddie, I may have been wrong about you," Vince said. "I think you'll be losing the US Title soon. I'm going to see if you're ready for bigger and better things."

"Really?"

"We'll see."

Eddie's smile said it all. He skipped to the back. Vince turned to me.

"Mark, you gave him a lot out there."

"I know, Vince... but I made a promise we'd have a rematch."

"Mark, Mark... it's okay. You two can be a draw if you keep this up. Now go get patched up. We'll discuss getting your star back later."

I walked slowly to the training room. Dr. Fraser was backstage, watching the on-screen feud recap on a monitor. He saw me come in. "Mark... ooo... that's a nasty one. Cut a little deep this time?"

"Yeah, Doc. Sorry... it's SummerSlam, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it. Lemme stitch that up for ya."

I tried to ignore the pain of the stitches as I watched the next match.

Evolution's music hits once again, segueing into Motorhead's Game. HHH walks out from the back, alone. He stands on the stage, belt over his right shoulder, water bottle in hand. He walks to the ring and performs his entrance routine, complete with water spray. He ascends the buckle, then waits.

"Wait... what about Vince?"

"I dunno, Mark. Guess he wants to go on last to give you time to get patched up."

"Guess so. Hope he knows what he's doing."

"Yeah."

The drums start up as the crowd delivers a mixed reaction. On the screen, we see a knock on a door. There's a pounding from the other side as Goldberg emerges with a knot on his head. He makes the long walk to the ring. The camera returns to HHH, smirking in the ring. Goldberg steps out from behind the curtain and stands in the pyro. He blows out the smoke and yells. After his usual gesticulations, he charges the ring, not waiting for the bell.

A slugfest breaks out, which Goldberg wins. Goldberg tosses HHH into the corner and sets up for the spear. HHH steps aside and Goldberg rams his arm into the post. HHH attacks the arm and applies an armbar. Goldberg stands up out of it and punches HHH away. HHH delivers a kneelift instead and poses over Goldberg. Goldberg kips up and clotheslines HHH with the bad arm, ignoring the injury. He pounds HHH down, but HHH tosses Goldberg aside and returns fire. A facebuster slows Goldberg down temporarily, but HHH can't get the cover.

The slugging continues as HHH tries to wear Goldberg down. HHH tosses Goldberg off the ropes, but Goldberg returns with a shoulderblock. Goldberg tosses HHH over the ropes and the two brawl around ringside. Back in, HHH takes control and stomps

Goldberg. He lifts Goldberg up for a suplex, then covers for one. HHH lifts Goldberg up, but Goldberg delivers a gorilla press. He charges HHH in the corner, but HHH elbows out and kicks him in the gut. Goldberg backdrops out of the Pedigree and poses for the spear. He hits it, and is ready for the Jackhammer as Ric Flair comes strolling out.

Goldberg yells at Flair, allowing HHH to roll out of the ring. Goldberg brings Flair into the ring and delivers the spear and Jackhammer to him. Earl Hebner helps Flair out of the ring as HHH returns with the sledgehammer. As Hebner's back is turned, HHH drills Goldberg with the sledgehammer, knocking him out. HHH tosses the sledge aside and covers, **and the oblivious referee counts three.**

HHH poses with a groggy Flair as JR curses him out. Goldberg slowly gets up and stares at the two Evolution members. They turn around, and Goldberg times it just right to spear both of them down. His music plays as he walks out. It's clearly not over -- if that's a good thing.

"Okay, Mark... you're all patched up. Now head to the on-deck circle."

"Thanks, Doc."

I walked back to just behind the curtain. There, I saw Big Show, A-Train, Vince McMahon, Zach Gowen, Kurt Angle, and Eddie Guerrero. *Eddie Guerrero??*

"Eddie? I thought Brock was the other guy."

"Oh... he was told to take the night off. The story is that he isn't Vince's guy, but he'll take the help. Vince said he wanted me to counterac-choo, man. Ain't that awesome?"

"All right. Congrats, Eddie."

No Chance in Hell starts up as Vince McMahon smugly walks to the ring. He jaws with fans at ringside, then looks at Tim White, the assigned referee.

"Understand this, Tim," he growls into a microphone. "I write your paycheck every week. I control your financial well-being. I don't like Zach Gowen, and I definitely don't like Hulk Hogan. So if you don't want to be in a position to regret the rest of your natural life, you'll do the right thing. Do I have your comprehension?"

Tim nods nervously. The crowd chants "Asshole" as Vince stares at the entranceway.

Gowen's music starts up and the crowd begins to cheer. Zach limps to ringside, then rolls into the ring. He stares at Vince, then removes his track pants and prosthesis. Tim White tries to go over the rules as a ringside official takes Zach's leg. He calls for the bell.

Vince immediately kicks Zach's leg down and begins to stomp on it. He tries for a legbar, but Zach is right in the ropes. Tim counts for the break, which Vince provides, but he stares a hole right in the referee as he does. Zach gets to his... er... foot, then dropkicks Vince in the back. A spinkick follows, sending Vince into the corner. Zach "charges", then delivers a series of punches flush onto Vince's face, with Vince providing the oversell. Zach tries to whip Vince cross-corner, but Vince reverses and Zach flies into the buckle. Vince lifts Zach up by the leg and spins him in a giant swing, then tosses him out of the ring.

Vince rolls to the outside and taunts the crowd. He tries to pick up Zach, who lowblows Vince. Vince crumples to the ground, and Zach leaps up onto the apron and moonsaults him. Both men are down, but Zach rolls in first. Tim White starts the count, but as soon as Vince hears "9", he glares back at the ref, who pretends to be distracted by

Zach. Vince makes it back in. He stares at Zach. They lock up, but Vince lifts Zach in the air and tosses him back into the corner, showing off his guns. Zach pulls himself up and clotheslines Vince. He hops to the top rope and delivers a missile dropkick for a slow two.

Zach gives the ref a funny look, then tries to pick Vince up. He gets a kneelift, then rolls up and delivers an elbowdrop. With Vince down, Zach returns to the top rope, only to get tossed off by Vince and through the Spanish announcer's table. Vince then orders the referee not to count. He waves to the back, and Big Show and A-Train emerge.

Show picks Gowen out of the wreckage and tosses him over the top rope from the floor. Tim White goes to ring the bell for a DQ, but Vince stops him and orders him not to. White protests, so A-Train gives him a Derailer. The triple-team continues until Kurt Angle charges the ring to a monster reaction. Big Show gets an overhead suplex, A-Train gets the Angle Slam, and Kurt helps Zach up. Kurt knocks Vince down and hands his leg to Zach. Zach applies the ankle lock as the crowd goes crazy. Mike Chioda runs to the ring to check on Vince, but Big Show knocks him down, then grabs Angle for the choke slam.

I receive the signal from backstage and charge the ring. Big Show is stomping on Gowen in the ring as I starting landing soupbones all over Show's face. A-Train is up and lowblows me, causing me to double over. The duo throw me into the corner, where A-Train does the avalanche. Big Show follows and goes to the top, but I pick him up out of the corner and Last Ride him... onto Vince. A-Train charges and gets a Tombstone for his trouble, but as I turn around, Eddie Guerrero runs in and clocks me with the US title belt. I slowly stand up and chase Eddie to the back as everyone in the ring is down.

Jack Doan enters and tries to restore order, tossing A-Train from ringside. Angle clotheslines Big Show over the top as Zach heads outside. Doan is distracted by Angle and tries to get him out of the ring as Zach returns with his other leg. He slugs it over Vince's head, knocking him down again. He covers, but only gets two. Vince yells at Doan, then points to the other referees, who are slowly getting up. Vince shoves Doan, and when Doan goes for the DQ, Vince clocks him. White and Chioda drag Doan out of the ring, and all three exit. With Brian Hebner out, who's left?

Vince turns around and boots Gowen in the head, then clobbers him a few times with the prosthesis. Vince struts around the ring as the crowd chants "Asshole" again. With no ref, he can continue to destroy Zach, then declare himself the winner. Vince picks Zach up and gives him a Stunner. He goes to do it again, but Zach is dead weight. Vince tries another time, but Zach flops down again. So Vince covers and starts to count his own pin, but even then Zach is up at two to Vince's shock.

Vince's Adam's apple bobs. He stares at this punk kid with one leg. He goes to the top rope and mocks Hogan's taunts, then dives off with a legdrop attempt. Zach rolls away, and Vince crashes to the mat. Zach is up and hits a seated dropkick on Vince. He climbs back to the top, and unlike at Vengeance, the corkscrew moonsault connects. He covers, and as he does, Michael Cole runs in from the announce table. He unbuttons his jacket... and reveals a SmackDown! ref's shirt!! He counts!! **1....2....3!!!!!!**

Back in the dressing room, the locker room is cheering wildly. All of them were into the drama of the match. An impromptu "Michael Cole" chant broke out. Much to the amazement of everyone, we had yet another candidate for show-stealer. Torrie taps me on the shoulder.

"Did we have a bad match at all?"

"I don't think so."

As the show goes off the air, there is no commentary. Cole and Tazz hold Zach Gowen on their shoulders and parade him around ringside as the crowds chants "Gowen! Gowen!"

Sunday, August 24, 2003, 11:58 PM

Phoenix, AZ

Vince McMahon had addressed us after SummerSlam to let us know he thought the event was one of the best in company history. He gave us the night to ourselves, and told the RAW group they could take their usual Tuesday meeting off. We were all to travel together for the next two days to celebrate. He also said that each of us would get a cut of the buyrate who had performed, and the four men in the ladder match were getting a bonus equivalent to two weeks' worth of pay for the best match of the night. After that, we were dismissed. That was three hours ago.

Now, Paul had called us into the conference room as soon as we got back to the hotel. He pulled his card out and slid it into the door lock on his hotel room. We entered, only to find a group of people already there. Christian, Rene Dupree, and Shawn Michaels were seated at the table. All three got up as we entered.

"Hey, wait a second," I blurted out. "How'd they get in here?"

"Relax, please," said Heyman. "They're with us."

"With us?"

"Yeah. These are the guys who work with Vince on the RAW side of things. We're here to talk about how things are going on both sides."

Lindsay immediately sat down next to Rene, while Kathleen hesitated. In the end, I moved over next to Christian, while Paul and Kathleen walked close to us. Kathleen nervously took a seat next to Lindsay. Paul and Shawn walked up to the front of the table.

"Wait a second," said Dupree. "Is he...?"

"I am," said Paul. "And for Andy's sake, Shawn here is the guy you would go to on RAW. After the roster split up, I was busy trying to be on both shows at once. Managing Brock Lesnar seemed to allow me to bounce from show to show, since he would be used as a top contender and later the Undisputed Champion. But then HHH made the decision to have two shows, two champions. So I needed help."

"That's where I came in," Michaels continued. "I was visited by an angel the night after SummerSlam and told my services would be needed. When she explained that people were working on trying to save Vince, I was all for it. I just never thought it would be like this. It's been a year since I began my job, and I must say I have no regrets about doing it. God chose me, and I praise Him for believing in me."

Wow, he sounds like a convert. I guess when you fall to the bottom and find yourself back on top, you would put everything in the thing that got you there, whether it's a religious life or a new friend. I just never thought of that.

"Now, I'm aware that some of you have never been in contact with the other

group. In particular, each of us has a new recruit here. So that's why we're meeting. It's to get everyone on the same page, basically. Either of you two have any questions?"

I looked over at Rene. He said nothing at first, then slowly began to speak. "Well... I was just wondering... am I here for the long haul? Do I ever switch over to SmackDown!?"

"You might," said Shawn. "The last thing we need is to make people complacent. Complacency leads to a sense of forgetting why you are here. We can't have that happen. So, in the near future it may be necessary to switch some of you around."

I spoke up. "Do you want us to focus on the roster or on Vince? Which is a bigger commitment?"

"Well, it's like this," said Paul. "Anyone you can get is just fine. There will be some weeks where you don't get the chance to change Vince's mind on anything. Some weeks, you'll be stuck working with the workers only. Other times, you'll have a very specific instruction. If you wake up and you're someone's brother, sister, parent, child, husband, or wife, it might be because God believes you can do your best work on that one person. But for the most part, if you can talk to Vince, try to make him a better person."

Shawn added, "That's part of the advantage of switching around that you guys have. The more people Vince thinks he's hearing it from, the more likely he is to accept it. It's still a long shot in most cases -- I mean, Paul and I have his ear, but you guys -- well, just do what you can."

Christian spoke up. "And guys, just remember this: as much as you may not have liked someone before, when you deal with or become that person, you have to put those differences aside. It's something I learned the hard way, and it's something you'll have to learn eventually. It's a difficult task, but I think you are all up to it."

Lindsay, as Josh, added, "I can tell you all right now that what happened this week was a prime example. On SmackDown! right now, I'm working with two relatively new people for whom this was their first Pay-Per-View experience. Both of them were in positions where they could speak to Vince, and he would listen. Well, I watched what they were doing, and Vince was listening. It may not have been directly about himself, but it was progress."

"And really, progress is all we can ask for," continued Shawn. "Vince isn't going to change overnight. Not too many people do. I know I didn't. Plus, everyone goes to their own time, and Vince is on his own time. It may have taken me a couple years and a marriage to a wonderful person before I realized I needed to change my ways, but for someone like Vince -- I mean, it's been almost ten years and we're still fighting. Just remember, it does no good for you to go all-out. You have to chip away at his armor. There will be setbacks, and there will be victories. But I don't want to hear of anyone giving up."

"Now," said Paul, "are there any more concerns? Anything you think we should know about?"

I guess Shawn should know, if he doesn't already...

"Actually, Paul... while I was backstage I found I had kept my glasses with me, so I looked around with them. I didn't see who everyone here is, but I did notice one person on RAW whose appearance surprised me. I know you said not to bring them, but I..."

"It's all right. It was a rookie mistake. Who was it?"

"It was Mol... Nora. She... uh... she was dark and featureless when I looked at her. It was like someone had taken a picture and colored her in in gray and black. I didn't know what it was."

Shawn and Paul looked at each other. Shawn nodded.

"Okay, I've been told of that condition before... I just didn't think it was around now," he said. "I saw this in someone in the audience when we were at a live RAW one time. I prayed for an answer as to what it was... heck, I had no idea people could be that way. Basically... the answer is... her soul is in trauma."

"Trauma?" asked Rene and Kathleen simultaneously.

"Yeah. It means something bad has happened or is happening to her. Whatever it is, it's something she doesn't deserve, and it's very serious. She's being victimized... I just wish I knew how. But we need to get her help if that's the case. I was told that victims are at a higher risk for suicide than most people."

"Shawn," said Rene, "let me work on it. Whoever I am, I'll talk to her."

"Good luck," I said. "I couldn't get her to talk to me about it. Heck, I tried to tap her on the shoulder and she freaked out."

"Greg," said Shawn, "if you think you can do anything, go right ahead. Vince is likely to be taking this week off the road after the match, so I guess we can all work on individuals. Paul, what do you think?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Okay then. I guess I have nothing else to add, so if you want to get to know each other, now's the time to do it."

We began to get into little conversations. Greg -- Rene -- was talking to Kathleen, and the two seemed to be vaguely familiar with each other. Lindsay walked up to discuss things with Shawn and Paul. I turned to Christian.

"So, I guess you've figured out I'm new here."

"Yeah, it was kind of obvious. But that's okay. What's your real name?"

"Andy. I got here about three weeks ago. The sniper hit me. At least, that's what they said."

"Oh yeah... heard about you. Tough break, man. But at least you're a big-name celebrity now."

"Hardly. I'm six feet under."

"It doesn't matter, man. Fame is eternal. You're the man now!"

"Are you pulling my leg?"

He paused for a few seconds. "Actually, yes. I mean, I was tryin' to cheer you up."

"I'm fine, man. I think I can get used to this."

"Hey... we all have that moment when it sinks in. Right now, you probably feel like this is all kinda surreal. Trust me, I've been here over 4 years. Eventually, the surreal thing goes away and you just get lost in who you are each week."

"Yeah, Lindsay told me about that. That people would bail out to Recovery when they needed time to be used to themselves."

"Right... for me it was a little harder the first few weeks, to be honest. I had a lot of emotions in this. I had to fight sabotaging this campaign for almost two months!"

"Why? Why would you want to send Vince to Hell?"

"Because... well, because his family and my family don't get along. And in fact,

when Shawn here was named an intermediary, it took a while to convince me to go forward. I couldn't forgive him for some of his actions."

"Some of his actions? What did he ever do to you?"

"It's not what he did to me, but he was Vince's pet, and he was always there to talk Vince into keeping up something or another against my family. I got sick of it. But that was so long ago... anyway, the point is, it's hard to be yourself and do this job at the same time. One day, you're going to need time off. Just don't be afraid to ask for it. That's why there's so many of us."

I didn't answer. A lot of things were running through my head. *His family doesn't like the McMahons. He couldn't work here a few weeks after his death. He didn't like Shawn... those traits all sound really familiar...*

"What's on your mind, Andy?"

"I don't know who you are, but I feel like I should."

"Go ahead and look. You'll know."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my glass case. At the same time, Christian slipped his glasses on.

"You know, Andy, you look like you could've been a good wrestler."

"Thanks."

I unfolded the glasses. For some reason, my moves were rather deliberate. I was having trouble maneuvering around. *That match must've been harder than I thought.*

"Tired?"

"I guess so. I'm just sore."

"Don't worry about it. Long matches take a time to get used to."

"How long after you died did you need?"

"Actually, not long at all."

"Why not?"

"Just put them on, man, you'll see."

I finally put them on and looked up. A man in his mid-thirties was staring back at me. His blond hair was in a bowl cut around his head. His nose looked like it had been broken a few times. His bright blue eyes stood out, even behind the glasses, with a passion for life. His mouth curled into a smile as he saw me look at him -- a smile I'd seen several times from a distance, but only how had the pleasure of seeing upfront.

I laughed. He smiled. Kathleen looked over. "What's so funny, guys?"

"Don't you know who this is?"

"No..."

"Check it out."

Shawn saw Kathleen put her glasses on. I could tell he was smiling the smile of a parent whose 12-year-old daughter is attending an N'Sync concert. It was a smile that said, "These people are happy, and I'm happy for them."

Kathleen's jaw dropped. She squealed and slid over the table. She gave him a big hug. "I can't believe it! I've heard so much about you!"

"Hey, easy, easy," he replied. "Don't get too emotional."

"Sorry..."

"It's all right, but... man... you don't know how strong you are now!"

We all laughed until Paul broke up the merriment. "Guys, we've been in here about

30 minutes. We should head back so that we all get some sleep and can wake up on time tomorrow. Now, I've reserved Van 7 for myself and Shawn, so tomorrow, make sure to go to that one. All right? Good. Group dismissed."

Greg and Lindsay headed for the door. Kathleen and I went up to Shawn and Paul, smiles across our faces.

"Man, why didn't you tell us about him?"

"Because I didn't want you guys to be anxious to see him. He's only going to be around for a few days anyhow before we split up again. Just get some sleep... you guys can talk in the morning."

"All right, Mr. Heyman."

"Sure thing, Paul."

Kathleen bounded out the door. I turned around and removed my glasses. Christian was right behind me, ready to return to the real world -- his world.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, I'll see you too."

"You know, I'm glad we got to meet."

"It'll be fun. See you tomorrow, Andy. Good night."

"Good night, Owen."

I was myself again. I was standing at the Exxon station where I had been shot. As I pumped the gas, I saw a figure moving in the shadows. I stopped and looked for him. Nothing. I turned around and headed back to pumping gas.

Just then, I felt a hand grab me. I spun around and found myself face to face with a man bigger than I was and twice as mean. He wound his fist up and punched me once in the face. I went down, and the gas spilled on my left leg. He laughed as he produced a match.

"No... no... don't do this... please..." I begged.

"It has to be done," he sneered. He lit the match and dropped it. The flames consumed my leg, but nowhere else on my body. I yelled in pain and began to try to roll, only to find the gas fumes too strong. The flame kept re-igniting as the man stood there, not laughing or smiling, but just watching. I began to lose feeling in that leg. I saw skin fly off and bone take its place. I let out one final scream.

I sat bolt upright in my bed. I looked at the clock. It was 7:55 AM. Sweat dripped down my face. I was short of breath. I looked for my glasses -- they were there, next to me on the table. I took a deep breath and flopped back onto the bed.

"Hey, you ok in there, buddy?"

A man emerged from around the corner. It was Shannon Moore, his toothbrush in his mouth, as he went through his morning routine. His blond hair was already pulled back behind his head as he checked in. He had a towel around his waist.

"Yeah... I'm fine... just a dream..." I sputtered. "Well, I guess it's time to get up

anyway."

"Yeah it is. Hey, if you need any help gettin' around, just lemme know."

Need help getting around? "Okay, Shannon... but I guess I'll be fine."

"All right, dude."

I lay back in the bed for a while. *What a crazy dream. Wait a second... I haven't had a dream of any sort since I died. Why am I having one now? Is there a message? I don't get it. Did the person I am have the dream, or did I?*

Well, I guess there's no use thinking about it too much. Today's the start of a new week. I just gotta go through it one step at a time. As long as I can put one foot in front of the other, I'll do all right for myself.

I pulled the covers off of me and got out of bed. I grabbed my glasses and put them on, then started to walk over to the mirror. After a couple of steps, I fell flat on my face. The noise got Shannon's attention, as he ran over to help me up and sat me on the bed.

"Careful, man. You all right?"

"Yeah... I guess I wasn't as awake as I thought."

"Well, take it easy, bro. We got a free day ahead of us, and we wouldn't wanna see anyone get hurt outside the ring."

I sat there, wondering what had happened. *How did I trip up? I was walking just fine.* I looked down at my body -- with the glasses on, I couldn't see any injury. I pulled the glasses off.

My breath shorted out. I had a lump in my throat. I suddenly realized why I had fallen down immediately. I also realized why I had had the dream I did. And most importantly, I realized that just putting one foot in front of the other wasn't happening this week.

I don't have a foot to put in front of the other!

No need to look in the mirror this time. There was only one person I could be. I was Zach Gowen.

FOURTH WEEK

Monday, August 25, 2003, 10:15 AM
Phoenix, AZ

I limped out of the hotel and headed to Van 7. My bag was over one shoulder, while a suitcase trailed on the ground on wheels behind me. Every other step was slow, deliberate, and frustrating. I was scared of delaying the group, so I had headed for the van early. Even then, my speed was severely hampered.

I dropped off my luggage in the trunk and staggered around to the front of the van. I held on to the side of the van as I scooted along, like a toddler taking his first steps. Every couple of steps, I attempted to let go of the side of the van and walk on my own. My right leg advanced normally, but the follow-through step invariably saw the prosthesis bend in ways a leg shouldn't. I would stumble into the van's side and be forced to start over.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, I made it to the passenger door. I pulled myself up the stairs and stared at the long alley leading between the four rows of seats. Shawn was talking to the driver near the back. His eyes were away from me, but he still heard me pull myself into the aisle. He quickly turned around and offered a hand.

"Hey, I thought you were coming on here."

He placed himself under my left shoulder and half-carried me to the back row. With his help, I sat down in a back seat, spread out across two chairs.

"Hey, driver... make sure you help this kid out when we get to Tuscon, ok?"

"Sure thing, Shawn."

The two continued their conversation outside the bus. I stared out the window at the other WWE superstars, who were co-ordinating a game of touch football in the parking lot. Rey ran a long fly pattern, and Kurt Angle threw a spiral to him that was just a little too high. Rey made a leaping catch in the end zone. *I wish I could do that. Well, normally, I would.*

As I sat in the back reading a book, I heard a scuffle outside. It was coming from the opposite side of the van, over by where Shawn and the driver had been talking. I tried to look in that direction, but my leg didn't fold enough to let me get out of the seat initially. Soon, I wouldn't need to get up; the problem came to me. Kane got on board, and he looked mad.

"There you are, you little punk!" His voice reverberated throughout the van. Shawn climbed aboard in an attempt to hold him back, but Glen just shoved him aside. "You pathetic little man. Look how you got to where you are! You're here because God screwed up with you!"

"W-w-w-what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about that leg, Zach! I'm talking about how you're a WWE wrestler because you have one leg! Look at me! You don't see me taking advantage of the raw deal I was given!"

Wait a second... Kane got the raw deal, not Glen...

"Now, G-g-glen, just calm down..."

"I am KANE, dammit! And I will teach you who I am, and why I am! Look right

here!"

He produced a book of matches from his pocket. My eyes grew wide. I didn't understand what was going on, but if Glen Jacobs really had lost sight of reality, I might die twice within one month.

"Kane... sir... what d-d-did I do to you?"

"It's what everyone did to me! You mock me! Your presence mocks me! I can't have that! You're going to have to pay!"

Shawn had finally spun him around. "GLEN! What the hell are you doing?"

Glen stared right through Shawn. "Do you know who I am?"

"I thought I did..."

"DO YOU KNOW... WHO I AM???" As he spoke, Glen pointed to his eyes. "Can you SEE who I have BECOME?"

"Get off this van right now!" Shawn yelled. "You have no right to be here!"

"You know I do, Shawn. Now, answer the question: Do you KNOW who I have BECOME?"

Shawn stared at Glen as an uneasy silence reigned for thirty seconds. Suddenly, it seemed a thought occurred to Shawn. He slowly reached for his pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses, much like the ones we had. *Well, if Paul has them, I guess Shawn should too.* He put them on. Immediately, he burst out laughing.

"What do you find so damn funny?" Glen demanded. "Are you mocking me?"

I searched for my glasses. As I pulled them out, Glen turned to me and roared. "Don't you dare! You don't deserve to know what I am!"

It was too late. I had put the glasses on. As I did, he smiled broadly. My fear left me, replaced with a combination of anger, relief, and laughter.

"Dammit, Owen, don't ever do that again!"

"I gotcha good, didn't I?"

I was speechless. Shawn, Owen, and I laughed for a minute solid. None of us could speak. I had gone from having the greatest scare in my life to having the closest feeling of kinship. *Owen has to care for me, I figured, if he's willing to make me the butt of a joke.*

We were still laughing when another person boarded the bus. It was Chavo Guerrero, his arm still in a brace as he sat down. He then stopped and looked at Glen. He panicked.

"Sorry, guys," he said. "I'm in the wrong place."

He hustled off the bus. *Ummm, okay.*

Meanwhile, I heard another, lighter pair of footsteps in the distance. I looked up to see Stacy enter the bus. She slowly walked her way to the back, looking down the whole time. Finally, she sat in front of me and smiled. "This is so much fun!" she said. I put my glasses on again. A man's face was looking back at me, covered in Stacy's makeup. He smiled and blew a kiss at me.

"Yecch! What the...?"

I quickly pulled the glasses off. It was Stacy again, giggling. Kane began to laugh loudly. "So Andy, I guess you've never been a Diva before? Don't worry, man. It'll happen to you soon. In the meantime, I don't think you two were officially intro'd. Andy, this is Greg. He's my partner over on the RAW side. Greg, this is Andy. He's the newest member

of the force."

"Hi, Andy. Sorry to scare you like that. I just wanted to get a reaction out of somebody."

"It's all right, Greg. I'll... recover. But between you and Owen... sheesh."

"Actually, I'm kind of excited. I've never been a woman before."

"Really? Probably would explain your walk."

"What do you mean?"

"You were looking down at yourself the whole time, Greg," Owen chimed in. I slipped on my glasses -- *now that the initial shock's over, I might as well know who I'm talking to* -- and wondered why it was my SmackDown! brethren hadn't arrived yet. Looking around, everything seemed so strange. There was Greg, looking like a drag queen instead of one of the most beautiful people in wrestling; there was Owen, his eyes replaced by Kane's contact lenses; and there I was, with three legs -- my own, and the prosthesis. *Welcome to my world.*

"Is this seat taken?"

I was snapped out of my daydream by a familiar voice -- Big Show's. I looked up, expecting to be dwarfed by his presence, but instead found Lindsay smiling back at me. I quickly removed the glasses to get the view I expected.

"Um... is there room for both of us right now?"

"I think so. Here, let me help you with that." Show moved my leg and enabled me to bend it. I was now sitting facing forward, with almost no room thanks to being paired with a 500 pounder. "Wow, you got the short straw."

"How?"

"No one I know of has ever been Zach before."

Just what I need.

Shawn returned to the bus with the driver and with Paul. Paul gave the signal, and the doors closed. The bus started to pull out of the parking lot. I began counting. *Hang on... one, two, three, four, five, six... shouldn't there be seven of us?*

"Paul, wait!"

"No, no... everything's fine."

01:17 PM

Tucson, AZ

The gang decided to stop for lunch before heading to the arena. We were in the IHOP outside of Tucson, enjoying a very large lunch. Poor Paul was forced to sit between Owen and Lindsay, which wouldn't have been bad if they weren't Kane and Big Show. On the opposite side, Shawn sat between myself and Greg -- er, Stacy. It must have been quite a sight, with the three largest people on one side of the table. "I think my lunch just gravitated your way, Paul," joked Shawn.

As we were finishing up, I tried to start a conversation with Paul. Quite frankly, something was on my mind, but I didn't know if it was appropriate here. *Good thing we each have two names, or I think I'd go a little crazy.*

"Say, Paul, I don't know if you heard, but a funny thing happened this morning."

"You mean what this guy did?" he asked, pointing at Kane all the time.

"No, but that was pretty good. Actually, it may have been something he did. All I know is, Chavo came on the bus, took one look at him, and hightailed it for the hotel. What did you do, man?"

"Nothing," said Kane, throwing his hands up. "Seriously, I just saw him there and he ran off."

Paul put his finger to his mouth. "We'll discuss this later."

Suddenly, I heard a series of familiar voices enter the restaurant. Andrew Martin (Test), Undertaker, Shannon Moore, Matt Hardy, Dustin Runnels (Goldust), and Eddie Guerrero all entered. Paul began to motion that there was space next to him. *Uh, where?* Management brought in a few more tables and we began a lengthy and enjoyable conversation. "Heck," Shawn pointed out, "Bell time ain't for another three hours anyway."

Halfway through, Test made a motion to our side of the table. "Hey, Shawn, may I sit there?" I looked to where he pointed. *I can't imagine why he wants to-- oh, wait, Stacy.* Shawn immediately agreed, and the laughter continued.

After another hour of conversation, the checks all arrived. Everyone reached for their respective pocketbooks, but Paul stopped me. "Remember," he whispered, "you guys are on me."

"Paul, where are you getting all this money from?" I wondered. "Money doesn't just come from Heaven, does it?"

"Don't worry about it. If I want to pay for a meal, I can, right?"

"All right."

Just then, I overheard a comment from across the table. "I got it, Eddie. After what you helped me do, you deserve it."

The voice was clearly Mark Calloway's.

We were in the conference room at Tuscon. Lindsay and I sat next to each other, across from Paul. Shawn was talking to Greg and Owen elsewhere.

"Okay, guys, we're all here tonight, so you know what to do. Just play it calm, be yourselves, hang out with the SmackDown! guys, and be ready for anything that can come your way. Now, Andy, I've noticed you're a fast learner, and Lindsay -- well, you're really experienced in this, so I don't have many worries."

"Um, Paul..."

"Yeah, Lindsay?"

"Where's Kathleen?"

"Oh, she begged out this week. You see--"

"Wait a second. Begged out? But she's not allowed to do that!"

"Andy, let me explain. It hasn't been 18 years since she was born. That means she is still a child in our eyes. I can't make her do anything she doesn't want to -- if I did that, I'd be overstepping my authority. Point is, she's in Recovery right now, taking time off to be herself. Just remember, she is not your business. Vince is."

I bit my lip. *Something just didn't make sense. What was with Kathleen? She got to choose? Eh, I guess if this were my first job I'd be nervous too.*

My mind wandered back to her complaints from two weeks ago. She had talked about being alone -- not having any family, either her own or her parents'. She had no friends either. *But that's not true. She does have friends. She has us, doesn't she? And Paul certainly is her friend. But do we count? Or are we just associates?*

"Is something bothering you, Andy?"

I looked up. Lindsay and I were alone in the room. "Paul said I should wait until you were ready to leave. What's on your mind?"

"Lindsay, it's..." *I can't tell her. Gotta think of something.* "...I had a weird dream last night."

"You did? What was it?"

"Well, I was back where I died, and... this guy came out and set my leg on fire. After a while I couldn't feel anything. The thing is, I was me -- not Undertaker, not Zach, ME! I don't understand why I would dream if I don't have a mind to produce a subconscious and all that... psychobabble."

Lindsay shook her head. "You didn't really dream. You were given a heads-up."

I looked at her, confused. "A heads-up? I didn't get one when I started, or when I took any of my other jobs."

"I know, Andy. Sometimes, though... well, sometimes, something happens that you need to be warned of. Like for me... it was one of my first weeks on the job, and I was about to be the British Bulldog. Before the week started, I got this image of being surrounded by these shadows. I was swinging at them, but I couldn't faze them. One of them approached me and I felt myself fall flat. Then a series of impacts followed."

"Lindsay, if I can interrupt... that... that was a long time ago. How do you remember?"

"You don't forget. You'll never forget that image of your leg on fire. Anyway, the deal is, it was to warn me. Davey had just been attacked by a group of street thugs, and while his body hadn't shown any ill effects, his soul was victimized. I had to try to figure out how to make him move on from this instance."

"Did you?"

"Not in a week, no. What's worse, that violent moment just never left him. I began to see him talking and thinking in a more abusive manner. He was always causing trouble backstage, picking fights with people and yelling at anyone who disagreed. I don't know where he is now."

"Lindsay... he's dead."

"I mean... whether he's in Heaven... or... not."

"You mean he could be in Hell?"

"Andy, I'm not sure there is a Hell anymore. These things," she said as she disdainfully produced her glasses, "they've made me realize that we're in a very fragile state. If we die, and our soul is lost, does it ever appear? Think about it. When you look at Vince, you don't see anything. So if he died, would there be anything to go to Hell? Is there a Hell to go to?"

Silence.

"I... I don't know, Lindsay. I just think there is."

"Andy, I don't know either. But I know I'd rather be in Heaven than anywhere else when my time is up. And I want everyone to be there. Not just Vince -- and when he dies, whoever else I help -- but everyone. And I especially want myself to be there."

"But you will be there. Just stay healthy and when your time is up, your ticket is punched, isn't it?"

Lindsay didn't answer.

"You are going to Heaven, right?"

"Yes, I am... probably... as of now... but I... there's so much time. So many things can go wrong. And it's not just me. You could mis-step. Look what happened with that girl! I don't know if John's life will be the same. And he didn't do it -- you did!"

"But I... I tried to avoid it! I'm okay now, aren't I?"

"Andy, that's not it. The point is, every action you take has to be measured. Everything I do has to be carefully executed. Everything we do right now has to be selfless because we have no self. That's just the point."

I wiped my brow off, even though I wasn't sweating. Something about this conversation was more intense than any wrestling match I'd ever been in.

"So I can live on my own? This is it? I have to masquerade for the next however many months or years? Why did this happen? What's in it for me?"

She looked straight into my eyes. Even though the glasses weren't on, I could see her staring at me through the window of Paul Wight's eyes.

"What's in it for you is eternal joy. What's in it for me is to be forever at peace."

Something in her voice -- even though it was delivered with Big Show's gruff baritone -- was more soothing than anything I had heard since St. Peter greeted me. The idea of being in Heaven was not just appealing, it was my goal. I just didn't understand why I had to jump through hoops to be there.

"Lindsay," I finally said after about a minute. "Why can't we just be us, just for a little while?"

"We can," she said. "Remember, Kathleen's being herself right now. And besides, do you really think Undertaker would say the things he said when you were he? You became Undertaker, but he became you."

"I... I'm confused."

"It's a hard balancing act. My first few months, I was confused too. I'm just glad I had some great people to guide me. Now I want to guide you. I care about you."

"You do?"

"We all do. Now, come on. We have a lot of living left to do."

She placed her mammoth arm around my shoulder. The warmth in her embrace -- even if it wasn't from her directly -- made me realize that my worries probably were for naught.

"Let's go."

And off we went, a seven-footer with an earring and a tiger tattoo next to a tiny twentysomething with one leg. We may have been an odd couple, but we were together, and that was all that mattered.

Monday, August 25, 2003, 05:51 PM
Backstage at Tucson, AZ

As Big Show and I left the conference room, I saw Shawn approach us out of the corner of my eye. I told Show to wait up and turned around to face him. Shawn's face seemed to tell the whole story. He was upset, as if he loathed this part of the assignment.

"Guys," he said, as if struggling to find the words, "Paul and I just got word that there's going to be a trade on the air."

I was nonplussed. "So?"

"Well... it involves Big Show."

Show's face went limp. He seemed incapable of handling the thought. I looked up at him for a reaction, but got none. I turned back to Shawn. He was trying to maintain his composure. I felt a tear run down my cheek, in anticipation of the worst.

"Shawn... does that mean...?"

"Yeah. We have to switch up with them. Now, we wanna keep the numbers the same, but there's no one who's really coming back in the trade. I don't know how we'll handle this. It's... Andy, can you go it alone this week?"

I was stunned. I hadn't even been on the job a month, and they wanted to know if I could do this without help. I didn't know how to reply. My throat was dry, and my hands shook. This was a lot of responsibility without a guiding hand... *wait, I have a guiding hand, don't I?*

"Shawn... I won't be alone. Paul will be with me, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Forgot about him. Man, this is hard. I mean, we're trying to see how we can work this out so that we get the numbers back to where they belong. I'll keep you updated. In the meantime..."

He pulled out his card and walked toward a door. He slid it in the doorjamb and opened it to the conference room.

"...if you wanna watch RAW alone, I understand."

Show was now crying as he walked toward the door. He turned around.

"Where's Paul?"

"I'll try to find him. He's working with Stephanie right now on SmackDown!. I can't make any promises. I'm sorry."

I slowly walked through the door, my tiny frame actually fitting beneath Show's outstretched arm as he leaned against the doorjamb. I limped to the seat nearest the television screen and sat down. I waited.

"I hate this part..."

"What's that, big guy?"

Show had taken his seat behind me. His massive arms actually curled around me when we were both just seated naturally.

"I hate having to move around. I mean, you get used to a group of people, a group of personalities... and then every once in a while, they need to make sure you don't get too comfortable. I don't blame them for what they're doing... I mean, if you're going to switch someone, this is the best way to do it... but I still wish it hadn't happened."

I hesitated. "Why do you think it's happened?"

"I don't know. I mean, for Paul Wight, it's because he has nothing to do on

SmackDown! anymore. For me? I'd like to think it's more than just wrong place, wrong time. Maybe they trust you now."

"How so?"

"Well, I was kept here when Kathleen arrived. I was told to help her get adjusted to her new life. Then you came along, and I felt like I was doing double duty. But you've... you seem to be ready for this. I don't know what it is, but you learned faster than anyone I know except maybe Owen. It's like you were born to help others."

"Aren't we all, Lindsay?"

"Well, yeah... but I mean... you... well, you see, it's funny. Most of us don't really think about dying. We go from alive to... this. I know when that glass came flying at me, I was still recovering from the sound of the explosion. I sure wasn't ready to die."

"No one is... especially at our age."

"Yeah, but... when Owen came aboard, it was the happiest day for all of us. We thought we had lost him, and now he was back with us. But the funny thing was, he didn't really have a shock period. He told me he had three seconds in the air to prepare for dying. He said those three seconds were the scariest of his life, but when he crashed... and he woke up with St. Peter... he said he knew what had happened, and it helped him accept his lot."

"Well, what does that have to do with me, and how I help others?"

"You said yourself you never saw it coming. You didn't feel the bullet enter your brain. And yet... you seem to be willing to accept your lot. Why is that?"

I thought for a moment. The words struggled to enter my mind. *Why should I be so used to this? I didn't ever get to see anyone in the WWE in person before I died, and now I'm surrounded by them, and within them, and it means nothing. I know I took acting lessons, but with that, you can turn it on and off. Here, it's always. It's... almost... permanent. It IS permanent. It's the next 50 years!*

"I... I guess..." I finally stammered after about a minute, "I guess it's that... well, can I still talk religion here?"

"Sure... I mean, it means nothing, really anymore, but sure."

"See, I was a Catholic, and... we're supposed to help others. That's all I know. So I guess that..." *Hang on. What did she say?* "...wait, it means nothing? Why?"

"Well, isn't all religion based on faith? And isn't faith having never seen anything and still believing?"

"Yeah..."

"But you've seen it all! You know what the afterlife is because you're in it. Religion is for the living. To us, it's nothing more than a direction to point a lost soul in. We don't need religion. We have the truth staring us in the face."

Man, that's deep. "I never... thought of it that way. But... you're right. Anyway... to answer what you said, I... I don't know why I'm so quick to adjust. I guess I just don't feel dead. I can actively participate. I think, therefore I am, you know? But... I'm not... I'm buried, falling apart... the only evidence of me right now as I am is in this room, and 99% of the world doesn't know I still exist."

"It's crazy, isn't it?"

"I guess so... can we just watch RAW now? I... just don't want to think about it."

"Hey, it was hard for me, too, at first. Don't worry... you'll be fine. But you're

right... the show is beginning."

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Aug. 25 / 03

- Live from Tucson, AZ.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Jerry Lawler**.

- Opening interview: **Steve Austin** comes out to rile up the crowd. After asking for a case of beer to be delivered to his office, he begins business matters. He mentions that he was upset with the finish to the World Title match. The finish, sure, but what about the rest of it, too? I mean, isn't there enough to go around? At any rate, he declares that he wants a rematch at Unforgiven, and to make sure nothing stupid happens, he'll be the referee. Second order of business: **Kane**. See, according to Austin, you just don't destroy everyone for malicious reasons. So Austin declares that tonight, Kane will face **Goldberg** and **Booker T** in a handicap match. **Eric Bischoff** interrupts and complains about losing the Inter-Promotional Brawl™, so he did something about it. **Test** has been shipped to SmackDown! for two unnamed wrestlers, and joining him will be the loser of tonight's match between **Randy Orton** and **Rob Van Dam**. **Evolution** comes out to protest, but that brings **Goldberg** out to counter them and a huge brawl erupts as RVD and Booker charge the ring to even the sides. Austin and Bischoff, of course, take their beer and run. Interesting segment, to say the least.

- **La Resistance** v. **Maven** and **Hurricane**. BUT WAIT! **Lance Storm** appears at the entrance ramp in a mask and colorful new wardrobe of his own, proclaiming that he knows the Hurricane's secret and will destroy him. Well, if they had to give Lance a personality, might as well be one that can go over the top. Hurricane is notably distracted and attacked from behind. **Dupree** gets a slam and elbowdrop, then prances. Hurricane airballs a Shining Wizard, allowing **Grenier** to hit a kneedrop for two. Abdominal stretch, with Dupree's help, wears Hurricane down. Backbreaker gets two. Dupree in with a gutwrench suplex for two. Back suplex gets two. Grenier tries a piledriver, but Hurricane reverses. Dupree cuts off the tag and goes to a figure-four try, but Hurricane kicks him off. Grenier knees him in the back to keep the pressure up, but Hurricane delivers the Overcast out of a superplex attempt. Hot tag Maven, dropkicks abound. Storm re-emerges, allowing Hurricane to give chase. That leaves Maven two-on-one, and La Crepe finishes at 6:45. MUCH better than it had any right to be. **1/2 La Resistance continues the beating on Maven, but **Rob Conway** emerges to even the sides. He punches Grenier out, then brings the CLAWHOLD~! back to the WWE on Dupree. I guess the Iron Fist just wouldn't cut it.

We heard the door open behind us. Stacy entered... well, Greg entered as Stacy. She was crying. I gave her my seat as she reached for a handkerchief.

"What's wrong?"

"I... I don't know... I mean, after Eric said that Test was switching shows, I... I just started feeling upset."

I looked to Lindsay for an idea. *That is odd. I mean, what does it matter to us if someone else jumps around? I sure don't care who wins the next match, for instance.*

"Oh, dear. It's okay, Greg. You're just having an identity crisis."

"Wh-what sort?"

"Well, you're emotional right now because Stacy would be emotional. Her boyfriend is moving to another show, and she may not see him for a long time. I don't blame you for being upset. It's happened to me a lot of times."

"What do I do? I can't be like this!"

I began to think. "Maybe he should find Shawn?"

"Yeah, that's good. Or Paul. Either way, they'll know what to do."

She sniffed as she wiped away the last few tears. "All right... thanks."

She got up and left the room. I turned to Lindsay.

"You think we'll see her again this week?"

"We'll see her," he replied. "But we won't see him."

"I don't understand."

"The best thing to do in an identity crisis is get out. He has to find himself again."

"Man, that's two today!"

"I know... but I mean, it's just the luck of the draw. I remember some weeks where all four of us were forced to bail out. The night after Montreal... no one was in a good mood. We were all getting the life force sucked out of us. We had to rely on our intermediary to tell us what happened."

"Wow... but that was an isolated incident, wasn't it?"

"Yeah... but it happens. Just remember... it happens. And don't let anyone else's trouble become yours. If you need to get out, get out. All right?"

"All right." I felt like she was trying to teach me as much as possible before she moved to RAW.

- **Randy Orton v. Rob Van Dam. Evolution** comes out as a group, allowing RVD to dive onto all of them and begin the fight in the aisle. RVD tosses him around ringside and up to the broadcast position, which is now so far away as to make the whole thing contrived. **Triple H** adds a low blow from behind, earning himself an ejection but earning RVD a trip through the table. Eventually, the two men make it back to the ring as we take a break. We come back with RVD suplexing Orton and hitting the split-legged moonsault for two. Blind charge misses, and Orton posts RVD and wraps his leg up a few times. Back in, Orton gets a kneebar as **Lawler** speculates on what might happen if there's no decision in the match. RVD boots out, but Orton dropkicks him low, staggering him for the Play of the Day for two. Back to the leg, but RVD makes the ropes. Clothesline cues comeback #1, but RVD lands awkwardly during the backflip shoulder thrusts. Orton hits a single-leg crab, and RVD tries to wiggle out. He eventually makes the ropes. Orton dropkicks RVD out and baseball slides him for good measure. Back in, it gets two. Comeback #2 starts as RVD hits a leg lariat (good leg) and rotating legdrop for two. He stumbles during the stepover enzuigiri, allowing Orton to turn it into an anklelock. RVD pulls his foot out, but gets hit with the Flatliner for two. Indian deathlock follows, finally

being used in context, but RVD punches Orton off of him. Comeback #3 looks successful, as Rolling Thunder scores for two. To the top, but the Five Star comes up pitifully short as **JR** speculates the leg damage may have prevented RVD from getting the lift. Orton pounces on the leg, punching under the knee a few times, then slaps on the figure-four, using Flair for leverage until RVD blacks out and is "pinned" at 14:47. I don't like the pinfall finish in a figure-four, but this was still Orton's best match ever easily, and maybe RVD's best legitimate match. I can only imagine what he'll do on SmackDown! now.

***3/4

- Backstage, **Orton** catches up with **Bischoff** and asks for an Intercontinental Title shot. Bischoff agrees, but **Austin** postpones it until Unforgiven, because Booker T is facing **Kane** next week. That's not good.

- **Chris Nowinski, Rodney Mack, and Jazz v. Dudley Boyz and Trish Stratus**. Huge brawl to start, as you might expect, with **Theodore Long** haterizing on the outside, belee dat. Dudleyz run through their litany on Mack, but before the Wazup can be dropped, Nowinski slugs **Bubba** from behind and the Dudleyz clang heads. Ouch. Mack gets two. Nowinski comes in with a scoop slam for two as Bubba is YOUR face-in-peril. Jazz kicks him low for fun. Team Black hits a double DDT, giving Mack two. Mack hits a right cross for two. Belly-to-belly gets two. Nowinski with a brainbuster for two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. Bubba reverses a whip into a flapjack, but Mack cuts the tag off. Double clothesline gets two for Mack. Blackout, but Trish goes low to break. False tag to **D-Von**, who hits the Saving Grace on Mack before being escorted out. Nowinski with the Cactus DDT equals the score, and Mack rolls on top for two. Nowinski in with a missile dropkick for two. Bubba with a Bubba Bomb out of nowhere, and Trish gets the hot tag. Jazz gets pummeled and hit with the handstand rana for two. Nowinski pulls Trish away, Bubba returns, and it's BONZO GONZO as all six men are in. 3D for Mack, but as D-Von hunts for a table, Nowinski drills Bubba with his facemask for two. If they're going to milk this like the old "arm injuries", I'm all for it. Trish hits Stratusfaction on Nowinski (!) for two. Jazz breaks it up with the Jazz Stinger for two. D-Von returns and goes for a piledriver on Mack, but Nowinski sunset flips over him for the pin at 9:35. Perfectly Acceptable Wrestling. ** The Cast of Rent continue the beatdown on Trish afterwards, but **Molly Holly** runs in and stands up for women's rights everywhere by beating the daylights out of Long to a MONSTER pop. Wow, that turn worked. Dudleyz recuperate and chase off Team Black, leaving Trish to punk out Jazz and Molly to give Long a Molly Go Round. Trish and Molly embrace, completing the face turn. And a very effective one, at that.

- **Scott Steiner** piece. He'll be back next week. Oh, joy.

- "World" Title: **Triple H v. Goldust**. Lockup, and HHH shoves Goldust down. Dust reverses a hiptoss, then lands an elbow on HHH. HHH bails, so Goldust follows him out, but eats stairs. Back in, HHH USES THE KNEE for two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. Goldust sees a back body drop coming and hits a sliding punch on HHH, then goes low. Sunset flip gets two, reversed for two. Lariat by Goldust, but

HHH dodges a legdrop and punches Goldust down. Outside now, as Goldust hits the post, but backdrops HHH into the crowd. Back in, Goldust tries Shattered Dreams, but it's blocked by the ref. HHH goes outside and groins Dust on the post. Back in, he gets two. MAIN EVENT SLEEPER is reversed by Dust, but HHH breaks with a jawbreaker. Dust gets slugged out, but ducks a haymaker and hits a bulldog. Ref is bumped when Dust shoves HHH off during a Pedigree attempt, and HHH goes outside for the sledgehammer. Goldust hits a neckbreaker to prevent the sledge shot, then grabs the hammer and brings it down on HHH. Curtain Call follows... for the pin??? NO ONE in the arena believes it, and sure enough, here comes a second referee to DQ Dust for the sledge shot at 8:17. You know, with Dustin Rhodes, Ric Flair's protege, and the Big Gold Belt involved, why NOT have a Dusty Finish to send me up the wall? Very good brawl otherwise. ***1/4 HHH beats Goldust down as they head to the back. Good, Dust isn't the answer in the main event scene anyway.

- We go "live" to a hospital in Grand Rapids, MI, where **The Rock** is laid up in a bed (still with his shades on, of course). He proceeds to cut a very un-Rock-like promo on **Kane**, ending with the ominous words, "You have my attention." It'll be interesting to see if Rock learns his lesson about Kane from last week when he returns.

- Main event: **Booker T** and **Goldberg** v. **Kane**. Double-teaming to start, but Kane shrugs them both off. Goldberg is sent to the corner, leaving Booker alone. Kane slaughters him with clubbing fists and his CLOTHESLINES OF DOOM, but Booker keeps kicking out. Choke slam gets two as Goldberg is getting antsy. Booker reverses a Tombstone attempt into a sort-of Victory Roll for two. Missile dropkick and Spinaroonie, but Kane just choke slams him again for two. Tombstone, but Kane picks him up at two to continue the punishment. And of course, this backfires, as Booker hits an enzuigiri, hot tag Goldberg. Slam! Slam! Slam! Kane sits up and chokes Goldberg down in the corner, and as the ref tries to admonish Kane, **Triple H** returns. He shoves the ref out of the way and swings a chair at Goldberg, but Goldberg ducks and Kane gets it. HHH is sent to the outside, spear, jackhammer, good night at 5:44. *3/4 Kane sits up soon afterward, and EVERYONE runs for the hills as the show ends.

The Bottom Line:

Wrestling? On RAW? Could it be? An astoundingly strong effort from everyone involved, as someone must have told them spots at Unforgiven were on the line. Orton and RVD steal the show, and Van Dam's presence on SmackDown! can only help everyone over there.

Until next time, BUY THE BOOK!

Shawn walked into the room as RAW ended. His eyes were red, and it looked like he had been crying some.

"Okay, guys. Ready to drive ahead to El Paso?"

"Aren't we flying? It's a long ride."

"I know... but we can get some sleep on the way over. Paul and I will handle it."

Lindsay noticed what I did. "Are you ok, man?"

"Yeah... I just was helping Stacy recover. It's nothing..."

"Where's Greg?"

"He bailed. He's gonna be with you guys starting next week... well, with SmackDown! anyway. Come on, we gotta get going."

He walked out of the room as we got up to follow him. I started towards the door when I felt a giant hand on my shoulder. I turned around. Big Show had put his glasses on.

"Hey, Andy," she said, "Let me know how things go while I'm on RAW, ok?"

I smiled.

"I'll make sure to write whenever I can. And you tell me how everyone's doing on RAW, too, you got that?"

"Sure. I'll enjoy reading your words."

"And I yours."

I began to feel a little awkward. We sounded like she was moving across the country, or like I'd never see her again. I knew I would -- at the very least, we would meet again at Survivor Series. So why was I taking this so personally?

"I'll miss you, Lindsay."

"I'll miss you too."

We hugged. It was all we could think of doing before returning to the real world and preparing to go our separate ways.

Tuesday, August 26, 2003, 05:37 PM
El Paso, TX

There was still a twenty-minute period before SmackDown! started. I took advantage of the time to observe everyone's behavior. The RAW guys returned the favor from the previous night and accompanied us to this Texas border town for SmackDown!. A big deal was made about how the WWE/F hadn't been in town since 1989, and as if that weren't enough, there would be two homecomings -- one in the WWE, and one in El Paso.

I "paced" up and down the hall, waiting for the fireworks to sound and the matches to begin. In the distant background, I heard a couple of random guys go at it for Velocity. I looked over to the curtain and saw Paul Heyman directing traffic on the headset, while Michael Cole and Tazz went over last-minute notes. Everywhere there was a feeling of specialness about tonight.

I limped my way to the door outside the locker room when I saw a figure out of the corner of my eye. I turned to the right, looking down a long hallway. A large man walked toward me. He cut an imposing figure, even in his obviously advanced years, against the background. There was no mistaking his shape and gait; even if you could

overlook that, his vibrant costume and smiling swagger were dead giveaways. I smiled, out of habit.

For 24 years -- longer than I was alive -- this man dedicated his life to the craft. Ever since I was 7 years old, watching on closed-circuit television as he stood in Detroit, Michigan in front of thousands and thousands, I wanted to see him up close and personally. I cheered him to victory in Atlantic City, and cried at his loss in Toronto. He infuriated me at Daytona Beach, jaded me at Atlanta on live TV -- and yet when I saw him again in Milwaukee, and again in Toronto, I welcomed him back. And now... now, after so long -- too long -- here he is.

"Hogan... welcome back."

"Good to see you again, little dude."

I grabbed his bags and prepared to bring them in for him.

"Hey, thanks, brother, but this is one man who's learned to carry his own weight."

He insisted. I simply moved into the locker room, as fast as my leg could carry me. In the locker room, the RAW and SmackDown! guys were carrying on, with an uneasy tone to their activities, as if they were waiting for something big. As I entered, they hushed a little.

"Is he here, Zach?"

"Yeah."

Everyone went quiet. I took my place by the wall. We waited. After several seconds, he entered. Big Show started to clap. Goldberg followed. I chimed in. Kane gave his applause. Soon the entire locker room -- both shows -- was applauding his arrival. Undertaker walked up to him and stared him down. "Hogan," he said, "try to stick around this time, ok?"

We all laughed. It was like an old friend had moved back in from out of town.

06:25 PM

"No Chance in Hell" had played over the PA system as Vince McMahon walked out, a little angrier for the events of Sunday. I heard Tazz on commentary talk about how Michael Cole might be in trouble as I waited for my cue in the back. Vince grabbed the microphone.

"Now, I understand that some people are a little excited about the results of SummerSlam. After all, we had a good World Title match, where that whiny Kurt Angle lost the title. We had an amazing tag team match, where four guys gave it their all in the ring... yeah, go ahead, applaud them..."

I heard the boys in the back applauding as well.

"But something else happened at SummerSlam. Something that I personally am very upset about. You see, I had Zach Gowan beat. I had him on the way out of the WWE once and for all. I could've destroyed that little freakshow! But no. What happens? Kurt Angle sticks his nose where it doesn't belong! And as if that weren't enough, it appears there's one person here who has forgotten why he was brought into the WWE in the first place.... Michael, get in this ring."

Cole slowly climbed the ropes and entered.

"Let me ask you, Michael Cole... what in the hell did you think you were doing? You were brought in to handle the television show. You were NOT hired to be a referee! You went behind my back! You cost me the match, dammit! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't put you out on the street right this minute!"

"Well, Mr. McMahon... I received my referee's license, and there was a match... and Zach Gowen had you pinned. It was my duty to count the pin. I don't care what threat you make to Tim White or to anyone else. When I became an official referee for SmackDown!, and for SummerSlam, I was required to perform my job."

"Your... JOB? Your... JOB??? Your job is to sit at that desk right there and call the match, not to change its outcome! You made a mistake you are really going to regret. Michael Cole, I've heard people talk about you. They don't think you're any good. They talk about Josh Matthews being better than you are. And you know, up until Sunday I stood up for you. I gave you the benefit of the doubt. But I should've listened to the people. I should've canned your ass years ago when you made everyone wish J.R. could work through a stroke! Your announcing makes me sick, Cole! YOU make me sick!"

"Now hang on, Mr. McMahon... I want you to shut up RIGHT NOW! If you're thinking of going on a power trip and removing me from that seat right there because I performed my duty as an official, I will go to the courts and hire the best attorneys the federal government has to offer me. You don't think they still want to take you to the cleaners? Keep it up, Vince, and you might answer to me."

"Is that a threat? Are you threatening Vince McMahon?"

"I'm threatening the son <bleep> standing right in front of me!"

The crowd cheered. *I can't believe this. MICHAEL COLE is getting a face pop.* Vince sneered. He grabbed Cole by the lapel of his suit and looked right into his face.

"YOU WILL RESPECT ME, DAMMIT! I AM YOUR BOSS! I WRITE YOUR PAYCHECKS! I CAN BREAK YOU RIGHT NOW, DAMMIT! I--"

All Grown Up started up. I looked to Stephanie, who nodded back. Together we headed out to the aisleway. We stopped halfway down the aisle. Stephanie had a mic.

"Dad, I'm ashamed of you. Why are you beating up on someone like Michael Cole? He did what I signed him to do. Furthermore, don't even think of hurting him or his career. He is MY employee before he is YOURS. So Dad, let him get back to doing his announcing. Right now, I have something to tell you."

Vince reluctantly set Cole down. Cole dusted himself off and returned to the announcing table, never taking his eyes off of Vince as he did so. Stephanie continued.

"Now Dad, I can't believe you would be such a sore loser. I mean, you set up the match to try to eliminate this kid who was living his dream! Well, Vince, you got a surprise, didn't you? You couldn't stack the deck enough. I guess sometimes guts and heart are all you need."

"Stephanie, do you have a point? Actually, I know you don't. You're incapable of formulating one! So let me do it for you. First things first: Sunday was a fluke. Secondly: I eliminated Hogan before, and I'll get rid of him again. He was nothing in his last stay. I put all my efforts into eliminating him, rather than letting him rot on his own. This time, it's quite simple: I'll cut it off before it even starts! Hogan, if you're listening, I have ordered security to make sure you never set foot in a WWE arena. You may be under contract, but

you will not be stinking up my ring."

My turn.

"Actually, Vince, that's where you're wrong. You see, Hulk Hogan is a WWE wrestler and has every right to be here. In fact, I can guarantee for a fact that he is in the building right now!"

The crowd exploded in cheers. Vince looked at me, ready to stare a hole into my body. I felt a chill running down my spine. *He's good... either that, or something else...*

"Well, Zach Gowen, if that's true, then he'll be here to watch you be dismantled. I'm putting you in an I Quit match tonight! And I'm putting you against a man I KNOW takes pleasure in destroying others. You will be facing Chris Benoit tonight! I expect him to..."

"Dad... Dad, I hate to burst your bubble, but that match will not happen tonight. You see, Chris Benoit, as of today, is off the SmackDown! roster, and officially a part of RAW. So is the Big Show -- I wanted to get your favorite weapon away from you as soon as possible. Now, I want to apologize to all of you for trading away Benoit, but I had to include him to make the trade fair. But now, Vince, I hope you have a backup plan. I hope you hired a little insurance."

Vince's wide-eyed expression turned into an evil grin. "I sure did."

I felt someone knock me down from behind. I fell forward and rolled onto my back. I looked up. The FBI was standing over me, putting the boots to me and to Stephanie. Nunzio grabbed my prosthesis and yanked it off, hitting me about the shoulders with it. He then turned me over into an STF-like hold. I tapped and screamed as Vince laughed in the ring. Nunzio got off of me and waved off his associates. Vince growled into the microphone.

"That, Zach Gowen, is your challenge -- an I Quit Handicap match! I don't expect you to last 5 minutes. Enjoy the Rio Grande -- you'll be wearing a cement shoe at the bottom of it!"

No Chance in Hell started up again as the FBI and Vince walked off. I slowly rolled onto my back and pulled myself up. I found my prosthesis and re-attached it. I pulled Stephanie up off the floor and helped her to her feet. We hobbled off to the back, hurt but angry.

07:39 PM

My music hit as I limped my way out from the back. I rolled into the ring and stared at the entranceway. Tony Chimel introduced me, but it would be an entire commercial break before I would meet my opponents. It gave me 3-5 minutes to ponder the beating I was about to take.

Now, if I am to make this match believable, I have to think of some submission. Unfortunately, a lot of the ones Zach can do -- armbar, headlock, sleeper, etc. -- are, well, boring. I need one that'll get the crowd to realize it could end the match. But I'm alone against three guys... well, to start. I wonder what Guido's got in mind. I just hope I don't make him look like a total putz at the finish.

The FBI's Italian music started up as all three men walked to the ring, yelling at the crowd. They didn't get much of a reception -- it seemed that the audience was a little surprised that this match was the main event after all. However, their apathy turned to unanimous booing when Vince McMahon emerged behind them, smiling. He produced a roll of 20s, which Nunzio took and put in his jacket pocket. He then pointed at me. Chuck and Stamboli rushed the ring.

I tried to fight them both off, balancing on my prosthesis which I hadn't even had the time to remove. But the numbers were too much -- Stamboli kicked my good leg out, and I tipped over to the mat. Chuck grabbed my prosthesis and tossed it to ringside, where Vince began to taunt me with it. I reached the ropes, knowing that in an I Quit match, they were my sanctuary. With my leg, I kicked away at Stamboli, only to be booted by Chuck. Nunzio entered the ring and got in my face, slapping me around.

I grabbed his wrist and rolled him over for an armbar. Stamboli yanked me off of him and pounded away at me. I was tossed straight into a superkick from Chuck. I staggered backward, barely able to gain any push with my foot. *Well, at least I'd have had trouble standing anyway.*

Chuck and Stamboli picked Nunzio up and launched him into me. His head hit my leg, causing me to flail around in pain. Chuck picked me up for a torture rack, but I anticipated it and armdragged out of it, much like I'd seen Rey do against Kurt Angle. I got to my foot and charged Stamboli, dropkicking him out of the ring. Chuck charged, but I ducked and Nunzio took a clothesline, flying out of the ring. I hopped up behind Chuck and hit him with a body attack, sending him out as well. With all three men on the outside, I got to the apron and moonsaulted onto the pile.

Having taken a temporary advantage, I tried to drag Nunzio back into the ring. I got him in and began to climb the apron when Chuck grabbed me and tossed me overhead. I flew through the air, landing on the announcer's table and in Michael Cole's lap. Vince came over and tossed me back to the FBI. As they pounced on me, I saw Vince slap Cole, causing him to lose his headset and stare at the owner.

I was sent back in the ring, where Nunzio tried a springboard into an armbar. I screamed in pain as Chuck and Stamboli added their shots to all over my body. The crowd began to get upset as Cole was being knocked down by Vince, who had climbed in and gotten in my face. I heard the chants of "Hogan! Hogan!" echoing throughout the arena. *Come on, Hulk, don't let me or the fans down... please...*

As the crowd got at their rowdiest, I heard "Voodoo Child" hit the PA system. Nunzio released the hold and looked to the entranceway. The other men followed suit. I lay motionless for a while as the cameras zoomed in on Vince's face. He laughed -- there was no sign of Hogan anywhere. Meanwhile, I saw him emerge from the crowd and climb in, standing in front of me and behind the FBI. They turned around and stopped in fear.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Hogan started landing right hands on anything that moved as I could feel the ring vibrate from the ovation. Vince bailed out and backed up the entranceway. I saw Palumbo and Stamboli get sent out of the ring. I knew this was all legal -- no DQ in an I Quit match, right? -- but still, I wondered if Hogan was stealing my thunder. *Wait... Hogan has enough of his own thunder. He doesn't need mine.*

Wait a second... I just thought of how I'll win the match!

Nunzio stammered back, then produced something from his pocket. It was a set of

brass knuckles, which found the mark on Hogan's head. But this only temporarily stopped the Hulk Express, as he immediately Hulked up and did his routine on Nunzio, ending with the Big Leg Drop. He left the ring and kept Chuck and Stamboli at bay. I slowly got up. It was my turn.

I hopped over to Nunzio and turned him onto his stomach. I made my way to his legs and stood with my foot between them. I picked his legs up and crossed them in front of me. I then leaned back as much as I could without losing my balance. Nunzio screamed. The crowd screamed. I had, on one leg, re-invented the Sharpshooter. Soon, Nunzio tapped out.

I collapsed backwards on top of his body. Hogan re-entered the ring with my prosthesis. He handed it to me and helped me strap it back on. We stood in the ring, smiling and high-fiving. The FBI retreated, while Vince shot his "I'll get you next time" look. As SmackDown! went off the air, Hogan and I held our hands up high.

The cameras stopped rolling, and Vince and the FBI were in the back. I started to follow them when I heard Hogan's voice on the mic. "Just a minute, Zach. I want you back in here to share this moment with all my Hulkamaniacs, dude."

I rolled back into the ring. As I did, Real American played. Hogan looked at me. "You know what to do, right, brother?"

"Oh yeah, I do. Let's run wild on El Paso!"

With that, we posed for ten straight minutes as the crowd ate it all up with a spoon.

10:45 PM

We were packing up our things as Paul worked on post-production. I was all ready to go when Eddie Guerrero came up to me.

"Hey, chico man, that was muy awesome what you did out there, man!"

"Thanks... you really think so?"

"Oh yeah, brother, I was marking out with the crowd, man. Say... I wanna do somethin' for ya. Chavito and I are gonna hit the town over the next couple days. We're inviting a bunch of people to stick around. Wanna come along?"

"I... I'd love to... but I'd better check with Paul first."

"Who, Heyman? Man, he's already staying!"

"In that case... let's go, Eddie!"

"All right! This is gonna be a fiesta, Guerrero style, baby!"

Eddie walked off and into the Undertaker. I held my breath.

"Hey... Mark, I, uh... I just wanted to tell you somethin', man."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I'm sorry I doubted you, buddy. You've been so professional to me so far."

"Yeah... you know, Eddie... SummerSlam was my litmus test. I wanted to see if you were a threat. And I realized... well, you're not after my spot. Your spot's on top -- Brock is the guy who should be worried. With folks like you around, the WWE's in good hands."

"Hey, man, that's great and all, but... you know, it's not our decision."

"Eddie, I saw the look in Vince's eye. I think he sees the dollars in you. Kid, you can move mountains. You proved it tonight. You had the crowd in the palm of your hand. Now, I heard you all were having a little party?"

"Well, yeah..."

"Is there room for a Dead Man?"

"I thought you wouldn't... sure, amigo. And thank you so much."

"No, man... thank YOU."

They shook hands and left their separate ways. I grabbed my bag and hobbled off to Paul, suddenly confident I had done the right thing.

Thursday, August 28, 2003, 07:35 PM
El Paso, TX

The last 48 hours had been a bit of a blur to me. *I know I'm supposed to be a wrestler and act cool and all that. I know I'm visiting Eddie and Chavo right now, and I should focus on them. I know I'm currently trying to play a Monopoly game with Undertaker and APA. So why is it that all I can think about is the high I got from POSING IN THE RING WITH HULK HOGAN! Woohoo!*

As Eddie and Paul were discussing the upcoming weeks of SmackDown!, I rolled the dice. *I desperately need a double six here to get to GO. I've got no money, and I don't know if my property can save me.* Nine. I moved around the corner, zoomed past the Taker's green section, over the Short Line, and... straight onto Park Place. With a hotel. *Damn. It can't.*

"Sorry, John," I shrugged at Bradshaw. "I'm out."

"Awww yeah! Gimme your stuff, man!"

I cashed in the houses and hotels and mortgaged everything to be sure. Sure enough, I was \$25 short. *Well, fourth out of six isn't horrible.* I forfeited all the deeds to Bradshaw and watched. He paid for them to return face-up, but decided against housing at the time. It was Taker's turn.

"Hey, Uncle Eddie, what do you want to do tonight?"

It was Chavo. He bounded down the stairs, taking great care with his arm as he headed to the main room. He nearly stepped on the board as he rounded the corner.

"I was thinking, man, let's go across the border for a big meal. I know a place that's been begging us to stop in. Remember El Toro Loco?"

"Oh yeah! I've heard good stuff about that! So when should we leave?"

"Let's wait for an hour or so. I don't want us to be in Mehico while SmackDown! is on, you know?"

Huh? "Eddie... what's the big deal? I mean, everyone knows it's a taped show... right?"

"It's all about appearance, man. There's marks down there, and they's dangerous some of them. I mean, Juarez has a gang problem. Trust me, man. Appearance is everything down there. And everyone: be careful; you might be spected to prove yourself

down there."

"Um..." Paul seemed very nervous. "If that's the case, I'd better stay here. I have some calls to make anyway, you know, to Vince about next week. Is that all right?"

"Hey, mi casa es su casa, you know that, homes. Just make sure to pay for your own delivery."

"Ha ha. All right, thanks."

"Rest of you guys in?"

I nervously looked at Paul. He seemed not to give any signal of advice.

"Sure, I'll do it."

Everyone else at the game liked it too.

"All right... we'll leave around 9 PM. Should give you enough time to finish the game."

"Dammit!"

"What's wrong, Ron?"

"Oh, it's not you. I just landed in jail, man. Damn."

We all chuckled as Taker took the dice.

09:17 PM

Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

"Tigre Negro! Tigre Negro!"

The crowd chanted and cheered as we entered. They yelled Tigre Negro -- Black Tiger -- which, as Chavo explained, was Eddie's moniker before he lost his mask in Japan. As Eddie and Undertaker moved among the crowd members, signing autographs and shaking hands, the maitre d' of El Toro Loco welcomed us and spoke with Chavo, directing us to a back room.

We all headed in and took our seats. Chavo remained close to the door, speaking to the maitre d' in Spanish. He seemed to be reassuring the guy about something. A motion of a camera was made. Eventually, both he and the maitre d' thanked each other -- that much I gathered -- before Chavo joined us at the table.

"Hey guys," said Chavo, "the guy was just telling me that if we all pose for some autographed photos with him after the meal, it'll be payment enough."

"Really?" I said, stunned. "I'm not that big a celebrity, am I?"

"You're a wrestler, man. Mexico loves wrestlers. And they love me and Uncle Eddie. That's what's important."

There was a huge racket breaking out outside. I heard Eddie's voice, yelling in Spanish at someone. I heard Taker responding. We all got up out of our seats and opened the door. As we did, we saw Eddie and Taker being restrained from each other as the patrons cheered and chanted. Eddie broke free of his restraints and dove at Taker. The two began to exchange punches as we rushed to stop it.

Chavo and I pulled Eddie off of Taker and took him aside. "Eddie, man, what are you doing? Are you nuts?"

"Zach, hombre, it's okay. It's a show. Just hold me back."

So we went along with the pantomime, with the APA trying to calm Taker down. Eventually, Eddie "punched" me in the face, causing me to lose my grip. He broke free of Chavo -- who, with only one arm, wasn't much defense -- and the fight was on again. The two chased, punched, and scratched each other to the back room. The rest of us followed, with Chavo closing the door behind him as he entered.

We heard a cheer outside. They couldn't see us through any windows. Eddie and Taker put their fists down and laughed. They embraced.

"Man," Taker said. "I haven't had this much fun in ages."

"Wait," Ron interrupted, angrily. "That was all a work?"

"Yeah... you couldn't see the inches of air between me and his punches, man?"

"Not from where I was."

We all laughed and took our seats. Ron kicked his chair before sitting down. You could tell he didn't like being the butt of the work.

"Damn."

11:03 PM

We had finished posing with the owner of the restaurant, first each in an individual picture, then all together for a group shot. We each signed the photo in the white spot underneath before he proudly hung the photos up on his wall. Eddie's and Chavo's were on top, of course, with Taker's, my, and the group's photo in the second row, and the APA's underneath. It was a beautiful circle of fame.

We headed to the parking lot to return to El Paso. As we got close, we all stopped dead in our tracks and stared ahead. We had gone in two cars. Eddie had brought his Cadillac convertible, while Chavo had a Chevrolet. They were still there -- but only as shells. Where bright wheels once marked their future passage, there lay only cinderblocks.

The cars had been stripped for parts.

"Dammit! How did this happen, man?" Chavo was incensed. He went over to his car's shell and looked under the hood. There was no engine. The car had no bumpers or license plates either. Inside, the seats and steering wheel were missing, as was the radio. But the worst was what was written on the doors -- SALGA TRAIADORES (go home, traitors) and ARRIBA LOS LEONES (Upward the Lions). Chavo shoved the car off its cinderblocks before grabbing his arm.

"Dammit, I hope it's not hurt again." He shook it a few times. "No problem... Shit! Who did this?"

"Los Leones, Chavito." Eddie had seen the same writing I had. "I should've known they might be in town."

"Who are they?" Taker seemed a little uneasy.

"Los Leones is this group of Mascaras fans. They're mostly in Tampico, but I guess they have branches here. Mi padre won his retirement match over Mil, and in CMLL my brother -- Chavo's father -- gave him the beating that sent him to AAA and the US. They don't like our familia. And it looks like they're here, and they're dangerous. Dammit."

"You got a cell, Eddie?"

"Yeah -- lemme call Paul for a ride." He dialed up his house on the phone and waited. He must have been waiting through his answering machine. "Hey, Paul, it's Eddie. Pick up please. We're in Juarez, outside El Toro Loco, and -- oh, hi, Paul. Yeah, our cars got scrapped while we were eating. I dunno who did it, man. We just need your van for the ride home. You got it? Great. See you in 15 minutes, then? All right. Muchas gracias, Paul. Adios."

He hung up. "He'll be here soon. Man, who did this?"

Suddenly, I felt a sharp shot right between the shoulder blades. I fell face-first onto the gravel pit that served as the parking lot. There was shouting all around as everyone else turned around. I heard a series of blows, skin pounding skin. In turn, I felt a boot strike me in the small of the back repeatedly.

I had to act on instinct. I grabbed a handful of the gravel and forcibly turned myself over. A large man with stubble stood over me. He had a black leather jacket on him. I looked behind him and saw other people fighting with us, wearing the same jacket. One had his back to me. It read LOS LEONES.

The man standing over me had the muffler from one of our cars in his hand. He raised it over his head, preparing to bring it to mine. I tossed the gravel at his face, causing him to flinch temporarily. With my good leg, I kicked him in the groin, causing him to double over. I scooted backwards and pulled myself up. I ran back to the restaurant, making sure to clip a Leon from behind as I did so.

"AVISO! AVISO!" I yelled, trying to remember something in Spanish. "LOS LEONES!" I made shadowboxing motions, hoping someone would get the message. About five people did, and they charged out of their seats. I had to jump to get out of the way.

I raced back. The brawl had escalated, with people joining either side. Ron tossed one man onto the shell of Eddie's car. Taker picked another man up by the throat and held him over his head. Two Leones charged Bradshaw, leaving him fighting off a triple team. In the midst of the chaos, I felt a huge impact on the side of my head, knocking me over. I looked up.

The man with the muffler had found me again. He began swinging at my head and chest. I thought I felt a rib crack. My nose was definitely broken, as the blood flowed from it and my lip. I tried to turn my head to shield the blows, but he just switched to hitting my sternum. Finally, two Guerrero sympathizers grabbed him and wrestled him to the ground.

I had trouble breathing. I stood up very slowly. As I did so, I felt someone shove me to the ground from behind. I fell down and felt my prosthesis pulled off of me. I flopped over with more gravel, but this time I couldn't get it off, as the man kicked my wrist before I could throw.

"I bet you feel big now," I muttered as the man swung with my leg. I saw the shoe coming straight between my eyes.

Friday, August 29, 2003, 01:15 PM
Hospital Municipal de la Ciudad de Juarez

"Zach? Are you all right?"

My eyes couldn't open all the way. I only saw a light shining right into them. I felt a swelling all over my face. It felt like a tube was in my left arm. My chest felt heavy, and a beeping sound was off to my right, regularly going off with my heartbeat.

"Who's... who's there?"

"It's me, Paul. We're alone now. I'm visiting you."

"Where am I right now?"

"You're in a hospital. You had a rough night last night."

"Yeah... I... remember..." I couldn't do more than a squint as I regained my focus. "How long... did they... hurt me?"

"I don't know. I think it was about 20 minutes, but they were still at it when I arrived. I tried to help you, but I'm not a physical guy. You should be thanking Bradshaw. He punked out three or four guys by himself. The cops came, and everything was explained. None of us are in jail."

"Oh... okay..." I felt very tired, despite not being awake for the past 14 or so hours. "How are my eyes?"

"They look a little red, but nothing major. You had a broken nose, about four bruised ribs, and a minor concussion. I'm sorry, Zach. I don't know how this happened."

"These guys... Los Leones... they attacked us from behind. There must've been about ten of them. The guys at the restaurant were a help. I don't know what I would've done otherwise..."

I began to open my eyes a little more. I saw a plain white ceiling above me. *Well, I am in a hospital.* I turned to face Paul, speaking as I did so.

"I'm sorry, Paul... I..."

I stopped as I faced him. Something was wrong with my vision. Paul's suit was its usual tones of gray, but so was his face! The monitor was giving off a bright gray pulse instead of a green one. Everything was bland, graying, colorless. *What the hell's going on?*

"Paul... what's happening?"

"What is it? Andy, is it you?"

"Yeah... I think it is... I can't... I mean..."

"Say it, Andy. What's wrong?"

"I'm colorblind right now."

Paul began to dig through his bag. He produced a phone and the Recovery container.

"It's all right. That beating must have been really bad. Don't worry about it, Andy. It may have been better it happened while you were here."

"Why?"

"Because now Zach's soul won't be traumatized. You took his bullet."

That doesn't make me feel much better.

"How deeply can you breathe?"

"I don't know."

"Look, take as long as you need. I'll hold it to your mouth. You need this... you and a lot of other people."

"What do you mean?"

"Molly needs it; I wouldn't be surprised if Chavo did now..."

"Can't you give it to them?"

"No! Their souls can't be separated from them. Now," he said, bringing the container to my face, "let's go."

Friday, August 29, 2003, time unknown

Recovery

"Shh... he's coming to. Quick, hide."

"Okay."

I heard two voices as my eyes opened. They were a male and a female voice, but I couldn't place them. I was still a little disoriented, having basically lost a day of my life to a group of thugs south of the border. I looked around. No one.

At the very least, the place was green again. Whatever had taken me, it was gone. I was still very tired, and if ever there was a time to be left alone, this was it. However, I wasn't alone. There were two others with me. *Who could they be?*

"Hello? Who's there?"

No response. *Whoever they are, they must think I need to be alone for a while. It's certainly not Lindsay -- she was there to help me from the beginning.*

"I heard two voices... whoever you are, show yourself."

Wow, I'm in a bad mood. What's wrong with me? Am I still hurt?

"This isn't funny. As soon as I can get up, I'm coming after you."

I heard the same two voices whisper.

"What's gotten into him?"

"He looks funny."

"I heard that! Now come forward!"

Finally, a man approached me. He was dressed in military combat fatigues, wearing a bright green helmet. He had a bright silver canteen in his right hand. I knew the face, but not the body -- especially his chest, where a gaping hole stood out.

"Greg? Is that you?"

"Yeah, it is. What brings you in here, Andy?"

"I... Zach got mugged. I couldn't see color. I'm surprised I can now."

"Oh, trauma, eh? Man, that stinks. Well, lemme help you up if you want."

I was barely able to lift my arm for him to grab. He pulled with all his might, getting me to the vertical base. Of course, as soon as he let go, I toppled over again, as my legs weren't nearly strong enough yet to hold my "weight".

"Sorry, Andy. I guess I tried too soon."

"Don't worry about it. But... what are you doing in this one? Shouldn't you be in your own -- Shawn's?"

"Well, normally yeah. But I'm being sent to SmackDown! now. Apparently I'm Lindsay's replacement over here."

"Replacement? Good luck. I don't know if she can be replaced."

"Easy, now. Don't say anything you'll regret. You're just lucky I understand."

"Understand? What are you talking about?"

"Well, if she'd been the one out here..."

"She? Lindsay's better than that! She's better than you!"

"No, not her... the other one... you know there's three of us here."

I paused. *Of course there's three of us. I can't believe that, for a second, I forgot. And why am I being so defensive of Lindsay? She doesn't need my defense. Does she?*

"Who... Kathleen? Is she...?"

"I'm over here, Andy! How are ya?"

"Kathleen, get over here so I can see you!"

"Nope. Sorry. You gotta get to me!" She giggled.

"Dammit, Kath, I don't have the strength to do that and you know it! I should..."

"Andy, mellow out!" Greg's harsh tone snapped my focus back to him. "Dude, you're not really in a condition to talk right now. You should know that."

"What do you mean? I can speak just fine!" Using my last bit of strength, I pulled myself up to my feet. "Are you saying there's something wrong with me right now?"

"Andy... there is. Look for yourself."

He held up his canteen. I stared into it, not sure what to make of the picture staring back at me. It was me, all right, but it wasn't. I could see Greg in color, and the room in color, but not myself in color. I was still a black-and-white view.

"Wh... wh... what is this?"

"Andy, you aren't fully recovered yet. It happened to me after... well, after this," he said as he pointed to the hole. "You still have some lingering effects. I don't know how long it's going to take, but the fact is, you're still poisoned a little. You feel a type of justifiable anger. Right now, you have to get it out of your system."

I sat back down. *Angry? I'm not allowed to be angry! If I'm mad, why am I as full-figured as ever... even if I am in black and white?*

"Andy," Greg said as he sat down next to me, "you have to relax a little. I'm sorry this has happened. I wish I could take it out of you right now. But these things take time. Just rest some more. See if you're better tomorrow. It's ok."

I began to feel regret in my system. I felt choked up by the error of my ways, in particular because I was afraid I was ruining myself. *I'm going to blink out in Recovery. This is embarrassing.*

"Greg... I..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." A tear began to roll down my face. I touched it. *How did this get here? I don't have a body to produce tears!*

"It's all right. It happened to me. Look, just calm down. Just take it easy. And we'll try again tomorrow, ok?"

I lay back. I felt my eyelids getting heavy as the tear rolled across my hand and to the floor. The last thing I remember seeing was a streak of flesh coloring where the trail of the tear was.

Saturday, August 30, 2003

I was up before Greg was, and perhaps before Kathleen, although I hadn't been able to see her. I took time to check my surroundings. *This place is a lot bigger than I remember it last time. But there's still pretty much nothing here. This is weird.*

I walked over to Greg, who was laid out flat. *Wait... I got up pretty fast, didn't I? Maybe I'm 100%... or it's just that first time...* I looked at his canteen, trying to see my reflection. When I did, I breathed a sigh of relief. *I'm back.*

"Andy! You're all right!"

"Kathleen? Is that you?"

"Yeah."

"Where are you?"

"Don't look for me, please!"

"Kathleen, I'm going to have to see you eventually. This room is only so big, you know."

"No!"

"Are you black and white too, Kath? Is that it?"

"Uh-uh."

"Then what is it?"

"I look awful."

Oh good grief... I thought vanity stopped after death...

"Kathleen, you can't look that bad. I've got a hole in my head!"

"You do?"

"Yeah! Can't you see me?"

"No."

"Where are you?"

"I'm not telling!"

Oh, this is just ridiculous. "I'm gonna go find you, Kath!"

"No you're not!"

But by this time, I was roaming around. This place did take a few twists and turns, which made me wonder how big we were in comparison to the container. I walked up a large hill, and as I did, I felt the ceiling close down. *This must be the open end of the lamp place.* Eventually, I saw a small figure curled up near the door to the container. It was Kathleen.

"There you are."

No answer. I looked closely at her. She was in plain overalls -- that much I could tell -- but I couldn't see her arms or face. Her long red hair covered her neck, too. She stayed in her position, not coming near me. I crawled deeper into the space to come after her.

"Kathleen, it's ok. Just turn around."

"No. I won't."

"Come on, Kathleen. You can't be that bad."

"Yeah I can."

"Did you let Greg see you?"

"No."

"Then how was he talking to you?"

"The same way you were."

I was getting frustrated. "Are you going to spend this entire time feeling sorry for yourself?"

"Yeah."

"What makes you think you can get anything done?"

"I don't have to. I'm in here."

She's got a point. Still, I wish she'd just open up a little. It's tough talking to someone's back.

"Kathleen, please. Just turn around, ok? You'll be fine."

"I don't wanna."

"Kathleen, I can always turn you around. You're not that big."

"Leave me alone."

"What's with the sudden attitude change?"

"I don't mind you. I just don't want you over here."

"Kathleen, I'm willing to bet you can't possibly look worse than I do."

"Yeah I do."

"Look, Kath, I'll close my eyes. You can turn around and see me. When you're done looking, I'll open them again. Okay?"

Nothing.

"Kathleen?"

"You promise you won't look?"

"Yes, I do."

"Okay."

I closed my eyes. "You can look now."

I waited for what was only 15 seconds, but what seemed like an eternity. "Can I open them now?"

"Yeah."

I did so. The same figure, back to me, was sitting there.

"Well?"

"I'm worse."

"Come on... look, just let me see, please?"

I crawled closer and tried to put a hand on her shoulder. She flinched.

"Oww! Don't do that!"

"Sorry. Look, I... you don't need to hide from us. We're here to help. We're your friends."

Suddenly, Kathleen turned around violently and roared, "The people who made me this were friends!"

I shrunk back from her aggressiveness, then took a second look. I was beginning to see why Kathleen wanted to hide. Her hair was a total mess in front. All over her face and arms were splotches of black. She had no lips to speak of, and her right ear was almost entirely missing. She looked like she'd been through hell.

She started to cry, burying her face in her hands. Her hands were almost entirely darkened, with only the knuckles shining through. I noticed her fingernails were completely gone. Had you just seen her hands, you would've sworn they belonged to

someone African and not Caucasian.

"Wh... what happened, Kathleen?"

She didn't move her hands from her face. As such, it was a little hard to understand her, but I think I heard what she said.

"It was back in early July... a bunch of us decided to visit this old building in the middle of town. It had been condemned, but we didn't care. My friends were all trying to act macho and stuff, talking about how they could last the night in there. I told them to do it. We all... we all headed in... and the next thing I know, the doors were closed behind me. They... they abandoned me!

I pounded on the door, trying to get them to open it. I couldn't hear them. I raced to a window and looked out it. They were taking off down the road. I was alone... I couldn't see anything inside the place... the floor was all wet... and there was a funny smell in the air. I just decided to lie down and try to sleep.

That night, I heard a car drive up. I began to pound on the window, hoping to get the attention of the driver. He began to approach the house, but he never made it to the door. I saw him light a match and smoke on some cigarette. He threw the match at the building... right through a crack in the window... to the floor.

All at once, I realized what the smell was. It was gasoline! I was going to be trapped in a burning building! But it was too late. The inferno raced across the floor and came right at me. I tried to climb the stairs to escape it, but near the top, I heard a crunch. I had fallen completely through the rotten wood. The landing knocked me out. That's the last thing I know."

She turned her back to me again, still crying. I felt numb all of a sudden. I looked at myself and at her -- we were both still here. I couldn't think of what to do. I just sat down by her side.

"I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. I promise I won't hurt you, Kathleen. I don't want..."

"Stop. Please. Don't talk to me about it. This hurts me. I just want it all to go away. I want to live again."

"Kathleen, we are alive! Look at me, or Greg, or Lindsay. We all get to interact in the world. We get to make a difference! It may not be in our original bodies, but right now we can do more for some people than we ever could while alive. If that's not living... then what is?"

"I'll tell you what is. Being able to look at an A on a math test is living. Cheering your team on during the Friday night showdown is living. Spending time behind the wheel, learning how the pedals and lights work -- that's living. We're not alive. We're existing."

"Kathleen... there's more to life than high school. Trust me, I went there. I did more than you. High school is a bunch of artificial nothingness sandwiched around seven hours a day of necessary learning. The people in high school who are the popular ones -- they're phony. They don't get the idea. It's not a popularity contest, and to act like you're better than other people just because you have the personality, or you're the head cheerleader, or you date the quarterback... it's nothing at all. Why would you put so much stock in a part of your life that only lasts four years anyway?"

She turned around as I was speaking to her. Something seemed to click within her mind. I couldn't tell what it was. As I finally put the question to her, she slapped me across

the face. I stared, more in surprise than pain.

"Dammit, Andy, I'm NOT a PHONY!"

She lunged for me, attempting to choke me down. I leapt back as fast as I could, but my footing failed and I tumbled back down the incline. She stared at me from the top, anger across her charred face. I tried to speak to her.

"Kathleen... that's not what I meant. I'm just saying... life goes on after high school. You have to be prepared for it."

"Sure you did. Whatever. Do friends stab you in the back in the rest of your life, too?"

I didn't try to answer. I simply walked away and lay down.

Sunday, August 31, 2003

"Greg?"

"Yeah, Andy?"

"I think it might just be the two of us tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Kathleen's... she's upset. I went to see her today... there's a fire in her eyes."

"What kind?"

"What kind...? What do you mean?"

"There's seven types of fire, Andy. This is one of the things Shawn taught us. Red is wrath. Blue is lust. Green is envy. Gold is greed. Orange is gluttony. Violet is sloth. And white is pride. What was it?"

"Green... I think."

"Ah. What happened?"

"Oh, she was talking to me about high school yesterday. I tried to explain how phony the whole high school social thing is... you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, tell me about it. The football team, the valedictorian... the whole thing was one big stereotype."

"Yeah. Well, anyway, I tell her that the popular people are the phony ones, you know, trying to cheer her up, and she lashes out at me. I think she was popular."

"Oh dear. Andy... why?"

"I was trying to make her feel better. I was trying to say friends in high school aren't important."

"Andy, I... I could've told you that was a bad idea. Come on... you basically tried to shatter her world."

"No I didn't!... okay, I guess I did, but it was for her good!"

"Andy, the best thing you can do is let her realize this on her own. Anyway, if she's going to have a week to think about it, that might be a good thing. It'll let her realize what the deal is."

"Yeah, but... wait... why green? What was she jealous of?"

"I can't say... did she say anything else recently?"

"Well, she mentioned that she couldn't have a family, or go to college, and that it

was her friends' fault, and... wait, Greg! That's it!"

"What is?"

"I think she was looking forward to life. I think she's jealous of her friends, who get to live on for deserting her, while she's stuck in this... this!"

"Yeah... that makes sense, actually. Anyway... if she's gone, and it's just us, what should we do?"

"I've been thinking... Greg, you know how I said that a bunch of us were jumped, and all that?"

"Yeah. You mentioned getting mugged."

"Well, just before I came here, Paul said Chavo might be a victim too. I found that kinda weird, because I don't know how he'd know. I think the best thing for us to do would be to talk to the people who were hurt... make sure they're all right, you know? I don't want anyone to be in trouble."

"Right... good idea. I guess we'll check with Paul in the morning, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, see you tomorrow, then, Andy. I don't know about you, but... I think I'm ready to begin again."

"Me too."

Monday, September 1, 2003, 08:11 AM

New Orleans, LA

Cypress Hill's CD blared in my ears as I struggled to my senses. I looked around for the source, but it was clear on the other side of the room. My roommate -- whoever that was -- hadn't been awakened by it yet. I looked around at my new surroundings.

My bag was on the floor beside me. I looked for an airplane ticket, but couldn't find it. *That's weird. I remember that we were supposed to be up in Boston and New York. Why isn't there any sign of flying in to here? Are we still in New York?*

I found my glasses lying on the bag. I decided I didn't need to put them on yet. I could handle seeing someone else in the mirror staring back at me by now. I glanced up at the room service menu just to check things. *We're in New Orleans? But why? Is anyone else here?*

I looked into the mirror, and suddenly, everything clicked. *We must have driven here from New York. We could afford to do the drive because the house shows didn't need us. But tomorrow, they'll need me. They need me more than anyone else out there. And I think I know why Cypress Hill is in my roommate's wake-up call, too.*

The face I saw staring back at me was of Michael Cole.

TO BE CONTINUED
