The Cavaliers had a day of rest to ponder their fourth-quarter Three Mile Island against Chicago, then came out on Saturday afternoon against Orlando and topped it with a Chernobyl, getting outscored 54-31 and turning an eight-point halftime lead into a runaway 101-86 loss. In a season with its share of peaks and valleys, this might be the low point. The team isn't playing well, the chemistry isn't correct, LeBron looks physically diminished… and time is running out to turn this thing around. Jesse tells us about it in his latest.

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Game Recap

I won't bother with a standard recap. If you watched it you know, and if you didn't watch it, you don't want to. Suffice to say the Cavaliers pretty much decided to stop playing after halftime. Abandoning the paint and settling for long jumpers, they experienced scoring droughts of 3:04 at the start of the third quarter and 5:24 spanning the third and fourth, a Kalahari stretch that saw the Magic turn a

72-64 deficit into a 75-72 lead. From the 1:38 mark of the third quarter until the final, merciful horn, Orlando outscored the Cavaliers 37-14. Somehow Cleveland got run out of its own building despite holding Dwight Howard to four points on 1-of-8 shooting. Well before it was over, fans were fleeing the Q with unseemly haste, hoping the Saturday afternoon sun- or some Saturday night liquor- might burn from their brains the memory of the horror they had witnessed.

But wait- there's more.

LeBron James is hurting. The best fourth-quarter player in the NBA had one point in the that period against Chicago on Thursday night, and in the fourth quarter against the Magic, as his team's fortunes were crumbling around him, went 1-of-7 from the field and scored three points. All but two of his tries were from eighteen feet or longer, meaning that he had essentially abandoned the aggression in the lane that more than anything makes him the most unstoppable force on the basketball planet. Late in the fourth quarter, Austin Carr (who made no secret of his disgust with the proceedings in general- you know A.C. is pissed when he starts channeling John Chaney and exhorts the Cavaliers to "knock somebody down!") opined that LeBron must be hurt, and indeed, he must be. No defense in the league can stymie him to the point where he's completely giving up on dribble penetration. It *has* to be his back.

Part of me wants the Cavaliers to shut LeBron down for the rest of the regular season and give at least a healthy portion of his minutes to Sasha Pavlovic. Milk Dud Head's stubbornness notwithstanding, at some point we will need the stoic Serb if for no other reason than to shore up this team's Swiss-cheese perimeter defense and inject the lineup with someone who is willing to put the ball on the floor and go to the basket (if not particularly successfully). Roll the dice and hope that the supporting cast can hold on to the fourth spot and build chemistry and confidence on its own while LeBron husbands his strength on the sidelines in those dorky sweater-and-tie combos he favors.

The problem is, the supporting cast may not be able to hold on to the fourth spot. Cleveland's lead on the Sixers and Wizards has shriveled to two-and-a-half games with red-hot Philadelphia (21-7 since early February) licking its chops in anticipation of a head-to-head opportunity against the Cavaliers on April 14 at Wachovia Center. And with the season-long problems this team has had setting rotations, maybe it wouldn't be a good idea to remove the fulcrum of the entire organization from the lineup. At any rate, unless LeBron is seriously injured, he isn't being shut down. So it's moot.

LeBron James sustains more punishment than anyone else in the NBA and it isn't even all that close. You have to wonder if he isn't going to be Earl Campbell or Larry Johnson some day in the all-too-near future. And for God's sakes, will someone find some minerals and retaliate when this man gets knocked to the floor? He's only the franchise and all; it might be a shrewd idea to lift a finger to protect him once in a while. What's Charles Oakley doing these days? I don't care how old he is, I *know* he'll get up in someone's mouth if he has to.

Odds and Ends

How the game was lost: While the Magic were aggressive to the hoop in the fourth quarter- they scored their first eight points of the period on free throws (albeit four of those on jump shots) and built a lead despite not making a field goal until the 6:31 mark- the Cavaliers, as they did throughout the second half, were content to stand around on the perimeter and launch errant jumpers. Cleveland went 12-of-40 from the field in the second half, including a rim-bending 5-of-22 in the fourth. When the Cavaliers did get to the free throw line in the second half, they failed to cash in, going a lukewarm 7-of-13 from the stripe. The offense collapsed first. The defense followed.

LeBron's line: 17 points, seven rebounds, and nine assists on 6-of-22 shooting. He isn't even close to himself. To paraphrase Max Rockatansky : that "thing" in there… that's not the King. No way.

Other heroes: The honors go to the game clock, for running out and putting an end to this travesty. Some Cavaliers put up solid numbers- Devin Brown had 15 points, six boards, and five assists, Delonte West had 19 on 7-of-10 shooting, and Z delivered with 18 and nine- but a crap-fest like this can have no heroes.

Next: Wednesday evening at 7:00, when New Jersey visits the Q. Maybe by then this team will realize it's a four-quarter game.