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)
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, scruffy, 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, SECRETARY 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.

SECRETARY (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
It’s 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 it’s 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 you’re 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.

Archers 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 storyboarded 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)
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 a 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-DESCRIPTION, 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, deutschmark, 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 worst 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. MADDE 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 spitcurl 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, cliche 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) Shit!

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

ARCHER

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 cliche 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)

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 barrelling 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 its 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 SERGEANT
(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 SERGEANT
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 goddamn 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


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

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)
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 SHOULDHER. 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 LAMPOST. 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 MADDE. MERL chuckles as Rorschach continues the assault.

    RORSCHACH (CONT’D)
    You think we’re stupid?

    MADDE
    (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 MADDE: 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!

    MADDE
    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)
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)
GUAAAAAAD!!!(no response)

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

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)
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 - MADDEIE’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.


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: