There's just six hours (episodes) left on "24", and we've had a dramatic shift in the plot line. The nukes are secured. But Audrey Raines is alive. And her captors want the "component" that can activate them. And Jack has "gone dark" to deliver it to them despite the Vice President's opposition. Should be a fun ending. Mitch checks in with his weekly recap.

"If it tastes like chicken, looks like chicken, and feels like chicken, but Jack Bauer says its beef. Then you better believe it's beef"…

Two minutes into watching tonight's episode, my wife brought up a question that I honestly have no answer to. "How did Cheng know to call Jack at that particular time and demand something from a nuclear device he had just secured a few minutes ago?".

Damn. I missed that last week. Good thing she has an IQ that's about double the one possessed by my ex-wife (OK…I'll stop stealing Hiko's schtick now).

I really don't know; but it does bring the prospect of a mole back into the equation. But we're not even sure if CTU had been notified at that point…in which case it would either have to be Doyle (very unlikely), or else Cheng had other spies intercepting military/Homeland Security chatter.

Or else the writers didn't think anyone would pick up on that little detail, and it goes down to the normal willful suspension of logic needed to enjoy this series.

Recap.

The military is moving in to secure the nukes, and Jack is looking for a secure phone and a place to make the call to Cheng in private. Which is really hard to do when Doyle keeps babbling on about his desire to name all his children, including the girls, after Jack. Shut UP, Doyle! The clock is ticking! Jack finally gets away and rings up the leader of Those Chinese Bastards!!!® and demands to talk to Audrey again. After a couple of words, Cheng grabs the phone. Jack offers himself in exchange for Audrey, which Cheng dismisses with a good line, “a man who won’t break is of no use to us.”

What he wants, naturally, is a small circuit board (or “component”, to make it sound more ominous…or maybe just because that’s quicker to say) off from one of the nukes which would allow them to pretty much hack the entire Russian defense system. Oh really? One circuit board on my computer is barely enough to allow me to download the entirety of “Debbie Does Dallas”…but I guess Russian technology is much better.

Well, hell…what’s more important; the life of one woman, or potentially the lives of millions if TCB!!!® get a hold of Russian military secrets and then convince the Chinese government (not to be confused with Cheng and the rest of TCB!!!®) to use it against them? Ding-ding-ding, you’re right!!! Audrey is MUCH more important. So while Bill Buchanan is giving the nuke post-mortem speech, Jack buzzes Chloe (she only wishes), and requests the bomb’s schematics, so he knows what he needs to steal.

“I don’t know” frets Chloe…and her resistance to Jack’s velvety voice lasts for about 1.35 seconds, then she’s all aboard the Treason Train as she hacks into Morris’s computer to get the information and downloads it to Jack.

Back at the White House, Wayne Palmer still isn’t looking that great…especially with that damn hideous Frankenstein’s Monster stitch job on the side of his face. Good God, first year medical school students could do a better sewing than the hatchet job performed in what is supposed to be one of the best medical emergency rooms in the world. I don’t even think the guys from “Nip/Tuck” will be able to help repair that. But I don’t know…isn’t it cool to think of a President with a nasty-assed scar down the side of his face? “Arrrgghh, Mr. Putin, I won’t be a-takin’ any of yer guff, now!”

Sorry…where was I? Ah, yes, the White House Bunker; and soon to be the White House itself as the head lifeguard has blown the All-Clear Whistle. Palmer cajoles Lennox into giving up his information about Daniels' perjury attempt, and uses it to demand Daniels' resignation. Daniels refuses, and Powers Boothe finally gets to do the menacing growling and snarling that I expected when I first learned of his casting. But after Wayne lets him know that he's aware of the tape, Daniels relents and agrees to the request. I'm not sure why this is such a big deal. Didn't we already learn late last century that perjury by members of the White House is OK? (Lighten up, democrats…I'll deploy equal opportunity offensiveness later on).

Which leads to a truly creepy moment later when Daniels informs Lisa of his decision, and then strokes her face while saying "at least we'll have a lot more time to spend together". Shudder. Images of Gollum and Shelob going through my mind considering the combined evil of Daniels and the Ice Princess Lisa.

At CTU, Morris comes over to his workstation, and knows immediately that someone has hacked into it. I'm still trying to figure out why none of these people won't do the simplest thing and simply LOCK their damn stations when they walk away from their desk. Is hitting Ctl-Alt-Del so frigging hard? But this does give us some great Chloe moments. Morris asks her why, and she looks at him with her usual helter-skelter psycho expression and says, "I'll explain it to you…in a little while", and then walks away. But Morris isn't buying it, and he threatens to go to Bill. Chloe then levels with him, but telling him that "Jack gave me his word." That may be enough for you, me, and the rest of the planet that Jack protects on a daily basis…but not Morris, who forces her to go up and tattle on herself to Bill.

What a shame, because Jack had convinced two Marines to give him access to the bombs…"I'M JACK BAUER!!!"…OK, that would work on me as well. He's moments away from a clean getaway when Doyle and a several others come up with guns drawn, and Jack gets the 17 th concussion of the season when one of the Marines he duped takes the butt end of an M-16 to Jack's head.

But Jack's OK in just a few seconds (Troy Aikman was a wuss for retiring due to only 8 or 9 concussions). Unfortunately, he's also handcuffed and has rifles pointed at him. Naturally, he could pick the lock and kill all of them, but just for a change of pace, he decides to call Bill and have him get in touch with Wayne.

"Mister President, you OWE me!" Jack exclaims when he talks to him. It seems Wayne wasn't too keen initially on Jack's idea to use the component as a ploy, and then once Audrey was free, he'd blow it up (and everyone within 30 feet) with a wad of C-4 if need be. Nice Guilt Trip from Jack, reminding Wayne about how he didn't have that much of a problem turning Jack over to Fayed to torture and kill 16 hours earlier. In any case, Wayne agrees to Jack's plans, and asks CTU to co-ordinate it. Doyle is asked to be Best Man…er…TAC team lead in the effort. He asks where Jack will be, and the response is about the fifth great Bauer line of the night; "I'm going to be where ever I have to". You see, this is why Jack laughs at Superman for having a weakness. Kryptonite? Feh!

Palmer is back in the normal White House Press Room giving the Happy-Happy-Joy-Joy speech about the end of the threat. He decides to then amuse the Press Corps by showing them his best George W. Bush impersonation and starts stammering, forgetting his words, and mangling sentences in a manner that would make Dubya proud (told you I'm an Equal Opportunity Offender). Not content with that, he decides to re-create that scene from the end of "Dave" when the President collapses from a stroke right in the middle of a speech.

I almost expected Daniels to rip his resignation letter up into a hundred pieces and dance around the room whooping it up, but he shows some restraint, and simply slips it into his pocket while giving a super smug Alexander Haig "I'm in charge" grin.

First order of business? C'mon…if you couldn't get this, then anything could fool you. Yep, time to cancel Jack's Excellent Adventure. It seems Daniels can do the math with a little better accuracy than Palmer.

So Doyle gets the call from Buchanan, urging him to not act suspicious as to not tip Jack off that the mission had been scrubbed. Sorry, Doyle, but Jack's intuition is as super powered as his Wolverine level healing abilities, and before Doyle can do anything, Jack has a gun pointed at him. Just in case Doyle has any delusions of Jack's resolve, Jack reminds him that earlier in the day, he shot and killed his last partner.

No problem…enjoy the truck, Jack. Can I wash the windshield and check the oil before you leave?

Final Thoughts.

Only one hour into it, but I like how they've rebooted the season with this completely new tact. And with only six hours to go, I think the pacing will be pretty brisk, without the boring soap opera crap they usually have to put in to stretch things out.

Palmer is obviously done for the rest of the day, but I don't see them killing him off…not after they pulled that same stunt in Season 4, having President Keeler initially being reported as in critical condition after the Air Force One crash, but later succumbing to his injuries.

With Palmer down, one thing probably won't come through. When Wayne first demanded Daniels' resignation, and mentioned the tape, I was convinced either Daniels, his pet snake Lisa, or someone else in the Blue Man Conspiracy Group would be going after Lennox to shut him up.

I may also have to resurrect the "Who's the Mole" part of this feature…just in case my wife was right, and Cheng got his information about Jack from someone inside either the government.

Best Scene: I gotta go with Morris and Chloe's little 'spat'.

The 24 Milk Carton. Have you seen these people?

Ex President Logan. He could be spending time with Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, JFK, and David Palmer. Nah…he's now shoveling coal with Richard Nixon.

Martha Logan. History. See you and Aaron Pierce for a special guest appearance next season.

Phillip Bauer. Last week I predicted that if Jack went Rogue…he might come back in contact with his father to help him. Looks more like a possibility.

The Blue Man Conspiracy Group. Waiting to pull the trigger on Lennox.

Marilyn and Josh Bauer. Totally forgotten. I hope they aren't locked in a CTU room somewhere, because they'd end up starving to death.

Walid and Sandra Palmer. With Wayne out of the picture, I doubt we'll see either of them again.

Life Expectancy: Unscientific wild assed guesses on how much longer certain people will still be breathing and the chance they have of living through the day. 6 hours to go.

Milo – 3 more hours. Didn't see much of him this week…another reason why it was a good episode. Chance of living through the day? 75%

Morris – 3 more hours. Still thinking there will be something going down at CTU…because it happens every season. Chance of living through the day? 80%

CTU Agent Johnson – 3 more hours. That's not to say that now that they've established Doyle as a "not-so-bad-guy", the whole Denver red herring will go away. Chance of living through the day? 10%

Phillip Bauer – 5 more hours. That is if he doesn't stay forever on the milk carton. Chance of living through the day? 50%.

Mike Doyle – 5 ½ more hours. I'm leaving him on the list, but I think they're still setting him up to be the main partner of Jack for some time to come. Which means, given the nature of "24" and of Rick Schroeder's usual level of "commitment" to a series…he'll be killed next season. Chance of living through the day? 80%

Cheng Zhi – 5 hours, 45 minutes. I need to start speculating soon as to what Jack's final words to him will be. Chance of living through the day? 10%

Audrey Raines – 5 hours, 55 minutes. They could still do a Terri Bauer with her, but given how much Jack's willing to sacrifice for her, they'll have her pull through? 90%

Off the List.

Wayne Palmer – No way they kill off three presidents in six seasons.

NOTE: In case you were looking for it, I am choosing this week to ignore a certain feature that I have posted every week, out of respect to the victims of the tragedy at Virginia Tech. Yes, this is a humorous feature about an unrealistic television show, but I just don't feel that it's appropriate this week. We all enjoy our entertaining diversions, but for now we also need to remember the horrible reality, and give our thoughts and prayers to the victims, the survivors, the VT community, and their families and friends.