

Moving Pictures

By Mike Hoefflinger

A band of garage filmmakers uses the next evolution in technology, Machinima, to upset Hollywood's business model. The establishment fights back by sabotaging the production the whole way. In a battle of wills, it is only a matter of time before one side is permanently disrupted.

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Chapter 1: On the Run

“Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel.”

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Bunraku’s car was the automotive equivalent of the medium build, 5’10” Caucasian. A ubiquitous every-car that could pass just as easily for a blue Honda as it could a green Toyota. With the plate removed and a Photoshop’d dealer slip taped in the corner of the windshield, it was virtually indistinguishable from the 16,547 like it in LA.

If you had to be on the run, Red and Vanity now realized, this was the right car.

And as they had done every day since going on the run, they were war driving for Wi-Fi. Vanity at the wheel. Red hunched over the NetStumbler console on their one remaining laptop and its precious cargo: their bits.

It was the worst of times.

“I am *not* doing this another day,” Vanity said.

“Come on. Four more days. Maybe five,” Red answered, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“I’ve been away from work for four days. They have no idea where I am. You don’t think about stuff like that.”

“This is *about* work. The big risk. You, of all people...”

“Don’t! I’ve been with you the whole way on this, but this is too much. Let it go.”

"I have to get on again to get the new model from Bunraku. Then we block the last couple of sequences. I need you to do camera direction. We got maybe 20 hours left, and a couple of days of encode. We can still get Cuban the stuff by Wednesday."

She pulled the car over abruptly, turned to face him, and let it fly. "Listen to me! They took our rigs. They're looking for us. We've been running around LA for five days. I've slept in three different motels. I'm not a fucking Le Carre novel. This is insane. It's over," looking down at the floor. "Tell them you're done."

He leaned back in his seat, dug a small bottle of Jack Daniels out of his cargo pants, poured the whole thing into the half-empty Venti caramel machiatto, no foam, in his cup holder, and took a couple of agonizing sips from the foul mixture.

"I hear you," quieter, staring out his passenger-side window. "This is insane, and I'm sorry. There was no way to know. But they're not going to do anything drastic. They just want to break us up and destroy the bits."

Silence. Then Red again.

"We can't let that happen. You, me, Bunraku, Silenz, everybody else. We've put four hundred hours apiece into this. And it's good. You know that." Choking down the last of his concoction. Wincing. Turning to look at her.

"For god's sake. It's not about that! Even if we lay low and finish, they know who we are. If we release, we're not going to get a legitimate job in this town again. We need to stop. Fight another day."

"It's too late. The only way is to release and take what comes."

"I know you're willing to take that chance. I just don't think I am." Shaking her head. Trying not to cry.

And then she saw them in the rearview mirror.

"What the...?"

"What?"

"They found us."

"No way!"

"Look for yourself."

One look back confirmed it. There was the Hummer that had chased them from the apartment five days ago.

"Well, what are you waiting for then? Let's get out of here."

No reaction.

"Come on, V! Are you with me?"

Chapter 2: The Beginning

"I'd love to kiss you, but I just washed my hair."

Bette Davis, *Cabin in the Cotton*

They had met a year earlier.

"Come here often," he asked, standing at the bar, glancing sideways at her. Hoping she'd detect the sarcasm. Disarming smile as Plan B.

"Sure. I like to hit the bars every Tuesday and Thursday. It's the one true thing in my life."

"Makes sense. You strike me as the lemming type."

"Oh, yes. That's me. Well, been nice exchanging transparent banter. Let's do this again sometime," ready to exit if he gave up, but not moving just yet.

"Oh, I don't know. I need some time to let this sink in. We're moving so fast."

"That so? Do we need to slow it down for the kids in the back of the class?" The guy kept smiling at her, even though she hadn't yet turned around to face him.

"That's alright. I'm just auditing."

"Don't have the guts to take the class for a grade?"

"I'm not familiar with the prof. Keeping my options open."

"OK, options closed. Are we doing this, or not?" Finally turning to look at him. A little surprised he was holding his ground. Still smiling. More Damon than Affleck. Not tall, but not short. No fashion model, but no love handles either. Shave, decent haircut and some product all that separated him from viability. There was something in the eyes. Cross between Eastwood and Cruise.

"If that's what you want," delighted to see her face, finally. Helen of Troy with no make-up, wearing an Ecco hoodie. Thousand-ship-launching tresses up in a careless mess. Pointy pumps under non-descript jeans the only concession to style. Better natural features than Theron. If someone had just pointed them out. If she would have been willing to believe them.

"Very well, then, why don't you introduce yourself to the rest of the class. Nickname, occupation and what you hope to get out of this, please."

"Red. Screenwriter. Between projects. Hope to not get outclassed."

"Red? You don't look Irish?"

"No. Questions later. Intro first."

"OK. Vanity. Digital artist at Blur. Hoping to get this over quickly, so I can still hit Steve Madden before I rush home to catch re-runs of *Green Acres*."

"Vanity? You must like Prince. A lot?"

"No. You first. What's the 'Red' thing?"

He leaned in a little, holding eye contact. Sizing her up. "You know much about John Lasseter?"

"Some."

"He did some great stuff way before *Toy Story*."

She was thinking now. Wanting to figure it out before he told her. "Right. *Red's Dream*. Old school. Not quite *Luxo Jr.*, but old school. So you're digital, too?"

"Less employed than you, but yes. Your turn. 'Vanity'?"

"Old story. Used to be a primer in high school. Got over it. Picked up the name to avoid repeating the mistake."

"Would that be sarcasm or irony?"

"Which do you prefer?"

“Sarcasm. It’s blunter. And pretty much all I’m capable of.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re not much good at that either,” half-smile to let him know she appreciated the effort.

“That so?” Disappointed. “Was that a *Caddyshack* reference?”

“Would it be good if it had been?”

“It would.”

“Then it was. Not the best line from that one, though?”

“And that would be?”

“Pool and a pond. Pond would be good for you.”

“Really? Not ‘Cinderella story...?’”

“If you prefer. But between that and *Red’s Dream* I’m sensing an underdog mentality. Should I read that as adorably humble, or freakishly insecure?”

“Adorably humble?”

“You’d think. But, I prefer freakishly insecure. More my speed.”

“Tell me more.”

“Sorry, Dr. Phil, you have to wait for the sequel before we get to that.”

“Sequel to what?”

“This.”

“What is ‘this?’”

“Don’t ask me. I was just standing here infusing my life with meaning as part of a mindless ritual. You started talking to me.”

“OK. OK. Can I talk you into moving ‘this’ to a more relaxed setting. There’s a decent place down on Wilshire.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I do much better in large crowds. Easier to fade away.”

“I see. How about we head over, and if it’s just a little too cozy for you, we’ll put together a flash mob for you?”

“Ain’t a girl lucky. OK, you win. Let’s go.” Looking down at the Red Bull in his hand. “You goin’ to finish that before we start drinking?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ve started. There’s vodka in here.”

“Charming.”

Drinks turned into the beach. The beach turned into a long session of trying to keep warm by merely hanging on each others’ every word. They capitulated, cold, but intrigued, ten degrees after midnight.

“Thanks, Red.” Back at her car. “It’s been a slice,” big smile, finding his eyes to let him know she was serious. “If you write half as good as you talk, this town better watch out.”

“Maybe you could move in so we can talk while I write.”

“You’re cute. Very cute. But, I don’t do complicated. I am, however, willing and secretly eager to talk more. Let me call your cell. You can save my number.”

Couple of taps on the phone, a kiss on the cheek and she was back in the car driving away quickly.

Already beginning to wonder how she was going to ruin this one.

Chapter 3: A Screenplay

“The formula for the well made play is so easy that I give it for the benefit of any reader who feels tempted to try his hand at making the fortune that awaits all manufacturers in this line.”

George Bernard Shaw, *How to Write a Popular Play*

It wasn't much different from the average American poker night. Instead of sitting at a felt table, they were sitting in their rooms, connected through a Gigabit LAN stapled to the walls with the carelessness usually reserved for garage door opener bell wire. Instead of guarded banter, they were loudly hurling invectives across the apartment. And instead of cards, they were playing *Half Life 2*. Other than that, however, it wasn't much different from the average American poker night.

“Say hello to my little friend, bitch,” came the thoroughly satisfied post-kill commentary from Silenz. A transplanted Brit, Silenz was an audio engineer at an LA studio by trade, a songwriter by aspiration, and connoisseur of 8-bit re-sampled videogame electronica by accident. He bore a passing resemblance to a bearded Jim Morrison, a distinction he carried with great pride, and an iPod full of *The Doors*.

“Whatever,” the reply from Red's room.

“That all you gotta say?”

“Who is the bigger loser? The guy that spends two hours a day on multiplayer getting his ass kicked by the guy that spends twenty-five and a half, or the guy who brings the witless *Scarface* reference?”

“Better than the stuff you been writing.”

“Oooh. Are you going to take that from him?” the inquiry from the other end of the hall. Bunraku fancied himself equal parts young George Hamilton and *Cowboy Beebop's* Spike Spiegel, but was in actuality neither. He had found refuge in LA as a digital animator after the inflow of his BFA in Puppetry failed to sustain the outflow of his Bruno Magli habit. To relieve feelings of having become a creative sell-out, he had adopted his moniker in homage to a centuries old Japanese form of puppetry.

Silence.

“Well, what's it gonna be,” Silenz looking for a response.

“One of us is working for the man. The other isn't. 'nuf said.”

“Fellas! Can we get back to it? I got sniping to do,” Vanity piping up from her room.

“Watch out. She's wearing her I MAKE BOYS CRY shirt,” said Bunraku.

“I'll let you borrow it,” she said, working to get an angle on him from above. “If...you're...nice,” pulling the trigger.

“Ah, crap. I'm out.”

“Ain't that the truth,” reminded Silenz.

"V, looks like it's you and me against Silenz. How about we use the trick you used to cut line at D-Land?" Red looking for an alliance.

"Oh, the one where I do this..." Vanity maneuvering out from behind the building to draw Silenz.

"...and I do this..." Red flanking Silenz, coming up behind him, and laying him out with a clean headshot from the H&K. "fatal1ty you're not, my friend."

"You just keep talking. I'll be over here cashing my paycheck."

"OK, boy wonder, just you and me. I'm going to hurt you now."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Don't bother with the funny. I love you, but this will end badly for you. Just hold still."

"Sounds familiar."

"Can we please not talk about that in front of the children?"

"You do know we can hear you guys when you're in here together, don't you?" Bunraku in her room now, looking over her shoulder at the action.

"Oh, alright. What's a girl to do? He's got dimples."

"And a nice ass."

"Forget about my ass. Has everyone forgotten how she looked last year when we went out for her promotion?" It had been the rare occasion where Vanity had taken an extra two minutes to do her hair and put on a dress from back in the days. She would have given Grace Kelly circa *Rear Window* a run for her money that evening.

"You got too much time to daydream, boy. Get a job."

"Overrated."

"No, really, I mean it. Get a job."

"Let it go, V."

"Awww, what's the problem, honey?"

"I'm not kidding. Let...it...go."

"Remind me to let it go next time we're floating your rent."

"Why do we constantly have to talk about my job situation in this fucking apartment?"

"We just want the best for you."

"Alright, that's it. I'll get a job. I've got your damn job right here. The four of us are going to make a movie. A machinima movie."

Silence across the hall. Vanity stunned just enough to wander thoughtlessly around a corner and get picked off from 100 feet away by his M29.

Red slammed the rest of the 7&7 on his desk, and spun around in his chair, looking at a puzzled Silenz.

Machinima. Short for "Machine Cinema", it was the latest gift of the cornucopia that is Moore's Law. Mix 25 years of ceaselessly increasing PC performance with the mind-bending sophistication of the latest videogame graphics engines. Shake, and pour into a box under your desk to make a tall glass of film making whoopass for the price of one week's pay.

Cost of a machinima set: \$0. Cost of union labor on that set: \$0.
Cost of a death-defying machinima stunt: \$0. Percentage of the
backend made by a machinima actor: 0%. Cost of the average
Hollywood production: \$60M.

Cost of a physically impossible machinima camera shot: \$0. Time
to completely change the camera shot and re-shoot the entire scene:
32 seconds. Cost of a digital high definition machinima camera: \$0.
Cost of a conventional commercial high definition digital video
camera: \$19,999.

Time to render a single high definition frame of machinima video:
30 milliseconds. Time to render the most complex frame of *Finding
Nemo*: days.

Cost of burning a digital cinema equipped theater-ready copy of a
feature-length machinima production onto a DVD-R: \$0.89. Cost of
manufacturing a theater-ready 35mm print of a conventional movie:
\$1,700.

Size of the engine, graphical assets and audio to render an entire
machinima feature in 1280 x 720 resolution: 600MB. Cost of
distributing that machinima feature over Bit Torrent: \$0.

Opportunity to run a four-person, all-digital studio, production,
distribution, exhibition, home video and video-on-demand empire with
an efficiency and speed even Pixar and Disney couldn't come close to
matching: priceless.

All good news. Just one problem. It had yet to be done with
noteworthy commercial success.

In 2000 Branit and Hunt's *405* proved that a couple of guys with
nothing but story-telling skill, a video camera, two fast PCs and three

months of late nights could release a wildly popular short film
combining standard video and state-of-the-art digital effects. 11 days
later they landed a deal with CAA.

But, at the time, pure machinima--producing the entire film on a
PC in real time--was in its infancy. Genre-defining shorts like Ill Clan's
Apartment Huntin' had just begun to build on the gaming-as-cinema
efforts of the Quake-done-Quick community and their stylized
recordings of record-breaking runs through the popular first person
shooter.

Although increasingly sophisticated efforts by Strange Company,
Fountainhead and the game companies themselves moved the medium
forward, machinima failed to establish itself beyond the
"machinisiseurs".

Then came Rooster Teeth's *Blood Gulch Chronicles*. Set in the
universe of XBOX top-seller *Halo* and starring the memorable Red vs.
Blue conflict, the 22 serialized episodes pulled down half a million
viewers a week. No marketing. No PR. No junket. No mutual
admiration society interviews with Couric or Leno. Cost of production:
three XBOXes in a multiplayer config, two controlling the characters, a
third acting as camera.

It was good. Good for the filmmakers that had jumped to
machinima after years of frustration in the farm leagues of the
independent film circuit. Good for three column-inches from the
coolhunters at *FHM*, *Rolling Stone* and *Wired*. Good for the gaming
community.

But, it was no *Blair Witch*. No *Memento*. It wasn't Blue Sky's
Bunny. It wasn't even Shaded Box's *Little Red Plane*. And, it

certainly was no *Toy Story*, patron saint of all things digital. Proof that bits could be compelling. Compelling enough to make money. Lots of money.

No, Machinima wasn't there yet, but you could see it from here. To master practitioners like Burns, Marino and Kang there was only one question left: Who was going to be their generation's Lasseter? The guy with the will power, the vision, to prove what they all knew was possible.

Red wanted to be that guy. Red *needed* to be that guy.

Vanity and Bunraku had come around the corner and were standing in the doorway of Red's room, looking at him and Silenz.

"Alright. You got some 'splainin' to do?" Vanity first to shoot.

"Bite me. You know it's what I've wanted all along."

"Sure. But through the system, with an agent, a studio and, oh, I don't know, *real* actors!"

"I've been working on something."

"Well? Let's have it then," Bunraku getting interested.

"No!" Vanity wagging a finger in Bunraku's face. "Do not encourage this. We're *not* doing this. Exactly one of three things is going to happen. We'll run out of gas halfway through and wind up hating each other. We'll get it done, and realize we're not the auteurs we thought we were, and wind up hating each other. Or we'll get it done, and against astronomical fucking odds it'll be decent, and we won't be able to deal with it, and wind up hating each other. Anybody see a pattern?"

"Didn't you forget one?"

"Odds are against it. Why try?"

"Do, or do not. There is no try."

"OK, then. I choose do not."

"Alright, Leia, slow down," Bunraku trying to prevent the escalation. "Why not let the boy say his peace. Then you can have make-up sex later."

"Thank you, sir," said Red.

"Fine. Let's get this over with. I've got sex to refuse you. This better not be some lame Sci-Fi shit like everything else."

"Don't worry. It's an adaptation of Sherlock Holmes."

"Oh, that's a winner. What is that? Couldn't think of anything else, so you picked the most well-known idea no longer under copyright?"

"Well, it is, but we're going to do it Film Noir style. Black & white, femme fatale, dialog from the 40's..."

"Perfect. Tie two rocks together. They'll float better."

"Come on, V, nothing wrong with Noir. Lauren Bacall...Rita Hayworth...Lana Turner. She was such a doll in *Postman Always Rings Twice*," interjected Bunraku.

"And the characters are marionettes," said Red.

"Perfect! Three rocks. You buying in volume?"

"No, V, it's great for machinima. We can get away with not having perfect human likeness. And, we can do sets, camera angles

and moves real marionettes can't. Imagine Holmes fighting in bullet time while on marionette strings."

"Oh, come on. You're just pandering to Bunraku."

"Hey, don't knock it. God knows I don't get enough of that." After a moment of reflection, he added "V, you're gonna kill me, but I see where Red's going with this."

"Bunraku, honey, don't you see? There's no story in this story. I don't care how Noir you go, or how cute the marionettes are, it's a Sherlock Holmes retread."

Red jumped on the opening. "There is one more thing. Occasionally we zoom out from the marionettes to the puppeteers," he was using both hands to show the camera movement. "They are the *real* characters and story. Rehearsing in a small town theater, trying to save their building from being replaced with a Cineplex by putting on one final show of *A Scandal in Bohemia*. There's Nigel, the uptight artistic director. Stella, who has greater artistic aspiration than talent, and Carson, a puppeteer who does comic relief. Think *MST3K* meets *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* all wrapped in *Two Weeks Notice*. We'll call it *Shlock*."

"Yeah, that sounds about right. So, tell me, Mr. DeMille, how does this craptacular end?" Vanity still not having any of it.

"Mysterious stranger shows up just when things look the worst. Takes over the production, performs and voices Holmes and puts butts in seats. Winds up saving the theater. Turns out he's President of the company that was going to replace the theater with a Cineplex."

"Convenient."

"So, let me get this straight. You want the four of us to do a full-length machinima feature about a marionette production of a Film Noir adaptation of Sherlock Holmes in a small town puppet theater fighting for survival, with three main characters that critique the play and each other, and are finally saved by a corporate stooge turned do-gooder? That pretty much it?" Bunraku trying to take it all in.

"Yes."

"Red, you know I love you, but that's too ambitious." Even Bunraku's optimism had its limits.

"Which is why we're going to do it Open Source."

The three standing around him, lacking a retort.

Bunraku the first to re-engage. "Not sure that's a good idea. We want something that's ours, not an unholy mess of creative control."

"We open up only the engine mods, the models and the sets, but not the screenplay and the final cut. We give our engine, models and sets back to the community, get contributions in return, but maintain copyright over the final product."

"So, that means..."

"...we've got to do four marionette characters: Holmes, Watson, the King of Bohemia and Irene Adler. Four people characters: Nigel, Stella, Carson and the Stranger. And three sets: the inside of the puppet theater, Baker Street, and Briony Lodge on Serpentine Avenue. Creating those, and the storyboards to begin with, would be you and V. Silenz would do audio engineering and music composition. We all do voices. We'll shoot in real time using the engine once we got all

the assets. Figure six months soup to nuts if we can all put in 20 hours a week.”

“Are you listening to yourself?” Shaking her head, counting off on her fingers. “We have never worked together seriously. We have never worked on machinima. And only Bunraku has ever worked on a full-length feature. Could we be *less* qualified?”

“Fortune favors the brave.”

“Yeah, yeah. Carpe diem. I know, I know. Just remember, he dies at the end of that movie. We are *not* ready for this.”

“Wait!” Making his last stand. “This is what you guys hound me to do. This is what we bullshit about when there’s no risk of having to actually do it. This is what we are going to do. The screenplay is half done. The timing is right.” Surveying the three one last time. “If we can’t live with each other when we come out the other side, then let’s find out right fucking now.”

Vanity looking down at the carpet, biting her lips. Arms crossed. No response.

“I’m in,” everyone looking at Silenz suddenly weighing in for the first time. “We either let Red take a run at this or we have to throw him out of the apartment, and then I don’t have anybody to abuse. But, one condition. You have to bring in someone to do lighting and camera if you’re going to be serious. I know a punter from the community theater days. See him at LAN parties. He’ll understand what you’re trying to do. Name’s photon.”

“Silenz, you big lug,” Red violating Silenz’ airspace by throwing an arm around his shoulder and patting his beard. “I’ll be your multiplayer bitch anytime.”

“Back off, wanker. Before I change my mind.”

“Oh, V, look at our two boys. They’re insane, but I feel obliged. It’s so Horatio Alger. Young artistes. The impossible dream. Makes me want to senselessly pour my best creative instincts down the drain and ruin my life for the next six months. But, hell, it’s either this or another CAA pretty boy. At least you’re the devils I know.”

“You’re a dear,” the grateful reply from Red.

“Oh, it gets better, son. I’m going to hook us up with the most important asset for budding *machinimateurs*.”

“Harvey Weinstein’s rolodex?”

“No, an engine guy. I’m going to get you a guy at Valve in Seattle. We do work with them sometimes. He’s not a big shot, but he knows the engine. His handle is Quaternity,” waving them in with outstretched hands, “go ahead. Tell me how much you love me?”

“More than I’m comfortable to admit in front of V.” Red blew Bunraku a kiss, then turned to look at Vanity. Trying to find her eyes. Willing her to take the leap. “Are you with us?”

“Gentlemen, would you excuse us.”

Ten minutes later Vanity was sitting in front of Red’s screenplay. All 62 pages of it. The cursor was blinking indifferently, waiting for her to start reading.

OPEN

Black screen with title.

V.O., WATSON

To Sherlock Holmes she is always THE woman. In his eyes she eclipses the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. The softer passions were admirable things for the observer--excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions was a distracting factor. And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory.

[ONE CONTINUOUS TAKE...TO FIRST DIALOG]

FADE IN, VERY TIGHT, ON

EXT, BAKER STREET, NIGHT

Watson walking. The shot is so tight on the rotund, mustachioed face of the marionette that we hardly see anything around him (this way we avoid having to build huge models). Everything is in B&W. Dramatic light and shadow on the marionette's face.

V.O., WATSON

I had seen little of Holmes lately. My marriage had drifted us away from each other. My own complete happiness was sufficient to absorb all my attention, while Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition.

START ZOOMING OUT SLOWLY

Recently, however, I was returning from a journey to a patient, when my way led me through Baker Street.

A smile of recognition comes across the marionette's face (!) before we

CONTINUE TO ZOOM OUT

EXT, 221B, NIGHT

Watson is standing in front of 221B. In Noir'ish style it's dark and raining. The cobblestone is wet. There's a light on in Holmes' room, and a figure is pacing behind curtains. In an anachronism, a car drives buy noisily. A cell phone rings off-camera.

Pan up the building to the roof and...

DISSOLVE

INT, 221B, NIGHT

...through the roof into Holmes' room where we see Holmes pacing. The marionette's face has a vague Bogart resemblance, and instead of turn-of-the-century-English he's wearing the dark suite and tie of Noir, a Dearstalker the visual tie to Holmes.

Put up the directing and acting credits while we pan around the room to see mementos from his previous adventures.

When done with credits, pan out of the room, catching Watson coming up the stairs. Re-enter Holmes' room behind Watson as he greets Holmes.

TWO-SHOTS

HOLMES

Wedlock suits you. I think, Watson, that you have put on seven and a half pounds since I saw you.

WATSON

Seven!

HOLMES

Indeed, I should have thought a little more...

The Watson Marionette slumps. The puppeteer is no longer manipulating it. We hear a slightly

effeminate voice off-camera interrupting the Holmes line dialogue..

CARSON (OFF CAMERA)

That's just terrible. Do you know how many kids are going to have body image issues when they hear that?

ZOOM OUT WITH MOTION BLUR, GO INTO COLOR

INT, PUPPET THEATER

The camera has zoomed out of Holmes' room, and far enough out to see that Baker Street is just a set in a puppet theater. But this isn't just any kind of puppet theater. The set is huge. 60 foot wide stage, 18 foot tall buildings and a puppeteers' bridge 30 feet off the ground. There's mist and rain. Marionettes on the street are moving by themselves. Stella is standing on the corner of the set to show scale. Hold two beats for audience to take in scene, then..

PAN UP WITH MOTION BLUR AND ZOOM IN ON

INT, PUPPETEERS BRIDGE OF THEATER

We see Nigel and Carson from above, with the Baker Street set below. They're standing on the bridge looking at each other, now that Carson has interrupted the rehearsal.

CARSON

I'm not sure that's a responsible thing for us to be doing. You always saying

we're the artistic pillars of the community.

NIGEL

Carson, it's just a play. We're showing Holmes' powers of observation.

CARSON

Would you want me coming in here and asking you if you had put on seven pounds? And don't think I didn't notice you bringing in that éclair this morning.

NIGEL

I'm not going to dignify that with a response. Can we please get back to rehearsal?

Carson doesn't respond. In a huff he returns to action.

ZOOM BACK DOWN WITH MOTION BLUR, GO INTO **B&W**

INT, 221B BAKER STREET

Marionettes pick up where they left off.

HOLMES

Indeed, I should have thought a little more. And practicing medicine again, I observe. You did not tell me that you intended to return to it.

WATSON

Then, how do you know?

HOLMES

I see it, I deduce it. If a gentleman walks into my rooms smelling of iodoform, with a black mark of nitrate of silver upon his right forefinger, I must be dull, indeed, if I do not pronounce him to be an active member of the medical profession.

WATSON

When I hear you give your reasons, the thing always appears to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though I am baffled until you explain your process. And yet I believe that my eyes are as good as yours.

HOLMES

Quite so.

Holmes lights a cigarette, and throws himself down into an armchair. In Noir homage, we see him in harsh light and shadow, fingering the cigarette like Bogart with one hand and touching a replica of the Maltese Falcon with the other.

WIDE SHOT OF ROOM, WATSON LEFT, HOLMES RIGHT

HOLMES

You see, but you do not observe. For example, you have frequently seen the

steps which lead up from the hall to this room.

WATSON

Frequently.

WATSON

How often?

WATSON

Well, some hundreds of times.

HOLMES

Then how many are there?

WATSON

How many? I don't know.

HOLMES

Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.

The Watson Marionette slumps. Carson's voice off-camera is mockingly imitating the last Holmes line..

CARSON (OFF CAMERA)

"I know there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed." What a snob..

ZOOM OUT WITH MOTION BLUR, GO INTO **COLOR**

PAN UP WITH MOTION BLUR AND ZOOM IN ON

INT, PUPPETEERS BRIDGE OF THEATER

CARSON

...I mean, really. Where does he get off? Poor Watson. He must feel like Jan Brady. 'Marcia, Marcia, Marcia.'

NIGEL

Carson!

CARSON

What? Maybe we could do a kinder, gentler Holmes.

NIGEL

Or maybe we could do it the way it was written. ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CARSON

Oh, alright.

Making to get back to rehearsal, then adding, just as a side note..

CARSON

By the way, Nigel, do your arms ever get tired with these large marionettes?

NIGEL

No.

CARSON

Hmmm. Me neither. Why is that?

NIGEL

Plastics!

CARSON

Oh. Right.

ZOOM BACK DOWN WITH MOTION BLUR, GO INTO **B&W**

INT, 221B BAKER STREET

Marionettes pick up where they left off.

Vanity leaned forward in the chair, skipped a few scenes and continued to read.

LONG SHOT

EXT, SERPENTINE AVENUE, FRONT OF BRIONY LODGE, NIGHT
Lamps are lit. Streets are still wet. Holmes
(disguised as a clergyman) and Watson are loitering
near the house. There's a hooligan sitting on a
curb and a copper wandering with a nightstick.

CLOSE-UP, HOLMES AND WATSON WALKING

HOLMES

Now the question is, Where are we to find
the photograph?

WATSON

Where, indeed?

HOLMES

She knows that the King is capable of
having her waylaid and searched. Two
attempts of the sort have already been
made. We may take it, then, that she does
not carry it about with her.

WATSON

Where, then?

HOLMES

Her banker or her lawyer. But I am
inclined to think neither. Women are
secretive, and they like to do their own
secreting..

The Watson Marionette collapses and we hear
snickering from above..

ZOOM OUT AND UP, GO INTO **COLOR**

PAN UP WITH MOTION BLUR AND ZOOM IN ON

INT, PUPPETEER BRIDGE OF THEATER

We see Nigel and Carson on the bridge from above with the Serpentine Ave and Briony Lodge set below. Carson is snickering, looking at Nigel...

CARSON

Heh. You said 'secreting'.

NIGEL

I know what I said.

CARSON

That's OK. Happens to all of us.

Nigel

Carson!

Carson

Yes, Nigel.

ZOOM BACK DOWN, GO BACK INTO **B&W**

EXT, STAIRS OF BRIONY LODGE

Marionettes pick up where they left off.

HOLMES

Her banker or her lawyer. But I am inclined to think neither. Women are secretive, and they like to do their own

secreting. It must be where she can lay her hands upon it. It must be in her house.

WATSON

But it has twice been burgled.

HOLMES

Pshaw! They did not know how to look.

WATSON

But how will you look?

HOLMES

I will not look.

WATSON

What then?

HOLMES

I will get her to show me.

WATSON

But she will refuse.

They stop walking. Holmes turns to Watson.

CLOSE-UP ON HOLMES

HOLMES

She will not be able to.

Holmes turns toward the sound of a carriage.

HOLMES

I hear the rumble of wheels. It is her carriage.

Turning back to Watson, hands on his shoulders

HOLMES

Now, carry out my orders to the letter.

WIDE SHOT

A gleaming carriage with sidelights comes around the corner and pulls up in front of her house.

CLOSE UP

EXT, SIDE OF ADLER'S CARRIAGE

Adler gets out (imitate Rose getting out of the car and looking out from under her hat in *Titanic*). She is the spitting image of Ava Gardner.

As she gets out, the hooligan comes up to snatch her purse. Copper lunges with nightstick. Holmes rushes to assist. Adler struggles to escape the melee.

ENTER BULLET TIME

The marionettes' strings drop. Holmes protects Adler, helps the copper, lands a few good ones on the hooligan, then takes a hard hit and falls.

EXIT BULLET TIME

The hooligan rushes off. Copper collects himself and gets up to check on Holmes.

PAN FROM THE LYING HOLMES UP THE STAIRS

EXT, STAIRS OF BRIONY LODGE, NIGHT

Adler is standing there in all her Noir-ish splendor with a spotlight on her, holding a silky wrap in one hand and a smoking cigarette in the other (when did she have time light that!?).

IRENE ADLER

Is the gentleman much hurt?

ZOOM OUT AND UP, GO INTO **COLOR**

PAN UP WITH MOTION BLUR AND ZOOM IN ON

INT, PUPPETEER BRIDGE OF THEATER

Stella has joined Nigel and Carson (she is Irene). Nigel, exasperated, is shrugging his shoulders and looking at Stella (think *Streetcar Named Desire* for the next line)...

NIGEL

Stella!!!

STELLA

What!?

NIGEL

This is the most important line in the production. It is the first time Irene acknowledges Holmes. I need passion here, yet apathy. I need excitement, yet ordinary. I need desperate longing for him to be alright, with a carelessness attitude that says my cigarette is more important than the man on the street. Do you think you can do that?

Stella is clearly dejected, and fires back.

STELLA

Well, if you knew a little more about what you wanted maybe we would still be together.

NIGEL

This has nothing to do with that. I have told you a hundred times, if you want to make it big in community theater, it starts here.

STELLA

Oh, you're impossible. I have artistic vision, too, you know.

Carson, standing between the two, plays peacemaker.

CARSON

It's alright Stella. There you go. You can do it. Just find your inner Irene.

Looking at Nigel now.

CARSON

Nigel, you need to be more gentle with Stella. She doesn't have your experience.

NIGEL

I was the understudy for the role of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* at the Spartanburg volunteer repertory theater six years ago.

CARSON

Yes, Nigel. I know. You've told us.

And energetically rallying the little team.

CARSON

OK, everyone. Let's try again.

ZOOM BACK DOWN, GO BACK INTO **B&W**

EXT, STAIRS OF BRIONY LODGE

Marionettes pick up where they left off.

Vanity let go of the mouse, pushed back the chair, stretched out her legs and stared at the ceiling, Angel and Demon vigorously advocating their cases on each shoulder.

“Red?” Walking into his room without invitation a while later. Turning at the desk. Running her hand along the monitor before looking at him. Holding it for two beats.

“I’m in.”

Chapter 4: Pre-Production

“To be the first—that is the idea. To do something, say something, see something, before anybody else—these are the things that confer pleasure compared with other pleasures are tame and commonplace, other ecstasies cheap and trivial. Lifetimes of ecstasy crowded into a single moment.”

Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*

Hemingway called the empty page the white bull. In the early days, the apartment was the scene of a mid-size stampede.

Vanity was worried. Red’s script called for a complex look of realistic--yet whimsical--1900’s England with a twist of 1940’s LA. It had her struggling to find a beginning. She longed to be surrounded by the warm embrace of a chaos of art design and storyboard sketches, but there were none. Instead, she was staring at two entirely blank walls, cleared for what would be hundreds of pages of art direction and storyboards. Three hundred square feet of creative inspiration yet to arrive.

For Bunraku things were only slightly different. Sketching simple, expressive puppets--even marionettes fusing the two visual languages of staid Sherlockian mystery and edgy Film Noir angst--was coming as natural as ever. In organization bordering on the obsessive, he had filed his prodigious output in folders. His screen, however, was blank. Unable to capture the creativity of his pencil sketches in zeroes and ones, his 3D modeling had yielded nothing but trite derivatives of gaming character design stereotypes. Bad as that was he knew it would only get worse. Creating believable marionette animations suddenly seemed much more daunting than it had just a few days earlier.

Photon, convinced by Silenz to join the undertaking, had moved himself and his rig into the dining room--to the extent that the anno 1978 table with the two chairs stuck between the kitchen bar and the hallway deserved the moniker. He had arrived with freshman-like enthusiasm. Ideas stacked in his head. Ready to do his part in legitimizing machinima. But, countless exercises with the lighting engine on shape primitives and generic 3D characters yielded no inspired breakthroughs. His effort soon degraded into an endless string of Internet searches started in the name of research only to turn into lazy sojourns on inexorable currents of links, each hop exponentially farther removed from the original goal than the last. They all ended, hours later, with no results. Entire meals of empty calories from the digital all-you-can-eat buffet.

Silenz was suffering downstream from the decidedly quiet creative factories elsewhere in the apartment. Without art direction, set design, characters or camera and lighting, he was, quite literally, working in the dark.

Crowded as the apartment was, their efforts were intensely solitary. Sets were built, torn down and re-built. Marionettes were sketched, modeled and scrutinized, then scrapped in resignation. Musical themes were constructed and dismissed as unoriginal, only to be replaced by worse offenders. Intricately designed camera movements suffered from calling too much attention to themselves.

Each fighting a lonely battle between discovery and resignation.

"It's not like we're not working hard enough. Last week none of us did anything other than work and spend time on this, but we don't have a good start," Vanity said to Red. The new day was four rejected sketches old. She needed to escape the empty walls of her room and was glad to find Red still working, the screenplay enjoying better momentum than the rest of their efforts.

"It'll come. We've all been there. This is how it starts."

"Sure. But it's hard with no net. Nobody but us. Nobody to blame."

He looked at her silently. Sitting there on his bed, hands on the edge, arms stiffly holding up a tired frame, head down, staring at the ground, the girl didn't realize how much talent she was carrying around.

"Sit with me for a second," he said.

She looked at him. Too tired to reject the offer, she walked over to his chair and folded her compact frame into his, bare legs in boxer shorts dangling over one side, head tucked into his shoulder. She let

her hair down, ran her fingers through it, and let it fall over his arm. A long, slow exhale trying to banish hours of frustration.

His hands found his favorite places. He was content to wait for her to start talking again.

"You know what worries me?"

"What?"

"We have no client. We made no commitments. We're not getting paid. What if it's too easy to quit?"

He stayed silent, not wanting to engage her line of thinking. She did not interrupt his silence, so he took a new direction.

"Do you believe it will happen?"

"It's not that simple."

"Answer the question."

She knew what he wanted to hear. He knew she was hedging.

"I think it's a long shot."

"I didn't ask what you thought. I asked what you believed."

"And I'm telling you I can believe all I want, the sketches ain't gonna make themselves brilliant."

"True. But what if that very thought was standing in the way of you making them brilliant."

She sat up in his lap and looked at him.

"I love you, honey, and I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I gotta get back to this."

"Not yet. Lesson isn't over."

"Oh, really? What are you teaching?"

"Not me. You."

She gave him a confused look.

"Why did you almost not move in here?"

"What?"

"Simple question. Why did you almost not move in here?"

"Oh, no! We're not doing that again. I'm tired enough I might start asking myself again. You wouldn't like the answer."

"That's not true. Now, tell me, why did you almost not move in here?"

"Because..." searching for a safe answer.

"...because you spent a lot of time wondering how you and I might fail."

"That's not fair."

"I think it is."

Silence.

"You spent a lot of time wondering how we might fail, but you're here anyway. You can't promise me that we'll be together, and I won't ask you to. The same way I can't promise you that we'll succeed with this. Just remember that trying not to fail, and believing something's possible is a zero sum game you already know how to win. You'll see. It'll come together."

She wanted to reply. Wanted to tell him that it was too simple. Touching, but too simple. She held back, closing her eyes, letting her mind go over what he had said.

When they kissed, she tried to gather for herself a little of the confidence he had in such abundance. She wanted to believe. Maybe this time it would be enough. For her. For them. For this project.

She fell asleep in his arms.

Things turned around in the fourth week. But, the breakthrough didn't originate in their apartment. Instead, it had come from Seattle.

After Bunraku's energetic pitch to join them, Quaternity had busied himself with the technology of the *Half Life 2* engine. Like a digital grease monkey, he had spent his evenings under the hood making mods.

What emerged from his garage was a shiny, beautiful beast of machinima power.

He had begun by tweaking the lighting model to do justice to the subtle reflectivity and glare of wet cobble stone streets, windows, oil painted wooden marionette faces, and silk costumes. High dynamic range computations gave him the power to do with light and reflection in real time what had first broken ground in Paul Debevec's SIGGRAPH '99 batch-rendered computer graphics short film *Fiat Lux*.

As with all craftsmen, his early success drove Quaternity to aim higher. He had gone to work on the engine's camera effects. The aesthetic of a camera's depth of field is so familiar to movie audiences

that it is conspicuous only by its absence. It is the infinite depth of field of real-time 3D graphics that betrays the virtual from the reality. He knew he could make a breakthrough, but instead of the awkward approximation of volumetric fogging, he took the road less traveled, writing a new pixel shader to specify the virtual camera's focal distance and depth of field. By allowing his team to keep certain elements of a scene in focus, while softening the focus of others, he had not only eliminated a threat to the viewer's suspension of disbelief, but also made available an important story telling technique.

He hadn't planned to make further modifications. That was until he was on the phone with Bunraku very late--or had it been early--one night, and got caught in a deep inner loop of Bunraku extolling the virtues of marionette construction and manipulation. While Bunraku was going on about the artistry and training of puppeteers who spent decades perfecting the mastery of an art form with centuries of history, the conversation suddenly started to sound to Quaternity like one of the more interesting physics problem he had ever faced. At the intersection of art and science, each intrigued by a different side of the same coin, the two had been on the phone for hours before they hung up. Quaternity had started immediately on what would become his most dramatic contribution.

He constructed, and virtually weighted the test marionette's body parts and joints, meticulously positioned the eight control points of the hands, knees, head and back and virtually attached them to the right locations of a simulated "airplane" style marionette control bar via computer-modeled strings. An inexpensive, glove-based game controller gave him the ability to manage six degrees of freedom--X,

Y, Z, yaw, pitch and roll--in one device. The whole thing was a near perfect simulation of the human hand manipulating the marionette's control bar.

Using his glove controller he subjected the virtual marionette to the engine's simulated physics and inverse kinematics. The early tests were predictably awkward, but after some tuning of the marionette's construction, the location of the control points, and the alignment of the strings and the control bar, Quaternity was able to achieve a faithful rendition of the classic marionette movements, even able to walk his character easily up a flight of stairs.

The entire scheme made the rag doll physics of recent shooters look like embarrassing 80's era side-scrolling animation. Most spectacularly, it was done in real-time. No hand-animation would be necessary for the marionettes.

Intellectually satisfying and technically sophisticated as Quaternity's work had been, the visual aesthetics of his new engine were his biggest rewards. He had delivered the foundation for dramatic locales and characters in their entire Film Noir splendor. Twenty-first century technology in the service of a 1940's twist on a Nineteenth century world.

It would surprise and captivate gamers and non-gamers alike.

Back in the apartment, it was as though Quaternity had unshackled Bunraku. Able to take his designs for a virtual walk under the beautiful new lighting and shadows in real time, Bunraku feverishly finished the Holmes and Adler marionettes in the first sleepless 32 hours after he got Quaternity's new engine. With simple,

expressive lines hewn from large polygon counts and bathed in sumptuous texture maps, he had created stars for the team's virtual camera to love.

It was a matter of creative dominos after that. Vanity used the tone set by Bunraku, and the possibilities of Quaternity's engine, to finish the first version of the Serpentine Avenue set.

Photon, finally able to work with refined characters and sets, used the engine's new functionality to do less with the camera while achieving better visual results.

Even Silenz's score had caught the muse. The decorum of classical violins and ethereal choruses for Holmes' theme. The intrigue of lazy strings and saxophones in Irene Adler's theme. And the urgency of staccato drums, horns and intense violins to complete the Film Noir homage. An understated companion for Bunraku's characters and Vanity's sets, as seen through Photon's camera.

Huddled not in their rooms, but around Photon's rig, they were working together, melding the pieces into their first screen test. It was a mere 14 seconds, but they would always remember it as their "Watson, come here, I need you..." moment.

Chapter 5: Hello World

"Virtual actors don't demand wages, just processing power."

@LLmixEdUp, VERC Collective

As with pictures of newborns, it is Internet tradition to display the results of your latest project--be it an accurate scale model of the Millennium Falcon in your backyard, a square block of downtown Manhattan executed in Legos, or video of lighting your barbecue on fire with liquid oxygen--on your personal web site.

The pre-production of *Shlock* had reached this all-hallowed point, and the team began to put their wares in front of the public at the far end of this infinite virtual flea market in the hope of building a community around it.

Running completely counter to the basic instincts of Hollywood secrecy, business school principals of competitive advantage, and the American dream of ownership, they put the source code of their engine modifications, their art direction sketches, pictures and source files of their 3D marionette designs and sets online. They wrapped it all into a spare website and added a manifesto on why, and how, they were going to do a feature-length Machinima movie under the terms of Open Source.

The *piece de resistance* was their first twenty-two second screen test. Output from the HL2 engine in 1280x720 16:9 full-screen anti-aliased frames at a standard motion picture rate of 24 frames per second, post-produced in Adobe Premiere to soften and slightly scratch the black and white images, and then encoded in 720p Windows Media 9 High Definition video, it was seventeen megabytes of beautiful, unadulterated geekery.

In homage to *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*, Weinberger's book about society and the Internet, and to the disruptive, but inclusive, principals of their creative approach, they called themselves "Loosely Joined Studios".

A few e-mails to their friends in the Machinima community, and their debut was off to the quietest of starts.

“For the scene where Watson tosses the smoke grenade into Briony Lodge, should we cut away the roof and shoot from above, or from behind Watson with the camera following the smoke into the room?” asked Vanity idly later that evening as she tinkered on a storyboard.

“I say start from behind Watson, but don’t follow the smoke. That way you don’t give away Irene running for the picture, or Holmes jumping out of the window,” answered Bunraku, lying on her bed staring at the ceiling.

Vanity nodded.

A few minutes of listless sketching followed.

“Pretending your mind’s on the film, eh?” prodded Bunraku.

“Pretty much.”

“But it’s not.”

She turned around, her face an exaggerated mope.

“Not so much.”

“You really want to run into Silenz’s room, throw him off his chair and hit reload on the site stats every three seconds, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“That is so Sally ‘You like me, you really like me’ Fields of you.”

“Pot calling the kettle black, *n’est pas?*”

“I think not! I can lie here perfectly calm while humanity walks past our creative guts laid bare on the most public of stages. Their disdain or adulation is nothing compared to my gain having been a part of the creative process.” Trying to keep a straight face.

“Give it up. You’re the Sally Field’iest of all.”

“Oh, it’s true. But my secret is safe with you, *non?*” Sharing a conspiratorial smile.

“But, of course! Us girls have to...”

“He-llo!” The outburst from Silenz’s room clearly meant for the entire apartment. “We’ve got liftoff. Looks like we caught somebody’s interest.”

With the team looking over Silenz’s shoulder, they discovered from their swelling site traffic statistics that their venture had been carried by a mod community newsgroup, was being discussed on several message boards, and had piqued the interest of tech blog kuro5hin.

Like a happening in the town square, the community was amassing. Drawn by the flame of something new. Drawn by the latest expansion in the art of the possible. And, as popularity bred more popularity, drawn simply by something that drew others.

Three days later Loosely Joined Studios had one mention on Slashdot, props from BoingBoing, 342 inbound links and 26,000 thousand hits.

More importantly, in validation of their community-oriented approach, they had their first model of the inside of Baker Street from a Doyle’ophile in Illinois, a new pixel shader for Irene Adler’s satin

dress from a CGI junky in Italy and an interesting interpretation of the Holmes marionette from a college student in Poland.

There was no turning back now.

Chapter 6: Interested Observers

"I do not regret one professional enemy I have made. Any actor who doesn't dare to make an enemy should get out of the business."

Bette Davis

Among the anonymous masses beating a path to Loosely Joined Studios' debut over the next month was Rick Berger, business development executive at New Line Cinema. His visit had left more than a fleeting impression on him.

"Have you seen it?" Asked Berger.

"Sure," the answer from Stéphane Garibault, Berger's right-hand man.

"Well?"

"One of a hundred like it that start every week. It's hobby-level."

"I think it's a little more than that. It's not just that they intend to do a full feature. Their community is starting to rally. Starting to scale."

"There's a thousand wanna-be screenwriters and directors rallying every day in LA. You don't see them making it. Do you really think it's that good?"

"Who knows? But it's evocative. That fucking screenshot of the Holmes marionette holding the Maltese Falcon is all over the 'net. The blogs are on fire about it. The marionettes...the machinima...doing it Open Source..."

"Oh, please! The Blogs run hot and cold. They'll be on to the next thing before you know it."

"Did you see their dailies last week?"

"I'm not worried."

"I know it doesn't seem like a big deal, but I can see them improving every day. Reminds me of looking back on my old stuff."

"Fine. So they're improving. They have no support, no agent. Their script has no pre-bought awareness. Best case they'll go on the indie circuit and fade into obscurity among the avalanche of new stuff."

"I wouldn't be so sure. They've got a different kind of community behind them. This is not a bunch of creatives railing impotently against the establishment. This is the most vocal fucking minority you've ever seen. They really think they know how to route around us. They make this into another David vs. Goliath cause for Open Source, and you and I are going to be the next Gates trying to figure out what happened while we weren't looking. Stephan, I will NOT get Linuxed by these guys."

"If you're so worried, why not co-opt it? Make them an offer they can't refuse. Then put it into endless turnaround."

"You don't think that would give them a foothold they could leverage?"

"Not if you're the one providing the foothold, then pull it out from under them at the right time."

"You may be right. I just don't want to give them a leg up with a deal and an announcement, only to have the swarm go non-linear when we pull the rug out from underneath them. Hell hath no fury like Open Source scorned."

"So? Let them fury. Doesn't change the fact that they have to come through us to get out. And no out means no green."

"But they've shown over and over that it's not about the money. I'm all for co-opting them, but I will not go into a bait-and-switch unless I know what game I'm playing."

"How about beating them at their own game? Their models, characters and engine are open. Why not put ten of our guys and a good screenwriter on it, and release before they do?"

"I know what you're saying, but I don't like it. It's not just that I can't take ten guys off our stuff. It feels very reactive. Like *Antz* and *Bug's Life*. They'll make a mockery out of it the day we put it out."

"Only two things you can do then. Stop worrying, or start making them a deal."

"You're right. Time to make a deal."

"They won't know what hit 'em."

From: rick.berger@newline.com
To: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
Subj: meet

Would prefer to meet with agent. Gives you best representation. But that's up to you. Can you come to Beverly Hills to meet?

Rick

From: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
To: rick.berger@newline.com
Subj: Re: meet
Date:

No agent, but glad to meet. Where? When?

Red
Principal
Loosely Joined Studios

-----Original Message-----
From: rick.berger@newline.com
To: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
Subj: meet
Date:

Would like to meet. You guys have an agent?

Rick Berger
Business Development
New Line Cinema

* * *

Returning from the eagerly anticipated meeting at New Line, Vanity's abrupt entry into the apartment jolted Photon upright in front of his rig on the dining room table and drew Bunraku and Silenz out of their rooms.

"You can keep saying the words, but you are not even convincing yourself." Unconcealed indictment in Vanity's tone. The attack directed at a conversational partner not yet in the room. She walked over to the sliding glass door and stood, arms crossed, staring out at the balcony as though the hibachi held the resolution.

Red, five steps behind in her jet wash, emerged at the door.

"I'm telling you we did the right thing."

"We? We didn't do anything!" Turning around, an accusing finger relentlessly stabbing in Red's direction. "You lost your ever-loving mind and made a bad fucking call...for all of us!"

"What the hell happened?" Bunraku eager to contain the tempest, if not to a teapot, at least to the apartment.

"Insanity boy over here turned them down."

"He did what?" Bunraku in disbelief.

"Un huh. How do you like that shit?"

And just as all of them were expecting the room to explode into a verbal melee, silence descended upon them. Vanity had run out of accusations. Bunraku was too stunned to know where to start. Red knew they simply weren't ready to listen.

"Turned what down?" It seemed to Photon as good a place to start as any.

Barely able to get it out without choking on the memory, Vanity explained.

"\$200K advance against first rights."

Silence once more.

"Creative control?" If Bunraku wasn't going to ask, Photon would have to do it for him.

"No, that's the thing. They just want regular screenings with a production advisor, but were willing to leave us control."

"What else?" There must be something else.

"That's it. They love the style, the visuals, the hook of machinima. They think the intercut between the marionettes and the performers works well. They're even willing to bring in a script consultant if we want."

Slowly the room turned to Red, finally ready to hear him out.

"They are looking for all worldwide rights to all displays, with no commitment to a release and lock-in for our first three features and first rights for five years after that. It's worse than the worst music contract. Nothing but lock-in for them and endless non-commitment for us."

Bunraku was slowly emerging from his bewildered fog.

"Red, none of us are proven. We're not proven as a studio. Not even proven in machinima, much less the 'real' world. There is not a machinima team out there that has come close to a studio deal, and you turned down our first advance? Don't you think we should have at least talked about this?"

"Don't you see? Now we know we've really got something. We can't get distracted by a little money. Not with terms like that. Not now!"

"For those of us that have real jobs, \$200K is real money. Some of us might have been able to quit and just work on this project. *Your* fucking project."

"This is bigger than me. Every one of us is all the way in. We're making the thing we've wanted to make, and it's going well. We'll get a deal. We'll get a deal that doesn't lock us in with no value in return."

"You just turned down the studio that did Lord of the fucking Rings. People that have more Hollywood in the tassels of their fucking loafers than the six of us have put together. Who *exactly* do you think you are going to do a deal with after that?" The calmer Red got, the more incensed Vanity became.

"V, this is a process. We need to stay patient. This was not the right deal."

"Whether this was the right deal or not isn't the point. You cannot make decisions for the whole team by yourself. You just can't. If they liked the concept that much, let's go back with a counter proposal."

"No, Bunraku, you don't get it. Red gave them an unequivocal 'no' and walked out."

The meeting with the two Loosely Joined Studios' principals had baffled even the seasoned Berger, who was relaying the Sportscenter version of the confab to Garibault.

"Unbelievable, I tell you."

"What the hell do they think they're doing? They're either completely naive, or they're as dangerous as you think."

"And after meeting them I couldn't tell you which it is. One thing I do know. These guys worry me. We need to know more."

"Well, you pretty much know who they are. The guy you met is a screenwriter with a couple of co-writer credits for third-rate TV stuff. The girl with him is a producer at Blur. And the other three we only know from their web site. Animator, audio producer and a part-time community theater lighting guy. Couldn't possibly be a more average background for LA."

"Any way to get closer to them without giving us away?"

"There's always a way."

"Find me something, and let's start keeping an eye on these guys"

"That's a lot of work for a bunch of twenty-somethings."

"It's peanuts compared to giving them a chance to succeed."

"We'll get on it."

Michael Carter had spent years trying to figure out how to get a meeting with a studio guy, but this wasn't exactly what he had had in mind. Some guy he knew telling him an exec wanted to know more about the team at Loosely Joined. Sure, he knew them, but why the mystery?

But, off-center as it was, there was no harm in talking. At least that's what he had told himself. So, there he sat in a breakfast place

in West Hollywood, wearing the green baseball cap, waiting for a guy he'd never met.

It wasn't more than a couple of minutes before the guy slid into the booth opposite him. A little younger, a little less good-looking, a little less well dressed, a little more French than he'd expected. But, who was he to say? The guy sitting across the table was a studio guy. Michael Carter was not.

"Michael Carter?"

"Yes. You are?"

"The right guy to be talking to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I heard you want to get more involved in the business."

"Sure, but maybe we could start with your name."

"In time."

"Look, I get it. I'm the new guy. You know a lot about me. I don't know anything about you. That's fine, but if I wanted to run lines from a bad 70's mob flick, I can do that at home. Let's remember that *you* wanted to talk to *me*."

"And you're here because *you* want to talk to *me*. Let's not kid ourselves. You know roughly who I am, and you want in at a studio. Well, you got it. So let's focus on how we're going to work together. The rest will come."

Carter was unimpressed, but not confident enough to push the issue.

"OK. We'll do it your way."

"Good choice."

"So, we're working together?"

"Sure. You know some people I'm interested in, and I know some people you're interested in. Ought to be some opportunities in that, wouldn't you say?"

"Who do you know?"

"Folks that can help you take the next step. People that have spent a decade doing the things you want to do. People that have done camera and lighting for movies that have done a billion plus globally, and are doing movies right now that'll make another billion. That about your size?"

"Sure," trying to be casual about it. Like it wasn't his first break.

"Great."

Carter realizing the studio guy was controlling the conversation. In no hurry to get to the real point. Waiting for Carter to ask what it was that he wanted of him. Carter trying to act dumb, stringing out the silence, but breaking down. Only one thing for him to say.

"And who can I help you with?"

"Yes, well, you know the guys over at Loosely Joined, right?"

"Sure." Hesitant. Waiting for the shoe to drop.

"Doing some quality stuff. Community getting pretty excited?"

"I guess. Did you want to talk to them?"

"No, just an interested observer. How's things going over there?"

"Fine. Their technology's pretty much in place. Screenplay almost done. Dailies are online. Probably another three months to finish."

"Nice. Got a production deal?"

"Not yet..." trailing off, leaving an opening.

"Really? Had an offer?"

"Yeah, but they turned it down."

"Interesting."

"Where are you going with this?"

"Like I said. Interested observer. Let me tell you a little about the business, Michael. Okay, if I call you Michael, right?" more rhetorical question. Not waiting for the answer. "Each movie is like a venture capital investment for us. You know about VC right? Except for us, the first two, three weeks of box office are make or break for the return on the entire thing, because that's what controls revenues in the other distribution windows. You follow me? Sure, the story, acting, camera have to be great, but marketing and competition during release are just as important, if not more so."

"I get it. But what does that have to do with Loosely Joined?"

"Suffice it to say we've got a CGI feature in the works, and we wouldn't want *Shlock* to have to go up against it." He had nothing of the kind in the works, but there was no way for Carter to know.

"So, you want them to hold off?"

"Oh, no, Michael. That would be anti-competitive." Then, seemingly off-topic, he added "By the way, have you ever been at WETA?"

"No." Of course he hadn't been to the DFX house in New Zealand.

"They do some great stuff there. I bet you'd be interested. Or maybe you're more the old school celluloid kind of guy. We could visit the soundstages in Burbank..." trailing off as if he was already thinking about who to introduce Carter to.

"Sure."

"I tell you what. Let's make sure that Loosely Joined isn't having too good a go of it. You know, with our feature in development. Let me see what you can do with that, and I'll be in touch."

Dropping a twenty to cover the bill, Stéphane Garibault departed without another word, leaving Michael Carter alone with half an English muffin and a hefty serving of treachery.

A week later, the following appeared among the daily updates at *Loosely Joined Studios'* web site:

Thursday, Feb 6th

Lost a day of work due to worm!

Bunraku and Photon's boxes were hit by a file-deleting derivative of SoBig.D overnight. We're running firewall and antivirus with latest definitions, but for some reason this one wasn't caught (we haven't heard of anybody else having caught this virus, which is weird).

We've lost all model designs and dailies since yesterday's web upload and NAS backup.

UPDATE (3pm): Looks like Vanity and Bunraku had been working with community member prague84 on some models yesterday and were able to recover all their work from his machine and the CVS check-in. MANY THANKS to prague84! We're about to re-do yesterday's dailies and will post again tonight.

The Gang

Carter had been approached for the meeting through the same intermediary Garibault had used last time. This time, however, Garibault wanted to meet at a Cineplex for a matinee.

Carter found Garibault in the back row of the darkened theater.

"Unfortunate thing happened at Loosely Joined last week," Garibault opened nonchalantly.

"That's how it is with viruses these days." Carter a little troubled at how easily he was sliding into the banter, but resigned to sleeping in the bed he had made.

"Odd that their variant didn't crop up elsewhere on the 'net. Almost like it was introduced from inside their LAN."

"Might have been somebody visiting them."

"That must have been it."

"How about your name at this point?"

"Why ruin a good thing with too much information, Michael? Besides, I wanted to chat a little bit about some opportunities for you. I made some arrangements at the Burbank soundstages. If you head over there tomorrow, you'll have a pass waiting. Ask for Roger when you get there. He's the DP on one of our big ones. He'll be expecting you, and if you behave yourself, he'll introduce you to the Gaffer and

the Camera Operator. You'll see stuff even Ain't-it-Cool-News hasn't told you about."

"Very good," Carter trying to remain cool.

"Enjoy it."

Both of them settling in to watch the movie. Carter not knowing whether to follow up. Choosing to let Garibault take the lead.

"Oh, you know, there is one thing I thought I'd ask you about, Michael."

"What's that?"

"I noticed their community managed to help them recover much of what was lost. Pretty resilient, those Open Source guys."

"I suppose so."

"You have to wonder if there isn't something that would hurt a little more. Something that the community couldn't help them with."

"There must be something."

"There must be."

"Could take some time, though."

"That so?" Garibault handed Carter the popcorn and left.

Chapter 7: Distribution

"The future is here. It's just not widely distributed yet."

William Gibson

Red and Silenz were standing on the balcony in the waning, smog-filtered daylight. They were each on their second. Red with Rum Punch that was punch in name only. Silenz with his favorite stout. In between pulls they were carrying out their grilling duty on the small hibachi hung over the corner of the railing.

The gloom that had descended on the apartment after the New Line incident was lifting, but there were still times when the balcony, small as it was, was a good place to be.

"We had a big row. It happens." Silenz shrugging off the conflict.

"Somehow I don't think V sees it that way." Red with a rueful smile.

"It's been two weeks."

"Just enough time to master her cold shoulder."

"That bad?" Silenz pretending he hadn't noticed.

"Oh, come on, we live together in 800 square feet. You know exactly how bad it is." Trying to make a good show of shrugging it off. Finishing off the rum.

"Bugger all you can do about it right now. Needs more time."

"Easy for you to say."

"Well, at least the film is going well. We're finishin' 'bout a minute a day. Last weekend we did three. Right now V might not be getting on with you, but she and Bunraku are doin' great."

"True. Probably only another six weeks to go, eh?"

"Probably."

"How's the site traffic?"

"Fine. Up another 20% a week since we started doing *Monday Morning Trailerback*."

"Yeah, community loves that."

"Sure does." Thoughtful sip from the beer. Then a cautious probe. "How's the distribution stuff?"

"Ah, shit. Come on. We talk about it five times a day. Can't we come out here and not deal with that for an hour?"

"Easy, Red. Just a question."

"Just a question to you, maybe."

"Look, I'm not on you like they are. Come, tell your frag mate all about it. You'll feel better. Really."

"Shit, I need another drink."

"Here, let me get that for ya." Silenz disappearing into the kitchen, and returning with the drink. Red accepting it with a nod.

"Well, you pretty much know how it is. The gaming sites and online mags are practically calling every day offering free distribution for the movie. That's great for publicity, but it don't make us any money. Couple of guys are willing to pay us for exclusive sneak peeks they'd put in their premium subscription areas, but that means we don't distribute on our site, and people couldn't get access without paying the sub. Community would get all over us for selling out."

Silenz just listening. Trying to let Red talk it out.

"We also have a couple of indie guys that are willing to buy it outright, but their numbers are in the mid five figures."

"Mid fives is nothin' to sneeze at."

"It is after I walked from low sixes."

"Still better than nothing."

"Only if you think there's a chance we'll get nothing."

"Do you think we'll get nothing?"

"No! Why the fuck would I think we'll get nothing. Do you think we'll get nothing?"

"If you say we'll get something, I believe you. Just asking."

"Stop asking."

"Consider it stopped." Another pull at the beer. Turning around, leaning on the railing. Looking out distantly over the carpools as though it was an oceanfront view. "So, what's your plan?"

"I've got one more idea."

* * *

* * *

Michael Carter had plenty of ideas on how to interfere with *Loosely Joined*, and every day he spent on the New Line soundstages, every ADP he met and every hand he shook made him increasingly willing to act on them.

The Hollywood career market that values ends over means had efficiently matched willing buyer to willing seller and this willing buyer was using a low-tech approach to do high-tech damage.

Defeating computer security falls into three camps: social engineering, technical wizardry and brute force cracking. Carter possessed neither the tools nor the skills to employ the latter two, leaving him little choice but to abuse his friendship with the team to get the job done.

When last at the apartment, he had been able to jump onto one of the team's machines already logged into the network console. It had taken him a mere three clicks of the mouse to punch a hole in the network's firewall, giving him a back door to exploit from another location at another time.

That time had come, and Michael Carter was making sure it would hurt. Disappointing the studio guy had become less tolerable than wrestling with the moral dilemma of betraying his friendships.

It had been a Hail Mary. The longest of shots. Red himself thought it so improbable he had to re-read the e-mail reply three times before believing it.

From: mark@hd.net
To: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
Subj: Re: tailor-made distribution opportunity

Alright. You're on. You come out, and I'll listen.

Mark

Fearing that any mention of the prospect might jinx his fingernail grasp of the opportunity, he had not told anyone in the apartment where he was really going: The Dallas headquarters of Mark Cuban's business empire.

30 minutes with the entrepreneur, Internet boom winner, Dallas Mavericks owner and HDTV zealot were now all that separated Red from the redemption of renewed opportunity, or the soul-crushing finality of failure.

Red was trying to keep his optimism in check, but as his taxi arrived at Cuban's office, any possibility of disappointment had been cast into his mental bit bucket. His ability to pitch an idea with abandon relied on burning the boats from what had come before at the shores of what lay ahead.

Cuban in jeans and polo shirt. Focused on running a business, not on looking sharp. Posture of a guy who became successful by building companies on sweat equity out of an apartment bedroom instead of relying on silver spoons and case studies. A guy who possibly felt more strongly about the nice towels he bought with his first profit than the \$1.9B he made off Google and Yang at the height of the bubble. Firm handshake. Pleasant smile. Knowing crinkle of don't-play-me-I-used-to-be-you in the corner of his eyes.

"First of all, Red, I need your real name," Cuban opened.

"Ben."

"Alright, Ben. You have thirty minutes."

With the briefest of introductions on how they used machinima, the nature of the deal Loosely Joined Studios sought from Cuban and the basics of *Shlock's* premise, Ben launched into the best 2 minutes of high def video they had put together so far.

When it was over, he turned to Cuban with gut churning anticipation, helplessly awaiting the verdict.

"You realize this is too niche, don't you?"

"No more so than HDNet."

"Except I've run half a dozen businesses and created jobs for thousands. Your entire team doesn't have a single lead creative credit between you. I checked."

"And you hadn't led a business before you started Micro Solutions. I checked."

"I helped real businesses put real products together so they could make real money. You are lashing together your best friends and a community of semi-talented independents and asking me to help make you successful."

"Only because it might help you be successful. You and Todd started 2929 Entertainment to integrate vertically: 2929 Productions, HDNet Films, Rysher's library, Landmark's theaters, HDNet's cable and satellite, and you're probably investing in NetFlix right now for DVD distribution."

"Ben, I know our strategy! What's your point?"

"What will pay all of your investments off, and why you're here rather than hanging out at American Airlines Center watching practice, are franchises that you can take through your entire pipeline. Own

and produce the property, launch it in your theaters, cultivate it on HDNet, distribute it on DVD. But, you don't have any franchises...yet. Ivy League basketball, NHL Hockey and bikini safaris might help Best Buy sell HDTVs, but they'll only take you so far. You need what *Band of Brothers* and *The Sopranos* did for HBO."

"That so?"

"You are passionate about two things: winning, and content. That's why you started broadcast.com to watch IU basketball on the Internet. That's why you bought the Mavs and signed Finley and Nowitzki for \$100M apiece. That's why you started HDNet when it required a \$10K TV set. That's what 2929 is now."

"Fine. Let's say you're right. What makes you think you can help me more than a guy named, say, DeNiro?"

"Of course DeNiro can help you. Mark, what we're doing is a new, parallel path. Very high quality visuals and stories, produced by a small team in relatively little time. Yes, we're much higher risk than a normal production, but we're also much lower investment. And we're positioned to give you all the things 2929 wants, right out of the box: a film running in high def on HDNet and in the 57 Theaters you equipped with high def projection systems, the ability to produce episodic off-shoots for HDNet quickly and inexpensively, a DVD franchise and even Internet distribution including episodics playing on PC-based 3D engines."

Cuban, the businessman, and Cuban, the guy who saw a little of himself sitting across the table, were debating what they had heard.

Ben, operating mostly on adrenaline and instinct, launched into a closer.

"The story of how you're taking mainstream what the Loosely Joined Studios community is doing, combined with your knack for promotion, will make back your investment in the first couple of months."

"Alright, Ben. Slow down. I'll decide how my investments make money. Tell me a little more about your production process."

Using the production tools he had on his laptop, Ben showed Cuban the process of modeling the digital sets and characters and the system to record the marionette movements in real time. Cuban asked to try out the virtual marionettes himself. Ben gladly handed him the laptop and watched Cuban grab hold. It was the pivotal moment. The idea had jumped off the screen, and, flush with possibilities, transferred to its next host.

Ben knew he could stop selling.

"It's a great tool, and I like where you're taking it. But, if this process is as efficient as you say, you don't need much up-front investment and I'll want to protect my downside by cutting you a deal heavy on the back-end."

"That's fair. Just bear in mind that we are all still holding down full-time jobs while finishing this."

"Well, that's the price you pay for glory, Ben. We'll probably be willing to invest \$100K up-front for sole theatrical distribution rights. You'll get around 10% of box-office and DVD receipts, and a flat \$30K for HDNet rights. We'll want 90-day first look rights for episodic derivatives and future features over the next five years, and if we pick up the options I'll commit to a pre-arranged schedule of increased

back-end participation levels for you at rates relative to the average success of your previous features.”

Ben was slow to react.

“What? We movin’ a little too fast for you?”

“No, no. This is great. We’re very grateful, Mark. You’ll get 110% from us.”

“Yes, I will...and then some. Now get out of here.”

“Thanks again.” A friendly handshake, a hand on the shoulder from Cuban, and he turned around to walk out of the office.

He stopped just as he opened the door and turned back.

“Can we tell our community?”

A moment of consideration. Then a big, anti-establishment grin.

“Yes, Ben. You can tell your community.”

Ben returned the grin, turned and closed the door behind him.

The feeling of relief consumed him. He had finally repaid his team’s sacrifices with The Break. At the airport bar he treated himself to the very best Martini they made. Three times.

“Red! Where the hell are you?” V answering her cell.

“V, you will *not* believe this!” Red drunk. Happy.

“No shit. It’s a fucking disaster! We lost at least two weeks. Fifteen minutes of the film. How did you find out?”

“Find out what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“We lost the on-line CVS, and the NAS was totally mis-configured, so the last back-up we have is from two weeks ago. What the hell are you talking about. Where *are* you?”

“I’m in Dallas. I was... Wait, the NAS was what? And the CVS?”

“Some fuck-wad from the community corrupted the CVS with... What? Dallas? Christ, we just took it in the gut, and you’re out getting frequent flyer miles?”

“No, I was here talking to Mark Cuban and we... ahhh, shit, did you say 15 minutes? The dialogue scenes at Holmes’ flat? We nailed those...”

“That’s what I’m saying. Two fucking weeks’ worth of stuff. Bunnaku is ready to hang himself. Even Silenz is... How the hell did you get time with Mark Cuban?”

“Long story. Look, I’m sorry I’m not there, but listen to me very closely. Are you listening?”

“Yes, what the fuck do you *think* I’m doing?”

“Calm down. Listen.”

“OK. I’m listening.”

“We’ll figure this out. Worst case we’ll do it again. It’s just two weeks, and we’ve got this thing dialed now. It’s OK, because...we have a distribution deal!”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“Holy crap! Do not even joke with me about shit like that.”

“No joke. I’m sorry it took so long, and I’m sorry I screwed up the other thing, but this is *it*. Cuban knows we can help him, and it’s the right kind of deal for us.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Let’s not talk about it now. I’ll be back late tonight. For now, get the guys calmed down and tell ‘em we’ve got a deal.”

“OK.” Long silence. “Hey, Red?”

“What?”

“Get home. I need to see you.”

Early the next morning, the following update appeared on *Loosely*

Joined Studios’ web site:

Thursday, June 18th
VERY bad news. VERY good news!

First ... the VERY bad news. CVS got corrupted last night and our local NAS back-up had been mis-configured, so we’ve lost ALL work from the last two weeks.

BAD situation, but we discovered that community member illini05 had been seeding a Bit Torrent of the CVS until yesterday, so we’re working a long shot of re-constituting the file from the individual Bit Torrent pieces of the leechers’ PCs.

We got in touch with Bram Cohen (author of Bit Torrent, and, very fortunately, familiar with our little project) and he’s written a 17 line patch that allows us to poll all the leechers’ PCs for the pieces.

EVERYBODY WHO WAS DOWNLOADING illini05’s TORRENT: PLEASE DOWNLOAD BRAM’S PATCH [HERE](#) AND LET US POLL YOUR PCs. WE’LL LET YOU KNOW IF IT WORKED. THANKS!!!

And now ... the VERY good news. We’ve signed a deal with 2929 Entertainment for distribution of *Shlock!* For those of you not familiar with 2929, it’s Mark Cuban’s media company. Yes, him of Broadcast.com, Dallas Maverick’s and HDNet fame.

You may be asking yourself whether a guy who bought his private jet on the Internet is just spending mad money on a crazy scheme to impress his poker buddies? Don’t worry, he gets it. But don’t take our word for it. Mark will join us for an IRC chat tomorrow at 3pm, PST, so ask him yourself.

Thanks to you, our creative partners, for sticking with us. Here’s hoping we don’t let you down in the last lap!

The Gang

Chapter 8: On the Run

“Exactly what do you mean by ‘guts?’”
“I mean, grace under pressure.”

Ernest Hemingway, *New Yorker* interview, November 1929

“Stéphane, you’re not listening. 2929’s size is irrelevant. This is exactly what I was afraid of.” Rick Berger was irately assaulting the steering wheel as they were driving south on the 405 in his Benz.

“I just think you’re overestimating Cuban,” rationalized Garibault.

“It’s not Cuban I’m worried about. Now that they don’t have to worry about distribution anymore, they’re going to do their best work. Nothing, absolutely nothing, beats...”

"...a good story. I know. I know."

"Do you? Do you *really*?"

Berger turned off the radio and pointedly turned to Garibault.

"Stéphane, you're going to take over for me soon, but you need to look out. You're the best dealmaker we've ever had, but you didn't come up through the creative side like me. You don't have the instinct for that part of the business yet. It's your blind spot. And it's costing us."

Garibault stayed dutifully silent.

Berger continued.

"Not to mention that it's a marketing moment. Their fan base has been waiting to be legitimized. This is their mainstreaming. Shit, you know how big they are about firsts. Especially when they come at our expense."

"You're right. I should have shut them down earlier." Garibault shifting into damage control.

"Yes, you should have." Berger trying to stay composed. Looking out his window. Hand rubbing his chin.

He turned back to Garibault.

"You know what you need to do."

Garibault nodded.

They sat in silence. Trapped in traffic as a Ducati shot past them.

Later that afternoon Garibault was looking to pass on the pain. With interest.

He had pulled up in his 360 Modena F1, waited for Michael Carter to get in, and driven away without so much as a word of greeting.

Garibault was swiftly navigating traffic, staying on surface streets, heading to a warehouse district.

"Nice ride." Carter trying to turn the conversational crank.

Garibault focused on driving.

"Where are we going?" Even the Connolly leather couldn't keep Carter from shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Garibault took his time.

"We are going to get our problem taken care of," he said finally.

"Yeah, look, man. I'm sorry we're not slowing them down. What can I tell you? They caught two breaks, what with the Bit Torrent thing and then pulling the Cuban deal out of their ass."

"What do you mean, 'we' aren't slowing them down? You aren't slowing them down. But you're going to change that, and I've got just the guys to help you."

"Say what?"

"Tell me something, Michael. What was your plan after that last scheme failed?"

"I was going to corrupt their database, and..."

"Michael, Michael...what did I ask you to do?"

"Make sure they didn't have an easy go of it."

"Right. And how are they doing?"

"Yeah, yeah, I see where you're going. I'm not fucking slow. Get to the point."

"OK. Here's the point, my friend. You're going to shut down *Loosely Joined*."

"What? We never talked about *stopping* them."

"Things change, Michael."

"What the hell are you going to do?"

"I...am not going to do anything. *You*, on the other hand are going to get them out of the apartment, and we'll send in your three new best friends to take care of this."

"Aww, shit..." Carter trailing off.

"Oh, *come on!* You know we do this with you, or without you. With you it's just easier for me. And much more lucrative for you."

No response from Carter.

"Good. We're here. Let's meet the guys."

* * *

"OK, guys, photon got us an interview with Xeni Jardin. We're leaving in fifteen minutes. Everybody ready?" Back at the apartment, Red was rallying the team for their latest PR activity, a sit-down at an LA eatery with the platinum blonde BoingBoing co-editor.

"Yeah, yeah. Hold your horses. I'm a-makin' myself pretty," came Bunraku's reply from the bathroom.

"You know she's a lass, right?" Silenz's helpful tip.

"I'm not trying to hook up with her. I just want her to love me," returned Bunraku.

"She'll love you, but you have to stop putting product in your hair. For god's sake, man, your hair's stiffer than a priest at boys' gymnastics." Vanity trying to moderate Bunraku.

"That's my girl!" Red's proud reply from behind the open refrigerator door. "Hey, photon, you want something for the road."

"No, thanks. I'm good. Not goin'. Wanted to finish the camera on the scene with the Duke. I'm trying something new with the specular map."

"What? Come on. You set this up. We should go as a team."

"I'd go, but this is driving me crazy. I gotta get on top of it."

"OK. Good luck, man. Stoked to see it when we come back." Everyone understood the irrational urge to beat the gremlins. They had all been there.

Eventually the crew, including Bunraku's hair, was ready, and headed out. Before he closed the door, Red popped his head back in. "Hey, photon. Thanks, man. Couldn't do it without you!"

Michael Carter-photon to his friends--sat alone in the apartment and stared at his screen.

After a long time, he made a phone call, got up and walked out.

The fusion place they had met Xenii at for lunch was very LA, but the pace had been very Paris. They hadn't been in a hurry to order. Nobody had looked at their watch. Everyone had ordered cappuccinos after the meal.

There was no rush to get to the next thing. This thing was the next thing. Loosely Joined was talking about what they loved to do. Xenii was listening to what she loved to hear. She wasn't asking softball questions and they weren't given conglomerated, agency-spun answers.

The vibe had carried over into the ride home. Windows down, afternoon breeze flooding the car and the radio on, all four of them were singing along to *Space Age Love Song* as they pulled past the dark blue Hummer H2 parked halfway up the curb and pulled into the carport.

Vanity stretched out in the backseat and fell cheerfully into Red's lap, looking up at him.

"I guess it's a little late for a nooner, eh?"

"Not in Hawaii."

"Oh, goody. Here, hold this," she said, grabbing his hand, tucking it under her T-shirt and depositing it on top of her bra.

"Well, I'd love to stay and watch this, kids, but I wouldn't learn anything. See ya." Bunraku offered from the driver's seat before getting out and heading back to the apartment, Silenz in tow.

"I think we're alone now," said Vanity, channeling 80's mall pop.

"Just us and half a dozen balconies looking out onto the carport."

"Nothing like a low-rent audience my mother always said."

"That's not what she told me."

"Oh, stop it, and get on with stimulating me," extending her arms and legs in surrender and closing her eyes, then opening one to peek at him.

He was smiling.

"As you wish."

But instead of going to work on her bra, he slid his hand back out from under her shirt and started running his fingers through her hair, letting his fingernails lightly scratch her scalp. She closed her eyes, let her head fall back and relaxed into his arms as he bent down to kiss her.

Just as his lips touched her neck, a scream broke the mid-afternoon silence.

"Ben!" It took Red a beat to realize Bunraku was shouting his name from inside the apartment. "Ben! Watch out!"

Red and Vanity jumped out of the back of the car and turned towards the third floor apartment where Bunraku had just appeared on the balcony, one hand seemingly reaching out toward them even though he was being pulled back into the apartment by a dark shape.

"They're coming for the laptop. Take my keys."

As the keys sailed towards him, the shape roughly dragged Bunraku back into the apartment.

Red instinctively moved toward the keys on the grass, but shot a quizzical look back to Vanity.

As he grabbed the keys, he yelled up to the now empty balcony.

“Are you OK?”

“Go, go, go! They’re coming,” the muffled reply from above.

A split second of hesitation, and then they heard the downstairs door around the corner slam open. Vanity had already run back to the car and was screaming at Red.

“Throw me the keys. Now!”

Forced to react without thinking, he followed the order and scrambled for the passenger side door, casting a quick glance at the laptop they had taken to the interview still lying in the back window of the car.

Vanity was already jamming the key into the ignition as he slammed the door shut, looking back through the rear window at the apartment entrance. He could see them coming around the corner. Two men.

He turned back to see how Vanity was fairing. He would have much preferred to be driving, but that was no longer an option.

“Holy crap. Go, V, go!

Vanity’s eager fingers slipped on the key, but then the engine turned over and she threw the automatic in reverse, jerking them forward as Bunraku’s car shot backwards out of the carport.

Barely out of the parking spot, she slammed the brakes, threw the automatic’s shifter downward, wildly turned the steering wheel and mashed the gas pedal. The engine revved to an ungodly whine until Red corrected Vanity’s over-eager shift from first to Drive.

He threw another look behind them as they gained speed down the driveway. It was clear that they were out-racing the men. The two didn’t slow their stride, but instead of pursuing them, they broke to the left and made a beeline for the parked H2.

“V!”

“Yeah, I see them,” she said casting a fleeting look into the rearview as they accelerated awkwardly over a speed bump and took a hard right turn out of the parking lot, the car fishtailing. Red was certain the back end would come all the way around and Vanity would spin out, but at the last second she got control of the car and surprised him with a deft maneuver to regain momentum.

He started feverishly looking for opportunities to turn right or left off the road before the H2 shot out onto the street behind them in full pursuit. Nothing. And just as he looked behind them, the dark blue hulk appeared in all its menacing glory looking as though it was bearing down on them from a dozen feet away.

“Take a left as soon as possible, V.”

“I can’t. Traffic’s too heavy.”

“You have to, or we don’t stand a chance.”

He shot her a look, and saw her starting to head over, gunning the engine. Suddenly, still fifty yards ahead of the intersection, she shot across the opposite lanes and bounced wildly through the corner parking lot and out the other entrance onto the cross street, narrowly missing oncoming traffic.

“Christ!” Vanity clearly flustered, but not letting off the gas.

“Drive, girl. Next right.”

He looked back. The Hummer had negotiated a less risky, but effective, left turn and was bearing down on them again.

Vanity took a hard right onto a six-lane thoroughfare with the beginnings of rush-hour traffic in their direction.

As the car slowed, Red's mind did as well. While trying to game out how they could navigate the obstacles in front of them he felt his mind's eye escape from the car and pulling up to several hundred feet above them to give him an eerie Five O'clock News traffic copter view of his own car chase.

And then he saw it.

"Head for the bus. Fast." He shot to Vanity.

"What?"

"Just do it. Cut in front of this Mercedes, then into the far left lane and pull up to the bus on the left."

Vanity complied. The sounds of honking horns and screeching tires from behind them told Red she had done it just right. If the next light didn't turn red before they passed, they'd have a chance. But only if the Hummer closed on them.

It did, taking a cue from their maneuver to close to within a car behind them.

The light mercifully stayed green and they headed for a long block that would be their one chance.

"Pull past the bus and then cut in front of it all the way into the right lane."

"Jesus, Red?"

"Just stay with me, and listen."

She accelerated, sneaking a look into the rearview to watch for the bus' front end to come into view, and then blindly swinging the steering wheel over to rocket in front of the bus into the far right lane.

Red hung on and timed their next move by watching the cars behind them.

"Now hit the brakes and he'll fly right past you."

And, suddenly, in the span of the *Top Gun* quote, Vanity knew what he was thinking.

She jammed on the brakes. With just enough distance to the car behind them, they quickly found themselves at the back right of the bus.

Red delivered the rest of the game plan.

"Pull all the way into the left lane behind him. Then a hard U-ey as soon as you can, and then next right."

She readily complied, and Red, craning his neck to the right, looked for the one last thing they needed to pull off their gambit.

There it was! Just as he lost sight passing behind the bus to the left he saw the swirl of dark blue emerging from the front of the bus, passing to the right. It was impossible for the Hummer to have seen their maneuver.

They passed behind the bus into the far left lane to find empty counter-commute lanes in the opposite direction. Vanity didn't hesitate, throwing the car into a U-turn across the double-yellow and ducking into the first right-hand turn.

Another left turn later, now headed towards the freeway to put some distance behind them, she turned to him, her eyes wild.

“What in the *hell* is going on?”

He could hardly hear her with the blood pumping in his ears, but he could see fine. The H2 was gone.

* * *

After two days on the run, they were able to re-connect with Bunraku and Silenz on IM and had gotten the 411 on the apartment incident.

Although the unknown men had stolen all their equipment, no one had been hurt or even threatened. They had gone as swiftly as they had come, leaving Bunraku and Silenz with an empty apartment and a lethargic LAPD investigation that never got out of the starting blocks.

The entire thing left more questions than answers, with the exception of the mystery around Photon’s disappearance. Silenz had received a PGP-encrypted e-mail from Photon’s address the day after the apartment raid. It read, simply, “I’m sorry ... --P” None of them had wanted to believe that some part of this had been an inside job, but it made sense, and they started to live with the reality that this was now a four-person effort.

Slowly they went back to work, Vanity able to send some of the data on her backup to Bunraku to help with modeling after he managed to get access to a friend’s computer.

But working with barely two computers and only able to communicate occasionally had been ineffective and frustrating, and their luck ran out completely on day five when their dark blue nemesis re-appeared in Vanity’s rearview mirror.

Red asked again. In her face this time.

“V? What are you waiting for? We *have* to get out of here. There’s practically nobody around. They’ve spotted us for sure.” Looking back. “Go! Right now!”

She gripped the steering wheel. Both hands. One panicked look over her left shoulder. Steeling herself for the takeoff. Then nothing. Her shoulders fell and her hands slid slowly down the steering wheel and into her lap.

And then they were there. One car eased in behind. Right up to the bumper. The Hummer stopped hard at an angle in front. Red thought about running, but there were four of them. Nowhere to go, nothing to bargain with, no dazzling third act getaway. Just an adrenaline-inducing anticlimax that left him wondering how they had finally tracked them down.

In short order Red and Vanity were efficiently separated from their computer and each other and were sitting in separate cars, attended by non-descript flunkies and headed quickly away from the scene.

“Are you guys fucking for real? This isn’t Bogotá. You don’t kidnap people in LA!” Red laying into the driver, leaning forward.

The guy in the back with him said nothing, but quickly moved the thumb and forefinger of his right hand over to the intersection of Red's left quadriceps and kneecap and squeezed tight. It was excruciating, but nothing like an elbow to the eye socket.

Red eased back in the seat, and slowly put his palms on his thighs.

They understood each other now, and rode in silent détente the rest of the way to their destination, a low-slung office building in an unremarkable, and unpopulated, warehouse district.

"You guys know J.J. Abrams?" Red asked. "He would love this."
Nobody answered.

As they were swiftly moved into the building, he looked over at Vanity being handled by the only woman in the group.

"V, you OK?"

"Yes. You? What's going on?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry. They won't do anything."

"That's comforting...not?"

They arrived in a window-less room. The three guys and one woman blocking the door. Red and Vanity in the far corner.

Flunky #1 spoke. "We need to search you for any more media. Take your clothes off and put them on the table?"

"Are you serious? No fucking way." Red taking a half step forward and in front of V.

"We'll be done with this in two minutes."

"We are *not* taking our clothes off."

"You will not be harmed, but we must search you. We'll wait."

"That could be a while. I'm in no hurry. And every minute I'm with you is a minute more accurate I'm going to be with the police sketch artist when we're drawing you this afternoon."

"You will do nothing of the kind. I suggest we get this over with."

"Nothing doin'?" Red pulled up one of the chairs and started to sit down when the guy from the backseat of the car made a move in his direction. "What are you going to do? Pinch me again?"

As deceptively quickly as the last time, he lunged for Red's wrist, and using only three fingers turned Red's hand numb while nearly incapacitating his arm.

Red put up his other arm in surrender. "OK, OK. I get it. I'm easy. Back off."

The guy let go of his hand, and moved back. Red avoided another move for the chair.

"Put your clothes on the table over there."

"You're not hearing me. There will be no taking off clothes."

His opposition merely returned indifferent looks.

Vanity lightly tugged on Red's arm from behind and spoke quietly while avoiding both his and the goons' eyes. "Red, let's get this over with. It's creeping me out. I just want to get out of here."

"No! We are not taking our clothes off in front of these people." Red looking at her insistently.

"I know. I know. But I need this to be over. OK?"

"I can't let this happen to you. It's my fault."

"Red, it's OK. There was no way to know. It's OK. Really!"

"No, no, no. This can't happen. I won't let it."

"There's nothing you can do. They'll wait as long as it takes, and the cops won't buy a story about us being shanghaied over a movie." Moving her hand to his face. Making straight-to-the-soul eye contact. "It's OK."

She moved past him and started taking her shoes off.

In a completely absurd display of decency, the men turned towards the door, leaving only the woman of the team inspecting Vanity's clothes.

Red grudgingly started to strip down to his underwear.

With Vanity down to bra and jeans, the woman motioned for her to take them off as well. Red knew Vanity had gone commando during their days on the run, and moved to put his hand on her arm in a gesture to help her maintain her dignity. Vanity put her hand on his, moved it away and proceeded to take off her jeans and her bra as well.

With nothing but a pair of briefs between the two, and all their clothes and belongings except for their cell phones having been checked thoroughly and piled back on the table in front of them, the woman motioned for both of them to turn all the way around. They complied.

A nod of the head, and a "They're clean" to her cohorts, and the four disappeared quickly through the door without another word, followed within seconds by the sounds of both cars moving away quickly.

"Oh, god." Vanity flung herself into Red's arms before he had a chance to develop useless notions of pursuit. Instead, he instinctively hugged her tightly. She was all heat and fear. Shivers and sobs.

He whispered into her ear. "V, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." Saying it over and over again, but completely unable to banish his all-consuming feelings of guilt and regret. He had been certain there was nothing worse than losing this dream. He had been wrong.

Eventually she stopped shivering. Red sat her down and reached for her clothes on the table. "Here. Put these back on."

As he eventually turned to get dressed himself, he heard Vanity behind him.

"Red, I'm OK." Standing up straight. Steely gaze level, steady.

"Hey, just take it easy."

"No, I'm OK, really. Let's just get out of here."

"OK. We need a phone."

"I think I saw a warehouse with people milling around two back from this one on the way in. Here, follow me."

"Easy, let me lead out of here."

They had no trouble making their way out of the building, around the corner, and past two warehouse complexes to a warehouse with three guys working at a loading dock.

Red was about to approach the guys when Vanity cut in.

"Guys, sorry to interrupt, but our car broke down about a half mile from here. Would you have a phone we could make a call from?"

“Sure thing. Just in here and around the corner. Ask Crystal for an outside line.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.”

She led Red into the cramped dispatch office and repeated her plea to the secretary with equal success. She turned to Red.

“OK, give me Cuban’s cell phone number.”

“What? How’s he going to help us get back to the apartment?”

“We’re not going back to the apartment.”

“Where else would we go?”

“To Dallas. We’re finishing this thing. And we need help.”

“V, take it easy. We just had a bad run-in, and we lost everything, but we’re OK, and we’re going back to the apartment.”

“Oh, no, we’re not. We didn’t lose anything.”

“Look, I don’t know where you’ve been the last couple of hours, but the parallel universe I was in, we just got cleaned out.”

With a triumphant look on her face, she dug into her jeans pocket, pulled out a plastic capsule the size of a slim key fob and held it up between her thumb and index finger in front of Red.

“Ta-dah!”

“What is that?”

“Two Gigabytes of *Shlock* on a USB Flash Drive.”

“No! You couldn’t have. You were naked and she checked all your clothes.”

“Yes, she did.” Triumphant grin turning into mischievous smile.

“Where in god’s name did you put...” and then the penny dropped.

He lifted her up in his arms and spun her around, knocking over binders and files. “Good girl! You little genius. I love you!”

“OK, OK, OK. Enough.”

He put her down. Kissed her like there was no tomorrow. Then looked at her.

“I don’t get it. I thought you were out. And then you pull this?”

“I thought I was too, but I’d been backing up all our data anyway, and when they had us trapped I realized that getting caught and having them think they destroyed everything was our only way out.”

“You’re crazy. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do, but I was so afraid it wouldn’t work. I had no idea they were literally going to kidnap us and then strip search us. That’s why I was shaking so hard back there! Scariest thing that’s ever happened to me. But it worked! It worked, Ben.”

He hugged her again. She returned the favor with more passion than he had ever felt from her. Her energy literally flowed into him.

“How did you get everything on there?”

“I don’t have all the output frames, but I have all the voice-over, audio, textures, 3D models, camera paths and all the puppet motion telemetry. We’ll have to throw it all into the renderer again to get the output, but that’s no more than a couple hours of just letting a big rig churn.”

“No problem.”

“Yup, but we need a new place to work in peace and quiet for a few of weeks to finish before anybody realizes they didn’t shut us down after all. That’s why we’re calling Mark. We’re going to ask him to get us a couple of new rigs, put us up at his place, and, most importantly, send his plane to come get us right now. Then we’ll call Bunraku and Silenz to meet us at the airport. And, voila, we’re back in business.”

“Oh, are we, then?”

“Yes, we are. Now, what’s his cell number?”

One cab ride to Orange County, three hours and one re-union with Bunraku and Silenz later, they were sitting across from Cuban in his plane on the way back to Dallas. They spent the entire flight planning their next four weeks and the launch of the film.

Chapter 9: Release

“I was an independent filmmaker before I did *Red vs. Blue*. I spent lots of time trying to promote my work and get into magazines and film festivals and was either rejected or ignored. Now, film festivals that rejected my submissions are calling to ask us to come speak about our work.”

Burnie Burns, Creator of *Red vs. Blue*

Red was looking around the Magnolia Theatre Bar in Dallas’ trendy West Village district with a mixture of fatigue, disbelief and unadulterated joy. The buzzing mass of people was assembled here for the private afterparty of *Shlock*’s premiere at the adjoining theater.

Everybody was here. Silenz sat next to him at the low-slung table in the far corner. They were huddled with a half dozen members of Loosely Joined’s Internet community who had come in from all over the US--and one from Europe--on their own dime and on very short notice to meet each other face-to-face for the first time. Bunraku was at the bar regaling a huge crowd including entertainment reporters with big, expressive gestures that made it look as though he was retelling *Shlock*’s story. Vanity was standing in a small group with Cuban and Wagner.

Smiling to himself, Red grabbed his Martini. As he tipped the glass, he caught sight of Vanity again. She looked spectacular. In a sign that the apocalypse was surely upon them, she had gone out the day before and bought a new dress. The form-fitting long black silk Cheongsam number with black shadow cherry blossoms was as classy as it was staggering, and only her self-conscious tugs at the dress compromised the secret that she was not the fashion horse everybody believed her to be on this evening.

Vanity looked over and caught him staring at her. She shot him a conspiratorial smile and raised her mojito in his direction. It reminded him of their wrap party at Cuban’s place three days earlier.

After arriving in Dallas on Cuban's plane, the four of them had sequestered themselves in his guest cottage with five new PCs--one for each of them, and one dedicated to encoding the final video--and gotten back to the business of finishing the film.

United once again and working closely together, they quickly fell into a creative and productive rhythm. As deadlines loomed, their long hours were buoyed by Cuban's effervescent visits to the cottage to share dinner with them, and on occasion even stay for several hours to help with decision-making and planning.

Missing from the final lap, however, was their collaboration with the Loosely Joined Internet community. Not able to provide any updates for fear of having their clandestine effort rediscovered by the wrong elements, they had no choice but to stand by and watch as first their web site, then the larger CGI community, and eventually much of the blogging universe became increasingly agitated by their disappearance and the apparent stagnation of *Shlock's* development.

Rumors and conspiracy theories were rampant and ran the gamut from genuine concern about the team's well-being, to innuendo that they had quit the project for lack of interest and that new leadership needed to take over.

It was two weeks before they finally knew with certainty that not only would they be able to finish the film in time, but that 2929 had been able to allocate 87 screens in 48 of their Landmark Theaters in 16 cities to launch the film. They could no longer be stopped.

Tuesday, July 7th

We're back.

First things first. We are grateful and humbled by everyone's thoughts and concerns at our disappearance. We can only offer a heartfelt apology for our absence. All we can, and will be able to, say is that we are better than ever and that the circumstances surrounding the situation were beyond our control.

Now, the important news: 2929 Entertainment and Loosely Joined Studios are proud to announce that *Shlock* will come to 48 Landmark theaters nationwide (check locations [here](#)) opening Friday, July 17th.

In a first for major US movie distribution, we will also publish the *Shlock* DVD (\$14.95, pre-order [here](#)) the same day the movie opens in theaters. Of course, it'll contain not just the final cut of the film, but also the mod'ed HL2 Source engine, all the source files for the 3D models, and the audio).

Thank you, again, for your support. And to make up for lost time, [here's](#) the Bit Torrent for the first official *Shlock* trailer (NOTE: this is final footage in high def 1280x720 format, so be patient on the downloads ... oh, by the way, we've had a chance to see it on the big screen ... it rocks!).

It's good to be back!

Red, Vanity, Bunraku and Silenz

ps: If you are an online movie site interested in reviewing the film, please send us a note so we can invite you to the screening on Wed, Jul 15th.

The news took the Internet by storm. Within a day, the *Shlock* trailer had been downloaded nearly 500,000 times over Bit Torrent, over 200 *Shlock* launch parties had been scheduled, and they had received 10,000 pre-orders for the DVD.

The day they finished encoding the final frame, the four of them had brought the final cut to Cuban, and watched it in his home theater. As the credits rolled, Cuban had turned to them and told

them what a pleasure it was to support them and how there was no doubt they were collectively opening up new creative and business opportunities.

Smiles, hugs and mojitos had flowed freely that night, too.

Back at the Magnolia Theater Bar, Red got up from the table.

“Silenz, come with me for a second,” he beckoned.

“What is it?” Silenz looked up from his conversation.

“I just need to talk to you guys.”

“Everything OK?”

“Oh, yes.”

Red steered over to the bar, and gently parted the throngs.

“Excuse me ladies and gentlemen, would you mind if we borrowed Bunraku for just a minute. We promise to bring him right back for the rousing conclusion of his tale.”

“Awww, Red, come on. You know how much I adore my audience.” Bunraku smiled self-mockingly.

“Then just imagine how rapt they will be if you leave them hanging for two minutes,” prodded Red.

“I can’t toy with them like that. They’re all I have.”

“Well, let’s ask your loyal subjects, then. Ladies and gentlemen, will you leave your story-teller with us for a moment or two?”

Willing smiles and encouragement were enough to convince Bunraku to follow Red and Silenz as they made their way over to Vanity.

Cuban waved energetically in their direction as they approached

“Ben! Did you hear? Our folks are projecting \$1.3M for the weekend. How’s it feel to be the #14 movie in the country? What’s that for you guys now? Somethin’ like \$230K?”

“Feels fantastic, boss. Glad it worked out. You took one hell of a chance with us.”

“*Shlock* just made 10x our money in less than two months, Ben. The chance would have been *not* working with you. Congrats. Really. You guys did great!”

“Thanks. Would you mind if we grabbed Vanessa for just a moment?”

“Ben, what is it?” She turned to ask.

“Just a little thing. Won’t take but a minute.”

“OK. I’ll be right back, Mark.”

“It’s your night, you guys. Enjoy it! And, hey, here’s to expanding our footprint next weekend!” he said raising his glass to the team who responded cheerfully before Red put his arms around them and shepherded the group towards the far corner of the bar, where the hallway led to the restrooms.

Once the four of them stood, finally able to hear each other, in a small circle in the hallway, Bunraku led the inquest.

“So, what is it, oh captain, my captain?”

Red didn't answer right away, trying to slow himself down for the moment. He looked at each of them one by one, so that if he remembered nothing else about this night a decade hence, he would not forget how the three of them were in that instant.

He saw echoes of himself staring back at him. Bunraku alive in the moment, the crowd. Vanity exhausted, but as close to unshackled contentment as he had ever seen her. Silenz with quiet, but infectious satisfaction.

"You're drunk, honey. And you're so damn cute," Vanity prodded him, putting her hands on his face, leaning up and kissing him. He could feel the satin of her dress, the heat of her skin, her hair on his neck. "Come on, what is it?" she asked.

"You guys," he started slowly, "everything was once an idea in somebody's head."

He paused.

"This," he jabbed his finger at the floor, "was *our* idea. And we built it."

He paused again. No one interrupted.

"I want to thank you guys. You don't know--really, you don't--how much it means to me to have done this with you."

"Always," he looked them right in the eyes, "always remember this. No one can take it away from you. And you're no longer the person you were when we started this."

They looked at him, unprepared for this much sentiment from their caddish leader.

"Amen, brother. Here's to you...to us," said Silenz, lifting his glass into the space between them. Glasses clinked and they drank.

"I love you guys. You know that, right?" said Bunraku, offering his own toast as they all raised their glasses again. "But can I go now? I've got an eager audience I need to delight."

"I agree. I'm about to get very emotional, and I wouldn't know how to fix all this eyeliner I put on. I gotta go. You comin' Ben?" said Vanity, beginning to turn back to the room.

"In a minute. I have to duck into the little boys' room."

She put her arm around him, leaned her cheek close to his and whispered into his ear. "I love you. You know that, right?"

Red watched the three walk back to the welcoming arms of the party and disappear into the crowd. He leaned back against the wall, finished his martini and stared at the ground, oblivious to the two drunken Loosely Joined community members on their way to the restroom slapping him on the shoulder and uttering way-to-go-man's as they passed.

And at that moment, after six months of insurmountable to-do lists, his mind was suddenly blank. He felt...nothing.

* * *

"Ben. It's Mark for you," Vanity yelled from the kitchen after picking up the phone.

It was late Friday night the weekend following their premiere in Dallas. They had returned to LA, settled down again in the apartment they had abandoned for a month, and were eagerly anticipating the results of the second weekend of *Shlock*.

Ben picked up the phone in his room.

"This is Ben."

"Ben, it's Mark. You got a minute?"

"For you, boss, I have several. How does it look?"

"That's why I'm calling. It doesn't look good."

"What's going on?"

"Our numbers have the audience falling off a cliff this weekend. We've done some exit interviews at a few theaters and it turns out that we're not crossing over to mainstream audiences at all, and we picked up the vast majority of your core community last weekend with the premieres."

"How can that be? We've been getting a lot of buzz all over the Internet this week following the launch."

"And that's why the mainstream media started reviewing the film, but it's not been very flattering. I'm sure you've seen it."

"I know, but that's not stopped good word of mouth from carrying them the first few weekends."

"Ben, we're not getting the cross-over word of mouth. I'm not sure I can explain it, but it's like a wall between your core and the rest."

"But with an expanded footprint we can in front of new audiences and get an uplift heading into next weekend, can't we?"

"That's the other problem. We weren't able to get any carry at bigger chains. We tried, but they're hiding behind the reviews and pressure from the big distributors to keep screens for their stuff. If the numbers drop as much as we think they will this weekend, they're going to shut us out completely."

Silence.

"Ben, you there?"

"Yeah."

"You know this happens. Don't forget you guys have already done more than 90% of the people that try their hand in this business."

"What are you saying?"

"We have to make some changes."

"Like what?"

"That's why I called. I didn't want you to hear about this from anyone else. We're going to keep running on 87 screens through Sunday, but if the audience comes in this low, we'll have to cut back to a handful of metros. Probably a dozen screens total."

"Oh, come on, Mark. Don't do this. Give us another couple of weekends to break through."

"I'm afraid it's not going to work that way. We won't be able to cross this over, and next weekend there's an event film and an Oscar contender premiering. They won't give us the time of day after these numbers."

“So, that’s it then? Just like that?”

“Ben, I’m sorry. Don’t get discouraged. We had a great opening!”
“Sure.”

“I’m sorry, but I gotta run. It’s midnight over here. Todd and I have to think over the numbers on the HDNet episodes. I’ll get back to you on that. Call me if you need to talk.”

The line went dead.

He held the phone, refusing to cradle it. Knowing his lifeline had been cut, yet still staring at the frayed rope in disbelief.

Eventually he put the phone down and for lack of anything else to do started typing slowly: nytimes.com/movies

He had read it, and others like it, during the week, but it had been just noise then. This time it was water torture. One painful word at a time.

Shlock is at first a compelling vision that throws off the burdens of Bruckheimer-esque excess and the waxy soullessness of self-obsessed computer graphics and gives us instead a beautiful, understated visual aesthetic anchored by its marionettes. However, its ironically two dimensional writing and weak voice acting fails to give the concept wings.

In the end *Shlock* does not meet the expectations set by its Internet following, barely even clearing the hurdle of its own moniker. The death of the Hollywood Goliath at the hands of a small band of computer graphics Davids has been greatly exaggerated by a tight knit and vocal Internet community.

★ ★ ★ ★

The irony smothered him. Critics’ pens mightier than the swords of treachery, sabotage and kidnapping. There would be no outrunning or outwitting the ink’s damage. This, Red knew, was the end of the line for *Shlock*.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself.

“I know.” He turned to see Vanessa standing in his door. Willing herself to find words for him, but there was only silence.

Chapter 10: Inflection

“Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself,
but talent instantly recognizes genius.”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Valley of Fear*

“I’ve lived with Ben and Colin for three years, V. I need to get some distance from *Shlock*, but even more than that I need more time and space for myself.”

It had been two weeks since the bad news. Eric--Bunraku’s alter ego--and Vanessa were sipping Mochas at the Starbucks down the street from the apartment.

“I know you need to take care of yourself, honey. I do. I worry about that for me, too. But, don’t you see? If you move out now, it’ll change everything. Even if we try, the four of us won’t spend as much time together, and there’s no way we’d do another project.”

"It's not that simple, V. I wish it were. I'd love to just do the Bohemian thing and work on our ideas, but we just put our best foot forward--probably better than any of us thought we could--and we beat the odds and still aren't close to being able to sustain ourselves."

"Come on. Don't be rash. Let things settle for a month. See how you feel then."

"Vanessa. Love. I just can't. I love you, but work is going pretty good for me right now, and I think I should put more focus on that. I'm gonna be thirty in a couple of years--ridiculous, I know, don't even start--and I have to get it together. Maybe really work on building a career."

She uncrossed her legs, leaned forward, reached across the table to hold his hand and looked him in the eyes.

"You're right, but you can't."

"What?"

"Ben needs you guys. Both of you, but most of all of you."

"Don't be ridiculous. Ben's the most independent person I know."

"You'd be surprised. He's really struggling right now. His pride is so hurt he can only tell me little bits."

"Then why has he become such a hermit. Last week I didn't see him for three days, and he never even left the apartment. I'm always there to talk. It's what I do. After all this time he should know that."

"You silly. Let me explain a little thing about heterosexual men. Or least this heterosexual man. He was as close to a leader as we had for six months. We wound up failing, and he feels he has to own that. He is not going to come find you to talk that about that. He's put it

right behind the pair of socks he never wears, and you're going to have to drag it out of him, or he'll continue to be the bundle of miserable inaction we've got living with us now."

"My god. Worse than women. Why can't you do it?" he asked, but smiled to ease the pressure.

"I've been trying, but the whole relationship thing makes it harder."

He sipped his coffee and looked into the distance. When he turned back to her, he couldn't look her in the eyes. His voice was quiet, breaking a little.

"I just can't. Please don't ask me again."

"Oh, honey. It's OK. I know you feel like you need to leave. I know. I'm going to miss you something fierce."

"Don't say that. Things aren't going to change that much."

She looked away and spoke softly, mostly to herself.

"Oh, yes they will."

In the wake of Eric's departure, the apartment had turned into three islands. Vanessa and Colin put more time into their work and Ben spent his days putting window dressing on doing nothing at all. His Half Life 2 skills, however, were improving immensely.

Their lives had returned to ordinary, but no matter how hard they tried, they could not escape the fact that *Shlock* had turned the ordinary into the intolerable.

Intolerable like Ben's increasingly depressing daily ritual of checking his Loosely Joined e-mail account. The past few weeks it had merely served as a barometer of the declining interest of the community. Once the lifeblood of their effort, it had become a jaundiced sideshow as the Internet moved on to its next meme.

He scanned the anemic volume of the day's incoming messages dispassionately. Then, something caught his eye.

From: steven.section8@gmail.com
To: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
Subj:

Steven Soderbergh here. Wanted to see if you had a minute to chat. Could you get back to me?

Thanks,
Steven

Unamused, Ben returned fire.

From: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
To: steven.section8@gmail.com
Subj:

"Steven",

Take your spam mails somewhere else. We don't have time for that shit. Soderbergh wouldn't use gmail.

Go do your algebra homework before you hurt somebody.

And he forgot about the incident until the following day.

From: steven.section8@gmail.com
To: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
Subj:
Attachment: dcp-1881.jpg

Turns out Soderbergh would actually use gmail ☺

I attached a crappy camera-phone self-portrait with today's datestamp so you don't think I'm messing w/ you. Try to resist posting it if you wouldn't mind... ☺

Leave me a phone number and a good time to call you.

Steven

Ben stared at the screen. He was unconvinced, but clicked to open the attachment, expecting it to be porn-spam.

Suddenly, there it was. The unmistakable, bespectacled visage of writer, director and cinematographer Steven Soderbergh taking a picture of himself. Today's date stamped in the lower right corner.

Ben replied.

From: red@looselyjoinedstudios.com
To: steven.section8@gmail.com
Subj:

Steven,

Sorry about that.

I can talk now. Call me at 310.555.1212

Red

ps: Nice pic.

Ben sat rooted at his desk, looking at the phone.

It rang.

He grabbed it.

“This is Ben.”

“Ben, this is Steven Soderbergh.”

“Steven! Sorry about the e-mail.”

“No problem. I bet you’re wondering what the hell I’m doing getting in touch with you.”

“Well, it’s great talking to you, but, yes, I’m wondering.”

“It’s about your guys’ little project with 2929.”

“Yeah, well, I guess it’s pretty much yesterday’s news.”

“Maybe not.”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you know about Section 8?”

“Sure. Your production shingle with Clooney.”

“Right. We sometimes work with 2929, and so we were keeping an eye on *Shlock*.”

“Hmmm. Not much to watch there anymore.”

“Well, George and I were talking, and we have an idea.”

“Really?”

“Really. At first we thought it was really interesting, and you guys really put out a nice visual style and some nice dynamics with the marionettes, but animation is not the kind of thing we usually do.”

“Right.”

“But then we started to think about it differently, and realized that it has a lot of potential as an ensemble piece, and started to see the graphics and the marionettes as just a visual language, not a genre, and it kind of fell into place.”

“What do you mean?”

“George and I feel if we can bring in a voice ensemble, spruce up the visual techniques and dial the Holmes concept to not play straight Doyle, but more as a jumping-off point for something more contemporary--a little bigger--we might have something.”

“I see. Well, we’d obviously be happy to provide you all our source material so you can get your team started.”

“Oh, I suppose we could do that. But we want the four of you to come and work with us.”

“Well, ahh ...”

“What do you say?”

“I gotta talk to the team, but this is exciting.”

“Great. If what you guys keep saying about machinima is true, we ought to be able to get started immediately with a small team and get this thing cranked out in three months for a December release.”

“Wow. You’re not kidding around.”

“Absolutely not. We’re getting a place set up right now to do the work, and we’re handling schedules with George, Julia Roberts, Don Cheadle and David Hyde-Pierce. Sound about right?”

“Oh my god, yes. Sounds incredible.”

"We like it too, and we talked to Cuban already. He's all in. Pretty much similar mechanics to last time around. 2929 and Section 8 will do limited financing since this won't be very expensive. We're thinking \$100K for Loosely Joined up front, and then we'll split the net backend 20% each for 2929 and Section 8, 20% for the domestic distributor so we can go broad this time, 10% each for George and Julia, 5% each for Don and David and the remaining 10% for you guys."

"Again, I gotta talk to the team before we can sign on the dotted line, but those terms are absolutely in the ballpark for us. Very considerate of you."

"Yeah, I think it's gonna work well." Short pause, then Soderbergh continued. "Look, Ben, I wanted to talk to you about one thing in particular."

"What's that?"

"The writing."

"Yeah, I know. I got skewered in the mainstream reviews. I assume you'll bring in somebody else and I'll help Vanessa, Colin and Eric with their stuff behind the scenes, right."

"Not quite. They did take you out behind the woodshed, and I've got a lot of thoughts on what we need to do, but I'd like you to co-write with me. OK with you?"

"Of course, Steven. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Just don't give me an excuse to change my mind...hey, just kidding. By the way, I'm thinking we do a take on *Hound of the Baskervilles*. Good theme for Holiday release, don't you think?"

"Great idea."

"Oh, and I heard you guys lost your cameraman on the last one. I thought I might be able to help you out with that. I'm kinda itchin' to get my hands on this new stuff."

"Absolutely, Steven. Fantastic."

"That's it then. Been nice talkin' to you. Stephanie from our office is going to call you tomorrow with the final details on where we're going to be working, schedule, etc. Just let her know specifics on what you guys need. And, by the way, I suggest you get some sleep tonight, because it might be a while before you get more."

"Yes, sir."

"See you tomorrow. We need to start writing eight to ten pages a day while everybody else goes into crash pre-production."

"Looking forward to it. Thanks so much!"

Ben threw down the phone and jumped out of his seat.

"Holy shit!" he yelled running out of his room.

Vanessa and Colin met him in the hallway.

"You will *never* believe this ..." he started.

Chapter 11: Take 2

"Film is life with the boring bits removed."

Alfred Hitchcock

Ben, Vanessa and Colin soon found themselves abandoning their apartment again. This time, however, they did so willingly.

The morning of the first day they discovered that the address Soderbergh's office had given them for the production facility was not a Burbank warehouse, but an Orange County cliff-side mansion that had stood empty after the shooting of a reality TV series.

Soderbergh's staff had converted the five bedrooms into workstations each with two Alienware monster rigs, the master suite into a sound recording studio, and the great room into a production area for the team to collaborate on design and story.

To them it was movie-making heaven. To Soderbergh it was cheaper than the least expensive sound stage or location he would have ordinarily needed.

Once settled in, they looked to complete the team.

An incredulous Eric had agreed to join them in the manse only after receiving a phone call from Julia Roberts assuring him that this was not a desperate stunt by his wayward friends to have him return to the apartment. He had been so embarrassed that even after three days he had barely begun to snap out of his apology loop. It would take him another week to wipe the star-struck smile off his face. And there was a good chance that he would never stop his incessant picture taking.

Fortunately, it had only taken one phone call from Ben to have Valve grant Blair--a.k.a. Quaternity--a three months leave of absence in return for giving the studio credit for the graphics engine in the final film.

They lacked only a lead camera operator

Standing in front of the team, framed by the Pacific behind him, Soderbergh was busy fixing that problem.

"That's what I'm saying, Blair. The trouble with machinima camera movement is that it's too perfect. It's too easy to move around on mathematical curves. If you need a great dolly shot, or a flawless sweep, that's fantastic, but I'd like to get a hand-held feel. Can we do it?"

"Well, we could program some random perturbation--within limits--into the computed paths." Blair trying to accommodate the camera expert.

"I don't know. I'd prefer to have control over the camera myself. Like I was holding it."

"What if we just gave you mouse control?"

"Maybe."

"That's going to feel awkward to you," interjected Vanessa.

"I can try it, but I think you might be right."

"Wait, what if we control the camera with the same six-degree glove that we're using for the marionettes," Eric piped up.

"How hard is that?" asked Soderbergh.

"It'll take you ten minutes to get used to, and it's as close as we can get you to holding the real thing," answered Eric, entirely unable to contain his excitement at having contributed.

"Can we try that out ASAP?"

“Sure. Give me a couple of hours. We can definitely hook the camera to the glove input, but I want to write some code to emulate a gimbal. You’ll get more of a Steadicam feel and it’ll look better.” Blair leaning forward to take notes.

“Steve, did you want to post-filter the output frames with a little noise to get a rougher image quality to complement the camera?” Asked Vanessa. The flawless quality of their current 3D output, even with Blair’s depth of field innovation, would be an odd match for a handheld camera look.

“Right, Vanessa. We’ll need to look at that. Can we try a combo of a little noise and saturation? See if the photography in *Traffic* gives you any ideas, but feel free to show me something else. You have more experience with your tools.”

“Sure. No problem.”

“OK, just one last thing on camera for now. How do you guys usually manage the actual performing?” Asked Soderbergh.

“We used to just huddle in one room on the machine that had all the assets and the glove inputs, and have everyone with marionettes in the scene watch the monitor as they acted.” Answered Ben.

“A little cramped, eh?”

“Yeah. A little.”

“We need to change that so that each actor can get a close-up of their marionette and give me a separate camera view. I know we can shoot each of the marionettes separately, and then do the camera later, and we’ll do that as well, but I’d like the option to act and shoot at the same time with everyone. Doable?”

“It may be possible,” Blair answered.

“How would it work?”

“We could set up a multi-player config in a single room where each actor is sitting in front of a PC with a third person view of their marionette. Then we’d add a PC that’s just your first person camera observing the multi-player scene and project the output onto a big screen that everyone can see.”

“I like that,” Soderbergh said, scanning the table. Heads were nodding in agreement. “Let’s set it up.”

He grabbed for a notepad on the table and continued.

“Enough on camera for now. Let’s talk visual style for a second. Vanessa, you’ll lead on set design. Ben and I have a long way to go on the screenplay, but basically we’ll pick up after the theater is saved in the first movie, with *Shlock* becoming a big-budget Broadway play in its own theater. The story will be a derivative of *Hound of the Baskervilles* and we’ll probably play away from Film Noir and towards tongue-in-cheek Broadway send-up. Think,” he made a marquee in the air with his hands, “*Shlock: The Hound of Broadway*”. I’d say keep the basic visual sensibilities and large scale sets, but take advantage of a bigger color palette. The other big difference, of course, is moving from the town setting to the countryside.”

“Absolutely. The manors will definitely have a different look, but the hardest part will be Grimpen Mire. Blair, I’m going to need even better water and fog than last time. Any magic you can work on light and shadow through fog, you’d be my hero.” Vanessa said.

“I’ll start working on that tomorrow. Water will only be a couple of days--unless, of course, you want Monte Carlo simulated caustics--

but I'll need a few weeks to get you what you want on the fog, so don't plan on having that for a while. But, don't worry. Diffusely lit self shadowing and dense particle system fog with laminar flow deformation under wind and character interaction shall be yours, my dear."

"Now you're talking." Vanessa said as though Blair had just promised her a new, exotic sexual technique.

"Love it. And when you're done with it, you'll have to tell me what the hell that all means. For now, I'll just assume it looks great." Soderbergh flipped the pages of his notepad. "Speaking of looking great...Eric, my friend, you'll lead on characters again. Don't feel like you need to scrap your entire style from last time, but start thinking about what a sarcastic Broadway homage would look like."

"Broadway? Did you say Broadway? I'm so your girl. Was also thinking we'd give the marionettes' faces some of the actors' physical traits. Nothing too close. Just a visual nod, you know. What do you think?"

"Like it, but don't get too literal. You won a lot of fans with your simple style last time. Don't stray too far."

"Consider the straying stopped. But, I'm always open for input."

"I'll do you one better. I got us Jeffrey Kurland, who did costumes for Woody Allen back in the 80's and did *Brockovich* and *Ocean's 11* with us. He could come in over the next couple of weeks if you'd like his help. What do you say?"

"I say yes! Would love to work with him."

"Consider it done."

Trying not to erupt with delight, Eric shot Vanessa a look of glee. She returned a knowing smile.

"Well, now that we have the hard part out of the way, let's talk about story." Soderbergh casting a look of sarcasm in Ben's direction. "If you guys wouldn't mind, I'd like to huddle with Ben. We've got work to do before we drag you guys into our twisted minds?"

The rest of the team gladly headed off to start working, brimming with a heady blend of thrill and terror.

Ben grabbed his beer and moved to the head of the table, sitting down next to Soderbergh, who was scribbling notes.

"So, with the story moving to the Broadway theater, how are you going to integrate the handheld camera feel?"

"I'm not totally sure, but I know we have to keep the complexity of the location design down to get this thing finished, so moving to a Broadway stage backdrop is a good idea. I just don't want to have too much of the polished tracking shots like *Chicago*. As a matter of fact, I'd like this to be set entirely during dress rehearsal and the handheld approach will be more intimate...it'll give us permission to be up on stage."

Soderbergh was starting to sketch the overhead of a huge stage with ses. He stared at it, tapping his pencil. Then he drew a winding path around the scenery and turned to Ben.

"What if each scene of the play is one continuous take that moves with and through the action. It'll be like what Hitchcock did on *Rope*. You know what I mean?"

"Sure. And we can give you virtually infinite freedom to move the camera around. You could even come all the way around and up, looking beyond the marionettes out into the theater."

"I'd just have to be careful not to indulge that too much."

"Sure, and we'd have to plan your camera moves pretty carefully with the marionette movements."

"That's alright. We got plenty of time."

"Not."

"I know." Soderbergh made some annotations.

"Are we keeping the huge marionettes and sets?" Ben moved on.

"Absolutely. Matter of fact I'd like to amplify that. Have eight foot marionettes that still move exactly like marionettes, but there are no strings or puppeteers. We'll just pretend they built life size marionettes and a remote mechanical set-up to control them. It'll be like *Lion King* meets *Cirque du Soleil*."

"And you can have fun with the outdoor scenes. Extend the Mire out into the distance even though you're in the theater, or do impossibly long tracking shots of the characters walking along the Mire and then zoom out a little to show that the set is rolling to the right and is somehow being created on the fly from the left like an escalator."

"Yeah, that's it. We have to take liberties and not explain them. That sets the tone for the off-center characters."

"Hey, while we're on that, let's write down the sketches, so that we're working in the same direction."

"OK. You start." Soderbergh leaning back to hear Ben's proposal.

"First, Holmes. Played by David, right?"

"You know, I thought about having George do him. Rakish maybe?"

"Interesting, but I was thinking George as Jack Stapleton, and play him as a cad--the way he did *Intolerably Cruelty*--to juxtapose with the butterfly catching. Keep David on Holmes. Stiff accent, but play him more as a cross between the bumbling half of Basil Fawlty with the intestinal fortitude of Niles Crane. That way we play Holmes against type, and we can turn Watson into the smart one that has to prop him up. What do you think?"

"I think you're gonna be very good at this, is what I think. I like it." Soderbergh was smiling. Then he hesitated. "That means you have Don as Watson, right?"

"Yup! The first Black Watson. And make him a cross between Eddie in *Barbershop* and Jules in *Pulp Fiction*. Anachronistically hip for Elizabethan England and resigned to helping Holmes solve the crime while standing in his shadow."

"Right on. Then we'll have Julia as Beryl Stapleton. I'd say keep the whole she's-not-really-Stapleton's-sister-but-his-wife mystery thing, but with a slightly sexier Kim Novak *North by Northwest* feel."

"That'll be great. We could give everyone period costumes, but give her a stand-out wardrobe to set her off?" Suggested Ben.

"Nice, and Eric will love it."

"OK, Henry Baskerville. Probably George, playing fairly straight, or do you want him to play it more southern oil tycoon?"

“No, let’s play the rest of the supporting characters pretty straight, otherwise there’ll be too much going on.”

“Good. So, Don as Mr. Barrymore, Julia as Mrs. Barrymore and Mrs. Mortimer and David as Dr. Mortimer. Which leaves only Inspector Lestrade. We could have David play him like Clouseau, but that might be a little too obvious.”

“Yeah, maybe a little, but let’s try it.” Agreed Soderbergh

“Well, that’s it, then.”

“Simple.”

“Now we just gotta write it.”

“Eight pages a day. You’re already two pages behind.”

“Do you want to write treatments first and compare notes, or do you want me to write the whole thing and then you re-write?”

“Start writing, Ben. I’ll sit with you once a day as you go.”

“Done. I’ll get started.”

Firm handshake, a final pull from the beer, and Ben was off.

As Ben walked to his room, he heard Vanessa calling him.

“Ben!”

He stopped and looked back into the room. She was sitting with Eric, the two leaning close together. A stance made for keeping discussions from prying ears. Their faces held no excitement.

“What’s going on?” Ben asked as he walked into the room.

Vanessa motioned for him to close the door.

He did so.

“OK, really. What’s going on?”

“Ben, have you thought about what this is going to take?”

“Sure, it’s ambitious.”

“Yeah, let me dial up the contrast for you a little. We’ve got two big new building sets to develop from scratch, and a huge outdoor set that we have little to no experience with.” Vanessa suggested in a subdued tone.

“And that’s just the sets, Ben. Did you realize I’ve got ten marionettes to design? I adore Broadway, and you know I can die after working with Steven, but this is twenty pounds of chocolate.” Eric followed.

“What?” Ben offered a puzzled look.

“You know, twenty pounds of chocolate. Way too much of a good thing. Way!” Eric starting to get agitated. “We’re not bush leagues anymore. Did you hear Steven’s got Warner Brothers as distributors? What we did last time isn’t good enough anymore.”

“Take it easy. You’ll be fine.”

“You’re not hearing me. I said ten designs.” Fingers of both hands stretched out in Eric’s face.

“Alright, stop. Both of you. We know how to approach this.”

“We do?” Eric, and Vanessa, looking at him with annoyed suspense.

“We have an entire community.” Ben replied.

"They moved on to the next thing after the first one. We haven't even told anybody we're going after a sequel." Refuted Vanessa.

"So, let's get the word out."

"Wait a minute! You can't just turn these guys on and off like hot water. It doesn't work that way. They'll resent the hell out of you." Said Vanessa.

"OK. So, let's humbly introduce the new movie and ask for contributions."

"Oh, really. Just like that, eh? I can't manage people I don't know to a common art direction. It just doesn't work. Not for this one. Not with Soderbergh and Kurland watching." Eric clearly dead-ending.

"Only one way to find out. Put it up."

"You're going to burn your good will. If there's any left." Said Vanessa.

"Or, we might be able to show the insiders taking a chance on us-- on this--that it can be done." Ben staring right at them. "Your choice."

Vanessa and Eric headed out to talk to Colin about updating the web site. Not because they had been convinced, but because Ben's closing left little doubt that the conversation was over.

Wednesday, August 25th

Just when you thought it was all over...

Section 8, 2929 Entertainment, Loosely Joined Studios and Warner Brothers Distribution announce **ShLock: The**

Hound of Broadway, directed by Steven Soderbergh, opening December 3rd.

Yeah, it was hard for us to believe too, but we're soaking in it, AND SO COULD YOU.

We're looking for set and character modelers to join us, RIGHT NOW. Please submit your modeling tests (Maya or 3ds preferred) of English country manor, swamp countryside or Broadway-style (yes, we said Broadway) Hound of the Baskervilles character to us in the next three days.

Winners will be announced on **Sunday** and must be able to fly out to LA on **Monday** for a 30-day all-expenses-paid production effort.

Love,
Bunraku and Vanity

ps: This is Steven. They're not kidding!



RSS readers cob-webbed from a month of no news from Loosely Joined's web site caught fire and spread the news.

Slowly the community 12-stepped their way through the implications. No-fucking-way-is-Soderbergh-working-with-them disbelief gave way to they're-off-their-rocker-to-do-this-in-90-days uncertainty and eventually turned into this-will-be-remembered-as-the-mainstreaming-of-machinima celebration.

Ben, even to his own surprise, had been right. The community was not only still around; they were--in large numbers--eager to answer the call. The six modelers eventually invited to join them were culled from 120 submissions.

The day after the arrival of the new team members, Ben ducked his head into Vanessa's den, as she was heads-down with their new outdoor modeling prodigy from the Czech Republic.

"So, how's it going in here you two?" He asked.

"Going great," said Vanessa without breaking her concentration.

"I knew it would. Enjoy!" Ben said cheerily.

"Prick," muttered Vanessa as Ben left the room.

"I love you, honey." Answered Ben down the hall.

"I love you, too," came the reply.

* * *

Four weeks in everyone could tell by Eric's hyperkinetic behavior that it was getting close to the scheduled voice recording session for Julia Roberts.

Eric, however, was not the only one with nervous energy. Of all the actors, Roberts' schedule had been the biggest problem. They had only a two-day window for her to come into their temporarily rigged audio studio. No margin for any complications. Complications like the one Soderbergh, Ben and Colin were encountering in their conference call with Roberts.

"So, there's no way you can get out of Milan until day after tomorrow?" Summarized Soderbergh.

"Right. The weather kept us from shooting for two days, so we're still filming tomorrow. I'm so sorry, you guys. I know I needed to be out there tomorrow to record."

"Yeah, we're all set for you. Look, maybe we can push out. When's your next opening?"

"Steven, you won't believe this. I'm totally solid until about five weeks from now."

Ben knew their production schedule by heart. "Julia, it's Ben. That won't be enough time for the marionette modelers to lay down their animations synchronized to your voice track and finish final production. Isn't there anything you can do?"

"I know, I know. I'm totally committed on this other thing. I wish I could do something."

Ben, Colin and Soderbergh looked at each other blankly.

Suddenly, Colin stirred and leaned towards the phone

"Julia, it's Colin. How are you flying back?"

"I'm on a charter to Munich, and then Munich to LA."

"What airline are you flying out of Munich?" Colin nervously anticipating the answer.

"I think I'm on Lufthansa."

"Perfect," Colin yelled triumphantly, jumping out of his chair.

Soderbergh and Ben could merely look on, clueless.

"What do you mean?" came Julia's puzzled response over the speaker.

"It's a little bit of a stretch, but I assume you have a laptop computer you."

"I do."

"Does it have Wi-Fi?"

"I think so."

"Colin, where are you going with this?" Asked Soderbergh.

"We're going to turn Julia's laptop into a recording studio at 36,000 feet. It's far from perfect, but I think we can make it work"

"Oh, can we, then?"

"Yes. Julia, here's what we're going to do. You're going to install something called Skype on your laptop before you leave for the airport. It'll will allow you to establish a crystal clear audio call with us using just the Internet. Then when you're on the plane--I'm assuming you'll be in first class...?"

"Yes."

"...so, when you're on the Lufthansa flight, you'll use your laptop's Wi-Fi to connect to their FlyNet service, which uses a satellite on the plane to connect to the Internet. Then you can fire up Skype and call us here and we'll walk you through the whole thing--do you have the script with you in Europe?"

"I do."

"...we'll walk you through all your lines with Steven here and record the whole thing on the computer on our side. We won't be able to do it all in one stretch, but we'll have well over ten hours on the plane. It should work."

Soderbergh and Ben were silent, looking incredulously at Colin.

Roberts broke the silence.

"So, Colin, when we're done with that, can you to me how to teleport?"

"No, really, you guys. We can do this. Julia, I do need you to do one thing for us, though. You need to have your assistant go out tomorrow and get a Plantronics stereo headset with noise-canceling microphone for your laptop. Just have her go to the best electronics place in town. They'll know what it is."

"You're really serious about this, aren't you?" Roberts said.

"Yup. No sweat, mates."

And, so it was done. Other than the funny looks she got wearing the headset most of the flight and rehearsing and performing her lines under Soderbergh's direction, Julia and the technology performed beautifully and in three sessions over nearly eleven hours the team got everything they needed.

That was until they put the recording under scrutiny in the mansion's home theater. Against their best efforts under the circumstances, the background noise of the aircraft was too audible for the extreme audio reproduction capabilities of the best THX-equipped theaters.

Colin, Ben and Soderbergh were sitting in the dark room.

"I'm sorry Colin. I know it's not a lot, but trust me on this, we have too much noise at the bottom end. Especially when compared to

the reasonably pristine mix we got with George, David and Don in the studio upstairs this will stand out like a sore thumb.”

“I know,” said Colin dejectedly.

“We have to think seriously about having somebody else come in to read Julia’s lines, you guys.” Suggested Soderbergh unenthusiastically.

“Hang on a minute, Steven. Let’s think about this. Colin, is there anything--I mean *anything*--else we can do?” Ben plead.

“I’ve tried the best filters I know. This is as good as I can get it. Only thing we could do...”

“Whatever it is, let’s do it!” Interrupted Ben.

Monday, September 27th

URGENTLY calling all audio engineers...

We’ve got 18 minutes of Julia Roberts’ dialogue with a low frequency hum that we haven’t been able to filter out without losing voice fidelity.

If we can’t clean this up, we won’t be able to have Julia’s voice in the movie, so here we are--hat in hand--asking for any audio geniuses to bail us out and save Julia for this movie. Your reward will be generous... ©

[Here](#) is a 30 second 192kbps mp3 of the audio in question. We need to get the hum between 50-120Hz attenuated by at least 18db to make this work.

“This is our most desperate hour. Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope.”

Thanks,
Silenz

Goddess Fortuna smiled on the motley crew not once, not twice, but three times. The low frequency hum was completely constant throughout the audio tracks. An audio engineer who happened to work at Skywalker Ranch during his day job reverse engineered the airplane noise and wrote a custom noise-canceling filter that eliminated the low frequency hum. The rest of the production was plagued by nary an insurmountable flaw.

On November 19th, two days behind schedule, they emerged from editing. 632 prints were made and shipped for the December 3rd release.

Chapter 12: Opening

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.
Live the life you have imagined.”

Henry David Thoreau

One Hound to Rule Them All

By NEAL RODGERS
Published December 3, 2004

The first incarnation of “Shlock”, a much-hyped independent effort by Internet contingent Loosely Joined Studios and new media mogul Mark Cuban, introduced a new kind of computer animation technology and visual style that intrigued many observers. Beneath the facade, however, the film lacked high-caliber writing and acting talent and foundered quickly in the intense competition that is summer movies.

"*Shlock: The Hound of Broadway*", the highly improbable re-incarnation of the franchise, is a most laudable Phoenix, however.

Improbable in that it would be made at all. That it would be directed and produced by Oscar winner, and perpetual experimenter, [Steven Soderbergh](#). That it would take only a record-breaking 90 days to make. That its writing manages to go back to Conan-Doyle as source material and eek out a hilarious send-up of many genres while doing the thrilling yarn at the core of the tale more unadulterated entertainment justice than any re-interpretation in the last 100 years. That the marionettes at the heart of its esthetic are easily up to the challenge of carrying the film.

Soderbergh's hand at the tiller is obvious throughout the film. From the first-ever application of a handheld camera technique in a computer-generated feature, to the thoroughly original Broadway-dress-rehearsal-meets-documentary visual style, to the tight pacing.

Even more important, however, is the addition of Soderbergh regulars Clooney, Roberts, Hyde-Pierce and Cheadle as voice talent. Although all give very charismatic performances in multiple roles, Cheadle's Dr. Watson and Hyde Pierce's Sherlock Holmes are the highlights. Written against type--Watson is the quiet brains of the operation, while Holmes bumbles his way through self-deluded leadership--the nuanced voice performances make it easy to hand yourself over to the film for its duration.

At the time of the original *Shlock*'s release, much was made of a small team of independent Internet creatives disrupting the established Hollywood powerbase. Its failure, however, quickly extinguished the discussion.

That the small team behind this latest film can make entertainment of this caliber, not only revitalizes talk of a disruption, but literally breaks through the barrier to usher in a new vein of film-making that instead of polarizing Hollywood and independent creatives throws them into a small, single-minded crucible which is capable of producing nothing short of a thrilling result.

Shlock: Hound of Broadway is the consistently delightful, handcrafted entertainment ornament that

recommends itself above all the heartless action and faux drama on this year's Holiday movie tree.

See this movie, and stay past the credits for the outtakes, surely the funniest in recent memory.

*** * * 1/2**

"*Shlock: Hound of Broadway*" is rated PG-13 (Parental Guidance for Children under 13) for mild graphic violence and adult themes.

Opens today in nationwide release.

Directed by Steven Soderbergh; written by Ben Redding and Steven Soderbergh, based on the story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; director of photography, Steven Soderbergh; production design by Jeffrey Kurland, Vanessa Montgomery and Eric Ono; music by Colin Turlinson; edited by Steven Soderbergh; produced by Steven Soderbergh; released by Section Eight, 2929 Entertainment, Loosely Joined Studios and Warner Brothers Entertainment.

WITH THE VOICES OF: [George Clooney](#) (Jack Stapleton, others), [Julia Roberts](#) (Beryl Stapleton, others), [David Hyde Pierce](#) (Sherlock Holmes, others) and [Don Cheadle](#) (Dr. Watson, others).

* * *

**'HOUND' RUNS PAST CENTURY MARK
Sequel, Foreign Distribution, DVD, TV Series Announced**
Sun Jan 30, 2005 02:45pm ET

By David Strickland

LOS ANGELES (REUTERS) - After only eight weeks, "Shlock: Hound of Broadway", the Steven Soderbergh directed remake of the Conan Doyle classic which used less than 20 credited cast and crew and was shot with Computer Graphics technology available on most home

computers has run past the \$100M domestic box office mark.

Having moved from 632 screens its opening weekend in December of last year to over 1700 currently, the film continues to do well with a wide variety of audiences. In addition, theater interviews reveal that the film's slew of hidden insider references, which have been widely detailed on the Internet, are drawing repeated viewings from its most dedicated fans.

In the wake of the film's spectacular success, the film's creators, Steven Soderbergh and George Clooney's Section Eight, Mark Cuban and Todd Wagner's 2929 Entertainment and independent collective Loosely Joined Studios, have announced the film's sequel, "*Shlock: The Final Problem?*", for Holiday 2005. David Hyde Pierce and Don Cheadle will reprise their roles as Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, with George Clooney also returning, this time in the role of preeminent Holmes foe Dr. Moriarty.

"The team is grateful for the wonderful reception '*Hound*' has been getting, and energized to deliver an even better picture with '*Final Problem?*' as a way of saying thanks. Together with 2929 Entertainment, Loosely Joined Studios and Warner Brothers Entertainment, Section Eight is proud to announce that '*Final Problem?*' will launch simultaneously in theaters, as an Internet download and a cable and satellite HDTV Pay-Per-View event to give our audience the most choice in experiencing the new film," said Steven Soderbergh.

"*Hound*' was a great opportunity for the cast to work with a very small team and a compelling creative vision. We are delighted that people have enjoyed the movie we enjoyed making and I'm looking forward to what would appear to be my last pay-day as the voice of Sherlock Holmes in '*Final Problem?*,'" said David Hyde Pierce.

Also announced were foreign theatrical distribution rights and the domestic DVD release of the current film as well as a TV series spin-off, '*Shlock: The Series*', exclusively available in High Definition TV on Cuban's HDNet network and Internet web site.

"Ever since the first '*Shlock*', 2929 Entertainment, Section Eight and Loosely Joined Studios have catered

to the High Definition audience. '*Shlock: The Series*' is the ultimate expression of this, and will anchor HDNet's Tuesday night block of broadcasting. We couldn't be more excited," said Mark Cuban, owner of the HDNet network.

"Back when the '*Shlock*' franchise was unproven, 2929 Entertainment and Section Eight, and especially Mark Cuban and Steven Soderbergh, dedicated their means and talent to bringing it to more audiences. Loosely Joined Studios is proud to once again work with both of them on '*Final Problem?*' and '*Shlock: The Series*'. We are particularly delighted that our partners are recognizing the Internet community by making the movies and TV show available via the Internet," said Ben Redding, principal of Loosely Joined Studios, and co-writer of '*Shlock: The Hound of Broadway*'.

* * *

It had been pulled together last minute.

There were only about twenty of them at Soderbergh's Hollywood hills house on a drizzly Saturday evening in February, but all the key players--Clooney, Cuban, Wagner, Roberts, Hyde Pierce, Cheadle, Ben, Vanessa, Eric, Colin, Blair and several significant others--were in attendance.

They were celebrating all things *Shlock*, and the mood was relaxed. At the bar, it was Bass Ale and Jack Daniels instead of Cristal and Courvoisier. In the kitchen, a small crowd was wildly cheering on Roberts and Soderbergh having an Iron Chef-style cook-off instead of Wolfgang Puck doing exhibition cooking. An unshaven Hyde Pierce was wearing chinos and Merrills, not Armani and Versace.

He was sitting at the piano talking with Eric, Colin and Ben. "I'm just saying we can make the musical themes a little more pretentious next time. You know, like this."

He put his hands over the keys, thought briefly, and with mock earnestness delivered a stiff, but expert, improvisation that lay somewhere between Andrew Lloyd Weber's Overture from *Phantom of the Opera* and Vince Guaraldi's *Linus and Lucy*.

The small group bent over laughing, Colin slapping Hyde Pierce on the shoulder and offering applause and a deferential half-bow. "Maestro! And to think you never let on that you could outplay me with your hands tied behind your back!"

"I'll have you know I *did* once study to be a concert pianist," returned Hyde Pierce with a mischievous smile, grabbing his beer and getting up from the piano to join the laughs.

"Love it, but I thought we were going to talk to Green Day for the soundtrack this time," Ben said, and looking up, spotted Vanessa across the way in the kitchen. "Would you excuse me a minute, gentlemen."

As Ben started heading toward the kitchen, Hyde Pierce intercepted him with a hand on his shoulder, steering him slightly away from the rest of the crowd.

"Ben."

Ben turned towards Hyde Pierce, noticing his lowered voice. "David, what is it? You almost made me spill my drink."

"I just wanted to catch you alone for a second." Hyde Pierce kept his hand on Ben's shoulder. "Ben, you've done an amazing thing here.

I mean it. Every person here--and this is about as exclusive a group as you'll find in this town--is glad to be a part of this. And it all started with you. Give yourself a chance to soak this in."

Ben hadn't expected the sentiment. "David, thanks. Really. But this is a simple story. We were dead in the water without Steven and the four of you."

"Every player has his part," looking Ben right in the eye. "But, there is only *one* catalyst."

"You guys are really being incredible, David. I mean, I'm just starting to get in sync with the whole thing really."

"I know. I know."

"Thanks for pulling me aside. Means a lot. Really,"

"OK, now. Go. Thank your better half for letting you indulge your creative instincts." Hyde Pierce put both of his hands on Ben's shoulders and vectored him in Vanessa's direction. "Think about what I said."

Ben wandered over to Vanessa, who was busy making the simplest pair of khakis and long sleeved boatneck T-shirt look very good while talking with Clooney.

She directed a smile and a welcoming arm in Ben's direction as he approached. "Was just talkin' about you," she said.

"I doubt it," mocked Ben.

"Oh, but we were," said Clooney. "I was just rudely--I mean curiously--inquiring how you guys are divvying up your \$10M take."

"Ah, good one," said Ben with a nod. "Who'd have thunk we'd ever be worried about how to allocate a large sum amongst us."

"Well, what did you do?" Asked Clooney.

"We figured there were six pieces to Loosely Joined. Me, Vanessa, Eric, Colin and Blair, and the Internet community. So we split it six ways, with one and two third million for each of the five of us, and a pot of \$1M--we had to take the taxes out--for the community on a grant-like basis depending on the projects they're submitting. We're hoping that'll be the best way to pay back a large group of supporters while giving them a leg up with their own efforts."

"Good karma, my friend." Clooney giving an approving nod.

"Hope so. And you? What about *your* ten million?" Ben inquired with a smirk.

"Hmmm, always more we can do with Casa De Clooney, or maybe pick up a place in Marseilles. Oh, I know. How about we go to my Italian place to make this next one. I'll pay." Big smile.

"Sounds nice, George, but the Reichenbach falls where the final scene between Moriarty and Holmes plays out is in Switzerland, not Italy."

"True, but it's a CGI flick. Location doesn't matter, genius. Not to mention, Switzerland is right across the border." Raise of the eyebrows to emphasize the point. "So, what do you say? Italy for everybody this time around?"

"If you can convince everybody, we're in." Ben looked at Vanessa who was busy trying to conceal a smile.

"Alright then, I'll get started. Would you excuse me? Vanessa, he's all yours." Clooney made a beeline for Roberts and whispered in her ear while she was finishing her dish.

Ben and Vanessa couldn't hear her response, but Roberts' face was consumed by a world-famous smile.

"Well, that seems to be going well," laughed Ben. He turned to Vanessa. "Are we enjoying ourselves?"

"Oh, yes. We are. I'm within days of finally getting used to this."

"Hard to believe. Do you remember how this got started?"

"Ben, it's been a long road. I've been trying to black out the memories," she said looking over his shoulder.

"Oh, no you don't. I remember it exactly. 'Remind me to let it go next time we're floating your rent'. That, my friend, is what you said. And that is how this got started. I trust you're happy." Ben found her waist with his hand and gently pulled her closer. "You know, David just pulled me aside and said a very nice thing about how everyone plays their part, but there's only one catalyst. It's you, V. It's been you all along. It was you the night I met you. It was you back in the apartment. It was you when we came within a few seconds of losing everything." He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "It's been you all along."

Vanessa put a hand on his neck and let it slide down to his chest. She looked up at him. "You're sweet, hon. But, you know that's not true. You're the only irresistible force here." Lightly tapping him with her index finger to underscore her words. "Your vision. Your will power. You keeping your head when all about you were losing theirs."

"V, I've been that guy for a long time and *nothing* ever happened to me. We are here--everyone is here--because *you* picked *me*," said Ben quietly.

"Oh, come off it," protested Vanessa, pushing Ben away in jest. "You just want to have sex later. Let's talk about something else. What are we doing for V-day next weekend? Oh, wait. Don't answer that. You probably haven't had a chance to think about it."

"Oh, there you go again. I try to call you a catalyst and all I get is a complete lack of faith. It's taken care of," assured Ben.

Vanessa looking at him askance.

"No, really. All done." Putting on the most earnest face possible. "Really!"

He had bought her a ring three weeks before, but had become so nervous having it in the apartment that it was a miracle he had kept up the act long enough to make plans for the kind of proposal she deserved.

"OK. If that's what you want me to believe," she resigned.

"That's what I want you to believe."

Eric was standing across the room with Clooney, frantically waving Vanessa over. "V, George is wondering whether we'd like to join him in Italy to make the next one. Are you OK with that?" He yelled across the room.

Vanessa turned to Ben. "Alright, hon. I have to calm Eric down."

"You do that. I'm going for a quick drive around the hills. Just to let it all sink in. I'll be back in ten, fifteen minutes."

"Alright. You OK to drive?" Vanessa asked semi-automatically.

"Oh, sure. Fine. Love you," said Ben and headed to the front door.

"You, too." Vanessa answered without looking.

Ben left his empty glass on the bar and headed out the front door.

* * *

BEVERLY HILLS COURIER -- FROM THE POLICE BLOTTER

FATAL CAR ACCIDENT (DUI): Occurred at 12:26 a.m., 2/6/2005.

Beverly Hills police were called to a solo vehicle crash at West Sunset Boulevard and Greenway Drive near LA Country Club. The driver and lone occupant of the vehicle, a 29 year-old white male with Santa Monica residence, died at the scene from injuries sustained in the crash. A preliminary autopsy showed the victim had a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.11.

* * *

None of it had gone right. Not Ben's parents' and sister's flight into LAX. Not the preparations for the memorial service. Not the weather. And certainly not the attempt to keep the news and paparazzi from the memorial service.

Vanessa was sitting in the passenger seat of Eric's car. The car she had driven so recklessly under Ben's command. The car in which

she and Ben been on the run for days. The car from which she and Ben had been kidnapped.

They were trapped in a throng of cars surrounding the small church. She was staring into her lap, scraping off her cracking fingernail polish. Eric, sitting in the back with Blair, had asked Colin to drive. Nobody had said a word on the way over.

Twenty minutes later, they finally made their way inside, walking slowly past many of the people with whom they had shared the finest of revelry and triumph seven days, and one lifetime, ago.

Hands and quiet whispers of comfort reached out to Vanessa as she moved up the aisle. She sat down in the front pew between Ben's family and the contingent from the car, Eric right next to her.

Looking straight into the railing of the pew, she grabbed for Eric with one hand and clutched the words she had prepared in the other. She could tell the pastor had begun his remarks, but she couldn't hear a thing.

Her eyes felt heavy and like a marathon runner, she began to play mind games to get herself through. *Just Ben's dad's speech. Try not to listen too closely. Now his mom's. OK, half of his sister's. Now the rest. Eyes straight ahead. Alright, your turn. No, you need a break. Collect yourself. Make Colin go first. Eric, tell him to go. OK, just breathe slowly. Don't listen.*

Then Colin started to speak, and she looked up.

He was standing at the podium, his weight shifted slightly awkwardly to one side. One hand still in his pants pocket, one hand grabbing the podium. Eyes cast up a few degrees over the edge of the podium, but safely below eye contact with anyone.

"I'm not really," he started, his voice a little soft. He started again, louder. "I'm not really the talker in our group. Or the writer, for that matter. I'm sorry for that."

He extracted his hand from his pocket to cover a nervous cough. Then he grabbed the podium with both hands, leaned forward, and made eye contact with the whole church.

His voice was clear and steady. "When we launched the first film--most of you probably haven't seen it--when we launched the first film, Ben said something to us about how we were no longer the same person we had been before we had made the film." He paused, looking down. Then up again. "Well, he was right, but it wasn't the film that had changed us. It was Ben." Colin's lips pursed tightly and he had to look above the audience to finish. "That is the finest thing a man can do. I love you, brother."

He moved quickly to sit down.

Vanessa's eyes started to water and her throat got tight. *Stop! OK, stand up. One foot in front of the other. Her eyes welling up. No. No! To the end of the pew. Across the way 'til your hand reaches the podium. Put the paper down. Look up. Look up!*

She tried to take a deep breath, but none was to be had. Then she could hear herself start to speak.

"Ben would want to thank all of you. His family for letting him pursue a crazy dream. His friends for putting up with him as they helped him pursue that dream. The Internet community for showing everyone that something loosely joined could take a dream and bring it to life. Our business partners for not only giving him a chance

against all better judgment, but also guiding him to take the dream to places even he had never imagined.

“Ben’s driving force was the pursuit of the nearly impossible. He not only sucked the marrow out of life, but looked for more when he was done. He didn’t need to travel lighter. Didn’t need to live more deliberately. Didn’t need to gather more rosebuds, or pick more daisies. He did it the way most of us wished we could. The way *I* wish I could. He did it right, and all of you helped him on that journey.”

She sniffed hard and wiped her nose.

“Thank you.”

OK, good girl. Now deep breath. Breathe, damn it!

She hastily wiped her eyes, smoothed her dress and continued.

“But I want to close...” Even the short sentences giving her trouble. *Try again. Do it. Now!* “But I want to close with what *Ben* did for us, not what we did for *him*.

“As I was...”

Impossible to see the words on the paper now. Or to find enough air to deliver them. *Just another couple of paragraphs. Come on!*

And then the finish line vanished. All she could do was look in Eric’s direction. Then she let go, and stumbled from the podium racked with gasping sobs.

Eric jumped out of the pew and met her halfway to steady her until she could sit down. Slowly he walked back to the podium. Vanessa had left her remarks. He took his time, unconcerned that the entire church knew he was trying to pull himself together.

He looked first at Vanessa. “It’s alright, honey.” Then back to the crowd. “Vanessa told me this morning that she thought she might not be able to finish her speech, and that she would like me to finish reading what she had written if she couldn’t. I told her that relying on me today was the last thing she should do. But, all week long she’s been the strongest of all of us, and I promised her I would do it. So, let me try.”

He shuffled the paper on the podium and looked up apologetically. “I haven’t read this before, so please bear with me.”

He picked up where Vanessa had left off.

“But I want to close with what *Ben* did for *us*, not what we did for *him*. As I was going through some of Ben’s things this week, I discovered that he had bought an engagement ring.”

A gasp came from the audience. No one had known about Ben’s acquisition, or Vanessa’s discovery. Eric looked devastated in Vanessa’s direction, but her head was bowed, her eyes screwed shut, slow streams of tears running down her cheeks and falling onto the folded hands in her lap.

He returned to the paper.

“We had made plans to go out this evening. I guess he was going to propose. I haven’t had much luck with relationships, so knowing that someone like Ben would want to be with me for the rest of his life felt like warm slippers and sunshine.”

Eric had to stop and wipe his eyes.

“I won’t have that future with Ben,” he continued. “But, I have been holding onto that feeling, and it has helped me a little. I hope

that each of you has something that you remember about Ben that gives you a feeling you cherish.

“Let that, and his creativity, be his legacy.”

Eric was stunned.

“Thank you, Vanessa. I’m so sorry honey,” he whispered.

He moved the remarks to the side.

“Let us all take a minute to silently express our prayers and thoughts for Ben, Vanessa and the Redding family.”

A hush fell over the church.

“Thank you all. I only have one last announcement. As many of you that worked with us on the film know, I was the pest that was constantly taking pictures of everyone during production. Had I known they would be the last record of Ben, I would have taken much greater care, but they are all we have now, and more than anything the team and I wanted to celebrate him in his element. We will be posting this retrospective, entitled ‘Moving Pictures’, at our web site tomorrow morning, so please visit us--and Ben--there and leave your recollections in the online guest book that we will present to his family in a couple of weeks. Thank you.”

* * *

It was late afternoon of the second Sunday in April. The sun had won out over the marine layer only by the thinnest of margins.

Vanessa’s emotional weather pattern was much the same as she headed out to visit Ben’s grave.

She had done so every Sunday since February, and today would be no different. The same lonely drive. The same uncertainty about whether it would be an anger day, or an acceptance day. The same resolution to stop going to counseling the following week.

But instead of the cemetery, she found herself at the beach. Their beach. The one they had sat on, cold and thrilled the day they met. The one they had been to countless times since. Back when time existed in abundance.

It was better out here. Much better. No gravestone staring her down with its self-important finality. Just good memories everywhere she looked.

Hunched over the steering wheel, she stared at the sand. She had made a point of doing away with physical reminders of him. Discarded the clothes that carried his scent. Abandoned the pictures and scraps. Kept only the one fading Polaroid she carried in her purse. But here, in this place, she craved for the sand he had touched.

As dusk insinuated itself upon everything, she took off her shoes, climbed out of the car and walked out onto the flat expanse. The air was starting to chill, but the sand was still lukewarm. She dug her toes in, stood still and closed her eyes.

There was the late day breeze, the small Southern California surf rumbling onto the beach, the smell of the ocean, the rumble of PCH behind her. It was as it always had been. As it had been with him. With her eyes closed, the distance to the way life used to be felt short.

She opened her eyes and sat down. She took the Polaroid of the two of them out of her purse and held it in her fingers. It was of terrible quality. More an impression of them than a picture. It was perfect.

Quietly, she started talking to no one in particular.

"Your hair's longer in this one. You always looked great that way. Eric cut his way short. Almost bald.

"You'd be proud of him. He's got the community all marshaled for the TV series. The loon wrote an art design manifesto. Can you believe that? A manifesto. I'll have to keep him in check.

"I think we might be a place in the Venice canals together. Prop each other up for a while.

"Colin's off writing and producing a song with Jason Mraz. Wonder how that's going to work out.

"Blair is all the man now at Valve. They're making him their ambassador down here. You should see him hold court with the cottage industry that's cropping around machinima in LA now. Yeah, I know. Blair. Mr. Quiet. It's funny.

"Yup. And me ... I'm workin' on it. Would be nice to talk to you. I'm tryin', though. To be more like you.

"Eric says if I work at it, I'll sound just like you." She launched into an imitation of Ben. "This is the thing we bullshit about when there's no threat of actually doing it. This is what we're going to do." She smiled. "Not sure that's a good think, but it's better than just sitting in the corner, or talking to the fucking therapist. And, hell, if you can do it, so can I."

She held out the picture at arms length. "You'll see. I don't even need *this* anymore." Scooping a shallow hole in the sand, she buried the picture and lay down next to her unmarked memorial.

She talked until she could only whisper. And whispered until she fell asleep.

When she awoke, cold and stiff, she got up and slowly headed back to the car. Halfway there, however, she turned around resolutely, ran to where she had buried the picture, dropped to her knees and started digging.

Her attempt failed to unearth the Polaroid. She became frantic.

Fortunately, the burial had not been very deep, and the picture turned up as she swam in larger and larger arcs through the sand. It was worse for wear, scratched and bent. But, no matter. She brushed it off, returned it to her purse and beat a determined path to her car.

* * *

Eric and Vanessa had indeed bought the place in the Venice Beach canals, and had set it up as their Loosely Joined Studios base of operations, *Shlock* franchise world headquarters and production facility for the new TV series.

Their master bedrooms had been turned into huge workstations and their third bedroom held an ocean of cardboard for storyboards, a couch, another PC and a recording set-up for the times Colin, Blair, their new writers, and the occasional Hollywood voice talent came over to work with them.

Many times, however, it was just the two of them operating a virtual operation of global scale. The Loosely Joined Internet community had swelled since the success of *Shlock: Hound of Broadway*, or S:HoB as they referred to it. Character and set designs for the TV series came more often from the community than they did from the core team. Episodes--most inspired by Conan Doyle's 40 stories--were written and directed by guests culled from both the online and Hollywood talent pools.

They had even been able to turn Colin's band-aided Skype Internet phone call solution for Julia Roberts' voice acting on *Hound* into the primary voice recording mechanism for the TV Series. The extreme convenience of contributing voices to the production--actors literally "phoned in" their performances--led to them collecting many a high caliber guest appearance from big-name Hollywood talent, in addition

Eric's role was to set, guide and evolve the creative direction of the show together with both the Internet and Hollywood communities, a delicate balance between embracing far-flung contributions and preventing the series from devolving into a patchwork. For his subtle stewardship, he had been given the mock title of UN Chairman.

After the first three episodes, the series' executive producers, Soderbergh and Cuban, handed Vanessa the sole producer credit, giving her responsibility for the shows' calendar, lining up and approving writers, directors, stories and creative assets, and the final product.

Sitting with Colin on one end of a Skype-based voice recording session with guest director Wes Anderson, and voice talent John Goodman for Episode 7, *Adventure of the Speckled Band*, she was busy moving things forward.

"Wes, how was that for you?"

"John, I'm wondering if we can have Dr. Roylott's delivery a little more neurotic. Your version of Woody Allen." Said Anderson.

"I'm not sure you're gonna want to do that. I'm not as willowy as I once was, and the whole Woody Allen thing went out with it." Answered Goodman.

"Oh, I don't know, John. Everybody knows your delivery the way you're doing it. We could really surprise with a different approach," tried Anderson again.

"Well, I just don't think it'll work for you."

"Guys? It's Vanessa. Could we try something real quick. John, let's run the handful of lines between Holmes and Dr. Roylott on page 38. I'll do Holmes, and you try Dr. Roylott in the Woody Allen direction. It'll only take a minute, and Wes can get a listen. Alright?"

"Yeah, sure, let's just figure this out. I have another thing at three o'clock," agreed Goodman.

"Fine," replied Anderson.

Vanessa and Goodman ran the lines.

Goodman reacted surprised. "That could work."

"Yeah, absolutely." Agreed Anderson pleasantly.

"Great. Thanks, you guys. Let's do it that way," Vanessa confirmed, then added "I'm really sorry, but I have to hustle out of here. I'll leave you in Colin's hands the rest of the way."

She whispered to Colin. "I have to head over to Warner Brothers. We're reviewing the initial worldwide marketing plan for the sequel. I gotta make sure we get a good-sized budget. You OK here?"

Colin nodded.

"OK. Thanks Vanessa," said Goodman.

"Yes, thanks. Good stuff. I'll talk to you tomorrow," came Anderson's reply over the speaker.

Vanessa ran down the hall to her bedroom and hurriedly jettisoned her jeans and T-shirt, opting instead for the chocolate-colored pantsuit.

She headed into the bathroom, brushed out her long hair and pulled it back into a silver barrette. She skipped the concealer and foundation, but spent time on blush, eye shadow, eyeliner and lipstick. There was no time for mascara or lip liner.

She straightened out the silver locket with the tiny copy of the Polaroid in it so that it rested on her skin in the valley just above the deep plunging-V of her jacket.

On the way out of the bathroom, she ducked into the closet, grabbed a pair of open-toed slingbacks and ran downstairs. As she put on the shoes, she looked in the mirror. She stepped closer and used the tip of her finger to carefully smooth her eye shadow.

Satisfied, she gave herself a half-smile and headed out the door.