

[Turn 10.5 - The Annual - Four Winds PbEM]
[the Sound]

With his mother Jocelyn at the hospital for "dinner" with Jonathan this gave Josh the perfect opportunity to follow up on an idea that occurred to him this morning. Finding the key for his parent's house next to the Swiss army knife on his key chain he quietly opened the door and walked up a creaking flight of stairs. He made a mental note that he and Jake should look into that next weekend. Passing the bedroom where he experienced a few of the more pleasurable nights of his misspent youth he pulled a staircase down from the ceiling to ascend into the attic.

Rummaging past several boxes of clothing the boys long since outgrew, souvenirs, trinkets, books, albums, etc. Josh finally found a box labeled "Halloween/Band Costumes/Sewing Machine" and cut past the tape that had sealed the box closed for at least ten years. He double-checked that the articles he was looking for were indeed there and then carted the box back to his car. He hoped that he could still get into his "Stereo-Man" get up from so many years ago--having the metabolism of a weasel he didn't give it much thought. Who knew being in a GWAR inspired band in high school would be an asset to a super-hero. He hoped Jake could piece together something from these items. He left a voice mail message for Jake that he should swing by his place tonight after casing Dodge.

He laughed at what he was doing. He pulled on the silver and black chest plate and shoulder pads that all resembled the woofer and tweeter insides of a stereo speaker over a black turtle neck, and changed from his blue jeans into a pair of black leather pants that makes his ass look great (really-he's not the only one who notices). The coup de grace came when he found a black domino mask at the bottom of the box from when he dressed as Zorro at a school dance his Junior year of high school. He remembered the comment he jokingly made to the group in Wiles department store and smile as he donned the...Mask of Sound!! But, he can't help replay the rest of *that* phone call to Annie in his head...

Surprised to be hearing from him, she asks "How long has it been, Josh? 8 months? a year?" almost bitterly...before silently cursing herself for blaming him for circumstances beyond his control. "How are things with your father?" she says tenderly before Josh can answer her first question.

"Still hanging in there. Did Lynn ever strike off on her own?" He says as he nervously begins tapping out a rhythm on his desk with his left hand.

"Yeah! She's been in Texas for the last 6 months working on a ranch in a small town outside of Fort Worth. She totally hates it there - there's no men she claims, the little hussy -- but she's never been happier at the same time. She's finally doing what she's always dreamt about."

"Is she still writing?"

"Not so much. She sort of lost interest after you left. She felt her poetry lost a step or two without you to talk her through it."

"How's your painting?" his tapping starts to shift into the bass lines from "If

you don't know me by now."

"It's going really well, actually. I've been in some group shows and American Fine Arts is supposed to be giving me a solo show two months from now."

"How's your music?"

"I have a few gigs with a few different bands every now and then but it's turned mostly into playing alone at nights."

"It's been hard since I left the city. Running the family business, helping Jake and Mom deal--it's all draining." The lyrics to the song starts to emerge at a noticeable volume.

"What are you listening to Josh?"

"Umm...Oh ah nothing..." the illusion fades as the question pulls him out of his reverie. "I was just thinking of you. I miss you Annie. I wish we could have been more."

[the Nightcrawler]

Carl slugged down the beer in the team area of the stands. Meyers sat next to him, good-naturedly joining him in booing the Bears' Jorgensen who had ended Carl's season. They'd both signed a few autographs before the game for the few young autograph hounds that still thought any athlete was famous. It didn't take long before they had been ignored enough to start ordering beers.

Late in the 3rd, in the opposite corner, Koryev laid a wicked hit on Jorgensen, shaking the glass. Carl roared to his feet in humorously affected bloodlust, sloshing beer onto Meyers. They both sat down laughing as Koryev got sent to the box. The crowd was less sanguine and roared their disapproval. The overhead fan-vision showed a little old lady spilling popcorn and peppering the air with all-too-clear profanity.

"Easy grandma," said Meyers like the screen could hear him.

"Let her be, goon. At her age, who's she gonna kiss with that mouth?" The wisecrack died on Carl's lips as he noticed a figure looking back at her in the lower corner of the screen. Sonuva...that was Jake or Josh from two days ago. From New Years.

The familiarity of the crowd, the chill of the ice, even Roxy's mild antagonism and Shauna's punk-kid belligerence had been excruciatingly normal reassertions of his life. Carl had embraced the easy normalcy of the last forty-eight hours, clutching to them to mute the awesome implications of New Years, of his visit to RoJo.

Now, here it was again, casually invading his life. "Yeah, ok. I get the message," he intoned under his breath.

"Wuzzat?" asked Meyers distractedly.

"Just remembered somethin' I gotta do tomorrow."

Meyers dismissed the subject and returned his attention to the ice where

Damphousse made a particularly unskilled pass. "Damn rookies, where would you be without the injured reserve!" he bellowed for Carl's benefit.

[the Fury]

Later that night at Rupp Arena, the fans are enjoying a great game as the Blades are giving the Hershey Bears a thorough ass whoopin' (as Jake would call it). But Jake just sits there oblivious to the game. Though he enjoys nothing more than to see the Blades getting one over on the Bears, he can't get the events of the last couple of days out of his head.

He knows that Dodge is going to bolt as soon as he can. He couldn't let his brother know of his concern right now. Jake had purposely pushed the papers through a little slower today to give him time to track Dodge's movements. He's not going to get out until tomorrow afternoon. That should give him time to get ready.

Jake is suddenly awakened from his thoughts with a shower of popcorn raining down on him. He looks up to see it's from the elderly lady behind him as she yells obscenities at the referee for an apparently bad call. He looks up at the scoreboard and realizes he just missed one of the best games of the season and get up and leaves.

The next day after a rough night of tossing and turning Jake decides to go to his favor spot and some painting. It seems like the only way he can really relieve the stress he is feeling and he is right. After capturing the beautiful Kentucky sunrise in all its glory in watercolor he realizes he only has a couple hours left before he has to be at work. Josh doesn't like it when he shows up late, besides there is a lot to be done today, that's for sure. Just enough time for a work out.

As he heads back to his car he sees a familiar car approach and park next to his.

"Well, brother, what are you doing up this early?" Josh asked.

"Painting the sunrise. Did McBell show up last night?"

"Yeah--it was no problem. She understood the delay." Looking at his brother's handiwork and recalling some of his friend's Annie's own landscape work says "I'm glad the painting's relaxed you...I put a call into 'Bentley' and have slated us for a training session this morning at his property."

"You ready to mix it up. little bro?"

"Yeah!"

"Is it just you and me or is the rest of the Millennium in too?"

"Bentley said he'd put in the calls while I picked you up and started the drive out to Dame Vera."

[the Nightcrawler]

The phone rang while Carl was sharpening his skates in front of Gilligan's Island reruns. He chuckled helplessly at the TV as he reached for the phone. That and hot coffee seemed to ease the day in.

"Carlos! Didn't wake you did I?" The too-cheery voice of his agent, Chuck Marston.

"Naw, just watchin' the news."

"Uh-huh. Something about a stranded tour group?"

"Damndest thing. Seems they made Polio vaccines out of coconut milk."

Marston's laugh was contagious and Carl smiled. Marston was a personable guy, even this early. Didn't mean he could be trusted, but still nice to know your agent didn't immediately piss people off. He was also the only one who could make his father's name inoffensive. "What's up?"

"Got one of those phone calls you warned me about."

Carl was instantly attentive. "How's that?"

"Some 'Millenium Company' looking for investments in industrial adhesives. Mean anything to you?"

"Adhesives...the Millenium Company?"

"Yeah, I never heard of it either. Guy had a wild British accent though. You could practically hear him 'tippin 'is cupper.'"

"That it?"

"Yeah. How's that knee?"

"Unless you're askin' for the Rangers, crappy."

"'Fraid of that. Take care of it, now. We both need you back up on it."

"Thanks Chuck. Later."

The old WASP was smart enough not to tip his hand, Carl begrudgingly acknowledged. But 'adhesives?' 'Millenium Company?' What the hell was that? Carl reached for the crumpled day-minder page on the end table. Guess he'd find out, muy pronto...

[the Sound and the Fury]

The two brothers head down the road, no one speaks for sometime. Both seemingly lost in thought.

Josh wonders why all of a sudden he just can't shake Annie's presence from his mind. Is it just Amanda reminding of him of New York or could it be all of the changes that have taken place leaving him wishing for something simpler.

What, as if life in New York with Annie would have been simpler.

Jake on the other hand can't help but continually run through his head the past run-ins with Clement Dodge. He had been a character around town for sometime. Remember him from high school, he was a couple of years ahead of Jake. He was the school bully even then. Jake and him got into it once, it wasn't clear who would have won before old man McTaggart broke it up. Never got a chance to finish that

fight before Dodge dropped out.

That was OK because Jake really didn't start to bulk up until Junior year when he started taking football more serious. He starts feeling the pangs of regret about having to drop out of college to help dad with the business. It's a good thing they are going to get a work out; he can feel the tension building in him all over again. He's going to have to release it soon or he will explode.

About that time Josh pulls the car into a long paved driveway leading up to a sprawling mansion. "I guess we're here."

[Reflector]

Sheesh, what a night. Business at Denham-Blythe was absolutely booming. Clients from Germany and Dubai had arrived and virtually moved in to the palatial conference rooms. Wealthy horsemen, particularly the young Maroum sheiks from Dubai, who Mark was working with on their project. The budget for this new training facility they wanted here on the outskirts of Lexington not only touched 8 figures, it grabbed it and took it for a tango around the building a couple of times.

Mark enjoyed the sheiks. They were quiet, content to put forth their ideas and sit back and watch Mark's CAD wizardry bring the plans into 3d rendered likenesses. For each display, they had twenty suggestions, each of which begat twenty more. But after ten hours of virtually unbroken plotting and rendering (there was lunch, and the sheiks also requested a private room for their required prayers toward Mecca), stage one was complete. As the printouts rolled from the printers, one of the sheiks approached Mark.

"Mr Reinard, you are doing our vision justice. My brothers and I hope that we have not been overly demanding of your talents."

"No, of course not. This project offers me a tremendous challenge. I'm grateful you approve of what we've accomplished so far."

"And we are grateful to you. We look forward to continuing. Please accept this humble token of the Royal House, as a small measure of our gratitude to you." The sheik turned to a younger, turbaned man, and took from him a small dagger, covered with jewels and sheathed in an ornately decorated sheath. As Mark started to stammer his way to the words 'But I really can't,' the Maroum family had departed the room for the sanctuary of their Rolls limosines waiting outside.

As Mark held a waiting finger aloft to the back of the departing sheiks, a secretary pressed a cordless phone to his hand. "From Millennium Investments. British fellow for you."

Mark pressed the phone to his ear. "Yes? Hello?"

"Mr Reinard? This is Mr Payne of Millennium Investments. You took part in a seminar on New Year's Day regarding community investing?"

"I did?"

There was a brief pause. "Yes, I'm sure if you 'reflect' on it for a moment..."

"Oh! Yes, of course. Mr Payne, is it? What can I do for you?"

"The board is holding a breakfast for the newer investors at Dame Vera Farm. Things to work out, as well. Can you attend?"

"Um, yes of course. Let me write everything down..."

At the appointed time, Mark arrived just as a car containing two men (that would be the brothers, he thought) pulled in to the farm ahead of him. A third car was already there, one he did not recognize until he saw Carl emerge from the driver's side.

The four men exchanged their greetings as the Hindu, Tehsin, emerged from the house to invite them in for breakfast. Once inside, he expressed regret that Sir William had to depart suddenly for Washington DC only an hour before their arrival.

"DC?" asked Mark.

"Yes," said Tehsin as he smoothly escorted everyone to a well-prepared breakfast buffet table. "Sometimes Sir William's knowledge is valuable to the government. They sent a helicopter for him, and by now he is well on his way. The lady also sends regrets, as she has had business to attend to in New York."

"Hmm. So where do we start today?" asked Carl.

"Moving a little further into the property would be a good idea. Put some hills between us and the road." Josh suggested. And with the closing of breakfast, the foursome did so, moving west as the sun rose in the sky. As they stretched and ran and loosened up, they were suddenly aware of a lone horseman approaching them.

The rider, 60-ish and dressed for a walk-on role in any John Wayne western, brought his chestnut horse to a stop. He was wearing a well-worn gun belt, and two long guns were in holsters on the horse. The man himself resembled a mustached Jack Palance, his face weathered from winds and sun. His thick fingers expertly held the reins of his horse, and kept a grip as he dismounted. With a tip of the hat, manners from an era long gone by, he introduced himself.

"Fellows, my name's Alan McGordo. My land backs on to yours here. I'm tracking a bunch of feral dogs. They've done crippled on of my best young fillies. There's a bunch of 'em, too. I'd sure be grateful for any help you could offer this old cowboy."

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Looking at the others for any signs of disagreement, Mark says, "Glad to meet you, Alan. I'm sure we can give you a hand. What are we looking for? Feral dogs? Have you caught any sight of them? Do you have an idea of where to look?"

Mr McGordo looks to the north. "I've got a bit of their trail, splitting around that there big hill with the shade tree and the salt lick on it," he points out. "They ain't doin' much to conceal themselves."

"Would you have a gun or two to lend us? I didn't come here looking for feral dogs. I didn't bring anything of that sort." Mark shrugs as he asks.

From one of the sheaths, McGordo pulls out what looks like an 1866 Yellow Boy rifle. If it's not the real thing, it's a damn good remake. He hands it to Mark, then draws a box of .44-40 shells from a saddlebag and also hands that over. From a larger duffel, he offers each man a Winchester 1873 rifle and a small burlap pack of twenty shells.

Josh looks around at the other members of their little team and says "Actually, we can pick up some at, um, our house." He points to Sir William's home. "Mr. McGordo, we would be happy to help out any way we can. I believe it would be best if we split up. Since you have a faster means of getting around maybe you should cover the other side of your property and drive any dogs around to us and we can herd them up that way. As for the rest of us why don't you two take the Northwest end? (He points to Fury and Reflector) We will take the Northeast portion. (He looks to Nightcrawler) We can all meet back at your ranch house later. (He looks to Mr. McGordo)" He looks around at his companions for their approval of his plan.

Carl's eyes flash in skeptical doubt, but he reluctantly says, "Yeah, sure." With a grateful smile and a tip of his hat, McGordo reins his horse back towards his property.

"Here, puppy, puppy, puppy," Josh calls overly sweetly, drawing a snicker from Carl as they stroll through the rolling hills of the grounds. "Hey, he does laugh."

"Don't even have to be that funny," says Carl in a mild jab.

"Ack, a touch, I do confess't." Josh drops the Shakespearean accent, as it's clear Carl doesn't catch on. "Something buggin' you?"

Carl gives Josh a hard stare. "What? Yeah, I guess there is. I was lookin' for maybe some more ideas on how ta apply our new ...skills. I mean we gotta lot to talk about. Then we get here and Big Jeeves jets off and we're cleanin' up strays off his rich friends' property."

Josh shrugged in good-natured unconcern. "Sounds like a job for the Millennium. I was looking forward to having a full group meeting to discuss things. But we really don't want to get into it before Amanda comes back, right?"

Carl nods begrudgingly to the last and asks, "'Millennium?' Jeeves said that on

the phone too. That our code name?"

Josh nods. "If it sounds ok to you. Jake and I tossed a bunch around and that one was the closest to sticking. Mark and 'Manda were ok with it."

"Sure, but why be shy about it? I was thinking 'Justice 2000.' Heck, even 'Millennium Men's got a bit more flair to it."

"Then you tell Phoenix."

Carl blinks, and a dry smile passes between the two men. "Yeah, Millennium it is."

"That's what I thought."

Mark

and Jake wander vaguely northwest, already amiably discussing tactics.

As the two wander off Jake starts to wonder how his brother always gets to be the leader. He starts to wonder aloud, "What big brother forgot discuss in his brilliant strategy is how to catch a feral dog. Do you have any ideas? I'm pretty good at tracking a man in a urban setting but I'm not trained at rural tracking. Dad wasn't much into the hunting and fishing scene."

Mark gets a pensive look. "I'm not a tracker, to tell you the truth. I've done lots of outdoors hiking and camping, but hunting? Not that much. I can get in and out of woods. God only knows how thick they get up in Canadian Forests. I could give my best shot. Unless you're packing, we should get something from McGordo. I don't want him to get weird ideas about us, yet.. we'll see how it goes." Mark hums a thinking pause and says "I don't think there is much you can do if they are truly feral dogs. If you don't know, otherwise stop me, Feral dogs are domestic dogs gone wild. They ARE dangerous. As far as I know, there isn't much to do but kill them. I'm not too keen on that, but we'll see how it turns out, Do you have any ideas?"

"True, if they are feral dogs there is no much else to do but kill them. We have to make sure to it looks like we killed them with these." Jake holds up his Winchester rifle. Jake never was much on guns. He guesses that goes back to Dad's teachings: 'If you can't handle it with your hands it's not a fair fight.'

"We have be sure not to leave any unusual markings. Guess it's a good thing Amanda isn't here. How would we explain 'BBQed Doggie'. I was hoping everybody would show up so we could have a real get to you session. I really wanted to talk to Mr. Payne about how the group was being organized. I guess it's up to us to get acquainted."

"I hope I'm not being too nosy. Just trying to pass the time and I kind of like to know who I'm working with. Are you from around here? What do you do?" Jake asks.

"That's fine and I agree with your thinking, I want to know you guys too. I'm Canadian. I was born and raised in Ottawa. I've managed to pass my BEng up there, and I moved to the States along with a great job opportunity. Otherwise, there isn't much to me, regular joe, until New Year's Eve, that is." Then Mark smirks.

"Me and Josh were born and raised here. We run our dad's bailbonds company. That could come in handy in what were starting here. You never know what reactions we

are going to stir up when we become more public with our efforts."

"That is good," Mark agrees. "... Public. Ack. I'm uncomfortable with that. I just hope the newspapers won't chew us up. We HAVE to get a good image. Oh well, time will tell."

The way I see it first impressions are lasting. We need for our first actions as a group to be impressive and well planned. If we truly come across as heroes the first time it will set a better image of ourselves."

As they make their way over the hills and rolling terrain, the sort that builds strong racing horses from the inside, Jake spots something first. A Doberman, seated at the top of a hill, staring out at the horizon; its head turning in tiny motions first to the right 90 degrees, then back to center, then to the left. The impression is that of a mechanical device, moving in time to some insane clock. Worse, it looks in the direction of Jake and Mark. Despite their best efforts of concealment, they hear the animal give out a warning cry. Worst of all, the cry is not that of anything living.

It is the shriek of high-speed data, electronic bits of information, traveling to some unknown destination in the middle of the otherwise quiet thoroughbred country. And as it stops, the Doberman twitches its ears, and suddenly charges toward the location of the two heroes.

As Josh and Carl cross the expanse of hills and grassland, they near the crest of a rise when they spot smoke coming from nearby. In a small valley between two hills, what looks like an old line shack sits pulsing with light from within; smoke comes from a small chimney on top.

Outside, three dogs of mixed breeding walk from one point, to another, and back again, their movements like something out of the front window of a toy shop. Suddenly, all three stop, their ears cocked against the wind. Then they suddenly run outward from the shack. The smallest of the three, a mutt that looks a lot like a Jack Russell terrier with some spaniel mixed in, heads straight toward the two men at the top of the hill.

It doesn't run like a dog. More like the modified guard animal owned by Hiro in "Snow Crash." Jack the hammer; bring the noise. It's coming in like a missile.

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[The Four Winds Annual, part three]

Phase 34 - Fury

Without hesitating, Jake snaps the rifle to his shoulder, levers a round into the chamber and squeezes the trigger. With grim satisfaction, he peers through the resulting cloud of black powder smoke to see the dog's head snap back, the shot having taken it right between the eyes. (Yup, rolled another 1. I hate these dice.) The hurtling animal crashes into a heap twenty feet away from the two heroes, and lays still.

Approaching carefully, the Millennium men note the impressive entry wound just above the bridge of the animal's nose. But Mark can't help but notice the lack of blood from the wound, nor the odd appearance of the tissue around the wound. It just doesn't look...right.

"Oh.. oh.. I think we are not going after NORMAL feral dogs. I don't know about you, but dogs in Canada, don't bark like that!" Mark comments, then cups his hands to his mouth. "Josh, Carl, We have one here!"

Meanwhile, not too far away...

Phase 30 - Wishbone :)

With grass crackling into quick burning flames and blackening as the dog picks up speed, Carl quickly glances around for any convenient trees. Unfortunately, being a horse farm, the trees are few and far between out of necessity. Having a million dollar thoroughbred snap a leg on a tree root would be really bad. He dives quickly to the side, the animal bursting through the space Carl occupied only a split second prior!

Phase 26 - Nightcrawler

Aborted phase to evade, cost 2 PR.

Phase 20 - the Sound

To his soon-to-be oozing companion, Josh comments: "I'm not usually one to belabor the obvious but they're not real dogs..." With the wonder mutt turning to bear down again on both himself and Nightcrawler, Josh uses the sound of the dog's roaring electronic voice to quickly erect a wall of sound in front of the pair. "Hold tight Carl!"

Phase 15 - Wishbone

Making a wide turn, the pseudo-terrier begins its incredible attack run again...only to stop short of Josh's force field! To the horror of the heroes, the animal begins modulating the weird tones emanating from its throat, and the air can be seen being displaced by the movement of the force field and the sound. Then, the creature sits down and looks at the two men. Its eyes glow, and suddenly blue rays of coherent light fire outward toward each man. But luckily,

the animal's aim is not as fearsome as its speed; the rays fire harmlessly into the distance.

Phase 11 - Nightcrawler

Reluctantly, Carl tenses his muscles, and feels the viscous goo course outward from his pores and flow over his body. Despite his reluctance, the feeling is cathartic, and Carl feels completely at ease in spite of himself. However, the force field is in the way, barring his powers effectively from the monster.

In the distance, Carl can see someone emerge from the line shack. The person looks at them through binoculars, then hurriedly reenters the shack, followed by the remaining two dogs.

Phase 5 - the Sound

Focusing his keen hearing on the dog, Josh attempts to amplify any inherent mechanical noises to a level that will incapacitate the animal. His body trembles with the effort, but suddenly finds himself rewarded when the monster suddenly flies apart in a burst of green fibrous goo! (made the special roll...12 points of damage...08 to knockout...I really hate these dice)

Josh and Carl suddenly find the air filled with the smell of dead plants, a heavy smell of chlorophyll. Faintly, Josh can hear Mark calling to them from around the bend of a couple of hills.

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[The Four Winds Annual - Phoenix Arisen]

Amanda wandered restlessly around her apartment and finished straightening things up as far as she could. It would probably last three days at most, she'd never been able to keep a place neat for long, but at least she could start her new life with a semblance of order.

It was weird, not having anyplace to go or anything, really, to do; she didn't know anyone in town any more outside the band and the Millennium, was dead broke and slightly bored. She actually found herself thinking that she could call Chris; his wounded pride, or something, had kept him away from the party, but one of their mutual friends had probably told him she was gone. Not that she really had anything to say, and besides, he'd been a real prick last time they spoke; she discarded the idea. The apartment seemed awfully quiet. Maybe she should get a dog.

Now that her abrupt relocation had been accomplished, she found herself wondering if it had been a good thing to do--but that was silly, just boredom and nerves talking, it's not as if she was chained to the place.

She'd meet some more people and get settled in, and if things didn't work like she'd hoped, she could move on. The current quiet probably wouldn't last long, and she should take advantage of it. She rooted around for a powerstrip and set up the Casio her parents had got her a few years back--she called it her sketchpad -- and jacked in the headphones out of consideration for her neighbors.

Despite her determination to bring her mood up, everything she played came out pensive and slightly sad, and she realized she was thinking about the previous day's practice. She might not have noticed anything if Jonas hadn't mentioned it; Alain's family wasn't really any of her business, she supposed, but still.... there was too much of that in the world. A few lonely notes trickled from her fingers.

"Cut it out," she told her herself aloud, and returned her attention to what she was doing with renewed determination. A tricky little passage had been trying to find its way out of her head for a couple months now; and between her social life and making sure her so-called coworkers didn't stab her in the back (never mind actual rehearsal and practice time), she hadn't had time to figure it out; it would be nice to find it a home out in the world somewhere.

It grew and developed as she worked with it, and though it refused to lose the bittersweet edge it came closer to what she wanted it to be. She'd have to see what the guys thought; it didn't exactly fit the RSD sound, but she trusted their ears. An hour passed without her noticing..

She didn't hear the phone at first, picked up as the third ring was dying away.

"Hello?"

Amanda really wasn't sure what to do--not a feeling she had ever relished. There hadn't been a lot of clues in the man's tone, but he'd hung up so abruptly.... Well, might as well swing by and make sure things are OK. Not as if it'll take me long, after all._

She headed for the building's roof--she'd have to find some way to vary her routes, but just this once, she figured, she could leave from home and no one would get suspicious. In more or less literally the blink of an eye she was in costume and heading for Dame Vera Estate.

Only once she was in the air did it occur to her that maybe she should call the others, but... heck, if it looked like there was a problem she'd just have to find a pay phone. Who was it, Mark who'd been worried about equipment and communications? He'd had a point.

She stayed subsonic out of consideration for the city's windows, but still it was a matter of minutes for her to see the fields and paddocks of DameVera Farm below her....

And there, nestled out of sight of the roadway, sat a black helicopter, its rotors still and quiet. The grass around the massive machine was well-beaten by the prop wash; the farm now had its own crop circle.

Then, from the west, a horse and rider came riding hard for the helicopter. The poor beast was definitely overexerting itself; what could have caused the rider to do this? The rider wore simple black clothing, and Phoenix's excellent vision could detect no markings of any sort on his wardrobe; however, he appeared to have experienced a fright...

She overflies the rider, scanning for anything that might be pursuing him and for signs of anyone else in the area before banking down closer, though she keeps a good distance so her flames won't scare the horse too badly. He doesn't look at all familiar, though his haircut is straight out of regulation 35-10 in the Air Force manual. Stopping a distance from the helicopter, he turns his horse away from the chopper and heads down a different path, over the rolling hills of the farm.

His path leads to an outbuilding the size of a one room cabin, about 1/2 mile from the main house and concealed by the rolling terrain. Three other horses are tethered here. He dismounts and goes inside.

The windows are at ground level, ie normal height, and clear, giving Phoenix a clear look inside. A large device, consisting mainly of a silvery globe five feet in diameter and ringed with racks of computer equipment, dominates one side of the room. An antenna-like protrusion aims directly toward a painted-over skylight. Sir William is standing with a woman, mid-30s, dark auburn short hair, wearing a white lab coat. She looks worried, and even the implacable Sir William exudes urgency. Three men in identical black fatigues ring the room; in fact, the men are identical triplets. They are joined by a sixth person, and Phoenix gives a start as she sees herself emerge from a corner.

All the occupants are glancing urgently to the west, though Phoenix can see nothing from her vantage point. The woman in the lab coat slides a chip into the device and flips a switch. There is a hum of power, and a surge of light flares from the antenna roofward, and passes noiselessly through the skylight.

Then, a multitude of lights from the west dominates the room with color and

brightness. Phoenix sees her doppelganger flare with energy; the corona of power around her surging with life. Sir William stands in front of the scientist, drawing his sword cane. The triplets array themselves in a semi-circle, quickly drawing a variety of weapons from pockets.

But the power from the west envelops them, and Phoenix has to turn away. On the wind, the whispered words "I only hope they succeed this time" bring her fully awake...

...in the coach seat of an airliner, where a flight attendant stands over Amanda Halle. "Miss, I'm sorry, but we're ready to land in New York; I'll need your glass," she says, pointing to a plastic tumbler of half-melted ice and diluted Diet Coke on her tray.

"Hours slipping by as you watch/ The worlds collide..." _Weird._

Amanda collected her luggage and fought her way through the crowds, where more than one collision with her bruises drew a wince. She had to force herself to pay attention to where she was going, preoccupied by the dream. Seemed that ever since New Years she'd been doing nothing but sleep, and dreaming far more than usual. Some kind of side effect, she supposed.

She was starving by the time she had made her way back to the apartment and banged on the door rather than try to dig out her keys. "Marie? S'me, open up." "I am coming," grandiloquent French accent answered, and then, apparently to someone else, "That is enough! No more--no!" She opened the door, blinked in surprise, and stepped back to let Amanda dump her bags in the tiny front hall. She had the phone trapped between her ear and shoulder, rolled her eyes. "I must go," Marie said firmly and hung up on the person before they could reply.

"Merde, I think he would jabber all night. What _happened_ to you?"

"Car," Amanda replied briefly, glancing at the phone. "Johannes?"

"Oui. You look," the dancer said thoughtfully, looking her over, "terrible. And half-starved, those southerners _cannot_ cook. I will make you something good." It was like waking up from another dream after the surreal experiences of the past week. Back in the familiar apartment, dark and cramped after her parents' airy house, back in the filthy snow and cold of the city after the warmer greys and browns of the Kentucky winter. Back in her real life. Marie whipped up one of her tofu concoctions in the miniscule kitchen and ranted about Johannes' perfidious behavior in between asking questions about her roommate's holidays. Amanda kept her responses short, did the dishes once Marie had worked some vegetarian magic, and sank into silence in the battered third-hand armchair.

"You are brooding," Marie suggested. "Perhaps some music?"

"Hm? Oh, no, that's all right. I am not brooding," she added mendaciously.

"Thinking, then, if you like."

"Well, maybe. Look, I'll tell you later. Don't you have a show at nine?"

"Indeed I do. So, later," she agreed. That was the problem with having the same roommate for more than two years now; the woman simply knew her too well.

Once she was gone Amanda released a sigh and wandered around the living room, sat down again and wondered what was going on in Lexington. It was all real, she had to remember that. It had been easy to tell Josh that of course she was moving back, but now that she was at home it seemed like a lot to give up.

But really, what am I giving up? she asked herself. _I've been handed a chance to do something incredibly important, explore a whole new world, be part of something completely unprecedented! That's worth losing the club scene, I'd say._ It really wasn't any contest.

When Marie got back from her performance after midnight, Amanda told her, "I'm moving back to Lexington." The petite brunette paused in the middle of removing her scarf.

"Pardon?"

"I'm moving back."

"You are serious." Her eyes widened.

"Totally."

"It is nothing that," she muttered something in French, "Christopher has done, is it? That can be taken care of, I am certain you know, even in this country."

Amanda's brows went up and she stifled a laugh. "Marie, he never got to first base. No, nothing to do with him, I just need a change of pace."

Marie was less complacent than Rose had been, and Amanda could tell that she still suspected some terrible secret, but she could rest assured that her roommate would never come close to the truth. If the new kind of people were turning up in New York as well as Lexington, there hadn't been any news of it yet. The discussion continued for most of the night, even as the pair went foraging for boxes -- for, Marie was even more horrified to discover, the move would take place as soon as possible -- but Amanda remained serene. It really wasn't in her nature to brood about things, and once a decision was made there was no point at all in dallying about putting it into action.

Which is not to say that her determination didn't waver over the next few days, as one by one she told everyone, starting with when she sauntered into the Majestic the next afternoon, smiled at the receptionist and went on into Martin's minuscule office.

"Miss Halle," he announced (he never simply _said_ anything), unsmiling. "You appear to have been in some sort of accident. Not too badly hurt, I hope?"

"Not too badly to play."

"Good." He looked back down at the paper in front of him, assuming that she had told him all he needed to know.

"Martin?" she said with an extra dose of sweetness, savoring the moment she'd been looking forward to for at least six months. He glanced up, faintly surprised. "I quit."

She left him staring after her with that same surprised look. Out of all of them

her agent, Sue Watson, had the best chance of arguing her out of the move, but even she gave up when two hours of alternate verbal hand-wringing and shouting failed to change her mind.

"Oh, fine," she growled at long last. "I hope you know what you're doing. I was getting some good stuff lined up for you, and now you go and pull this. Thanks a _bunch_." She hung up, loudly.

Her friends were, generally speaking, stunned, unable to believe that she would want to move back to that dead burg when she could have everything she wanted right there, but in the end accepting. They threw her a wonderful going-away party. She cried. Most of them cried. They all had a good time anyway. She gently turned down a few offers to make it an even better time -- last chance.... She promised to visit often.

Days passed while she disentangled herself from her old life and the dream stayed in her mind to remind her of the new one awaiting. There was music in what she was doing, she sensed, this many-layered rebirth. Something grand and extravagant, subtle and bold, dark and joyous. She was whistling when she took to the highway, heading... home.

She did some shopping before she left, though. No point in doing this secret identity stuff unless you're going to do it right. Phoenix would require a suitably dramatic image to go with the name.

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[The Four Winds Annual, all wrapped up and tied with a bow.]

Out of the corner of his eye Jake sees a flash of light over the hill where Carl and Josh were. "Did you see that" he says to his companion. "Looks like they got some action too. Let's check it out."

Jake and Mark bound over the hill to see Carl and Josh standing over a pile of what looks like smoldering doggie pieces. "Looks like they got lucky too." But on closer examination, the 'pieces' don't resemble anything like muscle or bone. More like...some sort of plant matter. The smell of chlorophyll fills the air.

As Jake and Mark approach their partners Jake notices the shack at the bottom of the hill. As Jake and Mark take their places beside Carl and Josh, Jake nods his head toward the shack. "Is anyone in there?"

Carl grunts in the affirmative. "Looks like th' guy runnin' the puppy farm. Either we got squatters, or somebody's stable boy is moonlightin'. Either way, he owes me a new pair a jeans," referring to the now-ruined clothing underneath his sticky covering. Carl starts down the hill, not particularly thinking about a more cautious approach.

"Wait a second" Josh says to Noxzema's poster boy. "Let's not go off half-cocked," he looks at Jake in passing too as he says this to Carl. "It's gone pretty easy so far but Jake's right when he says we got lucky. We came here to learn to function as a team and we should take this as to do so. At least hold up until I can "hear" what we're up against."

Deep inside Josh hopes that this is just a training exercise set-up by the elusive Glassjack, but to be prudent Josh focuses his keen hearing on the shack hoping to find out how many dogs are on the premises. Also, to see if there could be further unexpected surprises beyond the altered canines in store for Millennium waiting in the hovel.

Mark says, "Yeah, I have this suspicion too. You guys think it might be McGordo who in on it?"

But before anyone can answer, the ground suddenly erupts into a maelstrom of swirling vines, encircling the heroes within a dome of kudzu and sharply thorned roses. Only thin fingers of light poke through the plant-dome.

As the heroes of the Millennium search around, a small section of the dome twists and forms into a caricature of a face. It leers and grins maniacally. "Well, what has I caught, hrmm? Judging by the greaseball, I'd say I've a group of Bluegrass Brigadeers in my midst. Tell you what, sit tight and be real good, and LaPlante won't have to plant you six feet underground. Try to break out, and the whole dome will collapse. Unless all of you have passive skin-alterations, you'll end up shredded by the vines as they fall." The vines crackle and curve, and the face of LaPlante has vanished.

"Greaseball?" growls Carl.

"I think we've narrowed down the search for the bad guy," says Mark "But what about our present dilemma?"

"I'm pretty sure I can bust through this without getting hurt. Anyone bring some stainless steel umbrellas?" asks Jake.

"Don't need 'em, bro. Carl, Mark, can you whistle?"

"Exsqueeze me?"

"I think I know what he means, Carl," Mark answers. "We provide the sound, he makes it into Thunderdome and spares us the death by a thousand cuts." With that, Mark begins to whistle 'O Canada'.

"Good thing I'm a hockey player, otherwise I'd have no idea what that is you're whistling," Carl replied, then joined in, off-key, with Mark.

Josh concentrated on the whistling, and began to make a deep 'omm' sound of his own. He raised his hands, and Jake could see a bit of shimmer in the air. "Now, Jake!" yelled Josh.

Needing no further prompting, Jake reached out and ripped a chunk out of the side of the vine-dome. In doing so, the rest of the dome violently collapsed inward, a shower of lethal thorns cascading around the three heroes in the middle. Jake, despite his preternatural toughness, found himself sporting several nicks and cuts from the thorns. Hopefully LaPlante didn't think to envenom them.

"Nice job," commented Mark.

"That's my little brother," said Josh.

"Save the familial warmth. This 'greaseball' wants to find LaPlante." Carl, still visibly angered by the epithet, stalked toward the shack. The two dogs trot out to greet him, and as Carl morphs into maximum viscosity, the animals shriek their electronic babble and fire rays of blue energy from their eyes. The beams catch the Nightcrawler, who is suddenly overwhelmed by crippling abdominal cramps.

On a wall of the shack facing the heroes, LaPlante's face appears again. "What's the matter, Nightcrawler, intestinal flora acting up?" he taunts. The Nightcrawler can only spit out a curse.

"As for the rest of you Bluegrass Brigadeers, or whatever you call yourselves these days, I think it's time you were dealt with once and for all.

"Deal with this, LaPlante!" says Jake as he leaps forward and smashes his fist heavily into the wall of the shack. But all the Fury hears in return is mocking laughter and splintering wood. "Ha hahahaha ha ha!"

Josh quickly modulates the shrieks of one of the animals back at it, and it shivers apart into ropes of fiber and sap. The second one launches itself at the Sound. But Reflector steps up and interposes himself as the animal enters his space. With a shocked 'aarooouoo?' the animal arcs up and away from the battle.

The Fury shatters more of the shack, but only creates more firewood. He looks inside and sees the stunted trunk of a tree, covered in green vines and moss. It glows evilly in the warmth of the sun.

"Well, Mister Fists of Fury, think you can stop me? You'd have to destroy every bit of green here with those mighty mitts of yours. Of course by then I'll have strangled you to death with more vines." In response to this, more snaky kudzu climbs from the ground, poking and feinting toward the Fury.

"I can stop you, LaPlante," says the grating voice of the Nightcrawler. "Without sunlight, you're just another bundle of roots." With that, the Nightcrawler projected a huge volume of opaque goo over the trunk, cutting off the light from reaching it.

"Nooooooooo!" shrieked LaPlante. But he said nothing more, and the Nightcrawler continued pouring forth the ichor until he felt certain LaPlante was gone, or had at least fled.

"Nicely done," said Reflector. "Need a Tums? They're fruit flavored."

"No thanks."

"Look at this," said Josh as he entered what remained of the shack. He pointed to a wooden table, atop which sat half of what looked like a dog-shaped mold.

"LaPlante must have used this to form those animals."

"I wonder what plan of his we interrupted," the Fury said.

"Land grab, probably. Scare off McGordo and get it cheap. I've had it with this place; let's go," said the Nightcrawler. In silent agreement, the others followed him out, and headed back to the Dame Vera estate with the intention of driving to McGordo's and returning his weapons.

Tehsin met them at the back of the house, and immediately went to work helping the heroes recover from their adventure. But as they recounted the events, Tehsin stopped them.

"You say Mr McGordo met you, told you about the dogs, and gave you these weapons?"

"That's right," said Mark over a bowl of burgoo. "You see a lot of him?"

"No, Mr Reinard, I don't. No one does." Tehsin paused and looked out a window in the direction of the McGordo property, then continued.

"He passed away four years ago."

And in the distance, as the others looked to where Tehsin looked, atop a distant hill lit with the orange and purple sunset, a figure on horseback gazed back, and tipped his hat. To the men of the Millennium, there was a feeling of a torch being passed, from one generation of hero to another. And silently, they turned to their bowls of burgoo and mugs of beer, and ate quietly for some time thereafter.

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