

The Marvel Method

by

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FADE IN

EXT. DEEP SPACE - HIGH ABOVE THE EARTH - DAY/NIGHT

A steady RUMBLE. A large SPACESHIP slowly glides across the atmosphere high above earth. Our beautiful planet shimmers below. A band of lights on the eastern seaboard signal night.

The Spaceship slows to a stop. A bomb-bay door underneath opens. A large, menacing DEATH-RAY emerges from the opening. It grows quickly; tripling in length like an alien stalk. With a mechanical WHIR, it takes aim at the

EARTH

Slowly revolving on its axis. One revolution, passing the pacific, Asia, Europe, Africa, then back to the USA. The death ray focuses. The black shadow of night encompassing the eastern seaboard retreats westward, moving SLOWLY across the plains, unveiling California to a brand new morning.

THE DEATH RAY has CALIFORNIA in its sights.

Sound of an alarm emanates from the ship. BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

ANGLE on California. The death-ray unleashes a DEADLY BLAST!
ZOOM IN RAPIDLY on CALIFORNIA

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Loud, obnoxious BUZZING. An ALARM CLOCK on a night-stand: ECU-6:15 AM. Flashing obnoxiously.

A somewhat dim, large room. Perhaps the living room portion of a loft. Austere, minimalist, with very little furniture. The only light is the morning sun peeking in thru the shades.

A SILHOUETTE OF A MAN rises from sleep. ARCHER LEIGH SHUGEL, 35, shrugs the covers off and sits on the edge of the bed. Though we see him as an illusory figure, some physical traits are clearly evident: He is tall, sinewy, with sharp, angular features cut right out of a comic book.

ARCHER rubs his arms. Looks at the THERMOMETER: 58 degrees.

HIS HAND - reaches out and smacks the clock. BUZZING stops.

INT. BATHROOM

Just as he walks in front of the mirrored cabinet, he opens it, depriving us of a clear view of his face. He rummages around for something. Picks out PAINT SOLVENT.

OVER THE SINK

He washes his hands; stained by a night's worth of INK/PAINT.
We see a MEDICAL ID BRACELET on his wrist.

IN THE SHOWER

WATER shoots out from the shower head. BEHIND ARCHER. The water cascades down the back of his head. The shower is soon draped in fog. Then, the water cuts. When the fog lifts, we see ARCHER has disappeared.

EXT. CROWDED SIDEWALK - DAY

A cold, wet winter day. Office buildings and trendy cafes permeate the area. Men and women of commerce, dressed in sophisticated layers, move quickly thru the sidewalks of downtown, ignoring the Christmas decorations. They text on cell phones, read magazines, but rarely make eye contact.

A BUSINESSMAN, flashy advertising exec, 43, walks briskly past a trendy ELECTRONICS STORE. A larger-than-life FLATSCREEN TV beams out the morning news from inside the display window. The man slips on the icy sidewalk and falls forward into the store's front veneer. His face nearly pressed to the glass, he catches a report about...

In thru the glass on A MALE REPORTER. 30, tan, vacuous face.

TV REPORTER

Less than a week from the new year, and for the mother of Joshua Hernandez, things are looking quite grim. Esperanza's baby, born just 7 short months ago, has been diagnosed with a rare condition called Glomuvenous malformations plaque type. The condition is life-threatening, causing the muscles and blood vessels to harden. If left untreated, it can eventually lead to heart failure.

A LIVE REMOTE SHOT FROM INSIDE THE HOSPITAL

ESPERANZA HERNANDEZ, 35, Hispanic, teary-eyed, effete woman answers a reporter's questions from inside the waiting room.

ESPERANZA

It's progressive, so once the skin starts to harden and thicken it becomes extremely painful for Joshua. Right now, he is so small, so fragile that I can't even touch the affected areas because it is so painful for him. I can't even hug him because he starts to cry out immediately.

(MORE)

ESPERANZA (CONT'D)

And I just want to cry myself, because
a mother can't even hug her own baby...

Esperanza starts to cry. Her voice wavers.

BACK ON reporter.

REPORTER

When Joshua was born, his body was covered in lesions, but his condition was so rare it wasn't until almost a month later that geneticists pieced together the puzzle. Joshua is currently undergoing weekly laser treatments to shave down his skin. But these treatments are very painful, very expensive, and they do little to help the blood clots in his arteries.

EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY

BUSINESSMAN collects himself. Fixes his hat, adjusts his expensive neckwear as the reporter wraps things up.

REPORTER

No one knows what the new year will bring for Joshua Hernandez, the baby who cannot be hugged. His family can only sit back and wait. Because she cannot stray far from Joshua, Esperanza Hernandez has not been able to hold down a full time job.

Businessman grimaces.

BUSINESSMAN

Welcome to fucking America 2013, Ms. Hernandez. No one gives a rat's ass!

OVERHEAD SHOT. He stalks off and blends in with the crowd. Like a school of sardines they move down the sidewalk.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

ARCHER (we see him from behind) sits in a lounge chair. A good distance away is a flat PANEL TV, bolted into the wall. It is so far away, the images are small, flickering, almost indistinguishable. Yet it does not seem to bother him.

REPORTER

Esperanza's church has started a foundation for Joshua, hoping to raise enough money for alternative medicine.

(MORE)

REPORTER (CONT'D)

They hope the public will be generous and answer their prayers during this holiday season. At UCLA Medical Center in Westwood, this is ANDREW FAZONE for CNN.

A COMMERCIAL - for MAX RANGER, comic book hero for Grandstand Comics. MAX slices the head of no less than three villains with an ionized katana sword. HEADING TO THEATRES NEAR YOU.

He CLICKS off the TV.

VESTIBULE

On an ornate SIDE TABLE. ARCHER grabs his almost bare KEY RING and heads out THE DOOR, slamming it behind him. Propped against the entry wall is a FISH TANK. As the door slams shut the vibrations send a single GHOST FISH diving for cover.

INT. COFFEEHOUSE - DAY

ARCHER sits at a table near the dusty window, DOODLING on a pad. Stares out the FRONT WINDOW at A FELLOW ARTIST, mid 20S, scrubby, drawing caricatures of unsuspecting tourists.

A WAITRESS drops off his drink. Archer stares down into a LATTE. A LOVABLE CARE BEAR type figure has been etched across the top layer. He quickly kills the bear with a swirly stick.

He looks up at the counter. TWO TEENAGE BARISTAS get a kick out of Archer's pain. THEY laugh and slap palms.

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - DAY

Archer approaches the YOUNG ARTIST outside the coffee shop.

YOUNG ARTIST

(to Archer)

Would you like me to draw you?

Archer hands the man the sketch he drew in the coffee shop.

INSERT: A BEAUTIFUL SKETCH, crafted in pencil. Depicts the young artist with a larger than life head and eyeballs looking up at a large raven delivering tourists to the artist baby style; dropping them down from the skies.

ARCHER

Why don't you get a real fucking job?

YOUNG ARTIST

Excuse me?

ARCHER

Gold is the currency of kings. Barter
is the coin of peasants.

EXT./INT. GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

34 stories of steel, glass, and cement. An imposing structure standing tall over the skyline of Hollywood.

GRANDSTAND COMICS - ENTRY HALL - DAY

A grand entryway; replete with marble floors, expensive sofas and faux satin drapes laced over non-existing windows. Comic book art incongruently hangs on the walls, or encased in glass displays. A Christmas tree stands off to one side.

A buxom, mid 30s, SEXCRETARY mans the phones behind the desk.

A huge MAX RANGER HOLOGRAM stands atop a large pedestal in the center of the room, revolving slowly. Greets visitors stepping out of the elevator by brandishing his famed Katana.

Elevator DINGS. DOORS open. FROM BEHIND: A well dressed MAN, large, barrel-chested, 50, steps out into the hall. HE pauses just beyond the doors, which quickly close behind him.

ON THE MAN: A face that is round, almost cherubic; belying his age and predatory business acumen.

Fixes his tie. HIS POV: Stares at the hologram. Walks over.

O.S. - Phone RINGS at the secretary's desk.

SEXCRETARY (O.S.)

Grandstand Comics. Creating heroes for
over four decades.

The man stands still for a few seconds; admiring Max Ranger.
IN HIS HAND: Thick, gnarled fingers squeeze a TENNIS BALL.

INNER OFFICES OF GRANDSTAND COMICS - CONTINUOUS

Large open work space; with offices on the outer edges and corners; a giant pit of cubicles clustered around the center.

As THE MAN walks to his office thru a maze of corridors a small army of employees latch onto him.

MALE EMPLOYEE #1

Congratulations MR. LIEBER. A
victorious day.

WELL DRESSED EXECUTIVE

What do you say, Mr. L...another
hundred million dollar movie in the
works?

MR. LIEBER

God willing, if heroes, villains and a multi-million dollar marketing campaign align.

A short, effete, FERRET-FACED MAN, 38, with weak shoulders, Ivy League Business type, leans in close.

ACCOUNTANT TYPE

Warner Brothers called. They want first dibs on the Max Ranger video game rights.

MR. LIEBER

The other suitors?

ACCOUNTANT TYPE

Level 5, Epic, Neversoft.

Lieber thinks. Squeezes his tennis ball.

MR. LIEBER

Stall Warner. Let those jackals start a bidding war.

ACCOUNTANT TYPE

Warner wanted to make it official before tonight's premier. They have the CW network on standby, ready for a full court press.

Lieber stops in his tracks. His entire coterie behind him stops as well. Bodies pile onto bodies, but stop just short of hitting Lieber.

MR. LIEBER

You know what my favorite film of all time is, HARVEY?

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT

Not a clue, Sir.

MR. LIEBER

Casablanca. You heard of it, no?

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT

Of course I have.

MR. LIEBER

What do you remember about it?

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT

I don't understand? You mean the plot?

MR. LIEBER

The style, the substance, the cinematography. What do you recall?

Blank look on Harvey's face.

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT

It was filmed in black and white, Harvey. And it was screened in black and white. At least before Warner sold their souls to the devil and gave it to Teddy boy Turner, who colorized it for his network. Made Bogey look like a bland wax figure in the works.

(pause)

You may as well give arms to the Venus de Milo. Or fix the fucking crack in the Liberty bell.

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT (CONT'D)

I understand.

MR. LIEBER

I don't think you do, Harvey. I'll never forgive them for that. Somewhere out there, Harry, Sam, Jack, and the other one whose name I can never fucking remember are laughing at us from their graves!

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT

Yes, sir.

MR. LIEBER

You have those reorder numbers from Diamond ready?

Harvey hands over a file. Lieber opens it.

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT

Just passed Superman. We're right below Snyder's Batman for the second slot.

LIEBER slams the file against the accountant's chest.

MR. LIEBER

Next month I want the top!

He stalks off.

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT

Yes, sir.

MR. LIEBER

The top slot, Harvey!

Lieber's FEMALE ASSISTANT, frenetic, already on her third cup of coffee, rushes up to him. Hands him a stack of messages.

As he walks thru the OFFICE MAZE, Lieber rifles thru them. Crumples up one message after another and tosses them in the WASTEBASKETS of so many cubicles he quickly passes.

FEMALE ASSISTANT

Mayor's office called. Mayor Chance wants to know if you can set aside a block of seats for his group.

MR. LIEBER

Let me guess, front and center.

FEMALE ASSISTANT

That was my interpretation, sir.

MR. LIEBER

Does that lame-duck liberal plan on bringing his wife?

FEMALE ASSISTANT

Yes, sir. Also, Stan Wexler called from Visigoth Pictures. He wants to make sure you give Mike Towry some face time tonight.

She thumbs rapidly thru her daybook.

FEMALE ASSISTANT (CONT'D)

Towry is the president of Comic-Con.

MR. LIEBER

I know who the fuck Mike Towry is, NATALIE! You don't have to remind me.

(deliberates)

In front of the cameras, I suppose.

NATALIE

Yes sir. Mr. Wexler says it's very important for the press to view this relationship as an *Avant Garde* enterprise within a historical context.

MR. LIEBER

He said it just like that?

NATALIE

Yes, sir.

MR. LIEBER

Cocksucker.

NATALIE

Sir?

MR. LIEBER
Not you, Natalie.

They arrive at THE CONFERENCE ROOM. At the door, Lieber turns to her. Blocks the entryway.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
Yes, on the face time with Towry but no on the panel discussion. That one dimensional geek's outlived his usefulness.

Lieber turns away.

NATALIE
What about the mayor?

Lieber ponders. BEHIND HIM: his MINIONS have assembled around a large conference table. He turns again. Towers over her.

MR. LIEBER
Forget it. His wife's a Monet.

NATALIE
A Monet sir?

MR. LIEBER
Good looking from a distance, but every step closer reminds you how butt ugly she really is.

NATALIE
Mr. Lieber. We're talking about the mayor.

MR. LIEBER
That's all, Natalie. Now, why don't you go make like the Invisible Girl?

Natalie is dumbstruck as Lieber tosses her the tennis ball.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
Vanish. And take that with you.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Lieber enters to a packed house. At least TWO DOZEN 20-35 year old ARTISTS/EXECS stand around a conference table that resembles Max Ranger's shield, clapping simultaneously.

Lieber goes to the head of the table and takes a seat.

MR. LIEBER

OK. Settle down. We have a busy day ahead of us. A lot to cover in twenty minutes.

The minions sit. Lieber looks at his watch. 8:07 AM. Looks around the room. His eyes settle on one empty CHAIR.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

Where's Leigh?

The minions gaze around the room. No one answers. Finally-

EXEC

I saw him in his cubicle earlier.

MR. LIEBER

Go get him, JEFFREY.

JEFFREY rises and exits the office.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

For his sake he better not be sleeping.

INT. ARCHER'S CUBICLE. - CONTINUOUS

Small workspace. Neat and tidy, despite the large inventory of drawing instruments, books and sketch pads. PAN ACROSS the wall. SKETCHES of villains in various stages of development; from crude forms to sharp, ready to print glossies. One glossy PRINT strongly resembles MR. LIEBER himself.

ANGLE FROM BEHIND A CHAIR - ARCHER sits at his desk. A CLOCK off to the side marks the time. 8:08 am. CLOSE UP on the SECOND HAND, ticking off time.

ECU on Archer's EYES: dark blue, caustic, and penetrating. He stares intensely at A GALILEO THERMOMETER residing on his desk. The RED VESSEL inside slowly floats to the surface.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

MR. LIEBER

OK, people. Listen up. Everyone know what this is?

Holds up DIAMOND MAGAZINE for all to see. SLOW PAN AROUND the room. Lots of nervous glances, fudging. Some deliberate NODS.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

Good. Then I can assume someone here can clue me in on how Batman, a second rate psychotic masquerading in a cape just beat us in sales for the sixth month in a row.

(deadly pause)

I mean, that lunatic doesn't even have any real powers. Take away his utility belt and he's Alice from the Brady Bunch. Anyone? Don't be shy, speak up!

Lieber thumbs thru the figures in DIAMOND MAGAZINE. Looks up from his reading glasses.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

159,000 plus sales in November alone. Good for him! That should make paranoid schizophrenics all over the world happy and sad at the same fucking time!

Uncomfortable stares. EMPLOYEES squirm in their seats.

Lieber reaches out in front of him. AN ORNATE CRYSTAL BOWL holds a myriad of famous superhero dolls. Some of them beheaded. He rummages thru the bowl until he finds BATMAN.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

No One! No one can tell me why Grandstand hasn't held the pole position in over two years?

He brings BATMAN up to his face. Disgusted, he rips off Batman's head, chucks the doll onto the middle of the table.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

And before then it was Superman! I guess no one in this god-damn room's ever heard of kryptonite!

Finds the SUPERMAN DOLL. Tries to rip off the head but it won't come off. He hurls it against the far wall. It slams with stark ferocity, yet falls to the floor unharmed. A PICTURE does not fare as well. It drops, shattering.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

Aquaman...where are you you trident wielding fruitcake?

Rummages again. Plucks out AQUAMAN. Shakes it for all to see.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

The most useless superhero ever created.

Fingers Aquaman's rubber trident.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
 Paint tits and ass on him and we'll
 call him a mermaid.

Tosses Aquaman into a LARGE AQUARIUM propped against the wall. AQUAMAN lands with a SPLASH. Floats belly-up on the water's surface. Several fish nip at his hard plastic torso.

BRAVE MAN (O.S.)
 (small voice)
 My ability to talk to fish is of no use
 to me at this moment.

MR. LIEBER
 And before Aquaman it was the Teen
 Titans. Who the fuck are the Teen
 Titans, anyway? Anyone?

An eager beaver, BESPECTACLED MAURY, raises his hand.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
 What, MAURY?

MAURY
 Just like the title suggests, Mr.
 Lieber, the comic is about teen heroes
 growing up together. We have Robin. Kid
 Flash. Aqualad--

Stops dead in his tracks. Lieber glares at him malevolently.

MAURY (CONT'D)
 Forget Aqualad. My mistake.

INT. ARCHER'S CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS

JEFFREY comes in hot and heavy.

JEFFREY
 For Christ's sake, Archer. Lieber's
 waiting for you. And he's pissed off.
 The staff meeting's already started.

ARCHER
 Is it eight o'clock already?

JEFFREY
 You know it is. The damn time's right
 in front of you. Jesus, Archer,
 sometimes I think you do it just to
 piss the old guy off.

ARCHER
 Has he mentioned the monthly figures
 yet?

JEFFREY nods. Archer smirks, satisfied. Archer Looks around his desk. Opens his drawer.

JEFFREY
What are you looking for?

ARCHER
I had a Christmas crueller lying around here somewhere.

Archer lifts papers, books, and finally looks in the garbage can. He finds the CRUELLER.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
When he gets tired of throwing action figures around, I can give him this.

JEFFREY shakes his head in deep frustration. Storms out.

JEFFREY
Its your funeral, Archer.

ARCHER
(to himself)
Always been.

He looks at his drawings. His eyes settle on the villainous MR. LIEBER. Dressed in a black suit. A small EARTH GLOBE in his hand. Yellowish, cartoonish eyes, intense as a volcano.

INT. MEETING ROOM - A MINUTE LATER

Close up on Mr. Lieber's own YELLOW EYES.

MR. LIEBER
The question is, what do we do to capture momentum from this day forth--

Lieber looks across the room as...ARCHER walks in; a false sense of mollification mixed in with undisguised hubris.

SAME BRAVE SOUL (O.S.)
All hail the conquering hero.

A few nervous laughs as Archer finds his seat.

MR. LIEBER
Knock it off! Take a seat, Archer!

Gives Archer a hard look.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
Let me guess, virus on your Mac. Subway ran late.

Archer settles into his chair.

ARCHER
Mac's been working fine and I pound
pavement to work.

MR. LIEBER
Then what is it?

A deadly pause. Everyone stares at Archer.

ARCHER
I don't like Mondays.

MR. LIEBER
Don't like Mondays?

ARCHER
No, Sir. Bad things happen on Mondays.

More nervous laughter.

MR. LIEBER
You mean like employees getting
terminated by irate bosses? That sort
of thing?

Oooohs and Aahhhs from across the room.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
You may have heard, Archer, another
hero in the Grandstand canon has hit
the big screen. In fact, tonight's the
big premier.

ARCHER
Uh, yes. I'm aware of that.

MR. LIEBER
Good. Now, for the benefit of some of
you daintier neophytes, I'll spell out
a little back channel history. Max
Ranger isn't the first Grandstand hero
to hit the mark. In the 80's the iconic
TV series, 'The Copper Marvel' was a
successful mainstream hit, running six
full seasons. Since then, over a dozen
of our heroes have crossed over to the
silver screen. Q-Prowler. The immensely
popular Global Commanders. We owe it
all to one thing. What is that? Anyone?

No one knows. Archer lets out a SIGH. As Lieber begins to
speak, ARCHER mouths out his words.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
Basic, fundamental storytelling
combined with cutting edge artwork.
(MORE)

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

What our founding artists forty years ago called 'the Marvel Method'. I want you to give yourselves a well-earned round of applause for a job well done.

Round of applause.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

Now, get back to work. Access Hollywood will be doing a feature on us later today. I want everyone sharp and on the cuff.

Everyone rises. Begins to file out.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

Archer, I think its time you and I have a clarification session. Why don't you Braindrag yourself and your huge truck nuts into my office in--let's say--five minutes?

Employees file out. A WOMAN gently pats Archer's shoulder.

WOMAN

You really did it this time, Archer.

INT. MR. LIEBER'S OFFICE - 5 MINUTES LATER

CLOSE UP: on a small SUN TZU STATUETTE riding tall on the corner of Lieber's oval, space-ship shaped desk.

Archer appears at the open door. Clears his throat.

MR LIEBER

Sit down, Archer.

Archer sinks into a Star-Trek type leather command chair.

MR LIEBER (CONT'D)

You mind telling me what the fuck has gotten into you lately?

ARCHER

Sir?

MR LIEBER

That attitude you constantly project. You come in here whenever you feel like it. Late for meetings. Showing me up in front of my staff.

He soaks in Archer's dark, urban outfit.

MR. LIEBER

And what's with that get up? You look like your ready to take up arms with Patty Hearst and the god-damn SLA.

ARCHER

They still taking applications after all these years?

MR LIEBER

Smarty-clown. The world doesn't owe you any favors because you happen to come from good stock, Archer. I don't owe you any favors.

ARCHER

You don't?

Archer reaches out. Sifts thru a large stack of COMIC BOOKS on Lieber's desk. SNATCHES one. Waves it in front of Lieber.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Emerald Fury. First Issue. What are we going on now, 148 and counting? That's twelve years right there.

Lieber watches, simmering. Archer tosses FURY to the floor.

He picks thru the stack and pulls out another comic. Holds it so the cover is facing away from Lieber.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Another one of mine. Sold over five hundred thousand copies in one year.

Archer turns the book around so Lieber can read the cover.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

That means half a million people round the world think I'm the spit shine polish on their shoes.

Lieber gazes at the obvious villain gracing the cover. THE MASKED INTRUDER.

MR. LIEBER

You're talking villains, Archer. The fans didn't buy these rags to read about your provincial views on life. They bought them to see those precise views conquered by knights in shining armor.

He points to the cardboard-stock, strong-jawed hero gracing the cover next to the villain.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

It's the way the world bleeds, Archer.
The bad. The corrupt. They're given
just enough room to operate before
they're systematically squashed.

(pause)

These are miserable times and people
want redemption.

ARCHER

Redemption. Coming to a newstand soon
in forty pages or less.

MR. LIEBER

Whatever it takes. World is falling
apart out there. People don't want
masked men in black firing large,
atomic death rays. They want saviors.

ARCHER

You know that stock you mentioned
before? That stock helped put a comic
book in every kid's hand in this
country over the past thirty years.

MR. LIEBER

I know we owe your old man a great debt
of gratitude, but that was a long time
ago. The past.

ARCHER

If it weren't for my father and the
Copper Marvel, your father's company
wouldn't have survived the second year.

MR. LIEBER

Your father left quite a legacy, I'll
admit that. But like I said...ancient
history.

Archer rises from his seat.

ARCHER

You don't know a damn thing about
legacy.

Lieber reaches out towards his desk. He grabs a volleyball-
sized FOAM RUBBER BALL that resembles earth.

MR LIEBER

You know, you can hope in one hand and
shit in the other. Which one you think
is going to come up more often? Hmm?

ARCHER

Being clever don't excuse you from being an asshole.

MR LIEBER

You have to start producing around here! No more villains! You got that! I want heroes!

ON THE WALL

Archer pulls an ancient, weathered comic book off the wall. Framed in thick acrylic. No 1, Volume 1 THE COPPER MARVEL.

MR. LIEBER

What are you doing?

ARCHER

I remember my old man and his war stories. The long months he said it took to create this. Blood and blisters on his hands from sketching day and night. But in the end, all he could do was smile.

Archer places the picture back on the wall.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

You talking saviors? Who reached out to save him? Your old man stole his method and threw him out on the street. From holidays to holocausts, he story-boarded everything for you. And you abandoned him.

MR. LIEBER

Your old man was contracted to do a job. He was paid for his work. At least he had the foresight to look after you.

ARCHER

Foresight. Some might call it a curse.

MR LIEBER

You know, I would have terminated you a long time ago if your old man hadn't scored that legacy contract for you as part of his severance. So I suppose you are right. It is a curse. But the curse is on me.

ARCHER

You're right! I do have a contract. Ten year deal that ends in two. But you forgot one thing. I have first rights of refusal. Which means come last day

(MORE)

ARCHER (CONT'D)
of December, I can re-up if I choose
to. Which means you'll have to deal
with me for five more years.

Archer holds up his hand, fingers spread. Steps towards the door and exits.

MR. LIEBER
Nothing brightens up a room like your
absence. Just go find the Wonder Twins
and get me my hero.

INT. ARTIST WORK SPACE - DAY

A large, open territory shared by artists/writers/letterers. The room is divided into four separate squared off sections by floor-to-ceiling glass. Each cell has its own team.

INT. ARCHER'S CELL

TWO ARTISTS, both geeky, nerdy types; wait for Archer. One plays an ancient video game, SPACE INVADERS, on the computer. The other looks across the room at A VASE. Sketches a FLOWER. He's graced the flower with a rather enormous, erect PENIS.

Archer stalks in, still angry. Sketcher stops drawing.

SKETCH ARTIST
Someone's back from the proverbial
doghouse.

ARCHER
Shut up, SHAKESPEARE. You'll have full
title soon enough, the way your
writing's taken a turn for the worst.

SHAKESPEARE
I told Lieber that very thing when he
hired me. Damn it, Jim, I'm a letterer--
Not a copywriter.

DARWIN, 26, erudite, bearded, bushy-haired, speaks up.

DARWIN
Things get ugly in there with the
master debater?

SHAKESPEARE (O.S.)
You mean masturbator.

Archer shoots him a 'what do you think' look.

ARCHER

Not at all, DARWIN. In fact, Lieber shoveled so much gushy goodwill down my throat the little black man residing deep inside my heart couldn't help dishing out some for himself. The fuck you think?

DARWIN

Times are tough, brother Leigh. The high and mighty rule.

ARCHER

Well, I'm a master crop duster. And eradicating bullshit is my specialty.

SHAKESPEARE

How many times you going to cross that line?

ARCHER

How many times you gonna' draw it?

Archer slinks down into a chair. Happier. Grins ear to ear.

DARWIN

You brought up your contract again. Didn't you?

Archer nods. SHAKESPEARE lets out a cool whistle.

ARCHER

That didn't piss him off so much as I reminded him of my employee option. For the first time I could see Lieber thought I was serious about staying. I thought he was going to puke on his earth globe.

DARWIN

The foam one on his desk?

ARCHER

(nods)

South America was in a great state of distress for a cool minute.

SHAKESPEARE (V.O.)

Hasn't Chavez had a rough enough year already?

DARWIN

I don't get you, Archer. You piss and moan, moan and piss all day about Lieber. If you hate him so much why

(MORE)

DARWIN (CONT'D)

don't you just grab your nibs and move on?

SHAKESPEARE

Easy Darwin. If it weren't for Archer's expertise at creating bad guys, we'd both be out of the hero business.

DARWIN

Say, Archer. You get tickets for the Max Ranger premier tonight?

Archer shoots him a venomous look.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

Me neither. I was thinking about asking KIRBY for an invite.

INT. ACROSS THE ROOM - A DIFFERENT CELL - CONTINUOUS

A highly confident CREATIVE TEAM OF 13 MEN/WOMEN joke and laugh. Assembled around a table that resembles the last supper. In the center is JOHN KIRBY, 25, the brash, young creator of Max Ranger, beaming proudly.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

The likelihood is zilch, Shakes. Kirby don't like to mingle with the little people. May as well try and bring the Russian bear down to his knees.

ARCHER

Last I heard he fell in the fifth.

Archer studies the super-group.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Poor bastard. Fanboy don't know he just dug his own financial grave.

DARWIN

What do you mean?

ARCHER

Forget it. Bring out the sketchbooks and panels and hide the cleaning solvents! We got work to do.

DARWIN

You going to give Lieber his hero?

ARCHER

You know me better than that. We're going to give Lieber a villain for the ages.

SHAKESPEARE (O.S.)
Expanded universe, here we come.

They assemble wacom tablets, sketchbooks, coloring pencils and a tape recorder on the collective work station.

INT. HALLWAY NEXT TO ARCHER'S CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS

A young GIRL stops. Pokes her head into the cubicle. 25, short, plucky. EMO hair. China doll face with a Chucky doll attitude. A living Manga character.

MANGA GIRL
Can you guys tell me where I can find
Joe Lieber's office?

WONDER TWINS point. Archer stares at the pass in her hand.

ARCHER
Visitor's pass goes around the neck.

MANGA GIRL
Right!

She leaves.

SHAKESPEARE
Who was that?

INT. LIEBER'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

MANGA GIRL knocks. Lieber, pouring over figures, looks up.

MR. LIEBER
MADDIE! How the hell are you?

MADDIE
I'm fine. Are you busy?

Lieber remains still. Motions for her to take a seat.

MR. LIEBER
Never to busy for my favorite niece.
Come in. We have lots to catch up on.
When did you get in?

MADDIE
Last week.

MR. LIEBER
You settling in, right?

MADDIE
All squared away. Ready to start work.

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - CONTINUOUS

DARWIN

Say Archer, when was the last time you actually drew a superhero?

Archer shrugs.

SHAKESPEARE

Wasn't it a giant bee that released his spunk over unsuspecting turnip plants?

ARCHER

It was a mutant fly, asshole! Not a bee. And you should ask your mom. She bought the first issue.

DARWIN

That insult had long time hang time.
(snaps his fingers)
What was that one called?

ARCHER

TurboFly.

DARWIN

TurboFly. Yeah, that was it...Jesus, Archer you really suck at names.

ARCHER

That's why you're the writer.

WIDE ANGLE SHOT FROM ABOVE of the three working.

SHAKESPEARE

Hey Archer. Did you know Nicolas Cage took his last name from Luke Cage, Hero For Hire? Maybe you should get him to name your characters.

ARCHER

Up yours Shakespeare.

INT. ENTRY HALL (GRANDSTAND COMICS) - DAY

An elderly JANITOR pins doll-sized Christmas FIGURINES cast in the likeness of Grandstand Comics villains/superheroes on a giant floor to ceiling Christmas tree.

ARCHER exits thru the double doors and runs into Maddie.

Maddie, carrying a large drawing kit, knocks ARCHER right into the janitor, who loses his balance on the step ladder and drops a FIGURINE. It shatters on the hardwood floor.

ARCHER
Hey! Watch it!

MADDIE rears back in semi-shock. Completely still and mute.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
Well, you going to apologize or do you
need to buy a vowel first?

MADDIE
I am so sorry. I didn't see you.

ARCHER bends over and picks up the remnants of an ORNAMENT.
Looks at it closely in his HAND. It's one of his.

ARCHER
Look what you did.

MADDIE
I said I'm sorry. It's just one
ornament.

She looks at a large chest. Filled with DOZENS of FIGURINES.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
Looks like there are about a hundred
left in there.

ARCHER
Yeah, but this is one of mine. An
original. And you know what they say.

Maddie shrugs.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
Boy never forgets his first.

She leans in. Takes a good look at it.

MADDIE
That's GoldenWave...Holy Cathedral!
You're Archer Leigh.

ARCHER ignores her. Hands the broken pieces to the janitor.

ARCHER
She's sorry.

JANITOR
It's OK. I'm saving the best for last.
The Copper Marvel is going right up
there.

He points to the pinnacle of the tree. Naked at the moment.

JANITOR (CONT'D)

This year your dad will be on top of
the world.

Archer gazes up 12 feet at the top of the TREE. Naked, bare.

Maddie bares the visitor's pass hanging off her neck.

MADDIE

I'm Mad--

ARCHER

I don't give a rat's ass who you think
you are. What you are is clumsy. And
I'm not your nearest and dearest, so
watch where you're going. These
ornaments represent years of work. Real
work by real artists.

HE stalks off. SHE watches, flabbergasted.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

You talentless, on-line drawing-course
hacks need to learn a lesson in
humility.

INT. LUNCH ROOM - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

KIRBY, already dressed in a tuxedo. Hair slicked back
fashionably. A face as smooth as velvet. SHOUTS into his blue
tooth and takes down a protein shake.

Shakespeare and Darwin stare at him in wondrous awe. Half
eaten sandwiches clutched in their hands.

KIRBY

So I told them to get Bobby De Niro a
pair, front and center. After all, he
does have a wicked cameo in the
movie...

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

ARCHER stares down from the 11th floor window at the street
below. A commingling of superheroes fraternize with the
boulevard's tourists. ACROSS THE STREET EYE LEVEL - A MAX
RANGER billboard. MAX glares at Archer thru brilliant blue
eyes.

CROSS CUT WITH:

INT. LUNCH ROOM - CONTINUOUS

CLOSE UP on Kirby's own brilliant BABY BLUES. Archer enters.

KIRBY

I tell you, we're going to turn the after party into an apefest.

(spots Archer)

Archer. How's my favorite Tim Burton extra doing?

Archer ignores him.

KIRBY (CONT'D)

I tried to score you a set for the premiere but I was scared you might raid Hollywood Memorial for a date.

Kirby looks at Shakespeare and Darwin.

KIRBY (CONT'D)

Or worse, bring the Wonder Twins.

Shakespeare tosses out his sandwich. Snags condiments off the table and starts to design a figure on the plate.

ARCHER

You keep your tickets. After your dignity's gone, the memory of tonight's all you'll have left.

KIRBY

Why do you always have to be such a prick?

ARCHER

Cause I've got the higher ground.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD BLVD. - DAY

Crowded sidewalk. Tourists. Homeless. A mixed bag of mercenary actors/actresses masquerading as SUPERHEROES.

-SUPERMAN poses for a photo with ASIAN TOURISTS.

-A scrawny actor in a baggy SPIDERMAN suit wears a backpack. -

A giant TRANSFORMER picks a TOURIST'S WALLET as his accomplice, another TRANSFORMER, keeps him preoccupied.

MAX RANGER. Standing proud and stoic atop a SILVER SOAPBOX. waves a katana sword for the benefit of a few tourists.

MAX RANGER

Photo?

A CHINESE MAN eagerly hands over a five spot.

INT. LUNCH ROOM - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

KIRBY

You think you know so much? Then why isn't it your work up there on that marquee tonight? Why won't it be you stepping out of a limo with a beautiful girl on your arms?

ARCHER

My advice to you, Kirby--milk it for all its worth. 'Cause the ride, it won't last.

Archer grabs something from the fridge and stalks off.

KIRBY

Always the asshole, right Archer?

ARCHER

You want neutrality? Go to Switzerland.

Shakespeare and Darwin follow him out. Shakespeare grins as he hands Kirby the sketch-on-a-plate. Kirby looks down at it.

MAX RANGER is in an obscene, sexually compromising position. He bends forward at the waist, his pants hanging low around his ankles. SUPERMAN, grinning, stands behind him, ready to thrust. A caption in red ketchup reads: KRYPTONITE, MY ASS!

INT. GRANDSTAND COMICS - ENTRY HALL - LATER

THE ELEVATORS

ARCHER presses the elevator BUTTON and waits. Close up on a MEDICAL ID BRACELET as he reaches out. An elegantly dressed WOMAN, 40s, walks up and stands next to him and smiles.

A moment goes by. Archer again presses the BUTTON. The woman glances down at his BRACELET. Archer catches her in the act.

ELEGANT WOMAN

I have one too.

She holds up her ARM to reveal a somewhat copycat BRACELET. Only hers is a pricier design bracelet studded with jewels.

ELEGANT WOMAN (CONT'D)

Epilepsy.

ARCHER

Sounds expensive.

SEXCRETARY'S DESK

SEXCRETARY

No. There are no tickets available thru this office. May I suggest a ticket broker.

She slams down the phone. Phone immediately RINGS.

ELEGANT WOMAN

Say, aren't you Archer Leigh? Creator of the Suicide Sentinels?

Archer nods politely.

ELEGANT WOMAN (CONT'D)

My little girl just adores that comic.

ARCHER

Five brave souls risking life and limb to fight the evil recycling empire--Who wouldn't?

ELEGANT WOMAN

Aren't you related to someone famous?

ARCHER

Sheldon Shugel.

ELEGANT WOMAN

(not sure)

Yeah. He created--

ARCHER

--The Copper Marvel.

ELEGANT WOMAN

Right, the Copper Marvel! I saw one selling the other day at a yard sale.

ELEVATOR DINGS. Doors open. A few scattered souls exit.

ARCHER

What were they asking for it?

ELEGANT WOMAN

Fifty cents, I think. Marked down from two dollars.

ARCHER

Oh.

The WOMAN waits on Archer. HE urges her to step inside first. She smiles and enters. Presses the OPEN DOOR button. Archer fixates on her glittering ID BRACELET.

Archer takes a step forward, then stops.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
 Actually, I think I'll take the next
 one down.

ARCHER'S POV - The elevator DOORS close on the WOMAN.

EXT. SIDEWALK - HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD - DAY

ARCHER walks down the sidewalk. He passes a lethargic MAX RANGER, leaning against the wall, reading Variety.

MAX RANGER
 Photo?

ARCHER
 Go sit on your Katana!

Just then ARCHER hears...

O.S. - A cacophony of strange, ghostly MUSIC from far away.

HE stops. Looks ahead...then behind him. Crosses the street.

HE enters the mouth of a narrow ALLEYWAY, ever so closer to the growing percussion sounds: WIND, CHIMES, STEELPAN, ETC. Two ancient, 5 story brick structures shoot up on both sides of the alley, so close they appear to touch high above.

A PURSE-SNATCHER, black, lithe, muscular, with long dreads, runs past him at breakneck speed. He carries a woman's purse.

The SNATCHER bumps into Archer, who in turn drops his portfolio. SKETCHES and DRAWINGS fall scattered to the floor.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
 Hey! Watch it, you!

The SNATCHER bounds down the alley and stops in front of a COMMERCIAL GARBAGE DUMP. HE looks back at Archer. Grins.

TWO COPS in full dress blues give furious chase. They race into the alley, hot on the purse snatcher's heels.

COP #1
 Stop right there, asshole!

SNATCHER immediately launches into an intricate urban gymnastics routine. A running start...A DASH VAULT over a set of garbage cans...climbs one brick wall guerilla style, finding hand and footholds in impossible places. All the way up, where he performs a full top-out to the ROOF.

The cops look on mesmerized. Cop # 2 hits the fire escape.

COP #2
 Over here!

The cops climb the FIRE ESCAPE, an ungainly race to the top.

UPWARD ANGLE (FROM ALLEYWAY) - The purse snatcher jumps from one rooftop to another, a mighty leap of 10 feet, complete with a summersault thrown in for affect.

The COPS manage to scale the fire escape. The first COP peers down over the lip to the ALLEY below. LOOKS across the gap...

The SNATCHER has stopped. He leans back against a TV ANTENNA. Grins at the cops. He arrogantly holds out the purse.

COP #1 takes a few steps backward and races towards the edge. HE leaps across, barely making it. He catches the ledge and hangs. The SOLES of his LEATHER SHOES fight for a toehold.

Finally, HE pushes himself up over the ledge. The PURSE-SNATCHER takes off.

COP#2 does the same. He badly misjudges his jump, however and almost falls to his death. He manages to grasp the ledge with both his bare hands.

As he dangles from the rooftop, his NIGHTSTICK unfastens from his utility belt and drops below. It lands in a GIANT GARBAGE BIN, overflowing to the brim with boxes and garbage bags.

HE looks DOWN. In desperation, he tries to SCUTTLE up to the rooftop but the building's walls have grown slippery and mossy in the deep shade. His SHOES keep slipping. Fatigued, he finally lets go and falls down inside the GARBAGE BIN.

HE pokes his head out. Meanwhile...

ARCHER takes a few steps deeper into the alley. Looks up-

The PURSE SNATCHER leaps over the five story chasm, right above Archer, this time from the opposite direction. He tuck-and-rolls his body in a magnificent display of gymnastics.

Giving chase, COP #1 jumps again. This time he falls short, missing the edge altogether. Luckily, he manages to fall onto the fire escape a floor below.

WE HEAR the PURSE SNATCHER'S LAUGHTER high above - O.S.

ARCHER
Holy fuckballs!

INT. ARCHER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

ON THE FLOOR behind the door is a single LETTER. Archer steps inside. Takes the letter and quickly tears open the envelop.

Without looking, he starts to feed the lonely GHOST FISH. The FISH-FLAKES quickly pile up on the water's surface.

INSERT: A LETTER FROM THE PRODUCERS OF COMIC-CON. INVITING HIM TO SPEAK AT THE END OF THE YEAR CONVENTION IN SAN DIEGO.

A mountain of FISH FLAKES pile up on the water's surface. The GHOST FISH is going nuts. ARCHER reads a bit more. Then crumbles up the letter and tosses it away.

AT THE WETBAR

HE pours himself a stiff glass of top shelf bourbon.

PAN TO THE SIDE - the LARGE LOFT SPACE he calls home. It is cavernous. Dark, muted. Not much furniture and what little there is screams of a darker version of Ann Rand objectivism.

He steps out onto the TERRACE. He is surrounded by the glimmering lights and tall buildings of Downtown LA.

MILES AWAY - HE spots the bright KLIEG LIGHTS of the Max Ranger premier, sweeping madly across the dark night like London searchlights during the Blitzkrieg.

ARCHER

Fuck you, Max Ranger.

The sound of DEEP RUMBLING. A distant WHISTLE - O.S.

Throws his head back, takes down the bourbon.

TILT DOWN to reveal a wide array of RAILROAD TRACKS encroaching the terrain near his building. A LOCOMOTIVE barrels thru, its lone headlight probing the darkness.

IN A CORNER OF THE LOFT

ARCHER Pulls down on a cord. A hidden MINI STAIRCASE falls from the ceiling. He climbs up to his workspace.

WORKSPACE

Opens a sketch pad and tentatively begins to sketch.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

If it's a hero you want...

He starts to sketch. Unsatisfied, he quickly tears the PAPER from the pad, crumples it in his fist and tosses it away.

Does this over and over and over. SCENE after SCENE of ARCHER trying to create a sketchbook hero. He crumples up SKETCH after SKETCH and tosses each in the now full WASTEBASKET.

He turns on his COMPUTER. Goes on line.

A WEBSITE.

THE SUPERHERO GENERATOR. He blithely clicks at the cell that generates random names for new heroes. Instantly, the site comes up with a few corny monickers.

He clicks again. Another dozen or so colorful names pop up.

He makes a list. He repeats the process, this time searching for that hero's powers. Then, frustrated, he violently crosses out all the names.

Desperation time. ARCHER plugs in his headphones. CLOSE UP on A FILE on his desktop. He clicks on the ICON. WE instantly HEAR T.S. Eliot's, 'The Hollow Men' beaming into Archer's consciousness in a Paul Harvey, 'So God Made a Farmer' VOICE.

The pace quickly turns frenetic. Archer sketches from scratch. Scene after scene of his finger dancing over linen paper, erasing, retracing, reshaping, unleashing the dark impetus inside him, vanquishing ghosts thru his talent.

In record time, he's fashioned a villain for the ages. A HOODED, DARK, MAN-CREATURE with a formidable, galactic black hole for a face. His head is framed by a swirling, luminous galaxy, full of planets and stars and supernovas that are slowly sucked into the vortex of his face.

ANIMATED SEQUENCE: The CREATURE comes alive in Archer's mind. A host of scientific FORMULAS and EQUATIONS revolve around the creature's head, rotating counter clockwise. Pulled in by the creature's gravitational force, they collapse upon themselves. Tiny EXPLOSIONS abound. COSMIC BODIES are pulled in, implode, and only then can we see the creature's hideous, vacuous yellowish EYES and jagged, volcano-peaked TEETH.

ARCHER looks down at the finished product.

INSERT: A picture of Archer's new villain. A GIANT standing tall on the periphery of the universe. A small, miniature EARTH clutched in his hands. Archer scrawls a name underneath: NEUTRINO

EXT. NEWSTAND - MORNING

Archer grabs a VARIETY off the stack. The COVER fires a terrific salvo at the MAX RANGER PREMIER. FLOP!!!

ARCHER tears thru the magazine. Quickly scans the article. Words like COSMIC BOMB! OVERWROUGHT! LACKING IMAGINATION permeate each paragraph.

ARCHER

It's a great day to be atheist.

Archer hands the NEWSTAND GUY a ten dollar bill.

READS the LOWLIGHTS: MAX RANGER IS THE NON-DESCRIPT, COOKIE-CUTTER HERO OF THE DECADE...FILM SUFFERS FROM A LACK OF CLARITY AND VISION...ADD A CHEESECLOTH VILLAIN THAT MAKES US YEARN FOR AN ARCHER LEIGH ORIGINAL.

NEWSTAND GUY

Your change.

ARCHER

Thanks.

INT. ARTIST WORKSPACE - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

YELLING - O.S. THE GALILEO THERMOMETER on Archer's desk quakes as someone off screen BANGS his fist down repeatedly on a desk. The tiny VESSELS inside collide with a JINGLE.

From their vantage point, DARWIN and SHAKESPEARE stare thru glass to LIEBER'S OFFICE, where Lieber tears into a stunned Kirby. His SHOUTS can be heard throughout the expansive room.

Various ARTISTS and EMPLOYEES dash for cover.

SHAKESPEARE

Glad I'm here. Hunkered in the bunker.

MR. LIEBER (O.S.)

I don't want to hear any more excuses!
I'm the god-damn laughing stock of the
film community!

INT. MR. LIEBER'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

KIRBY

It's not my fault. The special effects weren't up to standards.

MR. LIEBER

Up to standards!? Fuck standards! The entire story dragged! It was boring! No, let me correct myself! It was so boring, boredom left the god-damn theatre after ten minutes!

KIRBY

I don't understand how you can stand there and blame me. I just wrote the screenplay.

MR. LIEBER

Aah! Exactly! You wrote that...

He snatches the VARIETY RAG off his desk and reads.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
 'Singular minded amateur of a
 screenplay', according to Variety.
 'Structure worthy of a first grader'.
 And I haven't even gotten to the other
 reviews yet!

He points to a healthy STACK OF NEWSPAPERS on his desk.

DARWIN on his computer. Starts to play 1992 SUPER TECMO BOWL.

KIRBY
 I'm not going to listen to this
 garbage. I have work to do.

MR. LIEBER
 Oh, but you will listen! You want to be
 a big shot Hollywood writer!? Good!
 'Cause now you'll have all the time in
 the world to practice.

KIRBY
 What do you mean? You're firing me?

MR. LIEBER
 God-damn right I'm firing you! Get the
 hell out of here!!! Now!!!

BO JACKSON dances around the entire MIAMI DEFENSE and scores.
 SCOREBOARD reads 7-0.

KIRBY
 You can't fire me. I have a contract.

MR. LIEBER
 Fuck your contract! And while you're at
 it, fuck you! I'd rather pay you not to
 be here!

KIRBY
 You know, I'll have my attorney up your
 ass by happy hour.

MR. LIEBER
 He'll know where to find me! I want you
 out of this building in ten minutes!

LIEBER grabs the MAX RANGER action figure and throws it at
 Kirby. KIRBY ducks. The FIGURE careens into the hallway.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
 Not twelve! Not fifteen! Pack your
 tools, turn in your badge and get the
 hell out of my sight!!!

SHAKESPEARE
Sandwich and a road map.

DARWIN goes back to his game of SUPER TECMO BOWL. BO JACKSON dances around the entire MIAMI DEFENSE yet again. Scores.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD BLVD. - DAY

Archer dodges the usual street rabble. Even though it is DRIZZLING, the SUPERHEROES are out in full force. He scans the crowded sidewalk...SPOTS something. Heads over to--

An ACTOR decked out in a GOLDENWAVE costume. Archer gazes up at an 8 foot tall TERRESTRIAL GOLDEN GOD; shiny and wet.

ARCHER
GoldenWave, huh?

GOLDENWAVE
That's right. One of the oldest and boldest around.

ARCHER
You don't say.

Archer looks at the miniature ACTION FIGURE GoldenWave has placed atop a newspaper vending machine.

GOLDENWAVE (O.S.)
Known for his ability to generate earthquakes. He can bend or shape anything with a wavelength or frequency. Light, sound, the ocean tide.

ARCHER
Spoken like a true fan.

GOLDENWAVE
Well, not so fast. Despite his omnipotence, I still think he's no match for The Thing.

ARCHER
The Thing? From The Fantastic Four? Are you shitting me?

GOLDENWAVE
The Thing is the epic existential conundrum. Though he acquired great strength from cosmic rays the transformation came at a great cost. His skin devolved into hideous rocky plates. Yet despite his appearance,
(MORE)

GOLDENWAVE (CONT'D)

Ben Grimm retains a gentle soul and love for humanity. Few heroes have done so much to protect the Earth...Except maybe Max Ranger.

ARCHER

And you were doing so well.

GOLDENWAVE

Thing has great respect in the Superhero community. He's benevolent, yet lonely. Strong as an ox, but isolated. Hence the great irony.

ARCHER

Irony? What irony?

GOLDENWAVE

It takes the love of a woman, the blind sculptress Alicia Masters, whom the Thing believes loves him for his monstrous form, to accept the creature he's become.

ARCHER soaks in his words. Looks around the STREET:

--A PHONE BOOTH. Sans phone. A rugged OLD WINO talks into a tin can tied to the booth with cord.

--A CAFE. A SPECIALS MENU on the sidewalk. INSERT: TODAY'S SPECIALS. NOTHING! NOTHING IS SPECIAL. YOU ARE NOT SPECIAL.

ARCHER

Interesting perspective. How's life on the boulevard these days?

GOLDENWAVE

Same old thing. Heroes and villains. Holding court. Fighting for every dollar, deutchemark, and yen. Just the other day I got into a brouhaha with Captain America.

ARCHER

You guys fighting over Wonder Woman again? I'm telling you man, she's not worth it. That invisible thing's highly overrated.

GOLDENWAVE

The Captain stepped into my corner. I was waxing philosophically with a bus load of Asian tourists and he wanted a piece of the action.

ARCHER

Waxing philosophically?

GOLDENWAVE

True. The Captain don't respect a thing. He's supposed to be the face of the good ol' USA, but he came in fronting like North Korea.

ARCHER

Amen to that, brother. Hey, can I buy that action figure from you?

GOLDENWAVE

Gee, I don't know. I need it for my shtick. The tourists really like--

Archer peels off a fifty dollar bill.

GOLDENWAVE (CONT'D)

On the other hand I can always get another.

ARCHER

Great.

GoldenWave hands it over. Archer turns. Takes a few steps.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

One last thing...The Thing. Ben Grimm. Doesn't he lose the girl in The end?

INT. GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

Archer, soaking wet, dressed in a fashionable raincoat, exits the elevator. The ROOM crackles with manic buzz: Phones RING, ARTISTS and MINIONS dash madly about.

He makes his way to LOIS'S DESK, happy as a clam.

ARCHER

(singing)

Oh, the weather outside is frightful...

Lois holds up her finger. Talks into the phone.

LOIS

No, I'm afraid that's impossible. Mr. Lieber is putting off all interviews until his publicist has a chance to set the story straight.

ARCHER

Hello, Lois. Crazy morning?

LOIS covers the phone.

LOIS

The phone won't stop. Every reporter in the city's trying to interview Mr. Lieber. They're calling Max Ranger the worse comic book movie ever put out by a major studio.

(back to the phone)

I'll write down your information and pass it along to him. Good-bye!

Lois hangs up. Archer stares at her. Lois looks up.

ARCHER

Well?

LOIS

Well, what?

ARCHER

Is it the worse superhero movie ever?

Phone RINGS again. She picks up.

LOIS

Archer, I don't have time for your nonsense. Lieber wants to see you as soon as you get in.

ARCHER

Does he?

LOIS

Yes. And tread lightly. I don't need to tell you he's in a very foul mood.

ARCHER

Has Kirby been in yet?

LOIS

Kirby's standing tall before him as we speak.

Archer lets out a low whistle. He picks out the bright M&Ms from a BOWL on her desk. Leaves the BROWN ONES behind. He looks down thoughtfully at his shoes. Rugged. Muddy. Broken.

ARCHER

I think I'm going to buy me a new pair today. These shoes have had their last say.

INT. ENTRY HALL - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

Archer pauses to stare at the Christmas tree. He pulls out the GOLDENWAVE action figure. Stares at it for a moment. Picks out a spot on the tree about waist level.

ARCHER looks up...KIRBY rapidly approaches. He carries two boxes worth of personal possessions, sketchbooks, etc.

KIRBY
Now, you're king turd around here.

ARCHER
What do you mean?

KIRBY
Lieber just fired me.

ARCHER
What?

KIRBY
You know, fired...ZAP! BLAM! KAPOW!
Finished.

ARCHER
I don't get it. Why?

KIRBY
You don't read the papers? Apparently
my writing belongs in the gutter.

ARCHER
But you have a contract.

KIRBY
Contract's only worth the legal team
behind the ink.

ARCHER
Kirby, I'm sorry.

KIRBY
Yeah, I bet you are.

Kirby places his belongings down on the floor. Grabs the GOLDENWAVE action figure.

KIRBY (CONT'D)
I remember when I first saw your early
sketches for this. I thought your work
was shit. Amateurish. Not worthy of a
legacy. What the hell did I know?

ARCHER
You'll be OK.

Kirby hands back GoldenWave. Points to the tree.

KIRBY

Stick to the middle. The higher you go
the more that arrogant asshole will
have you in his sights.

KIRBY leaves.

ARCHER fastens a rubber-band around Goldenwave's head. He looks at the same EMPTY SPACE on the tree. Pauses. He stands on his TIP-TOES and pins GOLDENWAVE to a higher branch.

His eyes rise to the very top of the tree. He looks at the COPPER MARVEL ornament shining bright like the North Star.

INT. COMIC BOOK STORE - DAY

MADDIE walks thru the aisle, peering inside the many bins. They are full, bursting with every type of genre imaginable.

She gets to the MANGA SECTION. One, maybe two comic BOOKS.

CLERK

Can I help you with something?

MADDIE

More Manga, maybe?

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - DAY

SHAKESPEARE fumbles with a rubik's cube. Archer enters. Tosses the reviews onto the desk.

ARCHER

I come bearing last rites.

SHAKESPEARE

Well, it's finally hit the fan.

ARCHER

What? The shit?

Darwin plays a video game. Shakespeare snags the Variety.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Is that Tecmo Bowl?

DARWIN barely acknowledges him.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

So, you'll play outdated, 1989 stone-age technology but you won't brave lunch at the Taco Dollar?

DARWIN

It's Super Tecmo Bowl. And it's 1992.
And that technology you are so quick to
emasculate was heralded as vanguard
back in the day.

ARCHER stares at the cheesy game GRAPHICS. Shakespeare flips
thru the pages of the magazine.

ARCHER

I see what you mean.

DARWIN

Laugh now, old man, but there's a big
difference. Tecmo Bo is a legend in the
annals of console games. They only put
in two plays for him but still he
dominated.

SHAKESPEARE (O.S.)

Dominance!

Tecmo Bo runs another long TD. Score is 63-0.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Did you hear what happened to Kirby?

ARCHER

I just passed him out on the hall.

DARWIN

Kirby's a corporate Mo. He won't be
missed.

SHAKESPEARE

It went down pretty fast. The ink's
barely dry on all the reviews.

Shakespeare tears out a review and puts it thru a SHREDDER.

DARWIN

Word is Lieber was so pissed off after
the premier he wouldn't let Kirby ride
in the limo with him.

SHAKESPEARE

Kirby just spent the last hour in
Lieber's hub, begging for his job. Told
Lieber he had no place to go.

ARCHER

Well, heaven or hell or Grand Rapids,
we all gotta' go somewhere.

DARWIN

Tough times out there on the boulevard.
By the time Kirby finds a new gig he'll
have had so many man fingers inside him
he'll think he's a puppet.

ARCHER

That's cruel.

DARWIN

That's me. Three parts devil, one part
cruel.

Archer snatches the rubiks cube and expertly works it.

ARCHER

Man's got to know his limitations.

SHAKESPEARE

You thinking of getting out of this
racket? Lieber will never let you out
of your contract.

ARCHER

No? He just kicked Kirby to the curb.

SHAKESPEARE

Yeah, but the comic book world's full
of Max Ranger's. No one can draw up a
heinous villain like you.

DARWIN

1 rule - Behind every great hero
there better be a despicable villain
waiting to take him out on page ten.

DARWIN looks at the sketchbook in Archer's hands.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

Speaking of which, what are you
squirreling away beneath those steely,
talented fingers of yours?

Darwin snatches the sketchbook.

ARCHER

This. Genius. That's all. Genius.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, we'll see about that.

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - DAY

Maddie exits the comic book store. Looks around and spots--

ON THE SIDEWALK. A SIGN-SPINNER, 17, masterfully twirling a sign that reads: FREE ADVICE. A YOUNG BOY, 12 stands near him, wearing a SANDWICH BOARD that reads: FREE SHRUGS.

Maddie heads over. Stands in front of the spinner, who jazzes up his routine for her benefit.

SPINNER
What 'cha looking for little lady?

Maddie points to the FREE ADVICE.

SPINNER (CONT'D)
No false advertising here. Like the sign says, advice is free. If you want my advice, I wouldn't hesitate to ask.

Maddie hesitates. A little nervous.

SPINNER (CONT'D)
It's alright. You can ask me anything.

MADDIE
Where do the best superheroes hang out around here?

SPINNER
Comic book heroes?

MADDIE
Not these faketards out here. I need something new. Something fresh.

SPINNER
Sure. Cost you five bucks, though.

MADDIE
I thought your advice was free.

SPINNER dazzles with quick, darting hand movements.

SPINNER
Already gave you that. Directions, however, are extra.

Maddie looks at SANDWICH BOY. Gray, deadpan eyes stare back.

SPINNER (CONT'D)
Nothing's free in this universe. You should know that.

MADDIE
(to boy)
What do you think?

The BOY shrugs.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
OK. I'll bite.

SHE hands over a fiver. Spinner scrutinizes it closely.

SPINNER
Finding heroes is easy enough. They're
all around. You just have to go where
your imagination takes you. You dig?

Maddie looks perplexed. The SPINNER walks away.

SPINNER (CONT'D)
And a good day to you, Little Lady.

Maddie, again looks at the boy.

MADDIE
You think he was bull-shitting me?

The BOY shrugs.

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - DAY

Shakespeare and Darwin look closely at the NEUTRINO sketch.

Archer is on his sacred website. Trolling for powers and
weapons to give to his newly developed villain.

DARWIN
Impressive. I like what you did here.
The nonlinear shape of his face.
Everything subsists in a gaseous form.
Like vapor. It's very Victor von Doom.
Maybe you should throw in a cloak or
hood.

ARCHER
You think so?

DARWIN
Absolutely. Adds to the mystery. Doom
is an evil person, but he wasn't always
evil. His facial scar is slight, almost
imperceptible. But he still sees
himself as disfigured. Because of that,
Doom hides beneath a mask. Not from the
world, mind you, but from himself.

SHAKESPEARE
Or rather, his perception of himself.

DARWIN

We can give Neutrino a similar story of origin.

ARCHER quickly sketches the cloak and hood on Neutrino.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

It's a start. Could use some work.

SHAKESPEARE

I like it. But what the hell's a Neutrino?

DARWIN

I think its a big rat from South America.

ARCHER

That's a nutria, asshole! A neutrino is an electrically neutral, weakly interacting elementary subatomic particle with half-integer spin.

They stare at him blankly.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

I looked it up on the web. It's part of time travel. Or rather, the reverse part of it.

SHAKESPEARE

You mean like a Tachyon. Going back in time.

ARCHER

Exactly.

Darwin hovers over Archer. Looks at the Superhero site.

SHAKESPEARE

The past is irreversible.

ARCHER

Not in our universe.

DARWIN

What's with this site, anyway? Kind of like cheating, if you ask me.

ARCHER

Not kind of like, Darwin. It is cheating. Whenever I need a helping hand I just let the Internet do the walking.

DARWIN

You call that inspiration?

SHAKESPEARE

More like copyright infringement.

ARCHER

I mean well. And as they say in the biz, the road to artistic endeavor is paved with good intentions.

Lands on something.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Let's see what we have here...Lycanthropy.

DARWIN

What the hell is lycanthropy?

ARCHER

Turning into a wolf.

SHAKESPEARE

Nothing special about that. You seen Darwin here come five o'clock?

Darwin flicks him the bird. Another quick search.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Invulnerability?

ARCHER

Where's the fun in that?

A knock. NATALIE at the door.

NATALIE

Archer. Mr. Lieber wants to see you in his office.

Archer pauses. Rises. CLOSE UP on RUBIK'S CUBE in his hand. A white cross is visible on the cube. Tosses it to Shakespeare, who catches it and inspects it.

ARCHER

Follow the white cross, Shakes. It'll get you to the promised land.

Archer exits.

SHAKESPEARE

Didn't work so well for JC.

INT. MR. LIEBER'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Archer stands at the door. IN HIS HANDS: Lieber thoughtfully holds the teak statuette of SUN TZU.

ARCHER
You wanted to see me?

MR. LIEBER
Come on in. Have a seat.

Places the statue on his desk; right next to the foam EARTH.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
So, how goes it with you?

ARCHER
Woke up this morning with a real atom splitter. Whoever said the angel's share don't lead to hangovers never took down a fifth of bourbon.

MR. LIEBER
I'm a little bit busy this morning so I'll dispense with the polemics. I want to go full bleed on your new hero by the end of the year. Three weeks from today.

ARCHER
What? What hero?

MR. LIEBER
The one you owe me, Archer. The one you better produce if you want to remain on staff. I don't have Kirby anymore, as you've probably already heard.

ARCHER
Can't do it.

MR. LIEBER
Sure you can.

ARCHER
You don't understand. I don't create heroes anymore.

MR. LIEBER
You did at one point.

ARCHER
That was a long time ago.

MR. LIEBER
Know thy self, know thy enemy. A thousand battles will equal a thousand victories...

Archer stares at the SUN TZU statuette.

ARCHER

That's uplifting. Let me guess, Sun Tzu again.

MR. LIEBER

Don't be a smart ass. I'm trying to help you.

ARCHER

You mean like you helped Kirby?

MR. LIEBER

Kirby was the sacrificial lamb. In this town you need one if you're going to survive the press working a tight deadline.

ARCHER

I don't know.

MR. LIEBER

Aren't you the one who said 'when one draws up a story one must consider both sides of an argument?' Good vs. evil. Sick vs. healthy. Rich against poor. You recall that?

ARCHER

It's the burden of rejoinder. And it's something I'm cursed with.

MR. LIEBER

Good. Then you'll do it.

Archer stalls. Remains silent.

ARCHER

I can't promise you results.

MR. LIEBER

One more thing. My niece is in town. Just moved here from Tokyo. She might be joining Grandstand for the long haul. I want you to show her the ropes.

ARCHER

You mean you want me to baby-sit.

MR. LIEBER

She's twenty-four. We're long past that. Plus, she happens to have a considerable amount of talent. I need someone who can help maximize that talent.

ARCHER

What about Shakespeare or Darwin?

LIEBER

Archer, when you put your mind to things, you are one hell of an artist. No one can work those panels like you can. But your attitude--it's holding you back, son. And it's ruining your career.

ARCHER

Another clever Sun Tzu witticism?

MR. LIEBER

No. That's a prophecy of my own.

Archer rises. Turns to leave.

EXT. SIDEWALK - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

MADDIE stands underneath the GRANDSTAND COMICS sign.

-A group of female high school JOGGERS run past an OLD HOBO, ignoring his pleas for mercy.

-A large contingency of ASIAN TOURISTS walk the boulevard, protective surgical masks over their noses and mouths. -

-THE CARICATURIST draws in his sketchbook. A TOURIST sits in a chair near him, trying hard not to move.

MADDIE looks across the street. A TIRE ALIGNMENT STORE. The L on the ALIGNMENT sign is off kilter. A WORKER is perched precariously on a ladder, ready to fix it. On the back of his COVERALLS: THINK SAFETY FIRST.

She throws on a red, garish SANTA HAT and enters GRANDSTAND.

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - DAY

ARCHER

I saw something pretty incredible last night. This purse-snatcher running away from two cops scaled a wall right in front of me. Climbed all the way up, jumped from rooftop to rooftop, then back again. Made those cops look like polyester monkeys. One of them even fell forty feet into a garbage bin.

DARWIN

Parkour.

ARCHER

What?

DARWIN

Parkour, you imbecile, is a form of urban gymnastics. Your purse-snatcher was probably a practitioner of the art form.

ARCHER

Well, whatever they call it, that guy was good.

SHAKESPEARE

I thought you hated everything good.

ARCHER

Yeah, I see your point.

A KNOCK on the door frame. MADDIE stands at the entrance. Wearing a Santa hat.

MADDIE

Boys. Having a nice morning?

Silence. She walks up to Archer and sticks out her hand.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Remember me? I'm the no talent, on-line drawing-course hack that ran into you in the hallway the other day.

ARCHER

You're Lieber's niece?

MADDIE

Maddie Cornell. In the flesh.

ARCHER

Well, the assessment still stands.

MADDIE

My uncle told me you were funny.

Shakespeare and Darwin exchange perplexed looks.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

He also warned me you could be an arrogant prick. Told me to watch what I said around you. Said you grew bigger and bolder the more times you opened your mouth. Your arrogance, that is. Not your prick.

Everyone stares at everyone. Maddie gazes at Archer's crotch.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I can see he was right on that count.

ARCHER

I see you replaced your name tag with a Santa hat. Very Valentino swag.

MADDIE

Thank you.

ARCHER

I didn't mean it as a compliment. You should take it off before the jackals around here make you cry.

MADDIE

I already cried this morning.

ARCHER

Yeah. Why is that?

MADDIE

I just found out Brad Pitt was hitched.

ARCHER

He's been hitched for ages.

MADDIE

Like I said, I just found out. What kind of a name is Archer Leigh, anyway? Sounds like one of them old time serial killers.

DARWIN

His old man gave it to him. Named him after one of his characters.

ARCHER

Shut the fuck up, Darwin!

MADDIE

Thank God your old man didn't create Jughead.

Shakes and Darwin laugh. ARCHER stands at attention.

ARCHER

Alan Ladd. Bruce Wayne. Clark Kent. These are strong, iconic names. Easily identifiable. Names that evoke classic images of strong-jawed, godlike men standing tall behind symmetrical masks. Men with purpose, a greater sense of morality; with a stricter code of conduct. Men with sleek and stylish costumes...

ARTISTS start to gather around, listening to Archer as his vitriol picks up steam.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

A black childlike spicurl resting on the forehead. The ability to hurl oneself thru the air while lit like a giant tiki torch. A plethora of innovative gadgets to choose from, ingeniously crafted into a shiny, handy utility belt. All these things at my fingertips and I missed out. Instead I get tagged at birth with the unseemly monicker, Archer Leigh Shugel. A man with obviously little pride in his appearance.

Archer stands up and does a twirl, to whistles and catcalls. His T-shirt proudly displays: SUPER EGO!

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Forced to date countless attractive adorababes. Forced to live in a resplendent, split-level downtown loft. Sharing the valet with other Aberzombie undesirables with six figure incomes. Forced to eat out in the city's trendiest eateries on a nightly basis because the maid has to be home by six to feed the kids. A man who diligently fights the ruthless army of Amway Christians stalking our streets by foot or bicycle; slamming the door on innocent, cherubic faces every chance he gets. This is a terrible burden I carry my young artistic dilettantes. But it is a burden I shoulder, and carry, with pride.

Shakespeare and Darwin CLAP like madmen. Others WHISTLE.

DARWIN

Time to throw the butterfly net on you!

Archer stands in front of Maddie. The crowd disperses.

MADDIE

And the baby Jesus cried!

ARCHER

Jesus ain't got no say in it.

MADDIE

Sounds like you're in limbo. Stuck between a rock and a hard place.

She stares at his shirt: SUPER EGO.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Shirt don't suit you. Should have superhero on it.

ARCHER

I tried. Marvel trademarked the phrase.

MADDIE

Well, we can throw in charming to boot.

ARCHER

Old debate strategy. You have to refute even the most ludicrous argument. If someone says the sky is red, you have to argue it's blue. You can't ignore the remark.

MADDIE

But the sky is blue.

ARCHER

Not in the Grandstand universe.

EXT. SIDEWALK - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

The YOUNG CARICATURIST puts the final touches on his sketch. It is an ugly, inaccurate depiction of the ASIAN TOURIST.

The tourist stares at it. Mouth drops open in shock. CARICATURIST quickly snatches the five dollar bill.

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - CONTINUOUS

ARCHER

Lieber tells me you're a Manga artist.

MADDIE

Shojo manga. Candy Candy. Vampire Knight. That type of stuff.

Archer stares at her blankly.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

It's meant for girls.

ARCHER

What's your target age?

MADDIE

Ten to fifteen.

ARCHER

So much for sophistication.

MADDIE

Hey! Be fair! Shojo is rooted in feminism, I'll grant you that. But we do a lot of historical dramas and Sci Fi!

ARCHER

Well, there's no room for that fantasy crap out here. This isn't a fairy tale. This is the concrete jungle. Urban warfare.

MADDIE

Concrete jungle? Urban Warfare?

ARCHER

Yes, ma'am. You have dinner plans?

MADDIE

Can't say that I do. Why?

ARCHER

According to your uncle I am supposed to show you the ropes.

MADDIE mulls it over.

MADDIE

Alright. I'm game. But you better be on your A-game in the behavior department.

ARCHER

Meet me at the Taco Dollar tonight. Nine o'clock sharp.

MADDIE

Taco Dollar. Sounds like a rental car place.

ARCHER

Trust me, you'll be renting something alright. They just call it Mexican food.

She leaves. Shakespeare and Darwin creep up.

SHAKESPEARE

What do you think?

ARCHER

Her? I think its too early to let crazy out of the box. You guys meet me at the fitness at six. And don't be late!

FADE OUT.

EXT. SIDEWALK - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

Archer Looks up at the BILLBOARD. Max Ranger stares down.

ARCHER

Bastard just won't go away.

TO ONE SIDE - The CARICATURIST takes money from yet another unsuspecting ASIAN TOURIST.

ASIAN TOURIST

OK. 'Sank you very much.

Archer is angry. He scrambles after the tourist.

ARCHER

Hey buddy! You! What do you have there?

TOURIST hands over the drawing. Points to the CARICATURIST.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

He charge you?

TOURIST NODS. The CARICATURIST scours for another mark.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

How much?

ASIAN TOURIST

Five dollars.

ARCHER

Bastard! Wait here!

Archer approaches the artist. Hot and heavy.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Hey! Hey you! You draw this?

CARICATURIST

You again! Look, I don't want any trouble!

ARCHER

I want that man's money back!

CARICATURIST

What are you talking about?

ARCHER

The money you took from Asian Lee.

CARICATURIST

I don't think so. I earned it.

ARCHER

You earned it? Look at this crap!!! You call yourself an artist?

CARICATURIST

I do.

ARCHER

You're an amateur hack who got his skills by answering an ad on the back of a matchbook! You're a superficial hand for hire at Bel Air birthday parties and nothing more!

CARICATURIST

Fuck yourself!

ARCHER

We'll do it your way then!

ARCHER slams him up against the building. They struggle. In the process Archer's MEDICAL ID BRACELET is ripped off and falls to the SIDEWALK. It lands inside one of the walkway's famous STARS. However, this one has not been designated yet.

HOLLYWOOD BLVD. The two combatants are surrounded by a plethora of SUPERHEROES. They look on as Archer smacks the artist around. But not one comes to the artist's aid.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Take advantage of a socialist!? Take his hard earned money! It's not enough the man's own government's got him on a pitch count!?

CARICATURIST

Stop it! You're hurting me!

The fight intensifies. Archer reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of bills.

ARCHER

You don't know what hurt is! Here, have some more!!!

TOURIST is thrown to the ground by the CARICATURIST, who tries to retreat.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

You, asshole! See what you've done!

Archer stuffs the wad of singles into the guy's mouth.

TOURIST on the ground. Frightened. Looks at the mob of SUPERHEROES milling about. Most of them CHEER Archer on.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

There's about eight bucks! Take your
god-damn show on the road! The bus
leaves for Bel Air in five minutes!!!

Archer steps away. HIS POV - all the heroes CHEER for him.

SUPERMAN

A job well done, Archer!

HAN SOLO

Way to use the force!

The sea of SUPERHEROES parts to let him thru. He receives
countless congratulatory pats on the back as he walks away.

Behind him - FAKE QUASIMODO picks up the ID bracelet. Looks
around. Puts it over his own wrist.

FADE OUT.

INT. GYM - 24 HOUR FITNESS TYPE - DAY

ARCHER looks at all the muscular bodies, pumped full of
steroids and red bull.

A heavily muscled, tattooed POWER-LIFTER pushes a nerd off a
weight bench. A LINDA HAMILTON look-alike does pull ups.
Muscles arching, rippling in a white tank top.

DARWIN on a machine, staring, carnival lust in his eyes.

ARCHER

Don't get too excited, Darwin. Sarah
Conner over there's 98% testosterone,
2% Coltrane.

Darwin's gaze is still locked.

DARWIN

Oh, yeah. She's a beauty.

SHAKESPEARE

I don't see it. No hips or curves.
Skinny as a rail. Looks like she left
her ass on the stairmaster.

DARWIN

Speak for yourself, Thespian. There's
nothing unnatural about a woman
tightening up her body to let us mortal
slumdogs know just how ineffectual we
are.

LINDA picks up a 45 pound plate. Ties it to her belt. She
grunts thru another set of pull ups.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

Or maybe not.

SHAKESPEARE

What are we doing here, anyway?

ARCHER

Recon, Shakes. Recon. Or as da Vinci would say, Canon of Proportions. We need ideas for Neutrino's body type. Muscle density and whatnot.

QUICK SCAN around the room. Many serious HEAVYWEIGHTS with cartoonish muscles wearing tight, superhero-like spandex.

DARWIN

You think da Vinci was hitting the 24 Hour Fitness when he thought up the Vitruvian Man?

ARCHER

Nah. He would have been holding a raspberry smoothie! Aah! That's enough for one day. I'm out of here.

SHAKESPEARE

Shipwreck Joey's?

ARCHER

Of course. Happy hour.

SHAKESPEARE

I'll take off with you.

DARWIN

I'm going to finish up my workout. I'll meet the two of you later.

DARWIN stares at LINDA. ARCHER & SHAKESPEARE stare at him.

EXT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

At his car, SHAKESPEARE bends over in pain.

SHAKESPEARE

You know how I know I just had a kick ass workout?

ARCHER

No. How?

Shakespeare pukes.

SHAKESPEARE

That's how!

ARCHER

You know how I know when I drink too much? I do the same thing.

SHAKESPEARE

There is no joy in Mudville. I think I'll take a pass on Joey's.

INT. SHIPWRECK JOEY'S BAR & GRILL - NIGHT

CLOSE UP: A GLASS JAR behind the bar with a paper taped over it: IF BOATS CAN TIP, SO CAN YOU!

Cooks load dish after dish into a bank of microwave ovens. Everything goes in. Chicken, turkey, omelets.

DINING AREA

A YOUNG WAITRESS happily chirps about the bar's organic, home grown food to a table of guests.

WAITRESS

Well heck, yes. Everything's homegrown. Fresh and organic as they come.

AT THE BAR

A JOHNNY DEPP TYPE BARTENDER greets him.

BARTENDER

The angel haired hipster returns.

Archer does the sign of the cross. Sits down.

ARCHER

JULES. How are you, brother?

JULES

Good. You're just in time for the two dolla' holla'.

ARCHER

I'll stay loyal to the small batch.

JULES

Always the classy one.

(pours a shot)

You sticking around for more than one this time?

ARCHER

Don't think so. Either you've got underage clientele issues or I'm a cow jumping over the Melrose Street moon.

(MORE)

ARCHER (CONT'D)

The mean age around here is not within my divide by 2, adding 7 for tolerance.

JULES

Where are the Wonder Twins?

ARCHER

Shakes is feeling his own mortality right about now...Darwin's probably doing the same, come to think of it.

A MIDDLE-AGED DRUNK at the bar grabs a passing WAITRESS.

WAITRESS

Hey! Stop that!!!

DRUNK

Why don't you sit down on my lap and we'll talk about the first thing that pops up?

JULES

For the love of everything Irish! Settle the fuck down, Old-timer, or I'll throw your ass out!

DRUNK (O.S.)

Sorry.

ARCHER

I see you've retained your people skills.

JULES

Vicissitudes of the job. It's what I get for working in a dive bar. Wish I could have one of your superheroes around on nights.

ARCHER

You and me both.

JULES

What's wrong? Business getting to you?

ARCHER

The usual. They want a hero and all I can come up with are death rays and pyrokinesis. Everyday's a Deus ex machina in the making.

JULES

Tough luck.

ARCHER

It's a shallow grave for artists these days. Corporate mentality has taken the game to absurd levels.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Sounds like personal transformation at the end of your rope. Ever think of seeing a shrink?

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Therapy? Who do I look like, Tony fucking Soprano?

JULES

It did wonders for him.

ARCHER

Then, why'd they cancel his show?

JULES

Relax. You need to evolve, brother. Learn to play the game.

ARCHER

When you make your living where the water meets the land, there's no time or place for evolution.

JULES

You sound like one of those fruitcake poets. Oscar Wilde or whoever.

ARCHER

Famous last words of his. 'Either those drapes go or I do'. That Irish bastard was as clever as they come.

JULES

I thought he was French.

ARCHER

Well, he died in France so that raises the possibility.

Archer rises from his seat. Pays the tab.

JULES

Hold on a sec--

He reaches into his tip jar and pulls out several business cards. Quickly rifles thru them until he finds one.

JULES (CONT'D)

Take this. If things get too squirrely for you, give the man a call.

ARCHER reads the card. Shoots him a look - "Are you kidding?"

JULES (CONT'D)

He's a good man, Archer. Helped me out during college.

ARCHER

I thought you flunked out.

Jules holds up the bottle of BULLEIT BOURBON

JULES

I did. Best thing that ever happened to me. One for the homies?

ARCHER looks at his watch: 8:30 PM

ARCHER

And you ain't even Mexican. Serve it up!

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

ARCHER runs into BLACK MOSES. 70s, black musician, blind, craggy skin and gray, unkempt hair. Moses sits in a rocking chair. Plays a nasty blues riff on his guitar.

ARCHER

Playing it safe tonight, MOSES?

BLACK MOSES

Not a chance, young squire. Some of us make our living in dangerous places. For a bluesman that place is the high E string, 11 gauge.

Plays a terrific riff worthy of B.B. King.

ARCHER

I thought it was a racist hick town in the deep dark south.

BLACK MOSES

Civil rights come a long way, baby. But you' right. I wouldn't go so far as to venture hundred yards past the Rio Grande. A man's got to know his where's and why's. Gotta know how to squeeze every ounce outta' them. Take my man, B.B King. He don't go nowhere else but this string right here.

Archer listens, mesmerized as Moses caresses the high E.

BLACK MOSES (CONT'D)

Music's beautiful all the same. Don't need to put my eye to the fret-board neither. I let my fingers guide me. You dig?

ARCHER

I dig...You ever feel cheated, Moses? Or regret?

He launches into a mean chord progression as he talks.

BLACK MOSES

That I lost my eyes?

ARCHER

Yes.

BLACK MOSES

The scales of justice don't see regret, son. They're blind like me. I suppose I would have liked to have seen Paris at night...But I've been to Chicago. And I played on stage with the Wolfman himself.

Archer throws some cash down into the man's hat.

BLACK MOSES (CONT'D)

That sounded like a sawbuck.

ARCHER

Nothing wrong with your hearing. Be good, Black Moses.

EXT. TACO DOLLAR - NIGHT

Maddie stands near a very long line of patrons ready to order greasy, C rated, Mexican food. On a table next to her, a MAN takes down a putrid looking burrito.

TWO ROUGH, GANG-BANGER TYPES stare at her. Their eyes fall down to her purse.

Maddie instinctively brings her purse up to her chest. She draws back onto the safety of the sidewalk.

ARCHER

Come around here often?

MADDIE

Every time I need to lose a few pounds. You're late.

ARCHER
Just want to keep you on your toes.

Maddie points to the picnic style table.

MADDIE
Is that--a burrito that man's eating?

ARCHER
It's a fair bet.

MADDIE
You think eating here's a good idea?

ARCHER
Don't want to brave the C rating the
city's bestowed upon this grand
establishment?

CLOSE UP on the 'C' rating sign hanging up on a window. A
look around at all the lowlife skels and illegals.

MADDIE
They kicked out an Asian women earlier.
She was red with anger, yelling on
about this and that.

ARCHER
What about?

MADDIE
Couldn't tell with all the squeals and
yips coming from her mouth at warp
speed. I just know they wouldn't let
her inside with her small dog.

ARCHER
They wouldn't?

MADDIE
Nope. Told her there was a law against
bringing in outside food.

ARCHER
I didn't realize you Manga artists were
so damn funny.

MADDIE
It's all in the set-up!

ARCHER
This wasn't my first thought, actually.

MADDIE
That's why sometimes back up plans are
the best.

Maddie pulls out a string of index CARDS. Reads the first.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I wrote down some small-talk on a stack of index cards.

ARCHER

Small-talk?

MADDIE

In case I got nervous.

(clears her throat)

A woman's heart beats faster than a man's. Did you know that?

ARCHER

Water is the leading cause of drowning. Did you know that?

MADDIE

I did not.

(reads)

The probability of a woman giving birth to a baby girl increases significantly the closer she lives to the equator.

ARCHER

And women blink twice as much as men. Does that mean they miss twice as many things as us?

She blinks seductively.

MADDIE

You tell me, sailor. Tell you what? I'm going to flip this here George W.

She pulls out a quarter.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

If you win, we eat here. If I win, we go somewhere else.

ARCHER

Home team calls it?

MADDIE

Of course. I'm civilized.

She flips it. Coin arcs thru the air. She catches it.

ARCHER

Tails.

It's TAILS.

MADDIE

Rats. Double or nothing?

He nods. She flips again.

ARCHER

Tails.

He wins again.

MADDIE

Something tells me we can go on all night and you'll call every flip.

ARCHER

That's because the average human don't understand the laws of probability.

MADDIE

Who are you calling average and what the hell are you talking about?

ARCHER

Never mind. I'll explain later.

MADDIE

Can we go get Chinese? Even though you won.

ARCHER

Why Chinese?

MADDIE

All Jews eat Chinese on Christmas. We have no idea why but we just do.

ARCHER

I'll do you one better.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD - NIGHT

The BOULEVARD is electric, bristling with activity. Cars stacked 20 deep near traffic lights, American Graffiti style.

EXT. THE MUSEUM OF DEATH - NIGHT

PLACARD on the window reads: ALWAYS OPEN.

MADDIE'S POV - Looks in thru the glass window. Stares at several items of death: Suicide, Manson, the Black Dahlia.

MADDIE

I'm just dying to go inside.

ARCHER

Keep eating Chinese and you will.

Maddie stares into a funhouse type mirror propped up on the sidewalk near the door. Her image is distorted.

MADDIE

I look like one of your villains. Come look at yourself.

ARCHER

(hesitates)

I'll pass.

MADDIE

Want to go inside? My morbid curiosity's got the best of me.

ARCHER

Nope.

MADDIE

You sure? Says here they have an embalming room.

EXT. SUSHI RESTAURANT - NIGHT

A JAPANESE WAITRESS walks by, carrying a tray with a large, specialty piece of sushi made to look like MARILYN MONROE.

On the TV above Archer's table: a CHRISTMAS SHOW.

MADDIE

You got a Christmas tree?

ARCHER

Nope.

MADDIE

What kind of a person don't have a Christmas tree?

ARCHER

The kind that thinks the holidays are for chumps or pure nut jobs.

MADDIE

I don't have any nuts.

ARCHER

Well, then I suggest you go out and grow a pair, if you're going to make it in this business.

MADDIE

Ouch! The knife turns! Bet your gal pals tell you that all the time.

Archer shrugs.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
What's wrong. Don't believe in
relationships, either.

ARCHER
I was married once.

MADDIE
Where is she now?

ARCHER
Where is she? Don't really know. It was
a long time ago.

MADDIE
Things went south I take it.

ARCHER
Any more south I'd be speaking Mexican.

MADDIE
Real funny. Spanish girls are really
strong characters, I heard.

ARCHER
She was Israeli.

MADDIE
Even tougher.

ARCHER
Great at throwing things with uncanny
speed and accuracy. Heavy things. Like
dinner plates, knives, words.

He rolls up his sleeve and shows Maddie a SCAR on his arm.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
Got me around a corner once playing the
ricochet.

MADDIE
She'd make a great villain, then.

ARCHER
Yes, she would. She left me with
physical scars, emotional baggage, and
a large ass aquarium with a single fish
that I truly hate. I am what you call
combat rich.

MADDIE
How old are you again?

ARCHER

Older than dirt and most Chinese take out.

Waitress arrives, carrying Sushi shaped like mini SKULLS. Pinned to her LAPEL is a CROSS with the inscription JOHN 3:16

WAITRESS

Anything else?

The both shake their heads. Waitress HUFFS, leaves.

MADDIE

Skulls. Now I see why you like it here.

ARCHER

It's a good place for inspiration.

DINING ROOM - LATER

On the TV above them: a news story on NORTH KOREA.

WAITRESS drops off the check. Flashes an insincere smile.

MADDIE

I got this.

ARCHER

You sure?

MADDIE

Yes, sir. I plan on getting my money's worth out of you. You take care of the lovely waitress?

ARCHER

I will.

Maddie grabs the check presenter.

MADDIE

Holy Christ!

ARCHER

What?

Maddie hands Archer a RELIGIOUS TRACT the waitress stuffed inside the check presenter.

MADDIE

It says Jesus loves me. That's so sweet of her. You should leave her a nice, fat tip. Even if she don't speak a lick of Japanese.

ARCHER

I was going to, but she just ruined it.

MADDIE

Don't be an asshole. And don't even think about being cheap.

ARCHER

Eternal salvation's a nice tip when you think about it. Seems to me, she's got that pegged down real good.

MADDIE

Yeah, but Jesus don't pay the rent.

ARCHER

Good point. I give God 0%, so the little lady gets twenty-eight.

On the TV:

TV ANCHORMAN

Kim Jong-un, leader of the habitually bellicose state of North Korea, plans to forge ahead with a third nuclear weapons test.

MADDIE

Oh no!

ARCHER

What?

MADDIE

My bunker isn't finished.

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Archer and Maddie walk.

MADDIE

So what did you mean back there at the Taco Dollar?

ARCHER

What? The coin flip?

MADDIE

You said something about probability.

ARCHER

I say a lot of things I don't mean.

MADDIE

Seriously.

ARCHER

OK. But only cause you asked. Why are you here?

MADDIE

You mean right now?

ARCHER

I mean why did you leave your comfortable little existence in Japan, come all the way out to LA?

MADDIE

I guess cause I want to see how I measure up to other artists.

ARCHER

So you want to be a serious player in the big time world of comics. Leave the safety net of Manga behind.

MADDIE

Something like that.

ARCHER

That's what I mean when I say people don't understand probability. It means you failed before you've inked your very first page.

Maddie stares at him. Confusion on her face.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Remember that coin?

MADDIE

Yep.

ARCHER

If I flipped it right now, would you bet me a dollar on the outcome?

MADDIE

Sure. Why not?

ARCHER

But would you bet your life?

MADDIE

Nope.

ARCHER

Why not? Odds are the same. Fifty-fifty.

MADDIE

It's different. Stakes are higher.

ARCHER

Exactly. Your life's on the line. And when your life's on the line emotions come into play...You just decided the outcome without even trying. And you lost.

MADDIE

Are you saying I made a mistake coming here?

ARCHER

I'm saying never take vacations.

MADDIE

Be Serious.

ARCHER

I am. This is a wake up call. You better be prepared to walk the walk, 'cause in this business everything's personal. Nothing's safe. Not Superman, not Ghost Rider, not even a simple Lynchburg Lemonade.

MADDIE

Now, you're talking crazy.

ARCHER

True story. If Jack Daniels can steal something so simple as a drink recipe, what makes you think Grandstand won't do that with a multimillion dollar franchise? The list goes on and on. Edison stole electricity from Tesla. Bell stole the telephone, Oreos ripped off the Hydrox, X-men ripped off the Doom Patrol, Siegel and Shuster lost the rights to Superman to DC. Hell, even Stan Lee sued Disney for copyright infringement. For Spiderman--his own god-damn creation!

MADDIE

So, not even the Web-slinger's safe?

ARCHER

Know this! The probability some fat cat editor's going to steal your work and make millions off you--100 percent.

MADDIE

You talk about it like it's happened to you.

ARCHER

Maybe it happened to someone close to me. Or at least someone that used to be.

MADDIE

You know, kicking the can of blame down the road ain't exactly austerity.

INT. ARCHER'S APARTMENT - PARKING STRUCTURE - NIGHT

Maddie slowly circles the parking structure. Many VEHICLES tagged with LICENSE PLATES from other states.

MADDIE

That's odd.

ARCHER

What is?

MADDIE

All the cars. They have license plates from other states.

ARCHER

The entire city should get locked up for vagrancy.

MADDIE

Look! There's a Hawaii! How in the world did that get here?

ARCHER

Next month they'll all be different. Maybe one or two more New Yorks'. A sprinkle of Minnesotas' and Texas's thrown in. One less Florida.

She pulls to a stop in front of the elevators.

MADDIE

Thanks for tonight.

ARCHER

Don't mention it.

MADDIE

I'm not really sure why you have to be so cynical all the time. You're a very talented artist, they tell me.

ARCHER
Who says?

MADDIE
Everybody.

ARCHER
You got the wrong guy.

MADDIE
Not where villains are concerned.
Emerald Fury. The Q-Cult. Crimson
Inferno.

ARCHER
You read my books?

MADDIE
Some of them.

ARCHER
Well, I'd invite you up but Confucius
might get jealous.

MADDIE
And I'd take a rain check, but it
hasn't rained in months.

Archer grins. Exits her vehicle. Moves to the elevator.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
Hey, Archer Leigh!!!

He stops and turns.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
Who's Confucius?

ARCHER
See you back in the bunker.

INT. ARCHER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

THE FISH TANK. CLOSE UP on the lonely FISH. Archer feeds him.

ARCHER
I was just talking about you,
Confucius.

LIVING ROOM

Looking down at ARCHER as he walks across the expansive, near
naked space that is his living room.

ARCHER'S WORKSPACE

CLOSE UP: AN EMPTY, SQUARE COMIC BOOK PANEL. Archer quickly begins to fill in the head and body of NEUTRINO.

INT. MADDIE'S OWN BEDROOM - NIGHT

MADDIE pulls out a wacom tablet and sketches an AMAZONIAN, VIRTUOUS, FEMALE SUPERHERO. Flustered. She suffers several false starts and stops. Goes thru several designs.

INT. ARCHERS APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

NEUTRINO is finished. But the hood/cape are still missing.

Archer turns to his computer. Pokes thru the INTERNET. Sites for celestial bodies. Clicks on pictures of red dwarves, white dwarves, pulsars, a dying red star; etc.

After a few moments, he finds what he's looking for. The words SUPERNOVA REMNANT flash on the screen. He smiles.

He plugs in his headphones. Bukowski's 'THE GENIUS OF THE CROWD' filters to his head, again in that Paul Harvey voice.

He sketches a rudimentary cloak and hood around Neutrino's face and torso. Looks at the computer screen. We see THE CRAB NEBULA, a bright, colorful, supernova remnant.

Archer deftly draws a band of colorful light in the shape of a hood around Neutrino's face. The bright band cascades like a waterfall down Neutrino's torso, forming a surreal cloak.

Satisfied, Archer falls back in his chair, studies his work. He scrubs, thoroughly wiping the ink stains off his hands.

INT. MADDIE'S OWN BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maddie looks at the finished product on the wacom. She has created a generic, cliché of a SUPERHEROINE.

She quickly erases the image on the tablet. Tosses the tablet on her bed in frustration.

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - CONTINUOUS

MOVE IN ON NEUTRINO. ANIMATED SEQUENCE as THE CRAB NEBULA bursts to life. The broad, oval-shaped mass of filaments surrounding a bright blue central region starts to pulsate, swirl. Tiny, bright explosions as electrons bounce throughout the magnetic field.

Archer is drawn in. He looks in. Closer...closer...closer...

FLASHBACK - INT. SHELDON SHUGEL'S LIVING ROOM (1985) - NIGHT

ARCHER'S father, SHELDON SHUGEL, arrives home to a small apartment. He is ecstatic about something. Kisses his WIFE.

YOUNG ARCHER, 7. Watching SPIDERMAN cartoons on TV.

SHELDON

Did you hear that Archer? Daddy's comic book hero is going to be on TV. Just like Spiderman. Daddy made it. We all made it. Thanks to the Copper Marvel.

FLASH FORWARD - INT. SHELDON SHUGEL'S KITCHEN (1987) - NIGHT

ARCHER, now 9, sits at the dinner table in a more affluent, upper class kitchen. Eating breakfast.

His father is in the LIVING ROOM, arguing with his ATTORNEY.

SHELDON (CONT'D)

What do you mean, trademark infringement? I created the Copper Marvel. And now you're telling me I can't take him with me?

ATTORNEY

Sheldon, the law is very clear. Your contract doesn't designate the Copper Marvel as a creator-owned character. I'm sorry but that's just the way the statute perceives it.

SHELDON

Do you know how much the Copper Marvel has made for Grandstand? The comic books? The TV series? They're just angry that I'm starting my own company. Well, they can't have him! I'll fight them to the death!!!

Sheldon grabs his COPPER MARVEL ETCHINGS and rips them to shreds. Grabs PICTURE after PICTURE off the wall and slams them to the floor, shattering glass and frame.

ATTORNEY

Sheldon, I'm talking to you not only as your attorney but as a friend. You have to let go. Trademark infringement and litigation have killed off more characters than deathrays and kryptonite.

SHELDON
 They'll never have him!!! You
 understand!!! I'll fight them to my
 grave!!! To my grave!!!

Archer's MOTHER protects him; presses him close to her bosom.

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - NIGHT - BACK TO PRESENT DAY

He presses the SKETCHBOOK to his own chest.

LIVING ROOM

He throws a comforter, pillows and blankets on the floor.

EXT. DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - MORNING

The SUN rises above the train tracks in Mission Junction.

INT. ARCHERS APARTMENT - BATHROOM - MORNING

ARCHER shaves in the mirrorless shower. He cuts himself.
 Blood trickles down his neck.

IN HIS KITCHEN

A SCRAPBOOK on the table. He skims over old newspaper,
 magazine articles written about his father, SHELDON SHUGEL.
 We see headlines and words like LAWSUIT, TRIAL, the impending
 NERVOUS BREAKDOWN.

ARCHER shuts the book.

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS AT MISSION JUNCTION - MORNING

Archer sits on a bridge overlooking a wide expanse of tracks.
 Down below a worker slides open a boxcar's single DOOR.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL - DAY

ARCHER walks in thru a doorway and enters THE COMMON ROOM.
 PATIENTS watch TV, snack at tables, play board games, smoke.

He spots a SOLITARY OLDER MAN, sitting in a chair, watching a
 small television set. He walks over and stands beside him.

SHELDON SHUGEL, 63, frail, chain smoking, and world weary,
 watches a TV NEWSCAST about Joshua Hernandez. Every few
 seconds he DOODLES something on a sketchbook.

SHELDON
 You cut yourself?

ARCHER
Shaving. I was in a hurry.

SHELDON
They say that baby in the hospital is
going to die.

ARCHER
What baby?

Sheldon points at the TV.

SHELDON
Right here in town. Has some disease
that turns his body to stone. Doctors
say his blood is so thick you can slice
it with a butter knife.

ARCHER
I heard about that.

SHELDON
It's a shame. Reporter says he has the
most common blood type. You'd think
people would be lining up outside the
hospital doors, waiting to donate.

ARCHER
Why you telling me this?

SHELDON
I think you know why. If your mother
were here she'd tell you what was
right.

ARCHER
But she's not here. You made damn sure
of that.

SHELDON
She walked out on the both of us.
That's the way I remember it.

ARCHER
The day she walked out you never even
noticed. Had your face pressed into a
stack of law books and lawyers.

SHELDON
Did you come here to rail about the
past, Archer?

ARCHER
What else is there?

SHELDON

Then why'd you wait so long, if it bothered you? You've been carrying that hate for me like a kidney stone for a long time now. It's been what? Six years since you last come by?

Archer remains silent. An awkward moment.

SHELDON (CONT'D)

How are things with you?

Archer looks at Sheldon's HANDS. Wrapped up in bandages.

ARCHER

I was just about to ask you the same thing.

At the window: a CARDINAL pecks at his own reflection in the glass. Sheldon taps back. This further infuriates the bird.

SHELDON

You're looking at it. Same old slice of the same damn pie. Day after day. Same window to stare at. Same god-damn bird singing the same god-damn song.

ARCHER

Can't be all that bad. You got your smokes. Sketchbooks. What are you drawing, there?

Sheldon hands him the sketchbook. He's drawn a FOUR PANEL progression: A man in a hospital bed, man in a wheel chair, man on crutches, and then a man walking in sunshine.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Nice. Tells the whole story.

SHELDON

You spending time in the gutter yourself?

Archer nods.

SHELDON (CONT'D)

Junior still running the show over there?

ARCHER

Yep.

SHELDON

He's made it far. I never thought he'd last. Definitely don't have the same business acumen as his old man.

ARCHER
That's funny.

SHELDON
What is?

ARCHER
What you call acumen some would call larceny.

SHELDON
I made my peace with it, Archer. I signed a contract a long time ago. And yes, I was young and naive to have done so. But I needed a break. A paycheck. I had a family to feed.

ARCHER
But you let them take something from you. Something you created.

SHELDON
I fought them as long as I could. As hard as I could. But old man Lieber had deeper pockets. Better lawyers. I fought for you and I fought for Debby. And I lost everything in the process. Don't you ever forget that!

ARCHER
Trust me. I won't.

SHELDON
I told you I already made my peace. You should do the same.

Archer watches the CARDINAL at the window.

SHELDON (CONT'D)
What about you? You got a girl out there somewhere?

ARCHER
I spend all my time with villains.

SHELDON
You always did have a thing for the dark. It's time you let all that go.

ARCHER
I've tried.

SHELDON
Have to try harder. Big money's in the cookie-cutter heroes these days. Smart. Colorful. The public laps that shit up.

ARCHER

Men like the Copper Marvel?

Sheldon looks away. Archer walks over to the Christmas Tree.

SHELDON

Believe what you want. Heroes are necessary. Villains are revolutionary, but they don't pay the bills.

ARCHER

He's on the tree, you know.

SHELDON

Who? What tree?

ARCHER

Copper Marvel. Every year Christmas-time Lieber breaks out tree ornaments shaped like Grandstand heroes. This year they put the Copper Marvel tip-top.

SHELDON

The damn north star, right?

ARCHER

You should be proud.

SHELDON

Twenty years ago I would have.

A pause.

ARCHER

Maybe one day my heart will turn.

SHELDON

Maybe.

ARCHER

Maybe one day they'll let you out. You can go far away from here. Go to where the sand turns to gold.

SHELDON

The sand is gold right beneath your feet. And you don't even know it.

ARCHER

I have to get back to work. I'll try and visit again before the new year. Take care of your hands.

Archer looks down at Sheldon's hands. Walks away.

SHELDON

Do what's right, Archer. You can help
save that baby.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD - DAY

Archer walks thru empty, sidewalks. Nods to a beer-bellied
INCREDIBLE HULK, who leans against a wall, eating a FOOTLONG.

INT. GRANDSTAND COMICS - ENTRY HALL - DAY

Lois at her desk.

LOIS

How are you today, Archer?

ARCHER

It's a slow day for superheroes.

LOIS

What?

Phone RINGS.

ARCHER

The boulevard. It was empty. No
superheroes walking around.

Archer reaches into a bowl of M&MS. Picks thru them but all
the colored candies have been taken.

LOIS

(answers phone)

That's nice. Grandstand
Comics. Creating heroes for--

ARCHER

Shit!

LOIS

What's that, Archer?

ARCHER

They stole the colored ones and left me
the turds.

INT. ARCHER'S OFFICE

A vessel in THE GALILEO THERMOMETER begins to slowly sink.

He reads a chemistry magazine. An article on TESLA & EDISON.

ARCHER

You know Edison fucked over Tesla for
the right to call electricity his own?
Screwed him out of royalties.

SHAKESPEARE

Kind of ironic considering those royalties came from screwing in a light bulb.

Darwin plays PAC-MAN on his computer. His score is huge.

DARWIN

If you don't finish those Neutrino panels by Friday, Archer, we're all screwed.

ARCHER

Don't you get tired of video games?

DARWIN

Not this one. There's a blind spot in the maze where the ghosts can't get you.

Darwin maneuvers his PAC-MAN to the blind spot. The GHOSTS swirl around him, but never come close.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

Level 187 and counting! Even Blinky can't get me!

Archer pulls out his sketchbook. Tosses it to Shakespeare.

ARCHER

Here you go. Finished last night.

ARCHER jumps on his own computer. Hits the INTERNET: A site about Blood diseases. Articles about Joshua Hernandez. Then a website on 'Deficiencies of Natural Anticoagulants'.

DARWIN

(over his shoulder)

What are you reading?

ARCHER

Nothing! Mind your damn business!

SHAKESPEARE

This is good. The cape and hood are just what Neutrino needed.

ARCHER

You're forgetting something.

Shakespeare and Darwin stare at each other.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

The hero.

Darwin's PAC-MAN gets eaten. Shakespeare shakes his head.

DARWIN
 Fuck you, Blinky!

INT. DOLLAR STORE - NIGHT

A line of piggy banks on a shelf. ON SALE.

A slew of shopping carts marked ITEMS RETURNED. One tired FEMALE CLERK sorts thru the mess.

IN THE COSMETICS AISLE

AN ACTOR dressed as CAPT. JACK SPARROW compares hair products. In each hand is a COMPETING BRAND of SHAMPOO. JACK deliberately considers which of the two to buy.

ARCHER leans back. Stares at Jack's tangled DREADLOCKS.

ARCHER wheels his cart from aisle to aisle, throwing a wide assortment of products into the basket. A bunch of chemistry like items--beakers, Erlenmeyer flasks, round bottomed flasks, brushes, food dyes, color streamers, etc.

THE CHECKOUT LINE. THE LADY ahead of him pays for a small, cheap, artificial X-mas tree. SHE looks back at ARCHER, who studies the tiny tree as it rolls down the conveyor belt.

LADY
 It's on sale.

ARCHER
 I hope you're not going to put that thing on the dashboard of your car.

LADY
 Excuse me.

ARCHER
 Try a plastic Jesus.

He reaches into his cart and pulls out a PLASTIC JESUS DOLL.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
 With posable arms and gliding action.
 Great conversation piece. It'll also keep the right wing nuts off your back.

She looks at him in awe. He holds out the doll but she refuses to take it.

LADY
 I don't understand.

ARCHER
 Exactly.

CASHIER (O.S.)
That'll be \$21.99.

ARCHER
You're holding up the line.

INT. ARCHER'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

An assortment of metal rods scattered around a de facto base.

THE KITCHEN. He lines up several cylinders and beakers. Starts to fill each with water. Then, he drops different colored dyes into each one. A rainbow coalition is formed.

ARCHER rummages thru a cabinet. ON ARCHER as he pulls out something. Places it on the cabinet top.

A COPPER MARVEL LUNCH BOX. Ancient, beat to hell. Archer stares at it. Picks it up. Caresses it with his fingers.

Opens the box. Looks inside and finds an old ROLL OF QUARTERS. Picks up the roll.

FLASHBACK - EXT. AN ALLEYWAY (1987) - NIGHT

YOUNG ARCHER, 9, runs down a blind alley, the same COPPER MARVEL lunch-box in tow. Places it on top of a crate.

In the distance he spots the HEADLIGHT of an oncoming train, illuminating the alley. The train WHISTLE pierces the night.

INT. ARCHER'S KITCHEN - BACK TO PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

He puts down the lunch box. Quickly assembles a CHEMIST-TREE. The base of the tree is a metal stand with protruding rods that have arms for holding each glass cylinder.

INT. ARCHER'S OFFICE - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

Shakespeare on the keyboard to the computer, typing notes. Maddie and Darwin are hard at work, looking over PANELS.

SHAKESPEARE
Fuck!

DARWIN
What?

SHAKESPEARE
I fat fingered the S.

ON HIS COMPUTER - The word ASS.

Shakespeare leaves the typo as ARCHER enters, hot and heavy.

ARCHER

I think we should give Neutrino the ability to dodge objects.

SHAKESPEARE

What type of objects?

DARWIN (O.S.)

Your bull-shit!

ARCHER

Shut the fuck up, Darwin!

MADDIE

How about shoe sales? I always have trouble with those.

SHAKESPEARE

Not a chance, Manga-girl.

ARCHER

Can you guys be serious!? I mean objects from outer space. Light, gravity, meteors, things that move at a high rate of speed.

SHAKESPEARE

Really, Archer? I think we're about to hit cliché territory.

ARCHER

Fuck that! We're doing it!

SHAKESPEARE

OK, OK. Whatever you want. Oh, before I forget, Lieber wants to see you.

(checks his watch)

About an hour ago.

DARWIN

I guess you left your ability to dodge circumstance at home.

INT. MR. LIEBER'S OFFICE - DAY

MR. LIEBER

There he is, Mr. Punctuality in the villainous flesh.

ARCHER

Sorry I'm late. I was working from home.

MR LIEBER

Ah, yes, work. Deadline come deadline go. I don't see any sketches in your hands, or on my desk. Where's my hero?

ARCHER

You look under the desk?

MR LIEBER

When are you going to grow up?

ARCHER

I'm a comic book artist. Is that a prerequisite?

MR LIEBER

Well, aren't you the recalcitrant one. I have an idea. Why don't you bottle up some of that high-powered vitriol of yours, go back to the panels and put it to work. It's time you show me more action tooth and less banter.

INT. ARCHER'S OFFICE - DAY

ARCHER

So, what do you guys think?

SHAKESPEARE

What do I think? I think we're all going to get shit-canned. Lieber wants a hero and you gave him Richard Nixon in a disco era jump-suit.

Holds up a sketch of NEUTRINO.

DARWIN

He's a villain, Archer. What part of HERO don't you get?

ARCHER

(to Maddie)

What do you think?

MADDIE

I think you should run with it.

Archer nods.

DARWIN

Archer, why don't you just lock yourself up in a room and invent something? What about that website of yours? Just click on this and that

(MORE)

DARWIN (CONT'D)

in whatever spot they ask you to and wallah!! I mean with that technology at your fingertips, you should be able to mass produce heroes.

ARCHER

It don't always work that way.

DARWIN

Don't always work that way!? What the fuck are you talking about?

ARCHER

Sometimes all you got left is thunderdome. I'm leaving!

Archer picks up his stuff and walks away.

SHAKESPEARE

Keep it angry, brother.

ARCHER

Always.

INT. ARCHERS APARTMENT - NIGHT

A KNOCK on the door.

He opens it. MADDIE stands at the doorway.

MADDIE

Hey there!

ARCHER

How'd you get up here?

MADDIE

Waited two hours until I saw a Japanese couple in the lobby. Fortunately they were big fans of my work.

ARCHER

You're kidding, right?

MADDIE

Yeah. They had no idea who I was. So, I bribed the valet. Gave him a copy of one of my Manga books. Even threw in an autograph to boot.

ARCHER

And?

MADDIE

I had to promise him a date.

ARCHER
Told you no one takes Manga seriously.

MADDIE
You going to let me in or not?

ARCHER
Depends...Is that a warrant behind your
back?

She produces a brown sack full of CLINGING bottles.

MADDIE
Dead soldiers.

ARCHER
You came to the right place!

He steps aside. She enters his FOYER.

MADDIE
You look tired.

ARCHER
A woodpecker in a petrified forest
ain't got nothing on me.

Maddie points at the LONE FISH in the tank.

MADDIE
This the bachelor?

ARCHER
Confucius, meet Maddie. Maddie,
Confucius.

She leans in.

MADDIE
It's a pleasure, Handsome.

LIVING ROOM. She stops. Turns. Takes in the vast emptiness.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
Nice. Very detached in a recidivist,
Iron Curtain sort of way.

ARCHER
Thank you, Sylvia Plath.

Walks over to the burgeoning CHRISTMAS TREE.

MADDIE
Are you kidding..? A chemistree???

ARCHER

I would have stuck to a gravitree but I failed miserably at physics.

MADDIE

You do have flair, I'll give you that. Want a beer?

ARCHER

What kind is it?

MADDIE

Some new craft beer from some new craft brewery I picked up at the new craft beer store. I can't tell which.

ARCHER

Is it good?

MADDIE

Mine tastes like Lucky Charms.

ARCHER

Oh, then by all means pass one over.

EXT. BALCONY - LATER

A row of EMPTY BEER BOTTLES balanced on the railing.

MADDIE

So, that's my story. Two years in Japan studying with Clamp. Creating characters under Tazuka's Star System. Exploring existential themes like chastity and pure love. Yuk!

Maddie stares at the train TRACKS down below.

ARCHER

Leaves no room for an alibi. I heard Nanase Ohkawa is a genius.

MADDIE

She was a good teacher..is, I mean. But there was a lack.

ARCHER

Lack?

MADDIE

Lack of originality. There was a clinical approach to Clamp's art. No one got personal or close. Stories were laid out in rigid scripts. No chance to express myself. I just felt, I don't know--

ARCHER
--Under-utilized.

MADDIE
Yeah, that's it. Over there, Japan, you don't mean a thing to people. They move thru you like the draw of a breath. So, I came back home. Wanted to try something new. Something I cared about.

ARCHER
Like what?

MADDIE
When I was little I read Blazing Combat. Russ Heath, John Severin. That sort of stuff.

ARCHER
Those are war artists.

MADDIE
I know that, dummy. But it's what I like.

ARCHER
That figures.

MADDIE
Shut-up! My dad was Air Force. Flew 26 missions over Kosovo. Me and mom used to send him comics every chance we could. Commando. Some old 'Unknown Soldiers'. Combat Kelly.

ARCHER
Combat Kelly?

MADDIE
The 70's version.

ARCHER
What, no Sergeant Rock?

MADDIE
Couldn't find any. Anyway, before we boxed them up, I'd sneak them into my room and read them. Cover to cover, too. I guess I thought I could get a sense for what he was going thru over there. One day I picked up a pencil and just started sketching. And the rest is history.

ARCHER

You know, not to try and slow you down, cause I don't think anyone can, but you have to ask yourself, is it all worth it?

MADDIE

Is what worth it?

ARCHER

Trying to make it in this business. After all, there really haven't been any successful women artists.

MADDIE

There's plenty in Japan. And what's your point?

ARCHER

Women aren't capable of capturing the graceful lines of exigency required to master the art. There are spatial elements to great storytelling and a woman lacks the fundamental ability to tap into those. Just my humble opinion.

MADDIE

Humble?

Archer shrugs.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Bullcrap on you! Women draw better female characters than men.

ARCHER

Black Widow, Wonder Woman, Bat Girl, Invisible Woman. These are all iconic, female heroines, would you agree?

MADDIE

Yeah! So!

ARCHER

Created by men. Talented men. Men who knew the female body inside and out. WE...can create anything.

MADDIE

Omniscience is overrated.

Maddie looks over the balcony. A long TRAIN WHISTLE - O.S.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

It's windy. Cold. Tell me again why you live up here.

ARCHER

Train reminds me of when I was a little boy.

MADDIE

(laughs)

You lived in a tunnel?

ARCHER

No, Smartass! But I did run away from home once. When I was nine.

MADDIE

You joking?

ARCHER

Wish I were. Headed down, oh, must have been several miles of tracks one night. Led by a single toy flashlight with dying batteries. Ended up in that same old train-yard you see right down there. Hid out for two solid nights.

MADDIE

You were nine. Wow. Why?

Archer pauses. Searches his soul for the answer:

FLASHBACK - INT. ARCHER'S BEDROOM - 1987 - NIGHT

- On the STAND - A picture of ARCHER hugging his MOTHER.

- ARCHER, 9, places a sandwich, Pop tarts and a ROLL OF QUARTERS inside a COPPER MARVEL lunch box. Closes the lid.

- Grabs the PHOTO. Stuffs it into his back-pack and crawls thru the bedroom window, MAP and FLASHLIGHT in hand.

EXT. MISSION JUNCTION TRAIN YARD - 1987 - NIGHT

- ARCHER, toting his lunch-box, walks alongside a set of dark, isolated tracks. Several TRAINS down for the night. His FLASHLIGHT fades...fades...very close to dying.

- AN OLD, BURLY SECURITY GUARD steps in behind ARCHER as he makes his way down the tracks. He shines his own flashlight BEAM on Archer. ARCHER turns. A frightened look on his face.

EXT. BALCONY - BACK TO PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

MADDIE

You OK?

ARCHER

You know, there are no answers out there in the night, Maddie. There's only...waiting.

MADDIE

I understand. I think. For me there's no time like winter. I miss the grand snowfalls of New York. The peace. How quiet everything got 'cause of all that snow on the ground. Down in Kyushu it never snowed.

Archer looks at his watch. The WIND picks up, HOWLS.

ARCHER

You know there's a place right here in LA where on nights like this you'll find snow on the ground.

MADDIE

Shut up! No, way!

ARCHER

Come on. I'll show you.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - HOLLYWOOD HILLS - NIGHT

MADDIE pulls her car to a stop. THRU THE WINDSHIELD as they exit the vehicle. Maddie has an amazed look on her face.

She stares ahead. Takes a few steps forward. Looks at Archer.

MADDIE

This is some holy shit! Are you coming?

ARCHER

It's your Christmas.

MADDIE takes off running down the street, whooping and hollering, but the camera remains fixed on ARCHER, still leaning against the hood of Maddie's car.

ARCHER'S POV: Against the backdrop of front yards decked out in festive Christmas lights, a virtual blizzard of PALM FRONDS float to the ground; sheared off the tall palms by the heavy winds barreling thru the canyons. The fronds break apart in mid air. Bits and pieces dance majestically and fall to the street like snowflakes, covering up much of the street, cars, yards.

Whooping and hollering gloriously, MADDIE performs an impromptu ballet in the middle of the street.

MADDIE

This is wonderful! It's like 8th grade
and the Nutcracker all over again!

She runs back to Archer.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Thank you for this. You made my
Christmas.

She leans in and kisses him on the cheek. Pulls back. Leans
in and hugs him. After a moment he responds to the gesture.

ARCHER

Come morning, I'll bet the garbage men
won't feel the same way.

MADDIE

Aren't you one for spoiling everything
that's nice.

ARCHER

I just call 'em like I see 'em.

Coming from the distance: They HEAR unusual SOUNDS.

MADDIE

What's that? Sounds like Viking horns.
Trumpets.

(pause, listens)

Is that a violin?

Archer steps toward the noise. Looks down the sloping ground
towards the CITY LIGHTS below.

ARCHER

The anarchy of music.

MADDIE

Where's it coming from?

ARCHER

I don't know. I heard it the other
night, though. Strange...

MADDIE

It's beautiful. I want to find it.

ARCHER

OK. We'll walk from here.

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - NIGHT

They walk down the street. A big commotion ahead: AN
ACCIDENT. THEY move closer.

At least four POLICE CRUISERS block the intersection. Archer and Maddie head straight into a sea of BRIGHT RED AND BLUE FLASHING LIGHTS.

THE INTERSECTION

A city FIRE ENGINE has plowed headfirst into a MINIVAN. The minivan, shredded to bits--only it's back half remains. The front half of the fire-truck rests on the sidewalk. From his vantage point, Archer can see a tight gathering of POLICE and FIREMEN huddled near the front area of the truck.

THE FRONT OF THE FIRE-TRUCK.

A PEDESTRIAN sandwiched between the fire-truck and minivan. His body smashed in horrific fashion, almost in two, but he clings to life. A FIREMAN, 40, stoic, consoles him.

FEMALE ONLOOKER (O.S.)

If I live to be a hundred I don't need to see what's underneath that truck.

ARCHER

What happened?

MALE ONLOOKER

Firemen were racing to a call. Minivan made a left in front of them. Fire-truck plowed right into it. Force carried them both onto the sidewalk. Man was on the curb, ready to walk across. And he--

The onlooker's voice drifts off as Archer inches closer.

FIREMAN (O.S.)

I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay with you.

PEDESTRIAN

(serene)

I think I can get up. I can make it home. Please help me up.

Fireman looks down at the mess. The pedestrian's body is crushed between the two vehicles. A pool of blood and bodily fluids stain the street beneath them.

FIREMAN

Sure. I'll help you up. We're just going to rest a bit. Is that OK?

Pedestrian nods.

FIREMAN (CONT'D)

What's waiting for you at home?

PEDESTRIAN

My boy. Turns eight tomorrow. I'm
planning a surprise party for him.

There are presents scattered all over the street next to him.
PACKAGES are covered in blood.

FIREMAN

Your boy's lucky to have you.

PEDESTRIAN

My boy is everything to me. Wants to be
just like me. Isn't that sweet of him?
I didn't have the heart to tell him his
father was a janitor. Cleaned up after
people.

FIREMAN

That doesn't matter. Your son would be
proud of the way you're holding up
right now.

PEDESTRIAN

You think so?

Fireman nods.

OFF TO THE SIDE -

A PARAMEDIC talks to a POLICE SERGEANT and the FIRE CHIEF.

PARAMEDIC

He's not going to make it. His legs are
partially severed below the knees.
Pelvis shattered. Internal organs
crushed thru and thru.

POLICE SEARGEANT

(to Fire Chief)

Can your man handle the situation?

FIRE CHIEF

He'll do what he can. But there's a
dying man in his arms. There's no text
book procedure for that.

POLICE SEARGEANT

Do the best you can. I gotta' make sure
the coroner's up and ready. Chief's
crawling all over my ass about
department overtime.

BACK TO THE ACCIDENT -

PEDESTRIAN

Where are my boy's presents? I have to get them home.

FIREMAN

They're right here. I'll look after them for you.

Pedestrian smiles, a graceful, beatific smile.

PEDESTRIAN

I told him I'd be home by eleven. I have to be there to put him to bed. Please help me. I want to go home.

FIREMAN

I will. In a minute.

Fireman looks around for help. Looks over at a YOUNGER FIREMAN, fresh from the academy, who just shakes his head.

PEDESTRIAN

Please, I want to be the first to wish him a happy birthday.

FIREMAN

(fighting back tears)
We'll wish him a happy birthday together...I promise.

Someone SNAPS a picture. A FLASH goes off.

FIREMAN (CONT'D)

It's OK. Everything's going to be OK.

The FIREMAN, his face faltering, gazes up at his comrades. They stare back in horror, unsure of what to say or do.

The PEDESTRIAN soon dies, buried in the fireman's arms.

POV FROM ABOVE - Maddie buries herself in Archer's arms. She is swallowed by his mass, disappears.

A blanket is quickly thrown over the pedestrian. The FIREMAN, deep in shock, stumbles away down the sidewalk, alone.

INT. UNDERGROUND GARAGE - NIGHT

Maddie drives around Archer's parking garage. The license plates are different. RHODE ISLAND, NORTH DAKOTA, OREGON.

She stops the car.

MADDIE

You alright, Archer?

ARCHER

Just thinking about that poor man. The way he went out. How his kid's gonna' remember his birthday for the rest of his life.

MADDIE

It's horrible. But those men tried. They did what they could back there.

ARCHER

Yeah, well the world's a graveyard paved with good intentions.

MADDIE

Think about that fireman. What do you think he's going thru tonight?

ARCHER

They ran that man to the ground and then they bitched about overtime!

MADDIE

Archer--

ARCHER

--It's a shell game, Maddie. Heroes and villains! Death rays and X-ray vision! Artists and editors. No one knows a god-damn thing!

MADDIE

You...you want--?

ARCHER steps out and walks away, melting into the shadows.

ARCHER

I'll see you tomorrow.

INT. ARCHERS APARTMENT - NIGHT

CURTAINS flutter thru the open balcony doors. The wind whips thru his living room, meeting the now completed CHEMIS-TREE in a grand display of harmonics. BEAKERS filled with colorful household liquids smack against TEST TUBES and COKE bottles.

ARCHER presses the play button on his STEREO. A steely voice fills the room; reciting Yeats's "The Second Coming."

He grabs two bottles of wine, a red & a white, and carefully mixes his own white zinfandel. Fills up several glasses and beakers until the tonal resonance grows deep and ominous, insidious. He licks his fingertips and glides them over glass rims. In seconds his apartment is filled with the sounds of a Wagnerian symphony gone mad.

On top of the tree is a rudimentary, homemade TESLA COIL. Archer plugs it in. The colored PLASMA springs to life.

INT. ARCHER'S WORKSPACE - NIGHT

AN OLD, WOODEN ARTIST TOOLBOX engraved with the name Sheldon Shugel. He opens it. Filled with his father's drawing tools.

Pulls out the NEUTRINO SKETCH. Mad dashes and strokes as he finishes off the last of his newfangled villain. Puts the finishing touches on Neutrino's EYES. An ANIMATED SEQUENCE shows them springing to life, swallowing light and color.

Archer enters the INTERNET. Searches thru sites about physics and black holes and space time.

Underneath NEUTRINO -- a blank column labeled POWERS/ABILITY. ARCHER starts to type. WORDS SUPERIMPOSED OVER HIS IMAGE.

EVENT HORIZON. Instead of riding on a wave of negative particles, Neutrino rides light waves absconded from the sun. Because of his compact mass, Neutrino can manipulate those light particles to go back in time. Thus, the Mathematics of Spacetime dictate that Neutrino can travel at will to any dimension in time. He can prevent any superhero from foiling any crime. Likewise, if he so chooses, he can stop that crime before it occurs...Stop a MONSTER before he is BORN.

FADE OUT on ARCHER'S EYES.

INT. COFFEE HOUSE - DAY

Banal, syrupy Christmas music over the speakers.

A NEWSPAPER with the LARGE HEADLINE: Valiant LA fireman consoles accident victim until the end. SMALLER PRINT: Record donations pouring in for victim's family.

ARCHER stares down into a LATTE. A hummingbird etched by the barista adorns the top. He kills it with a swirly stick.

SOLO GUY (O.S.)

Great music, huh?

ARCHER

Makes me want to drink hot cocoa and pay attention to every word you say.

SOLO GUY

Asshole.

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - DAY

A STREET PREACHER hands ARCHER a religious tract.

ZEALOT
Have you found God?

ARCHER
Why? Is he missing?

ZEALOT
Take a look around you, brother. He's everywhere.

Archer scans the street: Pimps, drunks, homeless. Man selling watches. Two people argue over a parking spot. A DERELICT feeds his mangy dog, then eats from the same can.

ZEALOT (CONT'D)
Just two nights ago we felt his presence on the boulevard.

Archer hands him the newspaper.

ARCHER
You mean the poor sap got sandwiched between a fire-truck and a mini-van? Died in that fireman's arms?

ZEALOT
May his soul rest in peace.

ARCHER
Same bastards tried to save him ran him over in the first place. Does that make the entire LA fire department atheists?

ZEALOT
Makes them human. Christ died on the cross to point out the fallibility of mankind.

ARCHER
Is that right?

ZEALOT
God works in mysterious ways. I see it all the time.

ARCHER
Then you've seen things I never will.

Archer hands the flyer back to the zealot. Walks off.

ZEALOT
Hey, you forgot your flyer.

ARCHER

Keep it! When Jesus died on that cross, mister, he did it to save you from people like me.

INT. GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

Maddie approaches Shakespeare. She holds her sketchbook.

SHAKESPEARE

What ya' got there, Maddie?

MADDIE

My future.

She passes the book to Shakespeare. He opens it.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Say, what's the deal with Archer? How come he's so angry all the time.

SHAKESPEARE

One word--anhedonia.

MADDIE

What's that mean? Anhedonia?

SHAKESPEARE

Emotionally empty. Disinterest in social contact. Withdrawal. Unable to experience pleasure. Take your pick.

Maddie looks at him. Waits for clarification.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Archer's great flaw is his legacy. His old man Sheldon lost his most famous creation to Lieber's old man over two decades ago and he's been paying for it since. Talk about a parallel universe.

MADDIE

You mean, The Copper Marvel?

SHAKESPEARE

The Marvel's an anchor tied to Archer's leg. Lieber's old man turned him into a hit TV show back in the day. Sheldon Shugel never saw a dime, seeing as he signed away all rights to his own character.

(points to her sketch)

It's good. Colors really pop off the page.

MADDIE

Thanks. How old was Archer?

SHAKESPEARE

Don't really know. But he was fairly young. Supposedly his old man fought Grandstand so hard he lost everything-- his bankroll, home, his wife.

MADDIE

And Archer?

SHAKESPEARE

Him too.

MADDIE

That's horrible.

SHAKESPEARE

Nature of the beast, Maddie. One day you think you've crossed over. TV, film. Next day you wake up to find what you really crossed over to was the land of exploitation.

MADDIE

I trust my uncle. He wouldn't do that to me.

Shakespeare gives her a 'We'll see about that look.'

SHAKESPEARE

You know, Archer's old man ended up in some psychiatric ward just outside the city. Archer won't go near him. But I do know that man in there, your uncle--

Points at MR. LIEBER in his office, yelling into the phone.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

--is proud of the fact that it was his own father put him there.

(hands her the sketch)

Good luck with this. There's talent in those pages.

MADDIE

Thanks. Guess I'm going to find out once and for all if I can hang with the best.

INT. ARCHER'S CAR - DAY

Archer pauses in front of the HOSPITAL. Dials a number.

ARCHER
Maddie, it's Archer.

MADDIE (O.S.)
Hey, Archer. Where are you?

ARCHER
You really want to know what it takes
to create heroes and villains?

MADDIE
Of course I do.

ARCHER
Meet me in front of the gum tree in a
half hour.

MADDIE
Gum tree? What the hell's that?

ARCHER
Ask Shakes or Darwin. See you in
thirty.

Phone CLICKS off. Archer stares at the front ENTRANCE. A NEWS
CREW in the midst of a broadcast. He drives off.

INT. MR. LIEBER'S OFFICE - DAY

Maddie turns in her comic book spec. A gorgeous, Manga
inspired FEMALE MERCENARY holding a lethal LASER CARBINE M-4.

MR. LIEBER
CRESCENT JADE. Female soldier. What's
this, Maddie, another GI Jane?

MADDIE
That Jane was a medic. Jade is a black
OPs specialist. Fights side by side
with mercs in Afghanistan. Iraq.

MR. LIEBER
Mercs?

MADDIE
Mercenaries, sir. Soldiers motivated to
take part in hostilities for the sole
purpose of private gain.

MR. LIEBER
I know what a mercenary is, Maddie!
(shakes his head)
You know, Iraq's over.

MADDIE

Don't matter. Jade will fight war profiteers all over. BlackWater. CACI. She'll uphold the rights of all civilians, domestic or foreign. The NorKos will fall right in line.

MR. LIEBER

NorKos?

MADDIE

North Koreans. The enemy de jour.

Lieber rises. Walks around his desk. Maddie watches, wary. Lieber stands in front of her, a cross look on his face.

MR. LIEBER

An idealist. In 2013...Well, I'll run it by the focus group. See if it grabs.

He offers her his hand.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)

You've made me very proud, Maddie. I think we can sell this. It's what the country wants right now.

MADDIE

Sir?

MR. LIEBER

After that Max Ranger debacle, America needs a new hero.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD - DAY

ARCHER pulls out a wad of gum and sticks it to the GUM TREE, a thick light pole covered in (what else?) WADS OF GUM.

LATINO WONDERWOMAN stands next to a LATINO CAPTAIN AMERICA, having an animated discussion in SPANISH.

WONDERWOMAN

This costume is too tight. My underwear's running up the crack of my butt. And don't get me started on the corset. How am I supposed to chase down bad guys if my double D's are flopping all over the place?

CAPT AMERICA

At least you don't have to carry around a pinchy shield that weighs twenty pounds. I tripped over the curb the other day. Chacha', I spilled *Four Loko* (MORE)

CAPT AMERICA (CONT'D)
all over myself. Had to run to the
cleaners after my shift.

Maddie approaches. Places her HAND inadvertently on the gum
tree and winces. Archer does not seem to notice.

ARCHER
Would you look at that? They're just
pouring over the border. Things are so
bad we've even outsourced our superhero
jobs.

MADDIE
What? Oh, that. I don't understand a
word they're saying.

ARCHER
No? You speak their language.

MADDIE
I don't speak Spanish, Archer.

ARCHER
You don't have to. People have all
sorts of ways of communicating.

She looks at him, confused.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
WE are one those ways, Maddie. Comic
book artists. Our work, our drawings--
they speak for themselves.

MADDIE
Picture's worth a thousand words. That
sort of thing.

ARCHER
Way it's always been. From Caveman to
Frenchman, some people just won't let
go the past. You know in Japan they
still use fax machines?

MADDIE
I do know that.

Archer walks in a tight circle. Surveys the crowd of tourists

ARCHER
How many people on this planet?

MADDIE
I don't know. Five billion. Six maybe.

ARCHER
Seven and counting.

QUICK SCENES:

A FOOTBALL STADIUM filled to capacity.

An OPERA.

AMUSEMENT PARK on the Santa Monica pier.

An ICE RINK.

The MALL, chock full of last minute Christmas shoppers.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

We'd reach thousands more if our incompetent editors didn't fuck up our storyboards half the time.

MADDIE

Not if you don't start drawing heroes again.

ARCHER

Heroes? You mean like Golden-Wave? You know how I created him, Maddie? I plugged in a few values in an obscure Internet site and the name popped up at random. GOLDENWAVE. Few more clicks and I had everything. Costume, powers, weaknesses. He's as artificial as Latino Wonder Woman over there.

MADDIE

I see talent there. You're wrong.

ARCHER

Am I? Look around you, Maddie. You think you're gonna' find anything of value out here?

He points out PEOPLE talking on cell phones. TEXTING. Sidewalk vendors hawking cheap merchandise and tours.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Anything magnanimous or spiritual? All I see's a flock of sheep anxious to shell out fifteen bucks for the next Max Ranger debacle.

MADDIE

What happened to you, Archer? You've been acting strange since the night of that accident.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

DOCTOR approaches ESPERANZA HERNANDEZ.

ESPERANZA

Is everything alright, Doctor? What's wrong with Joshua?

DOCTOR

I don't want you to worry, but...X-rays detected a clot near a major blood vessel. We're monitoring the situation very closely. We may have to go in.

EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY

ARCHER

I'm not acting strange.

MADDIE

I thought you were going to help me do some research.

ARCHER

This is research. It's what I'm trying to tell you. It's all pointless. Nothing's arbitrary. The system's taken care of all the loopholes. We're what's left--the Rembrandts and Pollocks of a rapid fire generation! The fucking new world order, Maddie!

MADDIE

There has to be more to it than that.

ARCHER

There isn't!

MADDIE

Who are you again?

ARCHER

I'm the last lasso of truth.

She stares at him, unsettled by his logic. Just then SUPERMAN passes by. Speaks to them with a Canadian accent.

SUPERMAN

Hey Archer! It's gonna' be a hot one today, ay?

ARCHER

Aah, what do any of us know, anyhow? You know Superman there had to be rescued from the slush pile over a dozen times before he went to print? Yet he reached icon status the moment they put him in the funnies. Fifteen times people passed on him. He started making a heap of money for DC. Then they wouldn't let him go.

MADDIE
You coming up?

ARCHER
Not today.

MADDIE
Suit yourself. I was going to show you something but now you can stay here and wallow with the infidels.

ARCHER
These things you want, Maddie? Fame? Fortune? They're all a dead reckoning with the adult world. Once you get them you can't turn back the clock. Can't get that purity you had as a child.

MADDIE
Speak for yourself. I was never that pure.

ARCHER
Just saying. Think twice before you go up those elevators. Subway can take you back home, but it can't take you back in time.

MADDIE
We gotta' get that tainted mind-set out of your bones. You come by my place tonight. See if I can change your mind about this new world order of yours.

She rushes headlong into the building, thru the REVOLVING DOORS. Comes back out immediately.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
Oh yeah! I forgot one thing! I was never in it for the money, Archer Leigh! Scary business tactics aside, I love what I do.

EXT. THE FREEWAY - NIGHT

Archer drives thru the FIGUEROA STREET TUNNELS. Blinded by HEADLIGHTS of cars travelling in the opposite direction.

He hits the open road. Then more LIGHTS and the 2ND TUNNEL.

Back to OPEN ROAD...followed by the 3RD TUNNEL. A TRACTOR TRAILER'S bright headlights blinds him. He stares ahead.

FLASHBACK. EXT - MISSION JUNCTION TRAIN YARD - 1987 - NIGHT

The main HEADLIGHT and whistle of an oncoming LOCOMOTIVE.

YOUNG ARCHER nervously waits as the security guard walks towards him. Guard's FLASHLIGHT shines onto Archer's face.

SECURITY GUARD

What are you doing out here alone? You want to get hurt?

Archer frozen in his shoes. SECURITY GUARD takes his hand.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

You won't need that.
(tosses out flashlight)
Come with me.

The GUARD leads him away; towards an isolated set of tracks.

A SINGLE-DOOR BOXCAR

The GUARD slides open the heavy metal door.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

It's OK. It's safe inside. You can spend the night.

Young ARCHER waivers. The guard looks down at the lunch-box.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

You like the Copper Marvel, I see. I have a son. He watches that show all the time. I think I might have some comic books inside here somewhere.

Archer nods. The guard picks him up and sets him on the floor of the boxcar. Security guard follows him inside. ANGLE ON the GUARD'S FACE as he slams the sliding door behind him.

EXT. THE FREEWAY - BACK TO PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

Bright HEADLIGHTS and car HORNS brings him back to reality.

INT. MADDIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Darlene Love's sweet voice pipes in from the speakers, singing, "Christmas, Baby Please Don't Go."

Several house CATS run around. One CALICO has a MINI-SANTA HAT over his tiny head, complete with clanging bells.

Archer looks around. Gaudy X-mas decorations and brightly colored FLOWERS everywhere. One wall is graced with Maddie's MANGA DRAWINGS.

MADDIE

What?

ARCHER

I just expected...more.

MADDIE

My elephant's in the bathroom.

ARCHER

Good thing I went before I got here.
What's that music?

MADDIE

That's Darlene love.

ARCHER

Who?

MADDIE

Darlene Love. You know, the 60s. Phil
Spector girl groups. The Crystals.
Ronettes. Wall of sound. Later on,
handguns and dead B movie actresses.

ARCHER

Oh, that Darlene Love. Where in the
world did you score it?

MADDIE

My dad, silly. He loved all of those
groups. Used to sing to me and mom all
the time.

ARCHER

Right. Just before he unloaded
thousands of pounds of laser guided
munitions over Kosovo.

MADDIE

Exactly.

INT. DINING ROOM

Close up on several CRESCENT JADE sketches, story boards.

ARCHER

Your old man would be proud. These are
good.

MADDIE

You think?

ARCHER

I think you found your niche.

MADDIE

Oh yeah? Where's that?

ARCHER

Somewhere between Manga and mayhem.
This is better than anything I've ever
done.

MADDIE

Stop right there, Archer Leigh!

ARCHER

Seriously. Women have proved their
mettle in combat. Just a matter of time
before they're allowed into special
forces. Maybe Jade here can help
expedite the process...Thank you for
showing these to me. I mean it.

EXT. BALCONY

A FULL MOON hangs still in the night sky. The record changes
to The Crystals, "And Then he Kissed Me."

MADDIE

There's a full moon hanging over
Hollywood tonight. No place to hide
your lies.

Archer stares out at the city beneath them. THE CAPITAL
RECORDS BUILDING outlined in lights, red spire flashing.

ARCHER

No lies in this view, I tell you.

MADDIE

Thanks. It's a slice of life but it
costs a pretty penny.

ARCHER

You live right underneath the shadow of
the Hollywood sign. Look over there.
Capital Records building. See that
little red light flashing on top of the
spire? Know what it means?

Maddie shakes her head.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Spells out Hollywood in Morse code.
Been that way for over fifty years.
Never missed a day. Some people might
look at it as a distress signal, the
way this city's let itself go. Me, I
see it as Pop art and nothing more.

MADDIE

It's never as bad as you think.

ARCHER

You know, Maddie, most of us don't ever stray that far from home. That place we belong. We like to stay as close as we can to our reminders.

MADDIE

Reminders.

ARCHER

Reminders of pain. Rage. Schoolyard bullies and home-runs. Things our memories just won't let go of.

MADDIE

That don't exactly explain those train tracks you live above.

ARCHER

It explains more than you think...What do you want most in life?

MADDIE

My own comic book. Strong female characters that'll lead women out of the wilderness.

ARCHER

I thought Gloria Steinem already did that.

MADDIE

Burning bras and same sex marriage? Not quite the wilderness but it ain't the supreme court either.

A cat runs right thru Archer's legs.

ARCHER

What in the blue fuck?

Archer spots her CATS frolicking underneath her X-mas tree.

MADDIE

You don't like Siamese?

ARCHER

I don't like cats in general. Especially ones running around like little ninjas in miniature Santa hats.

MADDIE

They're harmless.

THE SIAMESE clutches a tiny Christmas ELF in its mouth.

ARCHER

They're man's adorable little serial killers.

MADDIE

Don't like cats, don't like Mondays, don't like mirrors. Is there anything you do like, Archer Leigh?

He stares at her, longingly. She returns the gaze. For a moment, everything hangs in the balance. THEY leap into each other's arms and passionately KISS.

THRU THE LIVING ROOM

ARCHER carries her to the bedroom. Past Maddie's MANGA CHARACTERS on the wall, watching their every move.

He closes the bedroom door behind him. Stay on the DOOR for a moment. It opens. A glimpse of Archer as he tosses a cat into the hallway. The cat starts MEOWING & CLAWING at the door.

Stay on the DOOR. It opens up again. A glimpse of Maddie as she lets the cat back inside.

FADE OUT WITH MUSIC.

THE SOUND OF AN ALARM CLOCK BUZZING AWAY INCESSANTLY.

INT. MADDIE'S BEDROOM - MORNING

7:15 AM on the CLOCK. The sound of running water in the bathroom, coupled with Maddie's off key SINGING. Archer wakes up. Confused by his surroundings. HE fumbles for the clock and finally shuts down the assault on his senses.

KITCHEN

The tile floor is streaked in RED, as if a murder had occurred. Archer stops, stunned. Spies the culprit: a plastic CONTAINER that once held strawberries, lying on the floor; almost empty. Berries are scattered all over, most of them smooshed. Bloody cat PAWS lead in and out of the kitchen.

ARCHER picks his way thru the mess, careful not to step on fruit. He picks up a blending container lying on its side, having spilled strawberry puree all over the floor.

DOORWAY LEADING INTO THE BATHROOM

A beaded CURTAIN obscures Archer's view of the bathroom. Thru the fog he can make out the bathtub, shielded by an opaque curtain. He reaches out, ready to part the beads. He stops.

INT. GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

MR. LIEBER
Any of you see my niece?

SHAKESPEARE
Not today.

Darwin plays PITFALL on his PC. Looks up. Shakes his head.

MR. LIEBER
Where the hell's Archer?

SHAKESPEARE
I'm guessing he's still at home.

MR. LIEBER
(suspicious)
Hmm!!! If you see either one of them
send them straight to my office!

Lieber exits. Shakespeare gives the Nazi salute. PITFALL
HARRY misses the VINE and falls into a black tar pit.

DARWIN
Every fucking time, that guy!

INT. MADDIE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Archer is just about dressed. Maddie continues to sing O.S.

MADDIE
What in the hell!?

Archer tucks in his shirt. *Ready to go.*

MADDIE (CONT'D)
My singing that bad?

ARCHER
Let's just say Darlene Love ain't got
nothing to worry about.

MADDIE
Asshole! I happen to have what some
would call a very melodic voice.

ARCHER
Just kidding. But I do have to go.

MADDIE
I was going to make you breakfast.

ARCHER
Strawberry smoothie?

MADDIE
You went into the kitchen?

ARCHER
Cats got there first. Looks like a
massacre in there.

Avarice gives her a quick peck on the cheek.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
It's too early for massacres. I'll
catch you later.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD - DAY

BLACK MOSES strums a bluesy on his guitar. His collection HAT
has a few measly dollars in it.

ARCHER listens for a moment. Drops a wad of bills in the hat.

BLACK MOSES
Sounds heavy.

ARCHER
Ain't the blues just always that?

BLACK MOSES
Depends on a man's past, I guess. On
that line.

ARCHER
What line?

BLACK MOSES
The line he draws in the sand.

ARCHER
Most people never stick to it. They
bend it at will, sometimes erase it
altogether. Gets to be they soon forget
where the original stood.

BLACK MOSES
That such a bad thing? Showing
forgiveness?

ARCHER
It's weakness. A way to save face while
they let people off the hook.

BLACK MOSES
You get old enough, you'll get to the
point where that line stays where it's
supposed to. Nothing will move it.
That's when you've won the game.

Moses stops playing. Starts to pack up his belongings.

ARCHER

What if the line won't come to you?

BLACK MOSES

Then you have to go to it.

Moses shuffles off.

ARCHER

Where you going, Moses?

BLACK MOSES

There's a storm headed this way.

ARCHER

I don't see anything.

BLACK MOSES

I do.

EXT. GRANDSTAND COMICS - DUSK

A light drizzle falls on the boulevard beyond Grandstand's doors. X-mas decorations made of cardboard wilt, fall apart.

INT. MR. LIEBER'S OFFICE

MADDIE knocks on Lieber's door.

MR. LIEBER

Where have you been, Maddie. I've been trying to reach you for two days solid.

MADDIE

Busy. Doing research.

MR. LIEBER

Well, great news! We previewed Crescent Jade to a peer group of 13-18 year old females. She scored off the charts.

MADDIE

Females? Why only females?

MR. LIEBER

Because females are our target market.

MADDIE

Oh, OK.

MR. LIEBER

Look, Maddie, Diamond's already agreed to full distribution. We're going to go
(MORE)

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
 full bleed by the end of the year.
 Which means I need a story ASAP.

Maddie is silent. A bit disappointed.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
 I thought you'd be happy.

MADDIE
 I am! Oh my God! Thank you!

She goes to hug Lieber. Reluctantly, he reciprocates.

MR. LIEBER
 I never realized how popular Manga was
 in this country.

MADDIE
 Jade's not Manga.

MR. LIEBER
 What is she then?

MADDIE
 Beats the hell out of me. But I'm going
 to find out. Gotta' run.

MR. LIEBER
 Where you going? I thought we'd
 celebrate.

MADDIE
 Can't. Now that I have my hero, I need
 a villain. I'm going down to the
 boulevard to find me one.

MR. LIEBER
 The boulevard? At this time?

MADDIE
 Sure. Why not?

MR. LIEBER
 Little dangerous, don't you think?

MADDIE
 All them actors and actresses in
 superhero pajamas waiting on call backs
 from Paramount. Nah! I'll be fine. I'll
 bring you back some tacos.

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - DUSK

Raining harder now. A HOMELESS MAN takes the place of Black
 Moses. Sits down. Looks to the side. Finds a GUITAR PICK.

EXT. THE TACO DOLLAR - DUSK

The TACO DOLLAR sign looms high above Maddie. She takes a look around. Adjusts her raincoat and studies the lowlife SKELLS around her. Narrates into her I-phone as she walks.

MADDIE

Nothing. Lots of hobos and roughnecks mixed in with quasi-heroes looking for the next break. I truly believe ordinary people are capable of extraordinary actions. Consequently, the opposite's true. A normal person with set values is just as capable of committing evil acts. I just can't find anything or anyone out here on the boulevard resembling that.

A LARGE HISPANIC WOMAN takes down a large block of cheese.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Except for maybe the large Mexican woman in a sleeveless top with cottage-cheese arms. She just took down a block of cheese in one bite.

(she looks around)

Maybe I just don't know where to look.

Two STREET THUGS, 30s, watch her. They are dangerous looking. Scroungy, bearded, wearing baggy, dilapidated army coats.

Maddie spots them. Brings her purse closer, pinning it safely between her chest and elbow. She heads away from them, down the boulevard. The MEN follow.

EXT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - NIGHT

ARCHER exits his car. Looks at the front of the facility, partially obscured by rain. Pulls the HOODIE over his head.

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - NIGHT

MADDIE, sensing danger, quickens her pace. The THUGS follow suit. Speeding up themselves, quickly closing the gap.

She pulls out her PHONE. Fumbles with it, dialing 9-1-1.

OVER HER SHOULDER. The thugs are now about 50 feet behind.

She smacks right into a STREET HOBO, walking the opposite way. The PHONE drops to the ground, shattering in the STREET.

HOBO

Hey, watch it!

MADDIE

Shit!

The BATTERY lies in a shallow pool of water. Maddie picks up the broken pieces of PHONE. She puts it all back together. Tries to dial. But the phone is dead.

She looks back at the THUGS, who stand underneath a LAMPPOST. Waiting, ILLUMINATED by the eerie light. Their ugly, sinister countenances make it obvious they mean harm.

MADDIE resumes walking. THEY follow.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - NIGHT

Archer walks up to a GUARD. Hands him a visitor's slip.

Guard grabs a set of keys.

GUARD

He's in his room. I'll take you.

INT. ICU - HOSPITAL - NIGHT

On the INTERCOM:

NURSE #1 (V.O.)

Code blue ICU. Code blue ICU.

NURSES and a DOCTOR smash thru the doors leading to ICU. ESPERANZA rises from her chair. A NURSE runs past her.

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - NIGHT

The street is suddenly empty. MADDIE stops. Looks around. Nothing. Looks at the broken phone in her hand.

THE THUGS appear fearless, closing in quickly like jackals.

MADDIE turns; desperate. Heads right towards them. Speaks directly into the broken phone as she meets them head on.

MADDIE

I'm pretty sure they're up to no good, these two. Following me. Acting surreptitious and whatnot.

(on phone)

Yeah, one is small. Got beady little eyes. Like a ferret. Blotchy skin. Like Rorschach.

(pause)

You know, Rorschach, from the Watchmen. Looks just like him.

(MORE)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Other one could pass for ruggedly handsome in a Heath Ledger "10 Things I hate About You" sort of way. But dumb.

(listens)

As in too much empty between the ears. He's wearing a nametag. Can you believe it? Name's Merl...Yeah, OK. On the boulevard. Two blocks south of the Taco Dollar.

(listens)

I will! Bye!

She stares at them. On TIP-TOES, up in their grills.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

That was 9-1-1. They told me to tell you to go crawl back under whatever rock you just happened to crawl out from. Now buzz off! I already had leftovers tonight!

INT. HALLWAY - PSYCHIATRIC WARD - NIGHT

ARCHER moves past many heavy, steel DOORS; each one imbedded with a small, mesh-encased window. He walks on, studying the FACES pressed against each glass. His eyes capture the old age, the pain, and the misery of weary, insane patients.

SHELDON'S ROOM

GUARD unlocks the door to a small 10 by 12 foot room. A large mesh covered window to one side. Small cot in the center.

GUARD

You have fifteen minutes.

ARCHER

Thanks.

Guard walks away.

SHELDON sits on the far corner of the room, his back to the door. A large poster board is propped up on an EASEL.

ARCHER enters and stops at the foot of Sheldon's bed.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

It's me, Sheldon. Archer. I came to ask you something.

Sheldon doesn't hear him. Keeps painting.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Did you hear me?

EXT. THE BOULEVARD - NIGHT

SIDEWALK - MOVING

On Maddie's FEET as she moves with speed and purpose. She pauses underneath a STREET LAMP. Behind her, a narrow, ominous looking alleyway intersects the street.

ALLEYWAY.

She peers into the darkness. Tall tenements rise to either side. She brings out her phone. Dials but it is still dead. Looks around. Illuminated by the street lamp's eerie glow.

Suddenly, MERL emerges from the darkness. His HAND shoots out from the shadows and curls over her face. Maddie attempts to scream but it is too late. MERL pulls her into the depths of inky blackness. Remain tight on the MOUTH OF THE ALLEYWAY as Maddie begins to fight and scream O.S.

INT. ICU - HOSPITAL - NIGHT

A DOCTOR and several nurses frantically try to revive JOSHUA HERNANDEZ, who is turning blue, lifeless.

NURSE #1

Oxygen stats are at zero. I repeat zero oxygen.

NURSE #2

He's having retractions doctor. He's not breathing.

DOCTOR

I need the respirator.

They hook up an oxygen mask over Joshua's tiny face and attempt to pump oxygen into his lungs.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Start up an endotracheal tube. Heat up two vials of surfactant. 8CC's.

They begin to insert tubes down Joshua's windpipe.

NURSE #3

It's not working. His airway's obstructed!

NURSE #1

His pulse is weakening. Seventy over one-ten. Dropping. Sixty five over one-o-seven.

EXT. INSIDE THE BOWELS OF THE ALLEY - NIGHT

Surrounded by darkness MADDIE is thrown on the top of a loose pile of plastic garbage bags.

RORSCHACH
This the rock you were talking about,
bitch!?

RORSCHACH smacks her hard across the face. Kneels over MADDIE. MERL chuckles as Rorschach continues the assault.

RORSCHACH (CONT'D)
You think we're stupid?

MADDIE
(thru blood)
Oh, Rorschach! It's you! You know,
you're even uglier in the dark!

MADDIE spits on his face. RORSCHACH smacks her again.

RORSCHACH
I'll show you what ugly feels like! By
the time we get thru with you no one
will ever look at you again!

ON MADDIE: Her face is bloody, but she is unbowed. SHE reaches out and rakes RORSCHACH across the face. She screams for dear life but RORSCHACH covers her mouth quickly.

RORSCHACH (CONT'D)
You fucking whore! You're gonna' pay
for that!

MADDIE
The police will be here in five
minutes. You heard me call them.

RORSCHACH
Sure I did.

He LAUGHS. Cocks back, smacks her once more in the face.

MADDIE'S POV - Looks up at RORSCHACH thru all the blood. He leans in very close, all hot breath and red-devil eyes. MERL holds up her broken phone and taunts her with it.

MERL
You've been dropped by your cell phone
provider, Bitch!

RORSCHACH
Not a good time for that! Now you ain't
got no plan! Who's the dumb-ass now?

SHE shuts her eyes. RORSCHACH is on top of her, thrusting viciously. She fights him tooth and nail, but he is too strong for her. He pulls down her blouse, rips off her undergarments. Nearby, MERL claps with childlike exuberance.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - NIGHT

ARCHER
Are you listening to me?

SHELDON
I can't talk right now, Archer. I'm in the middle of something big.

Archer moves around the bed. He is behind Sheldon now.

ARCHER
Why'd you do it!? Why'd you let me run away!?

SHELDON
What are you talking about?

ARCHER
I was nine! You never came for me! You never looked! Two nights in that box car with--

He stops mid-sentence. Not wanting to go back.

FATHER
I did it for the family. For you. Your mother. How was I supposed to know I was dealing with monsters.

ARCHER
Monsters!? You were in the monster business, you god-damn bastard! You were a monster! Cared more about your work than your own family! You care about it more right now!

Sheldon rubs his hands together. Anxiety building in him.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
Where's your Copper Marvel now!? Huh? He deserted you! Right? Just like you deserted me!

Sheldon rubs harder...faster...

ARCHER (CONT'D)
I'll tell you where he is! He's pinned to the top of that god-damn Christmas tree! Mocking me!!! Reminding me every
(MORE)

ARCHER (CONT'D)

fucking day I go to work the monster never dies!

SHELDON

It's alright, you see. Because I have a new hero in the works. This one will be bigger than anything Grandstand ever came up with. And we can work on it together. Like old times.

ARCHER

Do you know what happened to me in that train-yard!? Do you even care!?

Sheldon hides his hands. Grimaces from some unforeseen pain.

INT. ICU - HOSPITAL - NIGHT

The DOCTOR inserts a paralytic so that the JOSHUA'S muscles can relax enough to accept the tubing.

DOCTOR

Is that surfactant ready?

NURSE #3

Yes, Doctor.

INT. SHELDON'S ROOM - PSYCHIATRIC WARD - CONTINUOUS

Archer steps forward, around the bed. He stops, frozen in his tracks because ahead of him, he notices that Sheldon has drawn figures on the poster board. In his own BLOOD!

ARCHER'S EYES fall down to Sheldon's hands. They are naked; wraps hanging loose and free on the floor. Sheldon has rubbed the skin completely off his fingers; to the point that they resemble pieces of bloody, processed meat.

SHELDON

I can't get the ink off my hands.

(rubs his hands)

It won't come off. No matter how hard I try. I rub and I rub and I rub but it just won't come off. Why do you suppose that is, Archer?

Archer steps backward against the wall. Stares at the blood.

SHELDON (CONT'D)

Do you think they'll get angry? Take away my painting? They promised to let me have my drawing tools back.

ARCHER
 (yells)
 GUARD!!!
 (no response)
 GUAAAAAAAAARD!!!

Keys jingle in the lock. GUARD enters and stops, horrified.

INT. ICU - HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Nurse hands the doctor a syringe. He primes the feeding tube with surfactant. A NURSE adjusts the ventilator setting.

NURSE #1
 Heart rate is increasing, doctor. Pulse
 is 72 over 104.

A moment. Beeping on the EKG is more pronounced.

NURSE #1 (CONT'D)
 Climbing. Back to 80 over 110.

ECU: ON THE EKG MACHINE. CLOSE IN ON THE BLIPS AND BEEPS

EXT . PSYCHIATRIC FACILITY - NIGHT

CONTINUE WITH THE EKG BEEPS. - O.S.

ARCHER breaks down outside. As he walks across the lawn, rain drenching him, he drops to his knees and begins to wail. He unleashes an infernal cry of pain and rage, but the rain bats it down in the night.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. HOSPITAL - MADDIE'S ROOM - DAY

Archer enters, carrying flowers.

MADDIE
 Hey you.

ARCHER
 Maddie. How are you feeling?

MADDIE
 Tired. Scared. I keep the light on at
 night. Helps me sleep.

Archer hands her the flowers.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
 You finished with Neutrino yet?

ARCHER

All done. Have my presentation with Lieber tomorrow morning.

MADDIE

I'd tell you to break a leg but there isn't room enough in this bed for the two of us.

ARCHER

I'll make room.

MADDIE

It don't always have to be fiction, you know.

ARCHER

What does?

MADDIE

Life. I told you before, there are wonderful things all around us. People. Sometimes you just have to open your eyes to see them. When you do, you'll find you're capable of great things.

ARCHER

When things get too heavy for you, who do you turn to?

MADDIE

You mean like a shrink? Or a friend?

Archer shrugs.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

The world's in short supply of one and long on the other.

ARCHER

What do you do then? When it all comes tumbling down?

MADDIE

You know, I thought I outsmarted them. Those--M--

(won't say the word MEN)

Thought I tricked them into believing my phone was working. I thought I was something special. Some hero, huh?

ARCHER

You did what you could under the circumstances. More than you could. The important thing is you're alive.

MADDIE

I flipped the coin and I lost. You know
 what I thought of when--
 (again, won't say it)
 --were raping me? When I was clinging
 to hope in that alley and no one came?

Archer shakes his head and sits down.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I came home. Crazy, huh? I tried to
 envision New York. The snow. Christmas
 lights strung out across Spring Street.
 But all that came to mind was Japan.
 Just like you said before. We all stay
 close to home. Like Manga characters.
 The way of mirth. Purity. All those
 sketches of young, wide-eyed girls with
 bright futures ahead of them. And
 Nanase telling me to close my eyes, to
 let my imagination take over. Let the
 hand follow what the mind sees. And I
 closed my eyes, Archer, and I wanted to
 see the future. I wanted to see good.
 But all I saw was darkness. The end.
 And I was scared to death.

ARCHER

I am so sorry, Maddie. I should have
 been out there with you.

MADDIE

You didn't tell me to go back out to
 the Taco Dollar...You do me a favor?

ARCHER

Anything.

MADDIE

Walk up to that mirror.

Archer hesitates, but walks over. He stands in front of a
 full length. His head is low, eyes avoid his own reflection.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Tell me what you see.

Archer remains still.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Lift up your eyes Archer. Lift them and
 tell me.

Archer does that very thing.

FLASHBACK - EXT. MISSION JUNCTION TRAIN YARD - 1987 - DAY

POLICEMEN, WORKING DOGS and VOLUNTEERS by the dozen; crawling all over the train yard in search of Archer.

A POLICE MAN bends over and picks something up.

COP#1

Over here! I found something! Looks like a kid's flashlight!

COP #2

Over here!

A group peels off from the others and assembles.

COP #2 (CONT'D)

Looks like a lunch pail. The Copper Marvel. He's gotta' be here!

The group studies The Copper Marvel lunchbox. The cop opens it. Inside is a ROLL OF QUARTERS and a used sandwich wrapper.

COP #2 (CONT'D)

OK. Spread out. He's close by.

AT THE BOXCAR

DOOR slides open, revealing the GROUP standing on the tracks. The looks on their faces, angry, sad, spells it all out.

ARCHER is PASSED OUT. Battered and bruised, naked and nearly comatose. THEY pick him up and gently wrap a sheet over him.

A CIVILIAN hops inside the boxcar. Shines a flashlight into several corners. He spots something. Walks over.

CIVILIAN

Holy mother of God. What did they do to this poor boy?

Archer's soiled, bloody UNDERGARMENTS lay in a pile.

INT. HOSPITAL - MADDIE'S ROOM - BACK TO PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

MADDIE

What do you see, Archer?

ARCHER

I see a scared little boy.

MADDIE

Well, I see a very brave man.

ARCHER

They never found the guy. The one who-

MADDIE
And you blame your father for it.

ARCHER
Yes.

MADDIE
Because you went out looking for your mother. After your father drove her away.

Archer nods.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
And if they found the guy?

ARCHER
I don't know. The word revenge comes to mind. What would you do?

MADDIE
If they find the--
(hard for her)
ANIMALS who raped me? I thought of that. Putting them away won't solve a thing. I'm still going to have to deal with this for the rest of my life.

ARCHER
Can I do anything for you?

MADDIE
Just treat me like an angel when I get out, and maybe one day I'll take you to heaven.

ARCHER
Not sure I'd make many friends up there.

MADDIE
You'll always have a friend in me.

INT. ARCHER'S CUBICLE. - DAY

A glossy, colorful NEUTRINO panel in Archer's hand. On the DESK: ARCHER has a full set of sketches and work-ups carefully tucked away inside a large carry all.

DARWIN
You ready to unveil our boy to Lieber?

ARCHER
Ready. Ready like Freddy.

DARWIN
Want me to go with you?

ARCHER
Something's I do better on my own.

LOIS (V.O.)
(intercom)
Mr. Lieber's ready for you now.

ARCHER
OK, Lois. Give me a minute.

DARWIN rises. Looks out across the room to the LAST SUPPER TABLE. A brand new batch of artists. YOUNG and full of moxie.

DARWIN
Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll let you have your moment of glory.

ARCHER
Hey! We did this together.

DARWIN
I never thought we'd get it done. But we're still missing a hero, you know?

Darwin turns to leave.

ARCHER
Hold on a sec--

Archer grabs the RUBIK'S CUBE off the desk. One side is set to THE WHITE CROSS. He gives the cube several quick twists and turns. He flips the completed CUBE to Darwin.

ARCHER (CONT'D)
Get to know the white cross, Darwin.

DARWIN
What?

ARCHER
It's a parlor trick in disguise. Once you got the cross, you have the solution to the whole cube.

DARWIN
Good luck in there.

Archer opens his carry all. Looks thru several sketches. At the bottom of his bag, he pulls something out.

CLOSE UP: The TOOLBOX engraved with SHELDON'S NAME.

He looks across the room at LIEBER, yelling into a phone.

Suddenly, Archer starts to tear up the sketches. All of them. As madness dawns on him he looks across the cubicle.

A SHREDDER

ARCHER grins.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Archer steps out of the building. Sighs with relief.

INT. WAITING ROOM - HOSPITAL - DAY

Archer approaches ESPERANZA HERNANDEZ.

ARCHER

You Ms. Hernandez? Joshua Hernandez's mother?

ESPERANZA nods; wary.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

What type of blood does Joshua have?

ESPERANZA

What? Who are you?

ARCHER

Forget it. Just take me to a nurse. I can help Joshua.

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

A NURSE takes Archer's blood. She smiles at Archer.

ESPERANZA

I still don't understand.

ARCHER

AB types are universal recipients. Joshua's AB, which means he can get blood from anyone. I'm O-NEG, the universal donor. Which means Joshua and I are compatible.

ESPERANZA

How do you know all this?

Archer holds up his naked wrist.

ARCHER

Lost my ID bracelet a few weeks ago. I have a blood deficiency. Only one in two thousand get it.

ESPERANZA

What does that mean?

ARCHER

My blood's thin. Like a hemophiliac's. Won't clot as well as a normal person's. Joshua's blood is the exact opposite. No proteins to hit the brakes. That's why he gets all those tumors.

Esperanza hugs Archer. He rises.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

You could say my blood is the Switzerland of blood cells.

ESPERANZA

Thank you, Archer. I won't forget this.

ARCHER

I'll be back next week. Give Joshua another fill up.

ESPERANZA

Promise me you won't go out drinking the night before.

ARCHER

Tall order but I'll try.

FADE OUT.

INT. ARCHER'S BUILDING - PARKING STRUCTURE - DAY

He circles the empty structure. No cars around as he enters

INT. HIS APARTMENT

QUICK SCENES: HE eats alone. Brushes his teeth. Combs his hair. Watches TV. Feeds Confucius.

He takes apart THE CHEMIS-TREE. Boxes everything up.

FADE OUT.

INT. ARCHERS APARTMENT - DAY

TV NEWSCASTER

The little baby whose blood is as hard as steel is doing much better these days. As you may have heard, Joshua Hernandez has a serious blood disorder that causes his blood to congeal.

(MORE)

TV NEWSCASTER (CONT'D)

But in the eleventh hour a miraculous, new blood donor materialized from thin air. Archer Leigh Shugel. You might recognize him as the creator of the comic book hero, GoldenWave. Mr. Leigh--

ARCHER

Mister..?

TV NEWSCASTER

--has pledged to aid Joshua with a steady regimen of blood transfusions. For Joshua and his mother, Esperanza, this real-life superhero couldn't have come at a better time.

INT. HOSPITAL - MADDIE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Archer enters, orchid in hand. A quick scan reveals a room full to the rafters with plants.

ARCHER

Your bruises.

MADDIE

What about them?

ARCHER

They're going away. But the plants keep coming.

MADDIE gazes absentmindedly at the TV.

MADDIE

I saw you on TV before. You were here. You gave blood to save that baby.

ARCHER

I had to. No one else would.

MADDIE

Is that why you want to save that boy? Cause no one came for you.

ARCHER

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

MADDIE

You once said to me there were no answers waiting out there. Well, you're wrong about that, Archer. There are answers. I found something. I don't know what it is or what it means but I'm going to find out.

On TV: Raging fires sweeps thru the hills and forests of California.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Would you look at that? It's dead winter and forest fires are raging up the coast. Thousand acres gone. News reporter says the fire was started by some heinous eucalyptus trees.

ARCHER

Heinous?

MADDIE

Says there flammable. Territorial. When things get crowded they weed out other trees by exploding. Some sort of napalm gas inside the bark. Once the smoke clears the eucalyptus is the only tree standing.

Archer passes her a colorful, beautiful ORCHID PLANT.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

It's amazing what plants are capable of. You know a Fig tree will kill the eggs a wasp lays in the fruit if the wasp leaves first without pollinating.

ARCHER

The fig murders the wasp's family?

MADDIE

Well, family ain't born yet. It's like a thousand abortions in one. I mean this orchid is beautiful, but you know what makes it special?

ARCHER

No. What?

MADDIE

It can produce the scent of a female bug in heat. The purpose is to lure the male insect in, coat him in pollen. Some plants do it so well the male insect ends up humping the flower altogether.

ARCHER

This your way of making a pass at me?

MADDIE

I thought that was clear as cotton.

ARCHER
You're not going to tell me plants can
fall in love, are you?

MADDIE
Nope.

ARCHER
Do you believe people are capable of
loving each other?

MADDIE
I considered the possibility.

ARCHER
How does that translate to you?

MADDIE
I want to love. All girls do.

ARCHER
And why is that?

MADDIE
We want to love because it's the
closest thing there is to magic.

ARCHER
Magic?

MADDIE
Magic is what life isn't.

ARCHER
What's that mean?

MADDIE
We all get old, and we all grow
cynical, Archer. And we all lose our
charms in the end.

EXT. STREET - DAY

A windy day. Archer walks...hears a CACOPHONY OF SOUND - O.S.
He walks over. Spots something...unseen; off screen.

ARCHER
Jesus, Joseph, and doggy style Mary.

INT. HOSPITAL - MADDIE'S ROOM - DAY

ARCHER
I'm getting you out of here.

MADDIE

What?

ARCHER

I have something to show you.

MADDIE

Are you crazy?

EXT. STREET - DAY

Archer parks his car on a bustling urban street.

ARCHER

C'mon. Let's go.

He guides Maddie into her wheelchair and falls behind.

MADDIE

Where you taking me, Archer?

They round a corner. Archer covers her eyes with his hands.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

What are you doing? I can't see.

ARCHER

Just trust me.

Archer pushes onward. Stops.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

OK. Open your eyes.

Maddie stares. Her mouth drops open. WOW!!!

MADDIE

Oh, my stars!

She looks at Archer.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Is this..?

ARCHER

Yep! The music we heard the night of the accident. It was right under our noses all along.

EXT. A FOUR STORY BROWNSTONE.

Painted in bright aqua blue. Attached to the building's facade, running all the way up to the roof from street level is an intricate system of interconnecting trap drains, funnels, musical instruments, trombones, weather vanes, and wind chimes that create 'musical' sounds when it's windy.

MADDIE
Oh, my--! It's fantastic!

YELLING and SHOUTING coming from behind them - O.S.

Suddenly, the RASTAFARIAN PARKOUR runs thru them. Fists pumping. Carries a rather expensive Louis Vuitton HANDBAG.

PARKOUR
Sorry mates! I'm in a bit of a hurry!

He crosses the street, dodging cars, somersaulting over hoods. He scales the building's facade parkour style. He latches onto whichever instrument he can, climbing with grace and speed, and disappears quickly thru a third story window.

The sound OF LEATHER SHOES pounding pavement. - O.S.

Without looking back, ARCHER grins. Two FLAT-FOOTS in uniform cut around the corner and race past them down the sidewalk.

ARCHER
Far out!

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPERIMPOSED ON BLACK SCREEN: TWO WEEKS LATER

FADE IN:

EXT. NEWSTAND - DAY

WILLY
Happy New Year, Archer.

ARCHER
Same to you, Willy.

Archer scans the racks. Spots a comic book. Grabs it.

INSERT: Issue #1, Volume 1 of CRESCENT JADE.

WILLY (O.S.)
Damn book's flying off the rack. I've had to re-up twice already.

ARCHER
That's good.

The COVER is graced by JADE and her MALE SIDEKICK. The male character looks like Archer. While Jade resembles Maddie.

WILLY
How about you? You got your own book coming out anytime soon?

ARCHER
Sometimes, Willy, that light at the end
of the tunnel is the train coming to
hit you.

ARCHER pays him with his ROLL OF QUARTERS. Walks away.

WILLY
Your change.

ARCHER
Don't need it.

INT. MR. LIEBER'S OFFICE - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

MR. LIEBER
I just need you to sign these
documents, Maddie.

MADDIE
What are they?

MR. LIEBER
Copyright language. A redistribution of
royalties agreement for Crescent Jade.

MADDIE
Redistribution. You mean you get to
keep it all.

MR. LIEBER
Well, Maddie. We are fronting all the
printing and marketing costs. And they
are quite substantial.

MADDIE
That's very sneaky of you!

MR. LIEBER
I don't think I appreciate your tone.

MADDIE
And I don't appreciate your sneakiness!
I don't really care about the money. I
could do with or without. But what
about Jade?

MR. LIEBER
What about her?

MADDIE
Do I get to keep her rights? It's only
fair, considering I created her.

MR. LIEBER
It doesn't quite work that way, Maddie.

MADDIE
No. Of course it don't.

HARVEY THE ACCOUNTANT
(standing up)
You have to underst--

MADDIE
--You just SHUT the hell up! I didn't
ask you a God-damn thing!!!

Harvey sits back down; disgraced.

MR. LIEBER
If you read your contract, Maddie,
you'd see we took you on as a
freelancer. That means you agreed to
hand over ownership of any and all
characters you created the day you
cashed your first paycheck.

She picks up the SUN TZU STATUETTE. In perfect JAPANESE:

MADDIE
The true villain reveals himself.

MR. LIEBER
Maddie, just have a seat. We can--

MADDIE
--I won't let you destroy me like you
destroyed Archer's family.

MR. LIEBER
Archer? What do you care about him?
He's through in this business.

MADDIE
He was right all along. He warned me
about you.

MR. LIEBER
Don't be naive.

She hurls the Sun Tzu doll against the wall. It SHATTERS.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
(ducking shrapnel)
HEY! What the hell's gotten into you!?

MADDIE
You don't deserve to have that!

MR. LIEBER
You broke my statue!

MADDIE
And you broke your promise! I won't let
you take Jade from me! I'll fight you!

MR. LIEBER
Maddie, don't be ridiculous.

MADDIE
I mean it! I'll get a lawyer.

MR. LIEBER
Maddie...
(he rises slowly)
If it's a lawyer you want, I have
dozens.

The look of anguish on Maddie's face when it hits her.

MR. LIEBER (CONT'D)
Go home. Think things thru.

EXT. SIDEWALK - GRANDSTAND COMICS - DAY

MADDIE races out of the building. Leans back against the wall
and starts to SOB uncontrollably.

Just then MAX RANGER walks by, pauses, and offers her a
handkerchief. She takes it and punches MAX in the stomach.
Real hard. Max goes down to the ground in agony.

FADE OUT.

INT. COFFEE HOUSE - DAY

Archer pours over CRESCENT JADE. THE WAITRESS, nervous, sets
a LATTE in front of Archer. He stares down at A SMILING SUN.
Instinctively, he grabs a swirl stick. Then looks at the same
TWO BARISTAS, standing behind the counter, gawking at him.

EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY

ARCHER leaves the coffee house. His PHONE RINGS. He looks at
the caller ID. Smiles.

ARCHER
How are you Maddie?

MADDIE (V.O.)
I'm doing fine. How about you? You
holding up?

INT. COFFEE HOUSE - DAY

The WAITRESS picks up the tab. Looks down at the full LATTE. Archer has left the SMILING SUN in pristine condition.

ARCHER (V.O.)
Me. I think I'm gonna' be OK.

INT. MADDIE'S BOOTH AT COMIC-CON - DAY

MADDIE is besieged by her new fan base. Her BOOTH is packed.

MADDIE
I'm down here in San Diego.

ARCHER
You made it to Comic-con. Good for you.

MADDIE
Couldn't have done it without you. You coming down?

EXT. SIDEWALK - LUXURY HOTEL - DAY

ARCHER looks up at a Goliath, 10 story high BILLBOARD for the MAX RANGER movie. The canvas dominates an entire side of a prime, luxury hotel. Workers on a scaffold tear down the canvas near the top floor. MAX comes crashing down to earth.

ARCHER
Me? I called it a career. Put Neutrino thru the shredder and Lieber banished me for eternity.

MADDIE
Eternity's not so long.

ARCHER
Sounds crazy over there. You must be packing them in...I read your comic, you know.

MADDIE
You like it?

ARCHER
I like the cover. Reminds me of someone I know.

MADDIE
You know I was just thinking. I've got this giant booth all to myself and no one here to pass the time with.

(MORE)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I'm wondering if you might want you to come down here. Show me how a professional handles his fans.

ARCHER

With grace and dignity.

MADDIE

Grace and dignity. Sounds like something you could teach me.

Silence from Archer's end.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Thing is, I'm working on this new character and I hit a major snag. I was hoping you could help me with ideas.

ARCHER

New character? A hero?

MADDIE

Nah! This one's a villain. I call her Sandanista Barbie!

ARCHER

(smiles)

Sandanista Barbie. I like that.

MADDIE (O.S.)

Will you come?

ARCHER

Sure thing, Maddie. I just have one last thing to do.

EXT. MEDICAL OFFICES - DAY

ARCHER at the front door. Looks at DOCTOR'S name on the wall plaque. Matches it to the card he pulls from his pocket.

INSERT: DR. ALFRED PENNYWORTH. Doctor of Psychology.

The wind PICKS UP behind him. Leaves RUSTLE. Tin cans bounce down the street. Kids ride bikes. Baseball cards pressed into spokes CLACK madly, yet sound soothing in a nostalgic way.

ARCHER turns, looks behind him on the sidewalk. A SIAMESE CAT darts across the road, narrowly dodging a car.

ARCHER looks up the street. Each way. There is nothing. No one is there.

HE reaches out to KNOCK...

FADE TO BLACK:

