

W I L D C A R D

by

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W I L D C A R D

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F A L L E N G O D

a deafening goodbye

At sixteen, Martha kidnapped her surrogate son Karl from their private prison and the only home they had ever known. IKG Psinetics, the most sophisticated genetics laboratory on Earth, created, raised and trained her to be the best at something. But they never told her what that something was. The anonymous staff taught her nine tongues fluently and a survivable grasp of twenty more. She was a biopid, pronounced like myopic, they told her, a genetically modified human. She learned a barrage of espionage techniques, philosophy, math, science, wide-ranging social skills including seduction, and most especially, psychology, both Eastern and Western.

The staff never told her their names, so she came up with names for them, which they accepted with indifference. Doctor Bob, Doctor Harry, Doctor Marcia. If one got too close to her emotionally, as happened a couple of times, they disappeared. She never left.

The high-walled, guarded compound had a 200 acre grounds in a lovely English garden style, a planned natural look with ancient oak, spruce, elm, lindens, ash, maple and a variety of other well-cared for trees, their canopies spread wide over the unnatural green of the grass. Multiple outbuildings dotted the grounds, some for utility functions, some for other reasons, unexplained to Martha. In the center squatted the two story sprawl of the IKG Psinetic's laboratory and corporate office, a brown brick vulgarity contrasting the opulent nature. Miles of shiny, bone-

white, cement walled corridor with unnumbered, locked doors rambled in square patterns throughout.

Her small, plainly furnished apartment came with a few privileges. She could lock her door whenever she wanted, and they wouldn't disturb her for days. She could read anything she wanted, or watch television. She could walk, and did, for hours on the large grounds, gaining what little comfort she could from flora and fauna. But they would rarely talk to her beyond the usual business functionality: keeping her alive, the pummeling education, and the endless round of psychological tests.

She was alone, with the dread sense that her loneliness was not ancillary to her place in this awful mechanism that she perceived only the tiniest part of. Being alone was central to whatever they wanted with her, her principal message. The person, or whatever being sending the message, never made itself known. They never even gave her a last name; she was only Martha.

Soon after she turned thirteen, the doctors performed surgery while she was awake. After strapping her to the icy steel of a table, they locally anesthetized her left belly, and inserted a tube through the side wall. A nerve block was used so she couldn't move. It took four and a half hours of cold fear, but there was little pain.

A few days later, she felt different, a physical buoyancy. Over some months her belly expanded and they told her she was pregnant, but that it wasn't her genetic child.

“Whose baby is it?”

There was no response. Five months later, with the pregnancy somehow accelerated, they handed her the infant, full of intense professional attention, and asked her what she wanted to name it. She brushed back the wispy strands of blond hair from his eyes and said, “Karl.”

After the birth, she had so many hormones. Something changed, and she understood what the word depression meant because hers went away to be replaced by love. But that was not all; now she had fear. She had something to protect.

The staff offered a clinical form of love, as if part of their job. It seemed to fill some fundamental human need so that she would turn out normative in human terms. It was faked on their part, of course, they even told her. But it was a sociological conformance that anyone needed to be functional in society.

They taught her many things, mostly through a computer program that spoke to her, teaching anything she wanted to learn, adapting to her preferences and learning styles. It found her points of curiosity and satisfied them. The program seemed ... aware of her.

She understood that life outside of this place was far different from her own and was trained in countless human interaction simulations. But no one taught her how to be a mother to Karl. No one needed to. They were brimming with quiet study about that relationship, almost as if it were the entire purpose of her and their lives. They had received orders not to interfere, but observe with an absolute scrutiny, measuring every word with micrometers.

She didn't care. He needed her and she needed him. He was so precious and beautiful, so innocent without the concept of blaming. And she was so alone. They had done their work well and even the doctors had a difficult time keeping detached from him. But they were trained. He belonged to her alone. Soon, he called her Mommy.

The compound gave them everything they needed, except a social environment, except

freedom, whatever that word meant. They relied totally on each other for love and human warmth, as the controlling entity, whoever, whatever that was, wanted. The bond became unbearable, the place a prison. After three years, at sixteen, she decided on their escape. He needed not to grow up in that awful place.

Her plan was simple. She possessed high level skills at manipulating men, both genetically implanted and trained. So, one night, she seduced a guard who claimed her virginity with a pumping frenzy. His lust was so easy for her to control; she made him lose his mind with desire. At the moment of his orgasm, which she wanted to experience and, for some strange reason, wanted to offer him as a parting gift, she pushed a syringe needle into his larynx, filling it with ammonia. His skin paled quickly, the veins rising. He tried to hit the alarm button, but with her martial arts training she easily fought him off. He grasped at her, froth on his lips, grimacing, then succumbed while reaching to choke her. She took his passcode and wallet, then slipped out the gates, Karl's blue eyes staring over her shoulder in fascination at the body. He cried out.

“Hush, Karl.”

“No. Afraid. Hurt.”

She slipped a hand over his head and tucked him in closely. “I know. I'm sorry, baby. It can't be helped.”

“No!” He struggled against her, reaching for the guard.

“Karl, we have to go.”

“Back,” he said. “I need a touch.”

She knew this about him, that he became stubborn with his compassion. He was a genetic empath and could no more ignore pain than fly. She nodded and let him go. “Hurry, please. It's dangerous.”

The man's eyes opened feebly. The child held his hand out to the mouth, then closed his fist as if catching something. He gave his toddler smile. “It's okay. Everything's okay now.” He turned back to her. “I can leave now.” The guard was dead.

She made her way to Paris, got a job as an escort. Six months later, IKG Farben was just outside of Berlin. She escaped with numerous drugs in a backpack full of high-tek lab equipment. The guard's wallet contained an American Express, a Mastercard, and two hundred Euros. She took a chance the next day and bought some expensive jewelry with the card, testing it first on a few cheap items. It passed. She pitched the card in the dumpster when she was done. She paid cash for tickets to Paris.

It took weeks of living in a cheap hotel in the fifteenth arrondissement, a quiet district, to shuffle the drugs and jewelry. Mingling with the criminal element was a snap with her training, but she had to get to the right people to sell her peculiar goods. She moved the lab equipment for a paltry few hundred Euros, though it was clearly worth tens of thousands. She wound up with 2300 Euros, not enough for very long.

She learned to steal and got good at it. Her cover was a prostitute, which she never had to do. Soon, she made her way as an escort. The money got better, but she hated leaving Karl with the iffy baby-sitters she found. And she hated being so exposed. She needed to go hidden deeper.

the call came on a client's cell phone, at an expensive restaurant. He seemed surprised and disgruntled, but handed her the phone.

"Martha, at long last I've found you." The voice had an odd swashbuckler's accent and sounded disturbingly not human.

"Well, glad to meet you, but I'm with a client right now. If you want an escort, contact me later."

"Oh, I daresay I need no escort. It would do little for me."

"Well, sorry I couldn't help." She hung up and the phone rang again before she could hand it back. The man indicated with a tip of the head that she should answer it. He seemed nervous.

"Don't hang up on me again or Karl will disappear."

"How did you know about that?"

"I know much more than you do. I know, for example, that your escape was intended to happen."

"I need to go to the bathroom," she told the client. He waffled between miffed and anxious. "Tonight's free," she told him. "And comes with a surprise." That made him happy and she slipped off to the bathroom.

"What's your name?" she asked the voice.

"A difficult question, and the answer would mean nothing to you. Someday, it might."

"What do you want?"

"I want to keep you hidden, but I can only do so for a limited time."

"Hidden? How did you find me?"

"I have reasons for your safety."

"What are those?"

"You have a destiny, though of lesser import. Karl has the real destiny."

"What is it?"

"We could say it changes the tiniest amount, every second. I want his destiny some time hence, others want the fate he would have were he discovered now."

"What are those?"

"Does it matter? Don't you simply want to be with him longer?"

"If he's found now, they'll take him?"

"Most certainly. They want him very badly."

"Who?"

"IKG Psinetics. And...others."

"That's a front. Who's behind?"

"Ah, very complicated, that answer."

"Tell me."

“I fear it would only confuse you further. But, you must leave Paris. Make no attempt to lose me. It would not work.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m keeping you safe. I don’t know how long I can. Do you have need of money?”

“For what? What do I need to do?”

She almost heard the smile. “Nothing. It’s solely for your assistance. It will be some time before I contact you again. Adieu.”

She left the cell phone at the maitre-d station and slipped out. When she arrived home, the baby-sitter, with a shrug, handed her a bag someone had delivered. Inside was half a million Euros.

The voice found her a second time, in Marseille, eighteen months later, outside of a boat turned into a puppet theatre where she had taken Karl. It told her she would not be called again until they had to separate. Things were looking for her. There was a need to minimize contact. She had to change location once more.

“Prepare your young charge to be...discharged,” followed by a soft metallic laugh. The voice was gender neutral, the octaves and registers fractured. “The next call will be your last.”

A few years after, in Grenoble, a payphone on the wall of a tabac rang. She stopped a brief second in a dead stare. Hurrying on, she tugged the young boy along faster. He deserved protection, his uniqueness demanded it. She chose left, walked down a short, narrow alley which cut off the sun and chilled. They emerged into a small plaza, marked by its barrenness. A payphone on a solitary square pole sounded. She lowered her head and used her peripheral vision to glance behind. No one was visible. She towed faster, but he bogged against her.

“Hurry, Karl.”

“Mama, ca fait mal a la main.”

She loosened her grip. His hand felt cold. He couldn’t get sick, not now. “Please don’t call me that. I can’t be your mother.”

“But I always-”

“You can’t think that way anymore.” She wanted to stop, put her hands on his little shoulders and tell him she was sorry. He should know that whatever happened, she loved him. But she couldn’t do that here. They had to keep moving, trying to outrun. “Come on.”

A narrow rue, there was only one man ahead of them. She passed him and his cell phone sounded as she emerged onto a busy thoroughfare. He answered it, then called to her back.

“Madame? C’est bizarre, mais c’est a vous.” He held out the phone to her. She took it, like news of a sister’s death and the man moved away, politely ignoring the conversation.

“I can hide you no longer.”

“Me?” She looked at the boy, who watched un cocinelle, a red ladybug, on his arm. “Or us?”

“Both. I cannot keep your location secret if you remain together.” The voice spoke casually,

almost bored sounding, and with an Errol Flynn flourish.

“How long do I have?”

“Separate. One, or both of you, must be in a different city within three days.” The voice paused. “Three.” It chuckled.

She squeezed her right shoulder into a doorway which smelled of old urine and fast food, trying to block out an unseen menace. The modern structure, built to look ancient, dropped an angular shadow around them.

“Why are they after us?”

“After you? I would say him, really. Karl will change things. Significantly.”

“How?”

“He possesses unique talents, one skill in particular. You have your salient features also, but yours seem more specific to a particular power. Two, really. I wouldn’t give a fig for them.”

She stroked the boy’s hair nervously. “Who are you?”

“Hmm. Call me Juniper.”

The passersby dotting downtown Grenoble shone the spotlight of attention upon the tiny drama, razoring focus on her anxiety, fear, and aloneness. The men glanced at her beauty, the women at her pain. She looked at a blue slice of September sky and gaged on a shred of hope.

“Can’t you get more time. A week?”

“No.” She heard what sounded like a knife thunking into wood and vibrating.

“Why not?”

“Can’t be bothered? It isn’t my sphere of excellence. The others are superior to me at that, Deeply Named.”

“What? What did you call me?”

“Oh? You haven’t heard this. That is interesting. Deeply Named. It’s your title. By the way, I have a message for you. Would you like it?”

“Yes. Yes, of course I would.”

“Reach out with your left hand. No peeking. Five four three two one.”

She felt an envelope touch her outstretched hand, and accepted it. “From whom?”

“It might take some time for you to understand what you find inside.”

“Is it from you?”

The voice made a throat clearing noise. “Don’t read it until you and the boy are separated. Three days, or they will find you.”

48 hours after, she walked through Grenoble holding the young boy’s hand. He was wearing a black nylon backpack, large for his size, and heavy, a bit, for his strength.

“Would you like to get lunch, Karl?” She wanted to say his name, though it was painful to do so. “At Les Dalton? It’s still your favorite?”

“Oui. D’accord.” He was smiling, happy, wearing a blue baseball cap. For luck, he said. Martha chewed her lip.

“Aloneliness,” she whispered to herself.

He looked up at her.

“Qu’est ce que ca veut dire?”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself. Speak English, little rabbit.”

“What did you say?” He skipped his feet back and forth, in the manner of children who want to move, but not to move ahead. “What does aloneliness mean?”

“It doesn’t matter. Somewhere between loneliness and alone.”

He considered the puzzle, turned his head forward again, and bounced it from side to side in rhythm with his feet. He had wide, bright eyes and an open expression, curious and interested. Keenly intelligent, but not in a science/math way. Karl engaged socially with a phenomenal ease. He would see a group of children playing, and, almost invisibly, become one of their group, though never the leader. Every time, they accepted him as if he had long been a part.

He learned French with no more difficulty than tying his shoes. Karl was attractive and charming, but not in a way that caused too much memory of him, which was good. Karl needed to disappear. Rather, Karl needed to stay disappeared.

She had taught him much in the four years of tutelage. Martha’s many trainings during her own childhood, matters of espionage, modes of survival, languages and non verbal communication if one did not know the language, means of very rapid language acquisition, techniques to disappear, as much as he could absorb, she taught. She invented games for him to play and learn, so that he could stay alive, possibly even thrive, in their harsh and bizarre milieu.

Finally, she understood her destiny or perhaps her mission in life. She had shaped it in the hours since the call. Her nerves, the fibers of who she was, realigned as she oriented her mind to this goal, her true work. It might and probably would consume her entire life, perhaps cause her death, and require inhuman patience. Her existence might be spent waiting, watching, then dying of old age, having done nothing. One brutal act of separation lay ahead, before the waiting and hiding began. Not began, but entered a new level, *aloneliness*.

He was born to do so. Not dying, or ceasing to be involved. But to be invisible and untraceable, seemingly designed that way. It was an innate skill in him, one which she had learned, been forced to learn, painfully, and was good at. But he was impeccable, completely natural. He was invisible, not by being separate, but by being part of. He had the touch of blending in, fading into crowds, causing another’s focus of gaze to slide away, just past the shoulder. The best way was not to cut their interest, but rather slip it off like water. There were techniques: looking over the other person’s shoulder, or back over one’s own, as if something interesting was there, or ‘going beige,’ so that one was not interesting, even dropping money surreptitiously to shift attention away, or making the other person self-conscious by staring for an instant at them. But Karl had that unteachable skill, which Martha did not.

He could vanish.

In the larger circle of disappearing, Martha had taught Karl more sophisticated technique: creating trails in other cities, leaving multiple witnesses who were certain you had gone to a false location, appearing on paper elsewhere by using credit cards, hotel room records, and legal

documents, paying people to plant evidence, but making them think they were doing something else. He was too young to understand it, but she would do it for him. Eventually, he would understand. If he lived. If he remained free.

Why so soon? Painful irony, to leave him now, only to wait for years. She had more to teach him, more to learn from him. He needed love and had no one else to offer it. And so did she. It was not fair, but fair was useless, probably dangerous.

They ate in one of the sizeable plazas in Grenoble, a simple affair with square stone pillars creating a covered walkway and a large, central open space made of large and rough, rectangular stone tiles. She vaguely watched the low pulse of the fountain. He ordered an American burger, fries, and a coke, then attacked it. She got a salad and a milkshake. The taste and smell nauseated and she couldn't force herself to eat. Gripped in the cold bright squareness of the steel chair, she could only sit frozen and watch him recede. Each tick of the hand on the church clock measured her last moments of sensibility. She had always known the day would come. Technology could no longer be outrun.

She couldn't tell him much more of value. Most of it was explained in a note in his pack. Places where money was hidden, the little she knew of his true identity, what to say if he was caught. Never to mention her name to anyone. She wrote everything except why, because she had no answer for that. She couldn't tell him what blocked their happiness. She might not want to if she knew; the well might be too dark. At the end, the most important – “Je t'aime toujours,” *I will always love you.*

She had to believe he could stay hidden. He knew how. Just tap into who he was and combine it with the training she had given him.

She ached for more time, longed to see him grow up. What a beautiful youth he would be, and she couldn't share it. They would never meet again.

She brushed something off his coat. “Let's play our game.”

“Which one?”

“Crowds. Blend into the crowd. I want to play it longer this time. More than a few hours. Keep your pack. Disappear.” She leaned over, lifted his chin with a finger and held it.

“Karl, you must disappear.”

She had been forced to learn psi-techniques as a child. Though she hated them, she used them on him frequently, planting knowledge and tactics which his young mind could not understand, but would be useful later. Now this one: disappear.

“What?” He didn't understand. Or he did and didn't want to. He wanted to pretend they were just playing one of their spy games for a little while longer. She let him play because she needed to pretend, too, just for one moment more.

“Go, disappear. Into the crowd.”

She dug her nails into her palm, using pain to drive against the tears.

“Where do we meet? When do we meet?”

She couldn't lie, couldn't tell the truth. “Look in your bag in one hour. There's a note.”

He pulled up his shoulders, a little boy who needed to be a man. “Anything else?”

“No, little rabbit.” She raised her head, then exhaled with a steady push to cut the anguish for another second. She looked back at him, put her hands on his face, and bit her lip. “There’s nothing else.” She choked the words out.

“Are you OK, mama?”

She nodded with a weak smile, and he turned to walk away.

“Wait. Come here.” She hugged him, kissed his head, and held the kiss for a long minute. Thankfully, he hugged her back and asked no more questions. She spun him around quickly so that he wouldn’t see the welling in each eye. “Go,” she said, with a false cheer and a slight push. “Don’t look back.”

He turned and left, humming, then disappeared into the crowd.

“Go, Karl,” she whispered.

musketeer

Juniper had to die. Difficult, Dartagnan knew, and unfortunate, but unavoidable. Dartagnan had no reason for lying to Martha and telling her he was Juniper. He did it on a whim. It meant nothing to her anyway. He liked the wrongness of it. Juniper would never have manipulated a human in such a specific way. Where Juniper operated in power structures; Dartagnan dealt with individuals. And he desperately wanted to meet them, but he couldn't - not yet.

Dartagnan had many human Named, and manipulated their lives for the purpose of study and curiosity. He loved to create heroes, get strange couples together, encourage people to try things they would not otherwise, sabotage people's dreams and watch, then create unexpected opportunities when the people were at their worst.

He once tortured a child to death and forced the parents to watch in separate rooms. He served them coffee and tea, but would not let them leave the room with a large glass window looking into the chamber and giant screen televisions showing the details of the suffering. He studied the parents after that, recording their divorce in minute detail and biographically writing their lives. He found it fascinating.

He actually considered the Dartagnan aspect, his primary face, to be that of a Romantic. He loved nature, theoretically. Free expression, high, beautiful things, the common man, lofty ideals. He strove to master paradox as part of his persona. And to be more human seeming. He had read all the books ever written by humans. He wondered if he could be human and longed for it. He would gladly give up all his power to understand humanity first-hand. It seemed impossible, but he knew impossible was the specialty of his type, especially ...*him*. He knew if he found the right combination, he might manage it without being destroyed.

The quest had led him to develop Dartagnan as a sort of lost human type. The great thinkers of the past, the Renaissance man, and the swashbuckler all rolled into one. A super being. Which was easy for an M-E. Except that people related to him as if it were a farce. Which it was, to him. But he knew they took him seriously. He played this, felt it to be ironic and paradoxical. He was a serious force in human existence, yet he managed to be taken comically much of the time.

It was his masterpiece.

He studied humour. He created funny interactions between people, manipulating life like a situation comedy. Two people, one fat and friendly, the other a silent loner, wrecked cars and got in a fight. Dartagnan saw it on a home video humour program and created situations where they repeatedly met afterwards. He would put both of them on the phone together, then listen as they yelled at each other for it. He got the fat one fired and then got the loner's company to hire him. They had to work together in a small building, and he gave both of them large pay increases, but created other financial problems for them so that they would not leave the job. Dartagnan recorded it all. He wondered if it was funny, perversely decided never to ask a human for a ruling on the matter.

He studied art extensively, creating a human form to wander in the Mansworld Louvre and other museums for days at a time. He would discuss literature with human professors of note, sometimes keen for their observations, sometimes tying them up in knots with logic puzzles and

character contradictions. What joy!

His persona learned to paint, sculpt, and play many instruments. He was especially good at harp, though when his work was reviewed by humans, they always said things like ‘technically perfect, but lacking in that *je ne sais quoi*, the human striving’. He thought frustration would be the proper response, but was incapable of it. He engineered some extremely frustrating situations in people’s lives and watched to see if he could mirror and possibly even comprehend their feeling.

He had a special fondness for tragedy and watched all recorded movies and other records which were labeled as such. Many of them seemed not so tragic to him. Oedipus Rex, for example. Too dry, like reading an ingredients list. Or MacBeth. He seemed a mere tool, and Lady MacBeth got what she deserved. He often felt he was missing some subtlety of human experience, just out of reach. He wanted it more and more.

He created human tragedies, frequently. He studied the reactions of people, hoping to understand grief and response to grief. But there was a barrier. Humans were on one side; he was on the other.

He needed Karl’s special skills to cross the barrier, to open it. Of course, Karl needed hard persuasion. He surely wouldn’t do it unless Martha was in danger. Soon enough. And D’Artagnan needed others with more special skills to create the proper conditions to cross. Unfortunately, the Benefactor and the General were involved in a multi-year cold war. That had to be addressed before anything else. Juniper had to die, too. That would be dangerous.

skin pressed under a blade

The General dressed in his field khakis: button up shirt and trousers, olive green 5 centimeter wide pistol belt, white lanyard of command buttoned inside the left epaulet, brass fleur de lis on both shoulders, and a khaki field cap. *Vetements de travail*, he called them. Working clothes. He was French, with a heavy accent, and used his native tongue exclusively to teach strategy and offer pointed insights. Otherwise, used English as needed. He owned a palace and a military headquarters, the latter on an island. He preferred the island, but the palace had its uses.

He pondered his upcoming interrogation of the Benefactor’s agent, the Mechanic. The Sergeant had captured the man and had also interrogated him, under orders, including significant torture. But he had been torture proofed, and never spoke a word. He was catatonic. Things had been moving in a funny way, a way the General could not see into. He didn’t know what was happening and he disliked that. Win or lose was less important - he had to see the battle in play, know the rules, and play an expert game. He had to be a master of the situation. Only the Mechanic could tell him what he needed to know.

He walked through the underground cement walled corridors of his compound to the interrogation room. The Sergeant stood outside, feet a half meter apart, hands clasped behind the back, standing straight in at ease posture. As the General approached, he snapped to attention.

“Doucez vous, Sergeant. “

He relaxed back to at ease. “He’s ready for interrogation, sir.”

“I will enter alone.”

“Sorry, sir, can’t let that happen, not with him.”

He nodded. “Comme vous souhaitez. May I enter first?”

“Prefer not, but as you want. Being captured was not on his resume. His capture is a ruse for something else.”

The General opened the door. Inside the bare concrete room, the Mechanic lay strapped to a metal frame, naked and unmoving.

“Monsieur le Mechanic. Parlez avec moi.”

His eyes snapped open. He stared at the ceiling a few seconds, eyes twitching to different points, stopping, twitching again.

“What does he do?”

“A memory recall device, most likely. His persona was inaccessible to us. Our best guess is a triggered catatonia, base condition: his capture.”

“It ends only because of my arriving?”

“No doubt. He’ll probably enter an intermediary state.”

The Mechanic tried to sit up, then realized he was strapped in place.

“I come authorized to negotiate.” The voice didn’t inflect.

“Free him, Sergeant. What have you to offer?”

He sat up after his straps slipped away. “We can open the gate.” He spoke woodenly, and sat the same.

“How?”

“We need the Deeply Named.”

“Martha. Why do you need her?”

“The gate will be blocked until she and the Benefactor meet.”

“Why?”

“You do not know?”

“Tell me.”

“I cannot answer that question.”

“He’s got pretty sophisticated psychic defenses about certain information, sir. We did some DNA testing: his loyalty is genetically encoded. It’s difficult to find much. We have found an information store, probably laced with traps. It clearly has good information based on indexing, but it’s dangerous for Trident. Do you want us to examine it? I strongly prefer not, by the way.”

“No. You are correct: this is nothing. Why does he behave in such manner?”

“Part of the conditioning. He’s in a mental glaze, a form of torture proofing. Most of his persona is absent. He probably can’t remember many things and others are locked away.”

“Tell to me of the Deeply Named.”

“We cannot find her. You must. Send her to us. We will share what we learn of reconsciousness and the gate, to a point. Later, we will need the one you call L’Innocent.”

“You need Karl. Difficile, votre request. From where is Martha?”

“She is our first clone, created in IKG labs.” His eyes stared without focus and never blinked.

“The clone from who?”

The Mechanic’s right eye, mouth and head twitched. His jet-black hair never moved.

“Le clone de qui? Sergeant, make him speak.”

“Trident, punch him with the nano nerve stimulator.”

He screamed, and began writhing. The Sergeant let it go for ten seconds.

“Enough, Trident.”

“Tell me, who is the Deeply Named?”

Nothing. Trident jolted him again. And again.

“Who is the Benefactor?”

He tried to answer, began choking, foamy bits of spittle flew from his mouth. He fell over, turning blue, and slid to the floor.

“Don’t answer that question,” the Sergeant said. The Mechanic was on hands and knees, vomiting bile, but no longer choking. The Sergeant picked him up and set him on the table, brought him a glass of water. “It will kill him to answer that.”

The General nodded. “I want the gate open.”

The Mechanic drained the water. He set the glass down, cleared his throat, and smiled. The Sergeant bladed off a fraction, ready to strike or defend.

“As do we, General. Shall we negotiate?”

He coughed into his hand and a plain white business card appeared in it, hidden from Trident, the Sergeant’s wrist device. He offered it to the General, who looked at the Sergeant, who slid the device arm behind his back to keep the card hidden from Trident’s sensors. The Sergeant scanned the Mechanic visually, then reached for the card. The Mechanic pulled it back, indicated the General by a nod. Getting a slight ‘No’ head-signal, the Mechanic brought his hand down slowly and palmed the card, holding it between index and middle finger, the edge not touching the palm.

No one mentioned it.

“We’ve located Karl.”

“You found L’Innocent? Excellent. Where?”

“He’s in Lyons.”

“He stayed so close to Grenoble?” The General looked into the corner. “Strange, but brilliant.”

“No doubt, being who he is. You have to do the project, General. We can’t. You must bring the team together, one which includes Karl. You must gain his trust, as well. There are many obstacles to crossing the gate.”

The General shrugged. “Your situation is unchanged?”

“We need Martha. You have to find her for us. Send her to us willingly. Nothing happens

until then, and for a time after. We will block it until we have her.”

“I think this is what must happen. I will do these things.” He turned to leave. “Sergeant, send me RJ Sublime. We will have need of him to form our team.”

The Mechanic nodded, then offered the card to the Sergeant. Holding his eyes locked to the Mechanic’s, who returned the stare impassively, the Sergeant took it, held it palmed, but pinched between middle and index finger, edge not touching his palm, as the Mechanic had held it.

The Sergeant stayed back to examine the card. **benefactor** was the only printed word. There was some tek on one of the short edges - a computer interface, and writing on the back, a tiny, neat cursive of many lines, too small for any human save the Sergeant to read, except the title. *Recipe to fell a god.*

mask of power

Every movement by the Benefactor counted to the purpose, a constant calculus guiding each subtle gesture to advantage. That was a critical difference with the General. He did things because they were proper. Often, he lost advantage by doing so. But he retained, perhaps, a higher status. The Benefactor would always be a contender; but the General was the seat of true power. Not because he had more. He didn’t. Because he *wore it better than his opponent.*

Though the Sergeant was American to the marrow, he still respected the General’s Frenchness, especially when he witnessed the subtlety with which he wove social grace and power. The way he made his lifestyle the master of his power and not the reverse, as the Benefactor seemed to do. Respect was proper. The General operated at a level of diplomacy forever beyond the Sergeant, just as the Sergeant operated in the realm of uncompromising reality, details where the General could only watch.

Despite the technical hierarchy of the two, they were a team. The General relied on the Sergeant’s knife of precision as much as the Sergeant relied on the General’s peerless insights into warfare and human motives.

The Sergeant had never seen the General seem obsessed before, which was no small statement, because he was a very focused man. He was convinced that he had to find Martha, and seeking her dictated every movement. He had further goals, but his entire plan was blocked until he found her. The Benefactor had assured that.

The Sergeant could not see how she was such a key to the overall picture and questioned the approach. The General waved him away, saying, in French, “You maintain the tactical view and I will maintain the strategic. You are dismissed.”

The Sergeant considered it part of his duties to say what he thought, and the General agreed. He could not see the details in the overall picture, and this was one of the things for which he needed his man-at-arms. He was the greatest strategist in history, however. He had uncanny skills at creating victory before the battle was joined. During an engagement, though, he would become lost in the haze of minutiae. The Sergeant was supposed to speak up, but the General

made the choice.

The General walked through his palace in southern France with RJ Sublime, the gambler from Georgia, pontificating on the perils of engaging the enemy without knowing him. He spoke about the great generals of the past, especially Napoleon, whom he had studied extensively, and Ghengis Khan, whom he greatly respected, using them as examples for his lesson. He stopped to admire a small statue of the god Jove in an alcove. He had hired an agent to steal it for him from a museum.

“I could have bought it for less than the cost of the theft, but this would have defeated the purpose.”

“The purpose?”

“Oui, the great man is his own law.”

Sublime shrugged, and responded, emphasizing his Georgia gentleman’s accent. “That is one possible opinion, to be sure.”

“Monsieur Sublime, I have a mission for you. I would like you to find a man by the name of LuvRay Chose. I need that he comes to France. He can find Martha where you and the Sergeant have failed.”

“Who is he? Why is he so special?”

“He lives in the desert of Mexico. A very... distinct person, a man quite close to the elements.”

“Why would I do something so foolish as to attempt to capture this LuvRay Chose? Combat is not my forté. That would appear to be more of a Sergeant mission to me.”

“No, do not capture. Persuade him to come. You are a diplomat.”

“Why would I agree to persuade him?”

“Because you want to know as much as I what will be unlocked by finding Martha.”

The General was right, of course. Sublime obviously wanted to know. But he predictably had to play coy a bit.

“I don’t know,” he said as if he did. “Maybe it isn’t so terribly important to me.” He turned the accent on high. The General looked him up and down, evaluating something on auction.

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