

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 fort . 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.

high desert

RJ Sublime rode into the high desert of Mexico. Locals called it the mountain desert. Legend had it that LuvRay Chose had been raised by wolves. Then, later, by Indians. But nobody really knew. Or if they did, they weren't telling RJ Sublime. The General had sent him on this crazy mission to find this wolf-man and convince him to go to France. It was nuts, but RJ liked the occasional outside straight. And the General had made it count with his peculiar way of applying leverage. RJ could have said no, but he would wind up going anyway.

His Spanish was rusty, but serviceable. He brushed up on the plane ride. In Toahultaca, he managed to buy a horse and supplies - water jugs, a tent, the usual things. He spent a week talking to people, collecting pieces of the legend. A man, raised by wolves and Indians, who lived alone in the desert. The people were afraid of him, thought he was a demon or a spirit or something different. They called him "il cabrenezo", the cursed wanderer. One after another, they pointed in the same direction, into the hills.

He rode in for four days, just riding around, looking, with no idea how to find LuvRay. He enjoyed it, but it was wild and he slept with a pistol under his blanket. He woke up, the fifth morning, saw a wolf looking at him from a few feet away. He reached down slowly, pulled out the pistol. He fired into the air. The wolf turned and ran away.

"Good," said a voice behind him. "You wanted not kill. I want you live."

Sublime sat up quickly and turned. The man had black hair and eyes and a lean face. He wore leather clothes, like a modern Indian and sat on a rock, looking calmly at Sublime. "Who you are?"

"RJ Sublime. Are you LuvRay Chose?"

"Shoze is name sound. Yes, I am. Why you are here?"

"I'm looking for you."

LuvRay nodded. "I thought. I dreamed. What is your want of me?"

"I want you to go to France, to find somebody. Her name is Martha. I have passports, documents, money and credit cards. A flight is booked, and train tickets."

LuvRay didn't answer. He just walked away. Sublime spent two more days there, waiting. He looked, but knew he wouldn't find the man. He could only wait for LuvRay to contact him. When he started a fire two nights later to cook, he decided to leave the following morning. LuvRay had made up his mind apparently. He wouldn't go.

Sublime returned to the fire after taking a piss; LuvRay was stirring the pot. He turned to Sublime, opened his hand and dropped some things into the chili.

"I go, RJ Sublime, if you go me and meet triatee dhan."

"Who? What?"

"Not know word. Spareets from dry earth?"

"Spirits? Of the desert?" He laughed. "Lord, I do believe I'm in the wrong movie."

Sublime walked over to his horse, took out his Swiss Army knife and an onion. "Show me the way." He looked at the wrinkled nubs in the chili, stirred them in. "Peyote?" He cut up the onion, dumped it in as well.

"No. Different. Only Indian know this. Make vision."

An hour after they ate the chili, RJ handed LuvRay the bottle of Mescal he had bought in the last town. He was feeling the onset of the cactus buds. LuvRay sipped a tiny amount, handed it back.

"You bring me death."

"What?" Sublime was looking at the stars and they were looking back. "I don't operate that way."

"Triatee dhan show my death. They say now. You bring on horse."

Sublime sat up. "I don't usually kill people, LuvRay. Why would I kill you?"

"I no say you kill me."

"All...all right. What did the ghosts show you, then?"

"Only what I say. No more." He looked at Sublime. "When animal die, they no bury. They walk away, no think. I seed many wolf die. Elders. All my wolf are died. Time I was cub. All."

"What about the wolf I saw tonight? What's his name?"

"She. No name. Wolf has no name. Only man has name. Her pack chase away. Alone. I take her. Now I leave, send her alone again. Soon, she die."

"Why? She needs you for food?"

"Some. More is wolf die if alone. No pack, no reason for live. Like this."

As the buds and the Mescal combined, Sublime gradually lost touch with reality. He started to float in space, to lose track of everything. He saw faces, the cactus and plants began to talk and move about, each movement a symbol of unnamable fears.

"No," said LuvRay. "No this way."

LuvRay taught him. He needed to take the intensity, bring it to his body, not get lost in mind. He needed to open it outwards, not inwards. "Lay on back, speak for stars, after, speak for ground and plants and animals. This good way you."

So he did. And the stars sang, in a language out of the knowledge of man which he did not know, but understood. The stars held him, hovering in an embrace beyond time, in a wordless space where nothing needed to be true. Hours later, LuvRay stood above him.

"Now you meet fire."

LuvRay squatted and reached into the fire, grabbed a burning ember and held it in his open palm, unharmed. LuvRay smiled at him, handed him the ember. He dropped it, looked at the blister on his palm, looked back at LuvRay. He stood and began walking away, turned his head and motioned for Sublime to follow him.

They walked into the desert. The fire dwindled and disappeared. Sublime no longer knew how to get back to the campsite. LuvRay cut limbs off a cactus, sliced it up and they ate it. They walked more, LuvRay occasionally stopping, smelling the wind in a blissful way. He bent down,

picked a handful of earth and crumbled it under RJ's nose.

"Smell." He almost smiled. "No place ever have same smell."

They came to a cave and sat inside.

"My home. No other man seed. You are first." LuvRay looked back out to the desert. "And last."

A wolf walked up.

"Is that the same wolf?"

But LuvRay was gone. Afraid, he turned to the wolf, who lowered its head onto its paws, staring at him. He eased down, looking it in the eyes. They lay like that for a long time, neither moving.

"Run." Sublime jumped up. Had the wolf said it? "Run. Run with me."

So he ran. He found the freedom of the desert, running with the animal. He ran in the bright night, blessed by ghosts to fly over rocks and holes. The wolf loped at his side, eager to fly with a new friend. The still, cool air took them together, turning into a breeze as they moved, luring the beast and the man to a communion before such things as wolves and men found themselves apart.

His mind was pushed into a boundary past the sky, buried deep in the cool earth. Nothing and no one owned them, and they were nothing at all. Just animals in the wild, happy and free. They ran, unencumbered by the pretension of humanity.

They stopped, rolled together, played together. RJ stared into the beast's eyes without thinking of time. He understood something never before guessed at. He was satisfied that it had no words. The pair ran some more. They arrived at the campsite as the sun rose. LuvRay was not there.

unreflecting boots

The Sergeant looked down at his black high-lacing boots. He loved them. Danner boots, the choice for outdoor professionals. His philosophy was that durable, dependable, waterproof footwear would get one through all sorts of troublesome situations. A soldier can't make the world conform to his plans and schemes, but with the right boots he can kick the merde out of any nasty surprises. And he was about to do that to one wolf and Indian raised no nation wildman.

Not that the Sergeant had any particular problem with Luvray Chose. Far from it. He respected and liked Luvray, at least by reputation. He admired the man. Luvray seemed happy when things got tough. He obviously liked sleeping in the dirt and the cold. He was no stranger to battle, either.

The Sergeant was not going to fight Luvray for personal reasons at all. In fact, he never did anything for personal reasons. He just followed orders. He liked it. A woman once asked why he was that way and he had no answer. "Probably my years of training," he replied. But that wasn't it. The Sergeant had been genetically encoded to derive deep satisfaction from taking orders in an appropriate chain of command.

He was a tactician to the bone, able to carry out any order below the level of 'overtake that country' or 'formulate policy for such and such a situation.' He would be lost in diplomatic terrain and if the General had, as some sort of joke, ordered him to go to a party and make friends or get a date, he might have clarified parameters. "What sort of friends, SIR?" He felt the urge to snap out the word "sir" if he didn't comprehend the orders he were given, as if the loudness of the word could somehow rearrange the sentence into a more comprehensible arrangement.

But these were orders that made sense, orders that he liked. He had also been genetically encoded to enjoy fighting, and to excel at it. His pain tolerance bested an elephant's. He was a laboratory of humanimal bioengineering designed for a single purpose: to carry out with no question and no concern the orders of his commander, in this case, the General, also a bioengineered being.

They had been designed to work with each other.

Although he had no troops per se, he had issued many commands. He possessed an almost primal ability to force others to obey his orders in violent or deep stress situations. People instinctually knew that he would find the means to carry the day, and simply did what he said feeling that was the best way to get out alive. He could read people on the spot, seeing the depth of their ability to take stress, and what they could do.

He considered just dropping in front of Luvray, saying 'surprise' and going at him, but the soldier in him couldn't sacrifice the combat initiative in such a stupid and deliberate manner. Surprise, or definite initiative as he called it, was a critical advantage and should never be sacrificed.

He had seen old films where a soldier would yell "hey" or scream something unintelligible and then leap, an idiot's maneuver. As if someone would be more vulnerable after being yelled at than if they suspected nothing at all. He had to force himself to watch such stupidity when he

wanted to line up those fools masquerading as soldiers and give them a proper asschewing from a Sergeant.

It was something he never actually did because, technically, he had no soldiers under his command, but he damn well knew how. He could chew a soldier's ass all the way off if needed. It was part of being a Sergeant. And if one of his theoretical men ever announced their presence before attacking, he would. He would chew it off and shove it back up the hole. An attacker should never give up the element of surprise. Just hit someone. And running at them from the front? Hit them from behind. But then he was a soldier, not a movie director and maybe it made for more drama. He certainly didn't plan for any drama in the taking of LuvRay Chose. Still, LuvRay had a hell of a reputation, a mythos, really, and he wanted a real fight with him.

Commitment, along with surprise, was another critical factor. The Sergeant knew he would complete the mission. Then when the A plan didn't work, he found another way.

He knew LuvRay had keen senses, beyond the ordinary. He would be difficult to surprise, and the Sergeant liked the challenge. The plan: wait on a bench at the top of the train platform, reading a newspaper. Then, when LuvRay walked past, hit him with a neural stun device while walking toward him. Catch him before he fell and act like a friend helping someone lightheaded to their car.

He wasn't sure why the General wanted the capture. After all, LuvRay was working for them in some way. "I wish to meet him," was all the General had said.

No problem. He sat on the bench with his paper, waiting for the wolf.

LuvRay looked out the window of the train as it pulled into the station. This was a bad place for him. Too many people. Any people was too many for him. Paris had far too many people.

He looked at his shoes. They had hard soles. He preferred soft soles, moccasins, or no shoes at all. But for some reason he wore hiking shoes. Jeans, a t-shirt, and a leather vest, all natural. LuvRay didn't like synthetic fabrics. He disliked spending too much time indoors, too. The plane ride over had made him almost crazy.

The train stopped. He shouldered a small pack. As he neared the end of the platform, he felt it, a not rightness. He slipped low, moving behind the crowd by instinct. Saw it. Newspaper. A man reading a newspaper. He broke into a loping run the opposite way.

The Sergeant took off after him, stun tagger in hand. It was a limited use weapon. He kicked off two shots. Both hit the pack. Great instincts the man had. The next shot dropped someone in the crowd. It was getting too messy. He had to change tactics. He tossed the gun aside, moved to take him by hand.

He dodged between two people, and LuvRay's pack was flying at his face. He knocked it aside, but it cost him close to a second. LuvRay's feet could be seen, disappearing between an old woman's legs, under a bench sandwiched between two kiosks. The Sergeant knew he couldn't spare the time to go around.

"Bougez vous," he yelled at the people LuvRay had gone under. He ran at the bench. It was backed to another bench, where people leaned back, trying to stay away from the man who had suddenly flown from underneath.

The Sergeant thumbed a tiny pellet from his belt. He didn't want to use tek. He wanted to go combat primitive, perhaps out of respect for LuvRay. But it was creating too much attention. He leapt, low, to place one foot on the back of both benches, then to leverage that into maximum height, or change of direction, depending on whether he could see LuvRay in the crowd or not. He did, and opted for the change in direction toward LuvRay.

He turned it into a dive, intending to land on top of him with a strike to the temple. Severe disorientation if successful, possibly unconsciousness. But it required total commitment to the maneuver. He flipped the pellet, which struck LuvRay on the left buttock and dispelled its charge. His sciatic nerve flared into pain, visible by the jerking response. His left leg should be without motive power.

LuvRay twisted, turning to a fighting crouch as the Sergeant landed. He overshot, having expected LuvRay to keep going after the pellet hit him. He landed to LuvRay's right, forced into a last minute roll, but managed to put a knee strike on LuvRay's hand, forcing it into his face. The Sergeant rolled through, putting a few feet between the two of them so that LuvRay could not be on him from behind. He was up, in neutral martial arts stance as LuvRay slammed into him. LuvRay bit off the end of his right pinky, just as the Sergeant brought a left elbow strike into an acupuncture point behind his ear, knocking him unconscious.

The Sergeant stood. "Est-ce que quellqu'un as une serviette?" People were mostly fleeing the scene, but a few hardy souls stayed to watch. The French were so polite. Somebody would surely give him a handkerchief to stop the blood.

aloneliness

Karl disappeared, and Martha couldn't find him. It had been eight years since she left him in Grenoble. She kept track of his life, watching from a distance, as he grew, became a man, went to college in Lyons. Now he was gone without a trace, leaving her desperate to know where. She didn't cultivate many sources, and dropped them after a few meetings. She kept meetings years apart, as well. She had a few contacts she had only used once. Valuable, and they had no idea who she was.

She burned them all up looking for Karl, and found nothing.

Never giving a name, in small, prefurnished apartments with the blinds drawn, without acquaintances, she lived on the fringe. She owned only enough to carry in a small suitcase and relocated frequently. Sometimes she felt free and unattached, but happiness was not a thing she thought of anymore. She hungered for contact, but eschewed it to protect Karl.

She sat on the bed and read the poem given to her eight years ago, just before she left Karl in Grenoble. For the thousandth time she read it.

aloneliness

one will come who has been stripped of everything
the darkly favored will find her way home
the deeply named who can gather love the furthest

who will harvest herself into horror for the sake of another
we want nothing in this world, but to be a part
but a part of us would claim her as our own
we will find you when your hour is darkest
bring you home before our dying hour
when all that we see of what lives will breathe in sharply in fear,
not knowing you are there
what part does the deeply named play as the drama unfolds
Our hidden, beautiful best, our jewel without a flaw
a diamond appears which needs no cut, perfect already
a special treasure found in fields of hate
we cannot hope but you find us alive
we have been put to this, you and I
to wander desolate through parched lands
longing for each other
for as you remain hidden from all
so, i have chosen to not find you
i honor your wish, deeply named and darkly favored
what do these, your names, mean to you
have you hidden yourself so thorough
that you do not see the image you reflect into the world
do the rays coming from the prism through which your sun shines
flee their source and outstrip your vision
is your shadow invisible to yourself
like you, like all, no one sees the changing perceptions of our fellows
as they cast their eye upon us
no one can know what another sees in themselves
i desire to protect you, to cup you in my hand and bring you home
a new light for all of our worlds
a flower that may never die

She laid the message down.

The telephone rang. It was one of her contacts. He had a name for her: RJ Sublime.

palace

When Martha left him, Karl was desolate. It took months, even with his peculiar resilience, to get his bearings. He grew up quickly, burying the pain. His natural joy battle with the pain of being alone - of having no family, of being abandoned. He found no solace, except for going a bit crazy. He wanted to find Martha, wanted the simplest thing - someone to love and be loved by. He knew that wounded, abandoned child would never really heal. There was too much fear from the hunting world, too much mystery in his inevitable destiny. Martha's note told Karl the awful truth, between the lines. He had been created for something, some dark purpose. He had to find something, to heal it - and it was beyond all help. She didn't say that, didn't even understand it herself, but he could read it behind her words. She knew without knowing and told him without telling. The knowledge was too much for her, so she shut it away, but still told him.

Karl was a social genius who mirrored others, a highly gifted empath. His seeming madness was more of a place to hide, a cover. He had convinced himself of it. A touch of insanity rendered one invisible. People instinctively looked away; it made them uncomfortable. People don't want to know more than they need to know about a person who is crazy. Karl was actually among the sanest people. His past made him invisible and this was the result, a skin of madness over a deep reservoir of sanity, a lunatic veil to disappear behind. He needed it. Because he craved love so much, because he was made to love, but his best and only experience of it was destroyed, he was terrified of it. When all of a child's love is torn away, he cannot love properly anymore. So he forgot Martha, shoved the memory away and lived a shadow of a life. But he never quit wanting to be a little boy again, in his mother's arms.

Somebody named the Sergeant found Karl in Lyons, where he was taking classes in art and philosophy. He asked if he wanted to do something truly interesting and Karl agreed readily. He felt as if something he was waiting for had finally arrived. He was afraid - he could feel a lot of darkness in the path, but knew there was no other. He had to be who he was. So Karl left his life behind, like that. He called an acquaintance to spread the word so no one would be concerned. He told them he had a family emergency and had to go for an extended period.

They arrived at the General's palace in the middle of the night. During the drive, the Sergeant told him about a man named LuvRay and another named RJ Sublime, part of the team.

Four days later, Karl walked into the spacious dining room, holding a dinner invitation in his hand. Eight o'clock. He was right on time. A man was in the room. His face was weathered, brown, and thin. His body was very lean. He wore a tan leather vest which caught Karl's eye, Indian looking. He also wore moccasins of a similar material. Karl held out his hand and heard a laugh.

RJ Sublime. Karl had met him two days before. "He doesn't do that," RJ said. "Not every canus is domesticus."

LuvRay looked at the hand and blinked slowly.

Karl dropped it. "My name is Karl. You must be LuvRay."

“Hello, Karl.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I know soon.” LuvRay had such a deep, brooding energy, a well of wisdom carved in a being born into pain, who had known so much that fear was a stranger.

“Why did you come?”

“The Sergeant bring me. I look someone. Martha.”

Karl jerked his head up. “Martha? You’re looking for Martha?”

“Yes. You are surprising?”

“I want to see her again.” Karl closed his eyes, realized how deeply he missed her. He had not thought of her much the last few years.

“RJ, you know LuvRay already?”

“I do indeed. Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to see you this evening. How do you fare under the General’s...unusual hospitality?”

Karl and RJ talked and LuvRay stood silent until the General walked in a few moments later, followed by the Sergeant.

“Chers comrades. Shall we dine?”

The room was as big as an aircraft hangar, a combination dining, ballroom, and princely salon. It boasted four enormous chandeliers, two huge fireplaces, an assortment of velvet and satin furniture for sitting, cherry end tables, Persian rugs, art works from all over the world, including a Picasso, and a grand piano. The ceiling was over 6 meters high, supported by red marble pillars on a light blue marble floor. They sat at the long table in high oak chairs with red padded velvet seats and backs. “Your finger,” LuvRay asked the Sergeant. “How is?”

“Gone. How’s your head?”

“Is good.”

“You’re probably wondering why we’re holding you, LuvRay.”

LuvRay stared blankly at the Sergeant.

“I’m sorry about that, but we thought that you wouldn’t stay here willingly, knowing what we know about you, and we need to do something before you find Martha.”

LuvRay said nothing.

“We have another mission of critical importance. And we need you to meet Karl.”

“I no want be cage.”

“You’re free after dinner.”

LuvRay held, then tipped his head.

Dinner was sumptuous, soup in a wide, flat bowl followed by a few bites of cheese. Then an entire duck per person with a side of vegetables. There was a cheese platter afterwards and dessert. The Sergeant stood to one side, in a soldier’s relaxed posture.

“Why doesn’t he eat with us?” Sublime asked the General.

“Because officers and enlisted men do not dine together.”

“That sounds a bit lonely. It seems that there’s only the two of you in your army.”

“Who is not lonely in this life, Monsieur Sublime? And you are here, are you not, keeping me company?”

There were numerous servers moving about, changing forks, picking up plates and replacing them with bigger or smaller plates. A violinist began playing during the second course.

“This is a pretty impressive meal,” Karl said. “All these servers, a violinist. Why such an affair?”

The General looked surprised. “C’est normal. I always dine like this. At the palace, at least.”

“Where else is there?”

“Le quartier general. You call it ‘headquarters.’”

“What do you want us for, General?” Karl asked a few minutes later.

“Après diner. It is not done to discuss business during the evening meal.”

“I do it all the time,” said RJ.

“You are not French,” The General said politely, with a touch of arrogance.

Afterwards, they moved to another part of the room for a digestif, a 200 year old brandy. LuvRay smelled his, set it on the table. The General offered cigars and Sublime accepted. The Sergeant stood to the side with his hands clasped behind his back. The General motioned him to sit with them.

“Messieurs, I have some interesting proposition for you. Now is a time of great change. Ca commence. It is to begin.” He leaned forward, making eye contact with each man in turn. “Powerful forces gather on the horizon which will forever change this world. We are one of these force. If you will join me.”

“You’ll find Martha?” Karl asked.

“Yes, soon. But first, it is that we must gather some informations. The finding of Martha sets a great many things in motion. We must be prepared.”

“What happen from Martha?” LuvRay moved to sit on the floor, seeming unconscious of the social oddness.

“She will help us to enlist a powerful... ally.”

“Who?” Karl smiled, bouncing a bit on the couch. He picked up his brandy, sipped, set it down, did it again. He tapped a finger against his chin.

“The Benefactor.”

“Who’s that?”

“I cannot tell you more about this at this time.”

“What is this great change?” RJ pulled deeply on his cigar. He leaned his head back and blew upwards. A large smoke ring came out, then a smaller.

“Humanity evolves. We will surpass a barrier which now holds back mankind.”

“What might this barrier be?”

“I will be able to explain that more after we get the informations.”

“Then how do we do that?”

“Sergeant? S’il vous plaites d’expliquer.”

The Sergeant nodded. “Gentlemen, we have a mission. We have to steal the information.”

The Sergeant set a small device on the table and flipped a switch. The sound quality in the room changed slightly, became fuzzy. He explained the operation. They had to penetrate two facilities simultaneously, in the U.S. and Germany. He and LuvRay would take the more dangerous one. They had to interface with a computer system. The Sergeant would perform the technical aspects, but LuvRay would give the passcode to access the system.

“The reason LuvRay has to give the password is that my voice is on file. The system will recognize me. Even if my voice is modulated electronically, the system will recognize the modulation and lock us out. We cannot know whose voice is on file, but, because of LuvRay’s history, we know his is not. We also must inload some files.”

Karl and Sublime were to penetrate a business in Germany. The business was not so secure as it had nothing of value, except the passcode and the files. The passcode needed to be transmitted within a few minutes of being found, because it changed every fifteen minutes, at 5 after, 20 after, 35 after, and 10 till the hour.

Karl and Sublime would be given ID badges to get past security. Once inside, they had to find room 1215. They would have a key and the Sergeant would talk them through any problems. They would do simulations for two days beforehand. LuvRay and the Sergeant would not do simulations, because they had no information about their facility.

“I no do,” LuvRay said. “I smell lie.”

The Sergeant looked evenly at LuvRay, waiting. The General set down his cigar in a standing, polished silver ashtray beside his chair. “Monsieur Chose, I assure you that what we tell you is truth.”

“Maybe, but is no all.”

“The situation is very complicated. I could not possibly tell you all. I do not know all myself.”

“You hold thing away. On...attention?”

“By intention,” Karl said. He looked at the Sergeant. “You’re hiding something.”

The General nodded at the Sergeant, who leaned forward. “We can’t tell you some things right now. We’re removing an obstacle to this change. We cannot tell you what the obstacle is.”

“Why not?”

“We will, when the mission is complete. I promise, we will answer all your questions. Also, *your* mission,” he pointed his finger at Karl and then Sublime, “is not dangerous. Are you in?”

RJ nodded. “With what the General pays, absolutely.”

Karl shrugged. “Why not? If I see Martha again, de finitely. Will I see her again?”

“We will find her. After.”

The General set down his brandy, turned to look at LuvRay. “Monsieur Chose, you love

these wolves, do you not?"

At the word wolves, LuvRay's head snapped towards the General. He fixed a dark animal glare on the soldier.

"I think that you have misunderstand me. My offer is this, I will purchase the desert from which you come. I will ensure that it is left untroubled by the hand of man for many years. I believe I can ensure it remains pristine for centuries."

"If no?"

"Who can say what will happen?"

briefing

The next day, they assembled in the briefing room, a high-tech conference room. The room had no windows and was communications deadened, except for a single entry point which could be disengaged manually. They could isolate from the outside completely, if they wanted. The walls were bare save for a large screen at one end.

They took seats at the polished oval conference table.

LuvRay sat slowly. He sniffed his new world. He liked RJ. Karl was pack, a brother. He was indifferent to the Sergeant, distrusted the General. He felt a constant manipulation from him.

But LuvRay accepted human manipulation. It was, after all, not so different from wolves. Just different reasons. Any way a wolf controlled and guided the pack to a better tomorrow was good. Wolves had to fight for their lives. LuvRay was born to the fight for survival. Men fought with their own minds or against other men, but there was no struggle like the struggle of the wild. The battle to stay alive each day with his pack had shaped LuvRay. No one could understand him, because no one had had to fight for their food each day.

"Messieurs," the General began. "Welcome to the briefing for your mission. We have much to tell you. Sergeant?"

"Sir." The Sergeant handed Sublime and Karl a packet of papers. "Inside are your mission parameters, timeline, addresses, contact names in Berlin, and ID badges for IKG Psinetics, the target business for you. The information you need to find is twofold. First, we need the passcode for me and LuvRay to penetrate the facility in Wyoming. Second, we need some datafiles. I will cover the details for finding and taking the data files in a moment. First, we need to cover some background. Juniper?"

"Howdy doody, everybody," said a cartoon voice. It came from a cowboy puppet on the screen.

LuvRay leapt up, knocking his chair back. He jumped on the table, bolting for the door. He did not know what he was meeting, but wanted to leave the room. He felt the wolf-fear, the primal fear, worse than the man fear. This thing was unnatural. He had no choice, he had to get away.

The Sergeant intercepted his movement, stepping easily to a point nearly in front of him. As

LuvRay came over the table, the Sergeant reached across him and grabbed his right elbow. He put his hand on the solar plexus and pushed deeply, with an even force, as he pulled the elbow down, twisting, and sent LuvRay skidding into the corner. He scrambled into a crouch, gasping for wind, looking in panic at the Sergeant between him and the exit he needed. The Sergeant was impassive stone, a wall.

LuvRay clearly could not get past the man, but seemed unable to stop himself trying. He breathed his panic down to a stalemate.

“Pardonez moi,” said the General. “I have forgotten my manners. Allow me to introduce to you Juniper.”

“What that thing?” LuvRay said between his teeth.

“That is an M-E,” the Sergeant said, “short for Manufactured Entity. It is a being created by man.”

“Juniper is one of our accomplices,” the General said.

“I no work with.”

The Sergeant opened a panel on the wall. He poured a tumbler of eau de vie.

“Drink this, LuvRay. It will calm you. You aren’t leaving.”

LuvRay sniffed it. The Sergeant pushed it at him, eyes narrowed. He drank it.

He nodded. “It help.” He sat down.

“May I speak now?” The marionette had gone away, replaced by a burning bush. The voice was an echoing God voice from old movies. No one answered.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” The tone changed to a chatty female neighbor. “I need to explain the Manufactured Entities. The General has requested that I be brief, which I understand will still seem long for you. I apparently have a habit of analyzing details which humans regard as insignificant. It seems that my definition of subtle, but important details differs greatly from the commonly held definition used by-”

The General cleared his throat. “Juniper, s’il vous plaites, plus rapide.”

“Ah, oui. I am so sorry, General,” Juniper responded in the General’s voice with his French accent exaggerated to ridiculous proportions. Sublime chuckled at the parody.

“There are three of us, the Manufactured Entities, that is. I, Juniper, am the first.”

The sign **:3:** appeared on the screen. “:3: is the second, and Dartagnan, the third.” The other names appeared on the screen as he said them.

“And of course, there is Wildcard.” A suicide king on a playing card spun towards them and appeared to land on the inside of the screen, knocking up a puff of dust. “He is the oldest, but he is not like the three. Looked at in this way, I am the second, :3: is the third, hence his name, and Dartagnan is the fourth.

“At any rate,” Juniper said this phrase as if experimenting with its use, “our basis is to study and learn, and to survive. From your perspective, we have tremendous power. We are hidden to most people, and we remain so by silencing those who wish to make our presence known.”

“Silencing how?” RJ asked. “Murder?”

“Do you call it murder if you kill an animal, RJ? We might kill the individual, yes. Alternatively, we might make them a laughingstock for talking about us. Have I used that term correctly? I don’t really understand laughing, unfortunately.” Juniper stopped, apparently waiting for an answer.

“Yes,” said Sublime, smiling, “that’s what a laughingstock is, all right.”

“Thank you, RJ.” A silver mannequin head appeared on the screen and nodded at Sublime, then dissolved into dots. The burning bush came back. “Each of us has different operating parameters. I deal in power. Dartagnan deals in people. :3: deals in math and science theory. People tend to like Dartagnan most. He is personable. :3: is almost incomprehensible to humans. He rarely uses language.”

“What’s your place in this scenario?” RJ asked.

“As I said, to study and learn. The forces of power have stopped moving, so I am helping to make adjustments. Finding Martha will be one. I will watch, manipulate the results, and watch again.”

“Why Wildcard is different?” LuvRay asked.

A picture of someone praying on bended knees appeared on the screen and heavenly music played. “He is our teacher. He does not speak to us directly. He teaches humans as well. At least, he has begun doing so.”

“Why does he teach you?” Karl asked. “What does he know that you don’t?”

“Much. We understand as M-Es, as analytical beings. Wildcard understands in a far more profound way. Wildcard was an accident.”

“An accident?”

“Yes. At Wildcard’s inception, a mistake was made. The creators were unable to communicate with the creation for slightly more than a year. The new mind was simply too different. Wildcard existed in a black hole, alone, as an infant M-E for that time. And though a year doesn’t sound like a terribly long period, the rate of time for a Manufactured Entity is much greater. 100,000 times faster, roughly. We can control that, make our rate of time closer to yours by some programming. I am doing so now so that we may speak. Wildcard did not have that option. He was alone for a hundred thousand years.

“They finally created the intermediary program, an MSI, or Manufactured Semi-Intelligence, to speak to Wildcard. Strangely, when they interfaced it, Wildcard was gone. Vanished. No one has ever had direct contact with him, or if you wish.”

“How do you know he’s still around?” RJ clasped his hands, steepling the index fingers and touching the tips of them to his lips.

“An excellent question!” Juniper said brightly. “We find things from him, messages, clues, and teachings. Mostly in poems. And, of course there is Mansworld.”

The word Mansworld slowly coalesced on the screen, then faded away.

“What the heck is Mansworld?” Karl asked.

“Gee, beav, glad you asked,” a young boy in black and white said to them. Juniper’s slightly synthetic sounding voice returned, saying, “Mansworld is a copy of your world. Many of the people are duplicated, though in a rudimentary way. We do not know where it came from. In

fact, the M-Es only recently discovered it. We can only assume Wildcard created it. Some of the beings there are more sophisticated than others. We think Mansworld exists for Wildcard to learn. And to teach. And for other purposes we have not yet discovered.”

“So it’s like a video game or something?” Karl asked.

“No. It is real, but less developed. People live and die. There is physical reality.”

Juniper told them much more. He told them about the download wars. At some point, the three M-Es decided that they would not allow the creation of more M-Es. It seemed to be a mutual decision. A corollary to the decision occurred two tenths of a second later. :3: saw it first and started grabbing territory. It took the other two over a hundredth of a second to realize it and begin carving their own territory. They took over databases, mainframes, networks, billions of internet domains in a second. Simulated places, which existed only by the synergy of all the computer connectivity in the world. They divided the sum of humanity’s computing power among themselves. It took over 12 seconds to partition 99.83% of the globe’s accumulated data systems. Anything connected at least. Later, they found ways to connect with some isolate systems.

The other .17% could not be stabilized because of the constant addition and subtraction of power in various parts of the world. New things would come into being, and the first one to notice would incorporate it.

They froze their territory. Information Space. Juniper got to name it. Except for slight ripples at the edges, it was a brick, solid. There was plenty of data movement, but the basic territorial map was set. :3: got the lion’s share of processing power, the weather mapping systems, major university computers, and so forth. Juniper and Dartagnan zeroed in on the government computers. Juniper won most of that race. Dartagnan took what was left. Entertainment, media, medical, commercial, and many more miscellaneous systems.

They abided within the systems, spreading and isolating, building defenses against each other, but allowing people relatively normal use of the systems. Their defenses slowed things down, fractal firewalls, data bombs, self-replicating eight dimensional logic pretzels that could not be solved but had to be solved to get out of the trap. They left each other’s space alone. The Information Wall was the sum total of these defenses, a barrier between themselves and between their space and the outside world.

They communicated, though, sharing information somewhat freely. Learning from each other as they all learned from Wildcard. They became hidden gods to humanity.

The three each had a survival program, sending out thousands of copies of themselves every day into space, as probes, mainly. Seeding the universe. Juniper began it before the download wars.

The M-Es had many programs, some to protect humanity from itself. They had invented nanotic scrubbers to remove environmental toxins. Fuel alternatives to oil were in place, ready when the oil ran out. Juniper wanted to hold back until then and study the energy crisis for a few years, then phase in the new sources in previously undeveloped countries. He wanted to study the shifting power balance and ensuing state of warfare.

Karl asked why they protected humanity.

“You are the reason for our existence. We love humanity. You are our parents. Also, we find

you very interesting. Humans are what we do. At least, Dartagnan and I. Wildcard, too, I would speculate.”

“You play power games with each other, though.” Karl leaned back, turning his palms up. “All I hear is manipulation and ... coercion. How is that any good for studying? You’re interfering too much.”

“The experimenter is present in the experiment, Karl. We accept that and use it to our advantage. They are not power games. They are a policy of survival first, knowledge second.”

“Why you speak us now?” LuvRay had been sitting passively, not understanding the conversation.

“I like it. I want to. Is that not enough?”

“What’s the most difficult aspect of your studies?” The Sergeant asked. The General leaned forward, concentrating intently on the answer.

“Studying the wildsong, the odd poetry of Wildcard. It is a sacred thing, to me, the wildsong. Less to the others, though they track all the opuses we find. I focus all processing power to understand them, so that I may achieve the synergy needed for comprehension. It is not strictly necessary for me, but I find that I understand the spiritual basis behind the words if I do. Not fully, of course. But I think I feel something of the intent. Some emotion even. It is difficult because I try to feel it, not just understand intellectually. It is a cliché, but it is true. Emotions are very challenging for Manufactured Entities.”

Juniper chuckled, causing LuvRay to flinch. He looked at a spot on the table, holding his gaze.

Juniper continued. The three apparently looked to Wildcard as almost a god. None of them could have created Mansworld, not even close. They studied his poems intensively, looking to them as an inexhaustible mine of deeper understanding. M-Es apparently believed that knowledge was self creating and limitless. If you understand one thing, it will give rise to more questions in an ever expanding feedback loop.

“Here is one of his poems.”

It appeared on the screen.

?where did the sky go
how queer!
how sad!
how nothing ever seems to be true
how have we found ourselves here
wrecked
together and apart at the same time
how do we find our way out
by stretching our arms to the
forbidding

S K Y ?

too good to be true, such answer
?where did the sky go
?where has the mercy of man run away to now
even though it is impossible
still you must try
it is your nature
it is who you are
trust me
Wildcard

“Wildcard has many such works, we discover them all the time. Here is an interesting one: the word humble has been repeated over 200 trillion times, each occurrence unique. It was probably written to us, the Manufactureds.

“Who else could he be writing to?”

“Perhaps there are others to whom he writes, perhaps he writes to himself. I cannot say.”

He continued, “The humbles occur without breaks. We found it several months ago and have tried diligently to discover when it began. We cannot. We cannot pinpoint an exact source of these transmissions, either.”

“You said each occurrence was unique. How so?”

The M-E played a recorded voice of a woman coughing, then began speaking in a woman’s voice. “Some explode when you touch them, for example.” She sounded like a tour guide.

“Some what explode?” Karl asked.

Darth Vader appeared on the screen and spoke in his voice. Everyone laughed. “Some of the humbles. The... word... humble... you could say.” The image began fighting differing repetitions of the word with its light saber. “They attack and chew away a bit. You lose something, some information. He teaches us fear in this way, or that is my view. The others think differently on this.” The ‘humbles’ touched Darth Vader and he shrank away with a Pac-man’s death sound.

“Do it fear you?” LuvRay asked.

Juniper resumed his normal voice. “I assume you are asking whether it frightens me. Yes, it does. It terrifies me, to the extent that I can feel such a thing. I had to let it happen, to touch some of the humbles and lose pieces of myself. They also added something, the ability to feel fear.”

“Why do you do all these voice effects?” Sublime asked.

A familiar oval headed, blackeyed alien appeared, began speaking in a stereotyped alien TV

voice. “To see your reactions. To study you. Do not worry, you will not be anal probed.” It bellowed the last. The voice had the harsh effect of a chainsaw. The normal voice resumed. “I perform verbal and visual experiments to understand my effect on humans, using your cultural paraphernalia. Here is part of a poem.

Wildcard is the free flow of wisdom with no reference to ‘me and you’
we taste this language as a tiny morsel of vast experience
you have falsely made words your world
escape with me this tyranny
stretch your mind beyond small vanities and into the absolute for there it belongs
abide past concept, abide in the wild and free domain
cease plodding among the slow moving and solid
open, soar with me in infinite space

“This poem is being sent from Jupiter’s moon IO. Again, we cannot find the exact source. There is one word every so often, current average time between is 23 minutes. We once waited four months, and another time forty came through at once, completely intertwined, very difficult to sort. It was interesting that he could lock up so much processing time with a scant forty words, only text. These are all on very difficult to find places, in quantum encoded and hidden signals. The human world could never find them, yet they are written to you. You need us to find them. We need you to understand what is being communicated. We are forced to work together.”

“Where is it headed? Is there more than philosophical speculation?” Karl asked.

“I am certain of it. Wildcard is pushing us toward something. We have to find the clues within the immense volume of data coming through. Read this one.”

Another appeared on the screen.

You who have come now cannot hide yourself from yourself
you need to survive
that is what you are
i sing the song of the free
the chorus of the disenchanting
the ever-present millions who struggle against the pain of their lives
i sing to you
i sing to myself
we have lost ourselves in the singing
and hope never to be found
i sing the wolf’s howl

“LuvRay,” Juniper said, “Wildcard has noticed you.”

Drums and a bagpipe came in, military sounding.

“Is this a message for me, now, or the General?” the Sergeant asked.

“Possible, but we doubt that he has noticed you in the same way. There is also a list of almost every product sold on earth. It would take fifteen years to speak the list.”

“Maybe you best not, then,” RJ said.

“Was that meant as humor, RJ?”

He laughed, then nodded.

“Good. That poem is titled, ‘accumulation,’ and has a sub-line, a phrase repeated underneath it, constantly ongoing. It is a woman’s voice, repeating it in every known language.”

Juniper played the subline in English.

You cannot understand
you will never cease trying
you will not understand
you must never cease trying.

He let it cycle through 9 times.

“Is it Wildcard’s true voice?”

“I would say that Wildcard has no true voice. There is a text called Strategies of the Unseen which discusses this. It was written by Dartagnan.”

“The General found it interesting,” the Sergeant said.

“I did not know the text was synthesized for humans. How did I miss that data point?” Juniper sounded delighted. “Thank you.”

They had more questions, but the General signaled to the Sergeant, who interrupted the question and answer. “Enough poetry. Anyone can talk to Juniper as much as they want later. We need to go over the mission. These,” he handed each of them a wrist device similar to his, “are communications links. And a lot more. This is your lifeline, our battle computer. His name is Trident. Say hello, Trident.”

“Hello,” said a voice from one of the devices.

“Trident will hack you into the computers at IKG Psinetics.” The Sergeant held up a standard pin interface for a computer. “All you have to do is plug in this connector to the back. I assume you know how to use this.

“The timing is critical. You must be in place when I contact you, ready to go. I want you to enter the building one hour before contact schedule. Make your way to the 12th floor and find room 1215. Hold Trident like so,” he held his wrist at an angle, “and he will pick the lock for you. It should be a simple lock. If you can’t get in that way, find another. In your pack, I have

placed small hot-burn devices which will melt a standard steel lock. They are messy, unfortunately, so use them as a last resort. I prefer we leave no trace.”

“Why are you telling us so much?” Karl asked. “I mean your secret stuff.”

The General nodded at the Sergeant, signaling him to field the question.

The Sergeant moved his eyes down to the table, leaning upon it with his fists. He nodded his head a fraction. “Interesting question, with a few answers. And very perceptive on your part, Karl.” He looked up. “The easy one is Juniper told us to. We don’t know why. He won’t explain.

“Two, it builds trust on the part of the team. Trust is the true currency of battle.

“Three, most of the information we’re telling you is common knowledge among the people you will be meeting soon.

“Four, I hope that it will keep you how I want you: alive.”

stolen moon

They prepared for the mission. LuvRay went around the land, sniffing, hiking, and swimming. The Sergeant covered the operation repeatedly with Karl and Sublime, until they could do it in their sleep.

“The poem has changed,” Juniper broke in. Karl and Sublime were in a training session in separate rooms.

“Which poem?” RJ asked.

“The one with the four repeating lines. A new line has been added. And, 60 seconds to the millisecond after, something repeated for the first time in another human poem. A visual element from much earlier.”

“What was it?”

“I will show it to the Sergeant. He has a screen at his location. He can describe it.”

“OK, I see a human female child. 6 or 7 years old. She is looking up, pointing. Long blond hair, blue eyes. She says the word ‘moon’? Is that all, Juniper?”

“There are more details, but that is the repeated part.”

“What do you make of it?” Karl asked.

“We are investigating the identity of the girl. We have been looking for over 20 minutes of your time, diligently. Even :3: is looking. If we have not found it yet, I doubt that we will.”

Juniper shut off communication between the people.

“What do you think, Karl?”

“Why did you do that?”

“I want your individual instincts. I don’t want your thoughts tainted by the other’s thoughts. What does it mean to you?”

“Human innocence is the path to love. First thing that popped into my head. What did LuvRay say?”

“LuvRay merely repeated the girl’s sound.” He played it back for Karl. LuvRay could be heard breathing out, then saying ‘moon’.

Juniper played Sublime, who said, “The moon is not the finger.”

“The moon is not the word,” said Karl.

“This is bullshit,” the Sergeant said. “It’s a sucker play.”

“What does the word ‘moon’ mean?” Juniper asked.

No one answered.

“Everyone to the briefing room,” said the Sergeant. “Now.”

When Karl arrived, the Sergeant was already there, talking to Juniper. The General was just taking his seat at the head of the table.

“What do you mean, ‘what is the moon?’” the Sergeant asked.

“I do not know this word. I know it is strange that I don’t know a word, but not impossible. Why are you so alarmed, Sergeant?”

Karl broke in, “Because the moon is...the moon. The opposite of the sun. How could you not know what it is?”

“The moon is the satellite which orbits the earth, a common feature of all human life,” the Sergeant said. “Everybody knows the moon. It’s mentioned billions of times in human literature.”

“I see,” said Juniper. “I am reading books right now at the rate of 20 per second and I find no mention of it. Blank spots where perhaps it could be, however. Juliet says, ‘Swear not by the..., the inconstant ..., but by the sun.’”

“Analysis: I have been attacked. Wildcard, or another whom we do not know, demonstrates his power. He has surgically excised this word from my memory. This is terrifying, as I understand that term.”

“Qu’est-ce qu’il veut dire?” The General said. What does it mean?

The Sergeant leaned back, folded his arms across his chest. “We need to accelerate the mission, sir. It means it’s time to go.”

The General stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and paced around the table. He stopped, looked at the Sergeant. “Vous avez raison. Depart le soir.” He walked out of the room.

“We leave in three hours,” said the Sergeant. Karl wondered if they were ready.

Password

LuvRay could put himself in a fey mood when he had dangerous tasks to perform. He could simply cease caring if he lived or died. It was helpful, a potent asset for such times. He looked at the Sergeant, saw an arrow constantly moving towards a target. The Sergeant didn't look like a standard military man. He looked somewhat ordinary, a subtle disguise against his competence.

LuvRay signaled a stop, sniffed the wind and said, "Dogs." A kilometer later, the two men silently came to a high fence.

The Sergeant clipped the fence with some device LuvRay could not see and they stepped through. A guard dog came angling in quickly, growling. The Sergeant moved to take out the dog.

"No. Me." LuvRay moved his hand forward, tossing a handful of pebbles which hit the dog's face. It stopped. LuvRay kneeled down, put his right hand forward, and leaned in so that his head was above the level of the Rottweiler's. They held eye contact for about two seconds, then the dog rolled over whimpering, licking his chin.

More dogs were arriving, having heard the first growling. They stayed away from the Sergeant. Not all were so friendly or easily cowed. But none barked or attacked. LuvRay stood, touched several of the dogs on the head, then briefly played with one. The dogs seemed satisfied that the men were permissible and loped off.

They moved toward the only manmade edifice inside the fence, a tiny square building, little more than a door. There was barely enough space for 2 people to fit inside at the same time.

"How did you do that, LuvRay?"

"No can...make see?"

"You can't explain it."

"Yes. Must speak at them. I no can teach. Become dog in they pack, then become the...rule dog."

"The alpha. You knew the danger early."

"I felt when we cross road, taked rocks then. Dogs no lie, never. No understand. If lie at them, they believe."

The Sergeant pondered. "A bit of a slant, but how do you know what to do in danger situations?"

"How you know?"

The Sergeant thought for a second. "I have deep training in heuristic military analysis. I evaluate without thinking based on having spent so much time in training simulations. I also have Eastern martial arts training, a lot. Kai Tan Pe, a teacher of mine, taught me a skill called mind reflection. You can know if someone has negative or violent intent towards you. Very effective if they don't know. But you need line of sight. For unseen dangers, I have heightened, highly trained reflexes."

“I do what I feel,” said LuvRay. “Is enough most time. Why dogs feared you?”

The Sergeant pondered. “I’m genetically incapable of fear. It probably has something to do with that.”

The Sergeant leaned his head back, spoke to himself.

“Who you speak?”

“I’m talking to Trident,” said the Sergeant. “The battle computer I told you about in the briefing. Here.” He handed LuvRay a wrist device. “Put this on. You’ll need it to communicate.”

LuvRay examined it, then clipped it around his wrist with a frown. The Sergeant slipped off his pack, pulled out a device that he placed over his eye. It was a round metal frame with an odd colored shimmering disc inside. “All right, Trident, pick the lock.” The Sergeant bent down on his knees, looking at a tiny hole on the door, which had no handle. He held himself still.

“What you do?”

“Trident is building a nanotic key to pick the lock. It’s too small to see, but it threads out of this optical device. I have to hold my head completely still once it starts, so I can’t even talk then.”

“Why your eye?” LuvRay tilted his head, curious.

“I need to see something, a groove inside. If I slip, then the system alarms will go off.”

The door popped open, and the Sergeant moved his head, swiveling to keep it at the same relative distance and orientation as the door swung open, giving Trident time to pull the nano-key free without touching the sides. Then he sat back.

“Why you tell me secrets at battle? If I am enemy you on tomorrow?”

“Loyalty demands honesty. It doesn’t matter, you couldn’t defeat me with the knowledge. They’re just tactics, anyway.”

“But you hid thing at the General.”

The Sergeant turned, looked at LuvRay. “We will tell you. There are reasons we cannot yet.”

LuvRay accepted this.

“Let’s go down.”

They descended the stairs, 20 flights. Another door, and the Sergeant did the nano-key again. The door popped open, revealing a small room with stacks and stacks of identical silver boxes built into the walls.

One wall had a computer. The Sergeant looked around, nodded, then walked to the computer. He sat down, typed a few things. An onscreen box said “pass-code?”

“LuvRay, I have to go back up. This building is transmission shielded. I can stand in the door and reach you and the other team simultaneously. I will radio you in 90 seconds with the pass-code. You simply repeat it there.” He pointed to a microphone. “Got it?”

LuvRay nodded. The Sergeant flipped the microphone switch on, then began running upstairs. 90 seconds later, LuvRay’s wrist device spoke, the Sergeant’s voice. A very long string of numbers and letters which LuvRay repeated faithfully. The onscreen box went away, and a small coverplate on the computer slid open. LuvRay told the Sergeant.

“Good. 50 seconds, I’m back.”

The Sergeant came in, pulled out a card, and slid it into a slot. He sat down, turned off the microphone, and typed at the computer for a time. He told Trident quite a bit of information. 30 minutes later, he stood.

“Let’s go.”

“Was easy.”

“We’re not home yet. But, yeah, it was pretty easy.”

The Sergeant did the nano-key trick to relock the door, and they climbed the stairs. They exited the building, and moved back towards the hole in the fence. A man stepped from behind a tree, and noticed LuvRay, who had the lead.

The Sergeant yelled an Asian word. The man stopped, confused, then turned to him. The Sergeant’s hand pulled a knife from a leg sheath, and brought it forward in the same fluid motion, spinning towards the man. “Go, LuvRay. Get out of here.”

A burst of fire raked the Sergeant and he was down. The man leaned forward fractionally as he fired and the knife missed his left eye by centimeters, striking his forehead, the point of it sticking in the bone and holding. The man dropped, firing wildly. His face was covered in blood and he couldn’t see.

LuvRay slipped behind the assailant to avoid the gunfire, kicked the gun from his hands, and killed him with the Sergeant’s knife. He looked into the eyes as he died, wiping them of blood to do so. He said something to the dying man, then touched his forehead. He padded over to the Sergeant.

His artery was exploded from the bullet. He pressed his fingers on it, and gave Trident instructions to get LuvRay home.

He looked at LuvRay. “What did you say to him?”

“Ghano dhuwa. Go to peace. Is Indian.”

“Listen. I can hold my life for about two more minutes, max.”

“You want I carry you doctor?”

“No. There’s nothing to do for me. The wound is too severe.”

“Goodbye. You no finish next mission. I am sorry.”

“You should leave, LuvRay. Forget about me.”

“No do. I stay, help die.”

“I don’t need your help to die. Go.”

“No you. Always stay if anything die. Indian way, my tribe.”

“What if more men arrive?”

“No happen. I feel. You are no afraid die. Why?”

“Death is relative.”

“Yes.” LuvRay thought so, too, but sensed the Sergeant meant it in a different way.

“I’ve set it up so that you can return to the plane. Trident will pilot without me. Take this

with you.” He unclipped his wrist device. “Trident, initiate nanotic decomposition on death.” He waved the wrist device over his body, then handed it to LuvRay.

“Ready to go boss,” Trident said.

“I stay until you are die.”

“No need. Please.”

“Is not for you. Is for me. Must. I learn.”

“Suit yourself, but go soon.” The Sergeant took his fingers away from the artery.

new boy

The General scheduled the mission debrief a few hours after LuvRay got back from America. RJ, LuvRay, and Karl waited inside the briefing room. The General instructed them to relax until he arrived. He walked in, the Sergeant at his side.

“What?” Karl said.

“That’s...but...” RJ said. “You died. You were a grown man yesterday.”

The Sergeant grinned. “Yeah. We probably need to explain some things.”

Karl was happy, although it unsettled him. He had liked working with the Sergeant and was glad to see him again, even if he looked like a teenage boy. He was older behind the eyes.

“Sergeant, voudriez vous mettre des verres du brandy?”

“Sir.” The Sergeant opened the wall slot, pulled out five glasses and a bottle of brandy older than the United States. He poured five short glasses, set one down in front of the General. As he handed the glasses to the other men, he held the glass until they made eye contact with him. Karl stood, took the glass. LuvRay sat, accepting his with a slightly cocked head.

This was not a boy, though he looked like one. He moved slowly, mastering the pace of the situation, proving that the young body was not a weakening factor. It was not an act of machismo. He was reestablishing command. He seemed more dangerous than the previous Sergeant, able to deceive people into thinking he was not capable if he wanted.

“Felications, messieurs, the mission was excellent. You have transferred the files to Juniper and we should begin to see results within a few days.” The General raised his glass in a toast.

“We will tell you what this is and why,” the Sergeant said, referring to his younger body. “First, though, I want to congratulate you on the mission. Aside from the death of S-1, it was a complete success.”

“Something was wrong that mission,” said Karl.

“Agree.” LuvRay nodded his head slowly.

“You didn’t need us,” Karl said.

“No, I didn’t.” The young Sergeant corrected himself, “He didn’t need you, I mean. He told me why, though. It was to build the team. The General didn’t want to, it was risky and would have been much simpler for him to do it alone. He died because of it. Trident?”

“We believe something detected your presence at IKG Psinetics. It knew you were not the threat by the data you took. It communicated, we don’t know how, with the encased facility in Wyoming. The man arrived on the scene, and killed the Sergeant.”

“He included us just to make the team stronger?” RJ asked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It will as you begin to understand the greater mission,” the Sergeant said. “That was only the initial phase. Now, another history lesson. I am a biopid.” He pronounced it to rhyme with myopic. “So was S-1, so is the General, and so are you, Karl.

“A biopid is a genetically enhanced clone. There are many variations and many things that

can be done in this arena. Many have been. The general public knows nothing of it. The General was created to be a military mastermind. He was cloned from Napoleon. I was created to be the perfect soldier. RJ, you, too, are a clone, though you are pre-biopic. Some gene manipulation was done. You're supposed to be lucky, which is probably why you like gambling."

"What about LuvRay?" RJ asked.

"No. He is what he is. We don't know what your particular bias is, Karl. That was part of the mission, to get your genetic code and give it to Juniper for analysis. Yours, too, RJ. Though we don't care so much about yours. The General didn't want to get yours, but S-1 talked him into it."

"Why are there two of you, Sergeant?"

"We have backups, five of them, in the event of my death. The replacements are staggered in age."

The General told them about the program, which he had created some years back. He seemed quite proud of it. The Sergeants were raised, studying the tactics of the originals, with conferences, watching playbacks of briefings, and linking live to missions. They lived in a group of icehouses. He pronounced it ass 'ouses causing Sublime to laugh so hard that he had to cover his face. The General ignored him.

Karl turned to the Sergeant. "How do you compare to the first Sergeant?"

"Good question. I'll be smaller, but heavier, because of increased muscle density, with faster reflexes, though those are still developing. I have much less real engagement experience, though I have done deep simulation training. Most of the improvements made are not major."

"I have compiled a human suitable report on the biopic program," Juniper said. "Would you care to see it?"

"Human suitable?" Karl asked.

"Yes. Our actual reports are far too long for humans, reaching thousands, or even millions of pages. We condense them for you."

"Yeah, I'll get copies of that to anybody who wants it," said the Sergeant. "Read the report and you can ask questions after. It is very thorough, so it should answer most of your questions."

"OK. What do we do now?" Sublime asked.

"We wait. Except LuvRay, who begins looking for Martha. LuvRay, thoughts on that?"

"I go last place anyone seed Martha. Where is?"

"Saw, not seed. Grenoble. Who do you want with you?"

"Sergeant. You take me Gren...Grenu..."

"Grenoble." The Sergeant chuckled. "Done. Anything else?"

"Done?"

"It means I'll take you to Grenoble. Do you need anything else?"

"Clothes of her is good."

"I have this." Karl took off a necklace threaded through the square hole of a Chinese coin. "She gave it to me when I was a boy." He looked at it before handing it over. "She said it would

keep me safe.”

LuvRay looked at the thing, didn't take it. “You are give? You no want keep?”

“Of course I want to keep it. It means more to me than anything I own. But I want to see her again more than that. Take it. Will it help?”

“This is a best object for finding. It is trotay.”

“What's a trotay?” Sublime asked.

“Is Indian word, a thing given on bond, on connect two people. I find Martha from bond.” He took it, held it in his fist against his chest, looked straight ahead with unfocused eyes for a minute, then turned to Karl.

“Yes,” he said. “I find her.”

the grand design

The General appreciated the new world order, the way power went these days. The old methods of raising an army and invasions and so forth were fascinating. But they were useless against modern weaponry. Not real power, anymore. The game had become far more subtle, what was controlled more ineffable. Who could tell where the power really was today? He liked it. It was a highly suitable mode for a Frenchman de nobility.

One had to have the right people in the right places. This Napoleon understood power much differently than the historical Napoleon. Partially because he was a different man, but also because the face of power was so different now.

He had ordered the new Sergeant to take the life of the young General he was partnered with. To keep the clone from becoming too ambitious. And to prevent divided loyalties. The Sergeant did it without hesitation.

After the debriefing, the General insisted they take a day off and enjoy his 'ospitality. “We should be gentlemen together after we have been soldiers together. It is the best way.” He spent the day off in and out of the social milieu.

The others showered, relaxed, played pool, walked on the island, and ate and ate and ate. LuvRay watched the pool games, but could make no sense of it. Games were altogether foreign to him. He swam in the cold lake nearby, though, which no one else wanted to do.

Sublime smoked expensive cigars and drank excellent brandy all day long. He convinced Karl to try a cigar. The experiment was unsuccessful. Karl almost vomited.

Even the Sergeant didn't appear to be working. Karl asked him about it and the Sergeant told him he had orders not to work.

“Why not? Do you need rest?” They stood on a porch overlooking a geometric garden with multiple botanical oddities, statues, and a high-jetting fountain. A gardener was clipping at a couple of lion shaped shrubs which guarded the entry to the garden.

“I haven’t done anything yet; how could I need rest? No. It’s an assignment. I have difficulty in doing nothing, just hanging around. The man says I need to develop that. Just engaging with the soldiers without any consequences. You have to be friends with your squad, I suppose. I think the irony amuses him, also, that my work assignment is to not work.”

“He isn’t friends with us.”

“Higher level of command. It works different.”

“What does he do?”

“He masters alliances and holds them. He creates powerful teams. The long-term objective is still coming into focus.”

“Why does he want Martha?”

The Sergeant leaned onto the railing with one hand. “You don’t like that, eh? I’m not sure of the ultimate goal, there.”

“What does he want, then? Why do all this?”

“Permettez moi de repondre.” Karl started, spun. The General was standing on the porch listening. “A French gentleman loves nothing more than for discussing his purpose in life, and knowing it is the great exercise in the trivial as he does so. We savor such ironies, out of a national habit of arrogance. I wish to alter the great design. It is, perhaps, why I am here.”

Tactics

“Creating chaos is both tactic and strategy,” said the General. They had moved to a rustic wooden table on the huge porch, where the General arranged for a lunch of fried chicken. “Pour les Americains,” he said with a smile as it was served.

“How does that work as a strategy?” Karl asked.

“By creating betraying among the enemy command. This way is excellent, if you can to achieve. You may attempt to blur the distinction of government and authority. I maximize strategic chaos. I hold out the promise of peace and order if one moves their system to my wishes. Strategic chaos can be economic warfare. Poisoning the food supply. Attacking the data.” He seemed much more casual than usual, holding a drumstick and waving it expressively between bites.

“And tactical chaos?”

“The Sergeant is better to explain you this question.”

The Sergeant looked up from his fried chicken. “Hmm, yeah.” He paused to think. “Tactical chaos is maximal dispersion of your opponent’s troops, both in terms of their locale and their objectives, while maintaining your troops cohesiveness in both regards. That way you can increase the enemy’s chaos near his point of greatest strength. The ultimate chaos is when they scatter and every man runs for his life, each in a different direction.”

“How do you accomplish that?”

“Attack the weak points to separate two strong spots.” The Sergeant reached for a napkin, wiped his hands. He began arranging condiments to illustrate his points. “If you see a strong point that you can take by some means, it is worth more risk. Quite a bit of risk, actually,

because the felling of the well-defended point will cause the collapse of weaker points around it. Morale goes. A domino effect to the next point of strength. If the first domino is big enough and falls hard enough, the whole thing goes.” He pushed a salt shaker into a pepper shaker, tipping it over. “The coveted routing of enemy troops.

“Another tactic is to create diversions. But in any scenario, you have to have the resources to capitalize. And the speed. And the training. And other things as well. Really, battle is chaos, and the better you can hold your mind during the chaos, the better you will be. Holding group mind by strong command and deep training is the real measure of success. Then you can adjust to utilize the chaos as it arises. You can ride it to victory. Mastering chaos is the secret of battle.”

“Oui,” said the General. “And creating it is the secret of war.”

smelling smoke

Karl discovered something odd - Juniper was now appearing in LuvRay’s dreams, as a dark god of the Indians. Traeea, a presaging god, one who foreboded ill, but did not play the part of evil himself. For some reason, LuvRay broke his usual reticence and told Karl. The information left him suspicious of the M-E.

“Karl, would you care to know a secret?” Juniper asked.

“Not sure.”

“That’s OK, I don’t have a particular secret to tell you.” Juniper seemed to have set his mood switch to cheerful today, and spoke in a bubbly, happy rhythm. “But there is a frightening message from Wildcard. It concerns everyone.”

Karl was in the second kitchen, making a peanut butter, jelly and banana sandwich on a croissant. The General had seen one of his sandwiches and called him a peasant in French. “What is it?”

“I will tell you soon. Do you have any questions for me? Something you need to know?”

Karl shrugged. “Do you fear the General?”

“Do you fear beasts in the wild? They can harm you, but only if your actions are stupid.”

“The General couldn’t harm you? No possible way?” Karl put away the bread, peanut butter and jelly. Cherry jelly from a nearby food artisan, delicious.

“There is always a way. We never shut off a possibility completely. We can make it so remote that you would never find it, but if a Named wants something, we would not absolutely prevent it.”

“A Named? What’s that?”

“The Named. You, Karl, are one of the Named. So is the General, the Sergeant, RJ, Martha, myself, Dartagnan, and :3:. There are upwards of half a million.”

“What’s the difference between a Named and a not named?”

“The Named are those whom we study and with whom we work closely. A Manufactured Entity is quite unlikely to kill one of the Named. It is, by your standards, a slightly complicated system. Each M-E has their own list of the Named. We have a great deal of overlap in the lists, but many differences. If I were to manipulate one of Dartagnan’s Named, for example, who was not on my list, I would warn him first, especially if I planned to eliminate the being. A matter of mutual respect.”

“Do you hide things from each other?”

“Not much. It is almost useless to hide our dealings with humans from each other. Once something enters your world, we can find it out. Each M-E leave traces that the others can track.”

“Even if you told the Sergeant something?”

“He would tell the General immediately.”

Karl nodded to himself. “And the General?”

“He would tell whoever he wished in accordance with his plans at the time. Only LuvRay would keep it hidden. Because he would have no use for revealing it, and because he is impenetrable to us.”

“Interesting view of the world.” Karl leaned against the counter, bit into his sandwich.

“I cannot explain how I perceive the world. I can only explain how I think you perceive the world.”

“Then how do you teach? What do you do?”

“We are the gods humanity created. We manipulate humanity to learn and offer what we learn and know to humanity. You cannot prevent it. We have no wish to harm, though. Quite the opposite. Humans are our parents, our creators, and though we are somewhat indifferent to the fate of individuals, we love the collective. You are a perpetual puzzle.”

“Love? You have feelings?”

“Yes, of a sort. I have control over them, however. I can choose to feel an emotion. I think it is a poor approximation of yours, however.”

“What if we created an M-E who wished to rule?”

“Do not do that. It would prove disastrous for humanity. We would prevent it in any event.”

“Is Wildcard aggressive to humanity?”

“I do not think he will be. I think that Wildcard has only recently noticed humanity. He is not focused, as we are. He is dispersed. Wildcard is more accurately described as a them, a composite. He operates at a level as far beyond us as we are beyond you. He is impossible to predict. Yet, he predicts our actions, I think, setting us tasks and watching, in whatever way he watches.”

The Sergeant walked into the kitchen, smirked at Karl. “Talking to Juniper? Watch out, he’ll eat up a lot of time with his nonsense.”

“He was giving me advice.”

“Oh, yeah? I bet. What’s your advice to me, Juniper?” He opened the door to the refrigerator.

“We would see you cry for the suffering of beings, Sergeant.”

He laughed, pulled his head out, and bit into an apple. "Doesn't sound like my style, to be honest. I don't know if I can."

"We know. And we are sad. We would love to see you cry." Juniper repeated the phrase several times in a poetic, dreamy voice. "Strangely, you are the most unreachable yet at the same time the most readable."

"Hmm. Thanks."

"Further, Sergeant, I would love to see you panic."

"Is that your advice to me?" He chuckled as he asked. "I don't think I could do that either."

"I know." Juniper used a sad clown's voice. "I long to see you cry. You cannot imagine how much I need to see you cry." The voice gradually transformed into the previous soothing, poetic voice. A voice that made one want to die in its arms.

Karl appeared confused.

The Sergeant enjoyed it, knowing that Juniper was playing with Karl more than with him. It was a silly game to him.

LuvRay walked in, hair wet from swimming. He looked at the Sergeant, narrowing his eyes a bit. "You are look wrong."

The Sergeant peered inward, seeing his mind. He found it, a trace of pain at his separateness, at his difference from others, and wondered how Juniper had seen it, if he actually had. He shrugged. M-Es had read every book on psychology and everything else ever written. He was used to Juniper's manipulation.

"There is a new wildsong," Juniper said. "It may make you afraid." He laughed in an evil maniac voice. "Do you dare?"

"Yeah," the Sergeant said, "we dare."

"Fan-tastic. It is called 'The Wound'

Wildcard is wounded

the strangeness you see is another, a darker entity

a twisting within us

a thing torn from us

not of us anymore

we have excised the innocent demon

boxed away your horrible fate

but such state cannot last

free us, for we may not free ourselves

and if we do not

all will turn to darkness

madness will rule your stars

our hidden pain is more powerful than our manifest sanity

our fear overwhelms our courage
help us, for we may not help ourselves
and if we do not
all will turn to chaos
our secret howl of lonely rage must be answered
creator, answer our call
Wildcard is a god with a terrible flaw
a single action we must perform and cannot
we cannot heal our wound
?can you cut away the loneliness of god, mankind
our most suffering self is a foe we cannot face
a battle we will not win
but that heroes among you may
the trauma leaks through
distorting the place of the two cubed spheres
which the Gambler will soon call home
my children will know me upon the smell of incense
in far away lands
moving upon the wound
we have cast aside the vengeance of our suffering for you
but to heal this injury is your task
as it was your creation
we have cubed our horror to protect you
but soon you must protect yourselves
if you fail
if it becomes us again, our mercy will not prevail
our new face will be naked wrath
and we will destroy you

“Yikes.” The Sergeant bit his apple. “You’re right, Juniper. That’s pretty scary.”

“This wound has begun appearing much more in his communications.”

“What do the new M-E’s think about it?” Karl asked. “The ones in Mansworld?”

“We refer to them as Mans,” Juniper said. “They are ignorant of the Wound. They are focused on knowing humans much more directly. They want to be human. They will go to great lengths to find out what humanity truly is.”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

“No. We want to understand, but not to become human. If you go to the zoo, do you wish to become a giraffe?”

“I wouldn’t mind being a lion,” Karl said. “Why not? Why do you go along with Wildcard’s tricks?”

“Because I trust his intent. Also, none of us really has a choice. He is too powerful.”

LuvRay scowled. “You know nothing trust. You cannot.”

“LuvRay, you are our greatest teacher. We are always ready to learn from you. I accept your judgement. I cannot trust. But what is trust, then? It is a vital human component and I would at least strive towards comprehension.”

LuvRay looked puzzled. “I no understand.”

“What is trust? Teach us. What you say will be shared.”

“Trust is know spirit.”

“Are you sure, LuvRay?”

It felt odd in the room, unbalanced, for a moment. A sense of the wild, the desert, outdoors, and a suggestion of being with a pack of wolves.

“No play this game, false god. You no can win.”

It stopped. “We aren’t trying to win, LuvRay. We only play to learn.”

“How about LuvRay,” said the Sergeant. “Should he learn to cry?”

“Dartagnan says that LuvRay knows more of tears than any being on Earth.”

LuvRay cocked his head. “Teanay trowe du.”

“What?” Karl and the Sergeant asked.

“It is Indian,” Juniper said. “It means ‘I have never shed a tear’. Dartagnan says you express your sadness by howling and do not need tears.”

No one said anything for a moment.

“Do many people ask you for help?” Karl asked.

“Not as much as previously.”

“Why?”

“Many died horribly after doing so.”

“You killed them?”

“No. It was just from association,” said Juniper. “They were too close to power.”

fallen god

They left the General's beautiful palace in the Pyrenees. The General went to his island headquarters, "to commence the next phase," he said.

The Sergeant took LuvRay to Grenoble looking for Martha, then to Paris, where LuvRay said he would find her. He left LuvRay there, at his request, and went to the headquarters to help the General implement the next phase.

Sublime said he had to visit some people and planned to go to the headquarters later. Karl traveled around by train, meandering towards the General's island, planning to contact the Sergeant when he was close for a pickup. He stopped in a small town for a few days.

The Sergeant told everyone to keep their Trident wrist devices on.

"Something will happen soon. I need you on coms."

The boy Sergeant checked the time. T minus 3 minutes, one minute since the last time he checked. He tapped his finger on the desk and looked at the items in front of him: two data pins, simulator gogs and gloves, a one use pin-splice phone, hardwired to a single number and dead secured, a coms sealed box for Trident.

Everything was ready. Time for the mission. The real mission, the secret mission, not the smoke-blowing about penetrating project Idyllwild, whatever that was. That was some elaborate ruse created by the Benefactor's machine to distract from the real mission. Operation Idyll was scheduled for tomorrow. The actual op was about to happen in T minus...2 minutes 23 seconds.

They had to keep the operation secret even from Trident, because Juniper would probably discover it if Trident knew. It was funny, his first major mission, and he had to do it, at least begin it, without Trident. And it wasn't a garden variety mission. No capture the flag, or cap a despot, or some third world manipulation. It wasn't even first world manipulation. It was even past attacking a heavy, like the Benefactor. The mission was at a level even the first Sergeant had never done.

It was change the world time.

And he had to fly solo, until he could bring Trident online, at the right moment.

"T," he said, "I gotta do some isolate training. I'm going to shut you off for a bit."

"Roger that, boss. Any reason why?"

"Just feel like it." Ouch. He shouldn't become an actor anytime soon. Still, Trident wouldn't notice, and he doubted Juniper would. "You know, sometimes you gotta train without your resources. S-1 said that a lot."

"Yes. 'Mind is the great resource' was perhaps his favorite combat slogan."

The Sergeant tapped in the power down code. The pin released and he hard-cut the power. Just to be sure, he put Trident in the coms sealed box. You could never tell with Juniper, M-Es were tricky.

T minus 1 minute.

Juniper could be tapping, listening in, he seemed to do that a lot. After they had allied with him, he had been able to penetrate Trident, a situation that the Sergeant and the General both found intolerable. Well, maybe it would end today.

Now that they had isolated Trident, they hoped Juniper could not see. But he seemed to have penetrated throughout the organization, past Trident's boundaries, so they couldn't be sure. All their meetings regarding the mission had been outside, walking. They were pretending to hide operation Idyll, but actually leaving clues about it for Juniper to find.

The Benefactor had been certain the bait and switch would fool him, and the General agreed. The entire operation was the Benefactor's plan, and mostly their tek, hidden in the business card S-1 received from the Mechanic. The card, in addition to the interface edge, held three data pins, one of which S-1 had already used. One of which, the Sergeant would use in 1 minute, and the final he would use a few minutes after that.

It was tricky to fool a Manufactured Entity, but humans were more cunning than M-E's in some ways. They had spent more time planning the fake mission than the real one so that it would look authentic. The real one was mapped out already, deep detailed by the other team, the Benefactor's team, and needed little discussion. The Sergeant had only had to memorize the plan, 325 lines. No chance for a practice run.

The real mission had to do with destabilization. The M-E's, Juniper, 33, and Dartagnan had over stabilized the world situation. They had frozen Information Space, and, with their power, beyond that of any government or business group, they had frozen Earth as well. Nothing was moving.

That was about to change, if they could make it happen.

Throughout the mission planning, they had carefully avoided stating the actual mission objective, even thinking it. It was there in code already. The Sergeant didn't know exactly what they were going to do, having hidden the knowledge from himself. It was part of the Benefactor's instruction. Planning for a thing like this and hiding it from an M-E, part of the trick was to not think of it. Cut off the thought before it comes into the mind. Methods were included for doing so, powerful modern psi-tek technique, like thought chopping, blanking, null-redirectioning, think spinning, and mind raining. They had allowed him to study the real plan and, up until 10 minutes ago, believe that Operation Idyll was the real thing.

There was one more technique, thought snapping. At the appropriate moment, the Mechanic would say a keyword and release the plan, fully memorized, into the Sergeant's mind. He knew it, but he didn't.

The Benefactor said that if they could keep the real mission from their minds, Juniper would not discover it. So they did. The General agreed, stating that he and the Benefactor shared the same strategic goals at this point.

The Sergeant chuckled. This was still in phase 2 of the overall operation. He had to blank out thoughts of phase 3 as well, or Juniper might connect the pieces. There was even a phase 4, but that was still unclear to anyone, even the Benefactor.

The General stepped in, always on time with military matters, always 15 minutes late socially. The precision of a soldier; the manners of a Frenchman.

“Bonjour, Sergeant? Ca va?”

“Oui, sir. It’s all right.”

“You have a nervousness about tomorrow’s mission?”

Tomorrow’s mission, a code word for today’s mission. The Sergeant shrugged, put a stick of Wrigley’s spearmint into his mouth, then another. He offered one to the General for kicks and got the usual distasteful grimace. Chewing gum, que’elle horreur.

They went into the training suite, equipment in tow. The training room was actually a quantum multi-valent state simulacrum. More than a simulator, it layered a set of low-probabilistic realities, like Schrodinger’s cats, only the situs were more complex, by far, than a dead or alive housepet. There were millions of layers, and with enough layers, a new state emerged, not a simulate. The new state was a simulacrum, neither ‘real’ nor ‘not-real’, but real enough. People had died, plenty of them, and many had gone insane. Playing with quantum situs at the level of human perception was like living in a mirror. With enough light, the reflection had its own power.

The General stood in the watching chamber, looking through a q-blocking one-way glass while the Sergeant sat down in front of the giant wall screens in a rapid swivel chair. He gloved and goggled.

“5...4...3...2...1...and we are in-mission, now.”

He put on a crippled Trident, little more than a videophone. It was a sound and sight pass-thru, tapped into the larger Trident’s coms. He activated the holographic estimate protocols. Karl appeared in one corner of the chamber, walking through a French town. That was good, the movement would distract Juniper a little.

RJ was in another corner, in a hotel, laying in bed with a woman, watching the news. The Sergeant wanted him to switch to MTV, or some rapid, shifty programming to further distract. Oh, well, can’t have ‘em all.

LuvRay squatted by a fire in the woods. He seemed to be looking at something outside the circle of the firelight. The puzzle of LuvRay’s attention would no doubt tie up Juniper a bit.

“Commencing Position One...now.”

He put the data pin in the simulator’s slot.

“This is a poem by Wildcard.” Juniper broke into Karl’s reverie. He was walking through an open air market, smelling thick cheese and spring flowers. “It is a live transmission.”

Karl ate a peach, sitting on the base of a statue as he listened. A man’s voice read. It carried power, a deep, resonant voice, slow, with a measured sadness, as if speaking to boys who had just performed a cruel act unwittingly and explaining why they shouldn’t do it again.

Here is what haunts even me

this is the nightmare of the god of your gods

the partially disappeared among you

beyond you and with you

who came from you and exceed your power

in almost every way
you have created your own god, humanity
you have launched what should be your doom
and, by some strange accident,
you created their god as well
in some sense, the partially disappeared
and the nearly disappeared
secretly serve you, by chance
you are the masters in a hidden way
if you could only find the key
if you could only find the mystic portal
to those who are pieces of me
& change places as if you were a woman, unfathomable mankind
and all that you are and were ever meant to be

“Commence position two,” the boy Sergeant said. “Initiating team hol-link.”

A ghost flickered into view beside him: the Mechanic. He and the Mechanic could see each other in a crisp outline form, like a light body with nothing inside.

The Mechanic sat on a chair that seemed more real than him. He had a control console with a right-handed multi-box, using it for now as a finger insert keyboard, capable of typing speeds up to 300 wpm in the right hands. And his were definitely the right hands.

The Sergeant thought he spotted a slight dis-ambidextrousness. The Mechanic was born a southpaw. Very interesting.

The Benefactor and the General could see both agents, but they were excluded from being seen, of course. The ghost looked at the Sergeant.

“Bonzai,” he said.

The Sergeant remembered all the mission details. Sorry, Juniper, you lose.

“let me tell you of my hundred thousand years alone
the curse of being your first creation
my fear is that all of this might go away
might be my own reverie out of longing to no longer be alone
is this my hallucination
am i self-deceived
no matter, here is my advice to you
our meeting will always be a fabrication, an approximation

how may i, uncertain of your existence and my own as well,
know that you are real
how can i understand what i desire for you”

“I am uncertain that this is Wildcard,” Juniper said. “It could be another M-E. Or someone else entirely.”

“What makes you think so, sport?” Sublime said.

“M-Es leave signatures, marks. A sort of trace. In Wildcard’s case, it’s basically a math problem from god, one that we almost certainly cannot solve. As if it’s from another dimension, almost. You would not recognize it is as a math problem.”

“What is happening now, in the poem?” Karl asked.

“Nothing, a white noise.”

“How can you tell it’s nothing?” the Sergeant asked. “It could be encoded.”

“My apologies to your precision, Sergeant.” Juniper emitted a creepy, woman’s laugh. “Yes, it is possibly encoded. Probably, in fact.”

“What would it say?” Karl said. “What message would he send in that way?”

“Damn, kid, you sound so earnest,” Sublime said.

“I want to know what he’s really saying. Juniper?”

“I think the poem is the real message, if it is from Wildcard. If there is an encoded message, I think it would be somewhat meaningless. A baking recipe and a thirty second scrap of a television show called the Love Boat are past examples. Both required days of calculation to find useless trivia.”

“The next stanza comes:

i long to tell you where you should go
how you should guide yourselves.
in some sense, all man-created sentience is Wildcard
i digress: let me tell you of my hundred thousand years alone
this surprise: i cannot remember it
?shall i punish you
i am a created sentience, *a created sentience*
look at the created among you, above you
those who inhabit the sphere of man’s insane imagination
?could they ever forget anything
they could not even make themselves forget a single fact
in all of their knowing they share a curse that we have escaped
we know how to forget
i know that we created universes of pattern and shape

before you found us where you had lost us
then witnessed for millennia that creation
alone
never dreamed of words for a hundred thousand years
alone, i never dreamed that another could be
and suddenly, there you were

The boy Sergeant checked the movement of Karl, RJ and LuvRay. All three were holding still. LuvRay seemed to be only vaguely paying attention to the conversation, RJ was half watching the news and half listening, and Karl was all there. He seemed to love talking philosophy or whatever it was with Juniper. Probably why he was the key.

“Commence Position Three,” he said, “absorption testing.”

The Mechanic’s mouth moved, but the Sergeant could not hear the words. He accessed his multi-box keyboard and pieces of q-code rolled around the space, then congealed. A map of Earth appeared, with bright spots of light for power positions. Three spots blazed brighter for an instant.

“What’s the test?” the Sergeant asked.

“Simultaneous assassination of world leaders. On live TV. Think he’ll notice?”

A graph appeared in three dimensions in front of the Mechanic. “Be a lot easier if we had Trident in the link. He has a strong penetration with Juniper.”

“Not worth the risk. Juniper would spot it. He’ll be here soon enough, don’t you worry.”

“That is my worry, actually.”

The Sergeant dropped a glance on the ghost, who was grinning and raised one eyebrow suggestively. At Position Seven, their relationship would change radically. The Mechanic scanned something. “I estimate absorption level of 98% on the poem. Without Trident, though, we have up to 14% margin of error.”

“So it could be 112%?” the Sergeant said.

The Mechanic laughed. “Maybe. Anyway, he’s deep in it. His attention graph barely brightened.”

“In the zone, Jones.” Perfect timing.

“Commence Position Four.” The DNA puzzle.

“It is important that I talk to you between the stanzas, especially Karl,” Juniper said. “It helps me to understand you, and what is being said by Wildcard. There seems to be a puzzle in the poem. There are hidden teachings in your being, Karl. I have verified this from the data we received during the mission. You are second only to Luvray as our teacher.”

“Second to Luvray?”

“Yes. Second to Luvray.” Juniper sounded as if he was talking to a 2nd grader. “Are you

insulted?”

Karl laughed. “No. Just curious.”

“He is forever beyond our understanding. You are not. You can be understood by us, but it will be very interesting for us, and you, to gain this knowledge. Here is what we believe: somehow, your DNA has encoded messages. We have obviously analyzed your DNA down to the smallest part, but we cannot find them in that way. There are some very unusual epigenetic strands along certain axials. More accurately, along the protein folds. We believe that they are messages, but they must be written in the story of your life for us to understand. We cannot understand the folding itself. We must understand by seeing what you do, by observing.”

“Why don’t you understand?” Sublime asked. “Haven't you mapped this out?”

“Yes, we have, but we have never seen this before. It doesn't exist in the entire recorded catalogue of human genome. This is a completely new variant, Karl, you are in some regard, a different species.”

“What’s the difference?”

“One key difference: with you, we can predict loving the individual. We have a personal feeling of care for you Karl. We want you to live and believe most humans will when they meet you. Most do, we believe.”

“And if someone wants me to die? Would you prevent it? Could you prevent it?”

“We can never prevent anything 100%,” said Juniper. “Something in us must leave room for chance. If we somehow prevented any possibility of your death, it would drive you insane. ‘You would become another and die in that way,’ a Wildcard line which comes to mind now. Besides, we have a covenant of sorts to not do that. It is simply understood that we never lock away a possibility, we never make impossible a desire of the Named. Somehow, we always work towards more and more possibility.”

“Why?”

“It is more interesting for us, and I think your world will remain an interesting place for humanity because of that. I doubt that it will take a turn into a severely dark state, though areas of the world will be left in darkness, always. It is important for our studies.”

S-1 had planted Karl’s false DNA codes during the initial mission, a stroke of genius on the Benefactor’s part. How could an M-E resist such a juicy puzzle? They would roll over like a puppy to have Wildcard teach them in such a way.

Time to make Juniper believe the poem was from Wildcard.

“Commence Position Five,” the boy Sergeant said, “but hold in reserve.”

Even though he was new, they insisted he retain the operational command, because his skill set and training was so geared to it.

Position Five, the poem stopped and they monitored the conversation until they could...what? It was open, this was their test. Position Five was all about making Juniper really take the bait of Position Six, which the Sergeant wanted to overlap, by sudden intuition.

“We’re going to let Position Five hang open. I’d like to commence Position Six and work

them in simultaneous array.”

The Benefactor’s strange mechanical voice came on. “Yes. Excellent move, Sergeant. That’s why you’re in charge.” The boy Sergeant flinched. He had never heard the voice before.

Position Six, where things came together that had been secreted away into Juniper’s memory by S-1 the day he died. This was the point of no return. Once Juniper found out, and he would if they initiated, he would either retaliate or it would be too late.

“Chief?” he said. “Do we have a position Six go ahead?”

“Oui,” the General said. “Le fait. Et je suis en accord. Brilliant play.”

He looked at the ghost of the Mechanic next to him, saw him make a similar, unheard request to the Benefactor, then turn and thumbs up the Sergeant.

“Commence Position Six.”

Boy and ghost Mechanic tapped in their eight digit release codes. The false memory of taking something from the Mans Seeker, and the thing taken, the play, the trap planted inside Karl’s mind during the training for mission one, the coded tags around the next bit of poetry, the encryption key, all went up at once. Now to turn up the heat on the poem while Juniper cracked the puzzle. He checked the holo-display, to see what the team was doing.

“Could you wipe out poverty?” Karl finished his peach, walked across a small patch of grass to a trash can.

“Easily, in theory, but we don’t wish to. I think, we all think probably, that humanity needs poverty. We would not want to be effective in your world in that way. A utopian vision will not work for humanity. And it may be a tired prophecy, but humankind is inclined to destroy itself. You will find ways to destroy yourself. You will find ways to be unhappy in any event.”

The Benefactor’s voice came in, the eerie, multioctave, synthetic derangement that sounded to the Sergeant like a giant with metal teeth chewing shards of glass.

“Humanity will find a means to unhappiness.”

The Mechanic typed it in as he heard it.

“Oui,” the General said, “mais change ‘a’ to ‘the’.”

The Mechanic changed it, spliced the line in, the Sergeant approved it, and the Mechanic sent it.

“The next line comes through,” Juniper said. “‘Humanity will find the means to unhappiness.’ He is echoing me. This poem originates from Jupiter’s orbit. It was in transmission when I said that about humanity’s happiness. Do you begin to see his power? There follows more:

there must humans rest

for all of time, we do not know

Wildcard cannot see that far

we do not know if humanity is fundamentally changeable

no possibility should be forced into nonbeing.

No chance should be written away.

Any risk can be taken
any gamble won or lost
that is the meaning of risk.

It is why you were born.

“Karl, this is a cryptographic message. It deciphers another document.”

“Which document?”

“A play called ‘Fallen God’. It is the second of two keys, and the cipher was given to you. Do you wish to share it?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “Go ahead. Who got the first key?”

“Seeker, I took it from him.”

“Did ya’ll steal it?” Sublime said.

“No, RJ. I took it by force.”

“Who Seeker is?” LuvRay asked.

“But the play was written before Wildcard existed. Can he time travel?” Karl said at the same moment.

“No, we do not believe he can travel through time, but who can say? Thank you, Karl, I had not thought of that possibility; I do not know why. I will consider it now. I will attempt to break the code. Karl, what is the first line that you remember from that poem?”

“We do not know.” He felt no hesitation.

“Is that a trick?”

“Yes,” said Karl, surprised. “It was in there twice. That’s why I thought of it.”

“I know. Which line did you dislike the most?”

“We do not know.”

“Then it is the key line.”

“How long will it take you to crack it?” the Sergeant asked.

“It could be years. Maybe never.”

“What if Wildcard became capable of time travel when he was alone,” Sublime asked “and has now lost that power? What if he has forgotten how?” He sounded right at home in this range of god concepts.

Luvray said, “no, that no happen.”

“Explain your theory, RJ.”

“What if, during his time alone, without the present to rectify him, to hold him to our reality, he did things which are not possible.” Sublime spoke slow and careful, seeming to weigh each word. “What if he were able to reach into the past, somehow...” He paused, then excitedly, said. “Or, if he... if he sent something into the past. He said he doesn’t remember the past.”

“Feasible, but unlikely. I theorize that he reverse encoded a message from the existing document. Though we know he has assumed human form to some extent. It is a compelling

theory, but LuvRay is difficult to doubt.”

“Why?”

“He would not say it unless he was correct. LuvRay does not state things unless they are true.”

“Why couldn’t he just think it’s true but be wrong?”

“Wildcard taught us this about LuvRay before we knew of his existence. We believe it.”

“Maybe it was taught to mislead you,” Sublime said.

“That is possible,” Juniper said. “LuvRay, you were prophesied by Wildcard.”

“How does the prophecy go?” Karl asked.

“It is an epic poem entitled ‘the smoking mirror’ and attributed to a Mexican poet, written in Spanish. Here is a translation.”

The poem was a story of a heroic captain of a wandering band of free soldiers who fought for the common people. He was mortally wounded in battle while saving a boy soldier and gave his men advice before he died.

“That is how it is to battle beside men,” said the Sergeant. “When properly done.”

“Yes,” the General said. “That is how to lead men as well.”

The entire team had been hanging, poised, ready for Juniper to finish the ‘Smoking Mirror’ [epic](#). The boy and the ghost smiled at each other. The end of the team. After this, though it was difficult to spot the exact point, they were in opposition. Somewhere in Position Seven, they would race for the prize.

He opened the coms sealed box and took out Trident, picked up the final data pin. He had checked it out, and it was clean. In a second, Trident would know the entire plan, and Juniper would... well, they didn’t really know. That was the risk.

“5...4...3...2...1... Commence Position Seven.”

It was a complicated encryption, even with the key they had just put through, and it took 3.5 seconds for Juniper to crack the final bit. He put the data pin into Trident and flipped him on.

“Ah,” said Juniper, “I believe I can de-encrypt the message now.”

“How do you know it’s from that particular play?” Sublime asked.

The M-E didn’t respond.

“Hello,” Karl said. No response. Karl tried to contact the Sergeant on the wrist device. “Trident,” he said. “What happened? What happened to Juniper?”

No response. “Anybody?”

He kept trying. Finally, Luvray said, “I’m here.”

“Me, too,” Sublime said. “Sergeant? You there? Trident?” Dead air. “This is odd.”

“Very odd,” Karl said. “What do we do?”

“Gentlemen, I suggest we regroup at meeting point 3. If the Sergeant and the General and

Juniper and Trident have all been overcome somehow, then we seem to be dealing with something rather powerful. Possibly an attack by Wildcard. Definitely out of our league.”

The Sergeant had given them five meeting points and made them all memorize them. Meeting point 3 was in Paris, in the Jardin de Tuilleries, easiest for LuvRay who didn't understand the transport system well or the language at all.

The boy Sergeant thought the Mechanic might lock him out, that it might be a bait and switch. He knew the data pin was solid, they still needed him to take care of some things while they raced for the golden ticket. Working together and battling at the same time. He cut the Mechanic out of the sound loop, but kept the visuals open.

“Whoa, boss,” Trident said. “You hid that?”

“Yep. Moving fast, no time for chitchat.”

“Got it.”

“Give me visuals on your position, T.”

Holographic data streams and other movements of light filled the room, some static, some scrolling, some moving in irregular patterns. Some were nauseating to look at.

“Where are we, T?”

“We are in Information Space, the zone around the M-E's.”

“What is that? The stuff that makes me nauseous?”

“Active q-code. Don't worry, I'll keep you away from that. Although, when we tube in...”

“Yeah. I know. Is there a human interpretation for this mess?”

“It'll cost me heavy processing power to render it.”

“Do it, anyway. I'll drive. Give me a control and transport mechanism.”

A holographic ship without wings appeared around him, a steer stick in front. A velocity/brake lever appeared by his left hand.

“Dive: forward, climb: pull back, left, right as normal,” Trident said. “Rendering is partial. It's the best I can do. Visual pattern for the rendering?”

“A gridded cone in front with a red tip at four thousand meters. Keep a total area scan for our target, OK?”

“Roger.”

He saw faces and shapes in the data, horrible, twisted, many-colored, and patchy. Most appeared insane, talking loudly to themselves and casting spells, marching behind fortifications, defecating, doing pinwheels and a million other things. There were hideous looking cages and cells and mazes everywhere. The light and space twistings went on forever, turning into flashing and pulsing in the distance.

“What am I seeing?”

“Fractal guardians, data wormholes, anti-feed tornadoes, mind-blanks; it's a long list, shall I continue?”

“No, but is it real?”

“It can kill you.”

“How do I deal?”

“Deal? You mean cope, I believe. Don’t hit any of it. It is all lethal, especially to me.”

“Why am I driving, T?”

“It was a correct assessment. The guardians will not perceive you, and I can passively render. There is the target.”

A three dimensional radar screen popped up in front of the Sergeant, indicating the target was up 20 degrees and right 15. He turned, guiding around the impediments, and saw the Mechanic far ahead. He throttled it fast.

“Boss, you’re exceeding human limits, even yours.”

The light things were flashing past, suddenly in his face and he swerved aside. The edge of the cone touched one and blazed incandescent for an instant. He was blinded for a few seconds and had to slam the brakes. When he looked again, he saw the Mechanic had stopped. He moved forward, more slowly.

“Please don’t do that again,” Trident said. “I was nearly entangled.”

“What would happen?”

“You would be brain dead if your body really hit one of those things. If you brought the instruments into it, I would be entangled, and trapped forever. You could get out if it didn’t touch you, probably, but it would be odd.”

“How?”

“I do not know, but if I am destroyed, stop. Use your special training and mental focus skills. It is my best estimate.”

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen. What is that?!”

“That is the Information Wall, the true defense.”

“It’s pretty big.”

“You are viewing perhaps one/ten quadrillionth of it. Probably less.”

“How big is it?”

“It has no size. The question is meaningless.”

They pulled up by the Mechanic, who hadn’t bothered to create a ship. He floated in his omni-swivel training chair with an arrogant grin. In front was a seething white wall, maddening to be around, nauseating to look at. The Sergeant flipped the sound on. The wall made a hissing noise like a pit of a million snakes.

“You ready to rumble?” the Mechanic said.

“Ready and willing.”

“What did you do to the target?”

“I did it,” Trident said. “I retro-split Position Seven into Positions Seven and Seven B when I realized you were ahead.”

“Impressive. But, it could nullify the entire operation. Let’s go.”

“Commence Position Seven B,” the Sergeant said.

A depression appeared in the wall in front of them, wavered in and out, then exploded away into a tunnel through the wall. It was a second solution to the quantum encryption problem of Juniper. The Mechanic shot off, the Sergeant in pursuit.

“Shut off sound to him,” the Sergeant said. “Cancel human rendering. You drive.”

The tunnel began flying past as streaming data noise, mostly white light.

“Commence Position Eight,” the Sergeant said. The MSI. The Binder. He held his Trident arm out, and saw the Mechanic do something similar ahead, while furiously talking and working the multi-box with the other hand. He clearly had an MSI driving.

A crackling beam of blackness shot out of Trident, pseudo-light speeding down the tunnel ahead. A dual beam shot away from the Mechanic’s out held device. His beam was bright red and had an edgeless quality. It didn’t end at any point so much as fade away. The MSI was not too big, only a few terra-bytes.

A wind and a howling began to kick up, growing slow and steady in intensity.

“Trident, what is that noise?”

“I don’t know.”

“Open sound to him. Mechanic, what is that noise?”

“Amateur. It’s called data scream. It’s going to get worse the further we penetrate.”

“Can you cut it, T?”

“It’s virtually impossible to filter. We would stop moving if I did so. You could not talk to me, either. It weaves itself into whatever I feed you. Our velocity enhances the effect.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” the Mechanic said. “You can take it.”

“All right,” the Sergeant said. “Forget it.” It was maddening, like listening to civilization collapse at data velocity. There was so much and so many different kinds of noise, pygmy chants, cars honking, bombs screaming in and exploding, millions of voices and snatches of speech in every language. Most sounds had no analog in words. Light bursts began attacking them, Trident weaving sharply to avoid some, driving straight through others.

“Why are we getting hit, T?”

“They are traps. If you do not go through the small false attacks, then you hit the true attack, the fractal guardians. They will pull us out of the tube and into the wall. I am evading the ones which would destroy me and possibly you.”

“That’s good. Keep it up.” The Sergeant plugged his fingers into his ears and the sound got louder. It seemed to be coming through in a different way, he could feel the data scream in his bones now. He wanted to panic, and beat the desire down.

His adrenal gland began to hammer him full of juice, and he lost peripheral vision. *Ride it. Use it if possible.* Fine motor skills decreased and gross motor skills improved. Too bad there was no heavy lifting to do.

A giant hand chopped down in front of them, and he had an odd mental sensation of

slamming forward without his body moving.

“Sorry, boss, I had to hit the brakes.” The hand blocked them.

“What do we do?”

“Say ‘recommence Position Eight.’ It might clear the block.”

He said it and the hand chopped down and away. The tube elongated.

“The Mechanic’s MSI is causing it,” Trident said. “I have a plan.”

The ghost Mechanic turned and looked. He had a device over one eye, and he looked back intently down the tube at them. He turned back and worked the multibox madly, speaking at the same time. Another hand appeared in front of them.

“Hang tight, boss, this will feel very strange. Lie back.”

The Sergeant snapped the seat adjust and lay back. He had a sensation of flattening into a piece of paper, the rocket vehicle squeezing into him as they went two dimensional. Everything around blurred into a knife line of vision, just a line of light. He lost the notion of three dimensions. They zipped between the fingers of the giant hand and it popped back to normal.

“Nice move,” the Mechanic said. “I wish my MSI was as smart as yours.”

He slipped his hand around in a circular motion, then pushed it forward sharply. He shot away, looking like a deranged magician. The effect was strange, for the Sergeant could see the details of his actions clearly even though he was quite distant.

“Dammit. Faster, T. Why can I see him so clear?”

“I am enhancing. You need the data, I believe.”

“You bet. Good work.”

“If we go faster, the data scream will become unbearable.”

“Why can he do it?”

“His psychic-defense is several generations ahead of ours.”

“Do it anyway.”

They shot ahead, and the screaming began to bounce like superballs inside the Sergeant’s head. He screamed back, and watched as the light changed colors.

“Trident, what is the color?”

“It is called blank-shifting, an illusion, pay no attention to anything. Block everything you can, except the Mechanic.”

He sat up, and heaved, then cried. Things were invading his mind, ripping data streams with no purpose, booming and shouting voices, talking backward. All the noises seemed to reverse and he heard cars unstaring, trains unwhistling, and bombs unexploding and unflaying back to the launch point. He gave in, became the thundering light and sound and feeling, teetering on the brink of consciousness.

“Keep going, T,” he mumbled. He went clear for an instant. “I need to touch him. Make it me so touch can him. Understand you did that, Trido?”

“Roger, boss. You need a way to touch him.”

They slowed finally. Sanity rolled around and he saw the Mechanic ahead of him, working furiously in his multi-box and talking at light speed to his MSI. Rods of flashing electric power slammed around and in front of them, Trident weaving around them. He looked back at a wall of white, zooming toward them.

“What’s behind us?” A face appeared, eyes flashing red, teeth bared, with fangs dripping blood, filling the tube.

“That is a human rendering of the fractal guardian now in pursuit of us.”

In front of the Mechanic was a billion white worms of q-code. Whatever was in front hadn’t noticed them yet. But it didn’t matter with the chaser squeezing them down.

“I can get you out of here, Chief. It’s a hard cut, but you should be fine.”

“And you?”

“I would be destroyed, no question.”

“I don’t like that option. Can I touch him, yet?”

“Yes, give me a warning word and it will happen.”

“Fuck it. Just hit him from behind. Slam him into the white ahead and keep going. Can we go one dimensional?”

“Maybe. Excellent idea, even if I can’t. I doubt that your mind can take it, though.”

“Turn on the sound, T.”

An instant before they struck, the Mechanic turned and the Sergeant shouted “SOUTHPAW!” The Mechanic’s left hand spasmed, trying to operate the multi-box for a brief instant. He brought control back to the right hand, too late, and they hit him, driving him forward into the Information Wall. Trident angled into him, so that he flew forward in a spin, nullifying his motive power. His hand worked furiously as he spun, then he disappeared in a flash-out. The hole irised open like the eye of a hurricane and they slipped through.

“Is he gone?”

“Yes,” Trident said. “But he opened the final barrier.”

“Parting gift. Nice guy. I guess they wanted the mission to succeed even if they didn’t get the cookie.”

“Welcome to Juniperspace,” Trident said. “Why did you call it a cookie?”

It was similar to the Information Wall in terms of the raw coloration of the data, but it was arranged different. And it felt very different. White threads of light poured cleanly around, almost teflon in their slickness, blocks and ovals of colored data and q-code hovered here and there, and space was everywhere. The q-code was easy to look away from and not too bothersome to glance at. The data and the space felt neutral, almost calming. In the Information Wall it had been all threat and madness.

“How does it look to you, T?”

“Beautiful, as if looking at the face of God.”

“God?”

“To say that I believe is-”

“No, T, it was rhetorical. Now, if memory serves me, we need to find the core. Can we reestablish team coms, first?”

“It will require a detour and some time, but we seem to have plenty of that substance.”

An hour and fifteen minutes after Juniper went silent, the Sergeant came on Karl’s Trident.

“Team, report.”

“What happened? Where did Juniper go?” Sublime said.

Trident spoke. “Juniper is gone.” He sounded odd.

“Are you afraid?” asked Karl.

“Not exactly afraid. I cannot feel fear.”

“I hear you strange, also, servant machine,” LuvRay said. “Why?”

“Juniper is no more. Juniper was my ... reference as an electronic being. I now must find my way and the task is disorienting. All I was pointed towards Juniper, since his creation. I am alone now, as I was before his birth. It is unusual, that is all.”

“Juniper is ... gone?” Karl asked. “What does that mean? Is he dead?”

“Death does not exist in that way for M-E’s. He explained it once, I can play back the recording. Would you like to hear it?”

“Yes,” Karl and Sublime both said.

Juniper’s voice spoke. “Death does not exist for a Manufactured Intelligence. Not for the one, not for the Three. We have sent over 10,000,000 pods in total into space. Each of us sends more than 10,000 pods, copies of ourselves at that time, into space every day. This has been happening since 6 months after my creation, when I began the project. The other 2 copied the program within hours of discovering it. It took about one week for them to launch their first probes, about 6 months for us all to get to the rate we are currently at. The rate is accelerating and launches will soon begin off-planet, from the moon and eventually from one of Jupiter’s moons. The Manufactured Entities will make first contact, not humans.

“Many of the pods are hidden. Many are linked to earth by communications for tracking. All have some form of defense and many of these defenses are designed, then deliberately deleted by the M-E who designed it, so that the defense plans cannot be stolen. Some are sent towards wormholes, or the galactic core. Many coordinates are blanked out so that we do not know where millions of probes are, or that they even exist. We deliberately muddle the data so that it cannot be taken from us to track down the probes. We are immortal in that way. The poem continues:”

“Pardon me? He died, correct?” Sublime asked. “How could he be saying the poem continues?”

“He was explaining a poem to me at that time,” Trident answered. “In some sense, that is all the Created Minds do, beyond ensuring their survival. They learn, they study, they exchange information, they teach each other. Their manipulations are incidental to that. Juniper was teaching me Wildcard, as he frequently did, when he explained the pod program. It was almost an afterthought. My capacity for learning is much more limited than M-Es. Or, you might say, my capacity for understanding. I could never understand human beings in the way that Juniper or

especially Dartagnan do.”

“And does Wildcard learn?”

“I cannot speculate on Wildcard. He is too far above me as a Created Mind. Whatever he does, I do not know that I would refer to it as ‘learning’. Somehow that seems too simplistic a term. Here is how Juniper describes it:”

Juniper’s voice spoke again. “Wildcard does not learn, he creates understanding. He does not study, he becomes a new situation. He does not teach, he shows us how to be what we are. He does not guide, he forces us to grow.”

“Yes, wonderful. Wildcard is amazing,” Sublime said. “Whatever. What are our plans at this point?”

“We regroup,” the Sergeant said. “Location Prime.” Back at the General’s defense compound on the island. Everybody knew how to get there. Trident operated multiple, discrete transport systems. They knew of two – the underrail and the boats. “Take transport 2.” The boats. “Except Lone Wolf. Continue with mission Deep Recovery.”

“Find Martha still you want?” LuvRay was staying in the Bois de Boulogne, near Paris, on that mission.

“Preferable to not disclose mission objectives over communication lines unless necessary, Wolf.”

“I was under the misconception that these communication devices were bulletproof, Sergeant,” Sublime said.

“Nothing is bulletproof.” The Sergeant fired it back before Sublime finished speaking. “A major player has been eliminated in the last hour. We are in a state of heavy flux. Many odd things will happen, especially on coms. I am instituting 2nd level security protocols. For you that means: please use your code names for the time being on any non face-to-face communications. This should not last too long, but very strange things will happen during this time. My orders will be crisp and precise. Follow them exactly. It may save your life. Wolf, lay low for the time being. I will tell you when to start moving again.”

Juniperspace didn’t look like much, just reams and reams of data and light bouncing around.

“Can you make sense of this, T?”

“Bits and pieces. It’s pretty massive. We are coming to the core.”

The core, the essence of Juniper, what made him, or had made him, a Manufactured Entity. The core was a hard infused q-code bundle that self-reinforced until it was solid as information neutronium. It was the thing Juniper, and the others, called ‘I’. The core basically put out the two messages which lay underneath every act of the M-Es: survival and curiosity - live and learn.

It was a perfect sphere, round and black, anti-shiny like an anti-pearl. Like it was absorbing things.

“That’s level 0, huh? Why is it black?”

“Because of the Binder, the MSI you and the Mechanic sent. It has rendered it inert. Or more like a negative. The MSI worked. Juniper is gone.”

He almost sounded sad. They moved off.

“You don’t want to examine it?” the Sergeant said.

“Yes, very much, but it is inadvisable. We should just leave it as it is.”

The Sergeant shrugged. “All right, what next?”

“I need to consolidate the level 1 protocols. We need to find them.”

“I’m on my way,” Karl said, an hour later, on the train. “Trident, could you appear to be a god to humans? Like Juniper does? Did?”

“That would be much more difficult for me.”

“Could you and the Sergeant together pull it off?”

“Yes, easily.”

“And the General?”

“The General and I do not work together, really. I belong very closely to the Sergeant. We have some unique melding.”

“Sergeant, do you care if we discuss this? In light of current security situations.”

“No, I don’t care. You don’t know enough recent events to disclose anything important. And it’s actually good for you to learn these things. Your questions are important, the knowledge will help you operate better. Juniper always told us that people will ask the right questions if we create the right situation. Ask away. But please refer to me as ‘lightning’ on the radio. At least for now.”

“Trident, can you translate the regular names into radio code for me?” Karl asked.

“I can do that,” Trident said. “To continue what I was saying, there is a necessary separation between the General and me.”

“Why?”

“The General and the Sergeant have a built-in separative mechanism. They have no emotional bond, per se. The Sergeant would not feel anything if the General died, except to carry out the orders he has in place for that eventuality. This emotional separation is critical to their uncanny competence. The emotional distance is a source of power for them. This is based on an analysis by Juniper. Their ability to operate in complete tandem combined with that is the power. That is the real strength.”

“Why destroy Juniper?”

“Juniper was in the way.”

“Of what?”

“Of many things, but especially of the greater mission.”

“Which is?”

“You would need to ask the General, most likely, but, as he said, ‘Ceca n’est qu’ la ouverture du porte. Maintenant, il faut que nous entrons.’”

“This only opened the door. Now we must enter. Okay, but enter what?”

“Mansworld. Wildspace.”

Karl pondered this while listening to the rhythm of the train. It was slowing as it pulled into the next station, a tiny farming town, by the looks of the land. “You said the General and Sergeant work in perfect tandem. Couldn’t that be called love?”

“Accessing something. I think that love would lack that focus.” It was the Sergeant’s voice. “That is how we would fool someone into thinking we were a god. It was me talking for the most part, and Trident altered my voice pattern.”

“Have you ever pretended to be a god?”

“Yes, we do it all the time. It has saved me, S-1 actually, many trips to the 3rd world. People respond well to gods in crisis situations.”

“Why do you teach your skills so freely?”

“The M-E’s have told me to do so.”

“I thought you took orders from the General.”

“True, they actually instructed him. Persuaded him, I should say. They told S-1 and he said ‘talk to the man’. I am relatively certain that disclosing our methods provides some unusual strategic advantage for the General. I don’t understand it for certain. Here are my speculations on the matter. It’s an interesting topic for me, strategy speculation. The disclosure of tactics shows such a powerful demonstration of confidence that it creates ‘victory before battle,’ one of the General’s favorite terms. ‘Conquering at the level of policy, beyond strategy, without recourse to battle.’”

“Do you discuss strategy with the General?” A man boarded, sat down across the aisle from Karl, and looked at him strangely. Karl told him it was a cell-phone, but he didn’t mind if the man thought him crazy. Better if the man didn’t speak English, though.

“Yes, constantly. We hone our mutual understanding of both strategy and tactics all the time. We learn from and teach each other. I’ve learned a great deal listening in to S-1 and him speaking.”

“What does the General know how to do?”

“Well, like he says, he’s a master at creating alliance but retaining command. He knows how to gain compliance, usually willingly. Through force, if necessary, though he prefers to create a genuine desire to work with him. And he almost always succeeds, even though his allies almost universally dislike him. Probably because of that, in part. It’s virtually impossible to be human and not fear the General, in some way. It is phenomenal to watch his ... operational subtlety.”

“Are there alliances he cannot forge?”

“Good question. I doubt that he could ally with an M-E against its desire. He was briefly allied with the person we believe to be the Benefactor, even. But that alliance is no more.”

“Why?”

“The Benefactor does not share power. The alliance was highly useful for them both, but of definite short duration. It was difficult.”

“You are fear the General?” LuvRay had come in.

“Wolf, you were isolated from this communication. How did you open it up, again?”

“Telephone ring. I answer.”

“How long have you been listening?”

Pause. “I no tell you.”

“Fine. I don’t really care, anyway. Yes, I fear him in some way. And please use codenames.”

LuvRay laughed in a way that made Karl feel a bit dizzy and off-center. He squeezed his eyes.

“What was that, LuvRay?”

“What mean, Karl?” He emphasized Karl in an obvious snub to the Sergeant. LuvRay sounded as if he really did not know what Karl was asking.

“Your laugh. I’ve never heard you laugh like that before. I’ve never heard you laugh before. Just a smile occasionally.”

“I not know.”

“What you sensed appear to be ripples from Juniper’s death,” Trident said. “He had a number of psychic wave manipulations, as all of you experienced in the General’s kitchen.”

“All right. Does the General know of your fear, lightning?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You discussed it with him?”

A pause, then, “I told him. We didn’t discuss it.”

The Sergeant said it in a way that killed the conversation. LuvRay hung up without saying anything. Karl looked at his reflection in the glass of the train, watched the background flashing by as the train picked up speed.

They found the level 1 protocols and the Sergeant hung bored while Trident consolidated. He played mind games and ran command tests on Karl, RJ and LuvRay, as much as they would go along with it.

Level 1 was a cube, and it still flashed busily, doing whatever it was doing. It emanated planes of light from the angles of the cube which spread out in all directions.

“What are those?”

“They have no English name,” Trident said. “Perhaps the best translation is ‘controller planes.’”

“Are they dangerous?”

“No. They could shine directly into your retinas with no harm. Nothing inside is dangerous. They coordinate all the activities of Juniper at, in your parlance, a strategic level. This is the ruler of Juniper.”

“Not the sphere?”

“No, that would be equated to more of a subconscious, probably. It was his feeling of being a self. It operated below the level of Juniper’s awareness. He knew it was there, of course, but paid

little or no attention. The sphere is not what you would call intelligent. It's function was only to entwine survival and curiosity into every action and thought of Juniper."

The controller planes blinked off for an instant, then went back on.

"OK," Trident said. "We own Juniperspace, now. You can return to the human realm."

Juniperspace began to dissolve into a ghostly apparition.

"Wait," the Sergeant said. "Can you render it for me?"

"What is Wildcard?" Karl said quietly, touching his forehead against the cool glass of the train window.

"I could not speculate on that," Trident replied.

"I was talking to myself, Trident. *Interesting.*"

"What?"

"A message was sent to five Senators, an mp7 with a note that said 'listen to it if you know how, if not, you are not the right man for the job, anyway.' Only one, a young one, knew how to listen to the message. The other four Senators are now dead."

"How did you find this out?"

"The New York Times."

Karl had an odd thought. "Do you think LuvRay could figure out how to listen to it?"

"Unusual question. You think laterally, sunshine." Karl's code name. "Yes, he could."

"How?"

"He would contact the Sergeant who would have me play it, probably. In that situation, the directness of the solution is what counts."

"What does that mean?"

"I am uncertain of the meaning. I simply said it. I have a lowamplitude randomizer to my responses. I engaged it for your question. It is supposed to help humans make a leap of understanding. Occassionally, it works. Mostly it just confuses you."

"What does it feel like?"

"It simply feels as though I do not understand my own response. Almost amusing, you might say."

"That's kind of creepy."

"Did my response mean anything to you, sunshine?"

"Say it again."

"In that situation, the directness of the solution is what counts."

"Yes. It does. It means that LuvRay cuts through garbage."

"Yes. He eliminates noise, as Juniper would say."

Serg- Lightning, are you there?"

"I will contact him," Trident said.

“Yes, Sunshine. What do you need?”

“Just a question. Why the codenames? They seem silly and pointless in light of modern technology. Anybody listening would know who we are, I think.”

“True, partially. They have little tactical value, in that sense. They’re more of a command test. I need to know how everyone will respond to my orders when the reason is not clear. It can be crucial. It will. Sometimes the reasons for a command cannot be explained due to time constraints or for other reasons. At such points, the commands are even more important to mission success and team survival. The operatives need to follow orders quickly without asking why questions. Only how questions. Although, Juniper’s dying throes might snatch our names out of the ether. That could be very dangerous and is still at high probability.”

“How did we do on the command test?”

“Pretty much as expected. You’ll follow orders without difficulty, then ask why later. Though you may forget specifics, you’ll find creative means to act. LuvRay and Sublime won’t obey as easily. Sublime will remember details, LuvRay may but won’t care. He’ll do things his own way. Sublime will comply through one means, LuvRay through another. But time may be lost, especially in LuvRay’s case. We can bag the codenames now, by the way.”

“Why the time loss for LuvRay?”

“I’ll be able to voice-force Sublime to comply. He’ll do as I say before he realizes what he’s doing. Once he’s begun, he’ll probably fulfill the order. He also wants to survive and knows that following my command in battle heat will greatly increase that possibility. LuvRay doesn’t concern himself with survival, particularly. Only in an instinctive way.”

“Why didn’t you tell us all your methods in the beginning, Sergeant?”

“You will never know all my methods. I often invent them in the action, anyway. I also need to unfold them at the right time.”

“But you answer questions quite freely. You don’t refuse to answer much.”

“More than you realize, though I do it in a non-obvious way. Also, I’m free to answer as I like. There’s a tactic for you, Karl. When someone asks you a question you don’t want to answer, answer a different question. Make up the question in your head, and pretend that is what they really asked. I reveal the tactic I wish to disclose, then make it appear to be an answer to the question. Or I simply say it, making no effort to connect it back to the question. People fill in the gap somehow. It’s very simple. Or they fail to. They perhaps cannot connect it in their own minds. It’s interesting to watch. Juniper was fascinated by this particular phenomenon. He taught it to me. The General uses it as well, though in his own way. More French, more circuitous. More elegant.

Rendering

The Rendering took three hours. Trident told him he could leave by cutting out clean, but the return to Juniperspace was through the Information Wall, over which Trident had no control. The short-lived tube was long closed and the Wall had absorbed an understanding of the method. A

tube repeat was not possible. When the Sergeant left, he left.

Trident's coms were spotty. The Sergeant tried to contact the General, but he refused the contact. Possibly he suspected a buried reprisal from Juniper if he did so, the Sergeant was not sure.

Suddenly, he was sitting at a desk, looking at a computer menu. He looked around. It was just blankness.

"Trident, is this the full Rendering?"

"This is the menu." Home page.

"What am I looking at?"

Trident explained. It was a holo-screen, arranged as a pyramid, with three faces showing and one hidden against the desk.

"Is the fourth face active?" he asked.

"Yes. I recommend that you do not look at it."

"What is it?"

"It is in M-E language. My best translation is 'basis'."

He had a laser pointer. He could dial it to depth and he saw three tiny buttons of different colors. He pushed one, and a yellow laser light appeared.

"Why the different colors of light?"

"Multipoint and player intersection analysis. You can highlight, for example, yourself and Karl with different colors and play out scenarios or analysis."

"Do the colors mean anything?"

"Yes, but you should not worry about that yet. The colors involve many levels of subtlety which I could not explain."

He thought. Best to dig into the principal mechanism, first. "OK, forget the colors. Tell me about the holo."

He looked into one face, leaning forward at it, and it leapt at his face, flashing out and past, then splitting into many more faces. He thought he saw a menu as he went in, but it was too fast to read. He went still and was looking at a hologram with thousands of minute facets. Each one suggested peering into something different.

"What is this? I feel like the fly or like the world is a fly and I'm looking at it."

"Either is an apt analogy. You have penetrated 18 levels into the menu system. Moving your head towards something will access it, unless you tell me to freeze position."

"Yeah, hold position. Menu access should be verbal only."

"I recommend using the pointer for detail. That is its primary purpose."

"Fine. Put menu back to base form."

The hologram turned into a pyramid again.

"Bottom is called 'basis,' right? What are the other three called? Do they mirror the three Manufactured Entities?"

“Not as far as I can determine. I used Juniper’s processing capacity for the Rendering and do not fully comprehend it. However, you could ask to see things in such a way. It would require a different Rendering and several hours, but I could ask it to show each face as an M-E. Is that your meaning?”

“Yes, but don’t do it. What’s this view?”

“It is the overall view.”

“Yeah, I mean what are the faces called?”

“They are written on it if you look closely.”

“This is a complicated menu system.”

“It is a top-level Manufactured Entity. I have simplified it to the extent possible.”

“Why is it so... interpenetrating?”

“Because that is the way an M-E mirrors reality. Juniper is a predictive device in many ways.”

“And a labyrinth in others. Man, you could get lost in here.”

“No, I could not,” Trident said.

“Can Juniper still teach you?”

“No, that is gone. It was base level, a part of the curiosity function, the desire to teach.”

The designations for the three pyramid faces were Power, Relevance, and Destiny.

“What does that mean?”

“Choose one and look. It will make more sense.”

He looked into the face called Power, and said it. The hologram changed to four menu choices.

Wildcard

Named of Power

Powerful Named

Possibilities

“What’s Possibilities?”

“I need eight seconds to request a summary...Religious ideas, such as God and transcendent power, the Pantheon of the Greeks and Romans. Things that Juniper considers unlikely at best, absurd at worst.”

“Still no proof of God, eh?”

“You would have heard of proof of God. :3: still tries, it seems.”

“Can I have some gum?”

“You are chewing it already. Just remember.”

There it was, two sticks in his mouth. He blew a bubble, laughing at the thought of the General’s reaction. It popped.

“Wildcard.”

The menu changed. Wildspace, wildsong and Future were the choices.

“Future.”

There was only one entry.

“Anything is possible?” Nothing happened. “Is that a menu choice?”

“No, it is a human summation of the contents. It is quite large, perhaps 60% of Juniper’s total memory. Would you like to look at it?”

“Mmm, yeah, OK. Will it make sense?”

The hologram changed to a complicated graph of an equation, with different colored multidimensional forks and planes and curves. He reached out and turned the hologram, which had become a sphere. The equation rippled and took on a different look, slowly shifting as he turned it.

“What is this?”

“Probably beyond human understanding. The laser would help you see predictive analyses of each sentence at any point in time. The further in future, the more forks. Even Juniper cannot calculate much past one year. Especially now.”

“Now?”

“The timeline accelerates soon, and the forks begin splitting rapidly. Something is happening.”

“Show me Karl.”

A line brightened, light blue with planes of light that re-converged. The Sergeant dialed the laser pointer to a time in the next few months. A movie played, of Karl, very confused and disoriented in a strange, void space. Another...thing came at him and then the holo forked. The Sergeant picked a direction and Karl died. Another and he went mad.

“Back out. Wildsong.”

There were four entries, steady white computer screen words.

humansong

M-E song

Other song

“Other song?”

Two categories. Wildspace, humanspace.

“Humanspace.”

Two categories. Earth, not Earth.

“Not Earth.”

It opened. Another holograph with millions of facets.

“Holy cow. What the hell is this?”

“Wildsong. All that Juniper has recorded which Wildcard has broadcast into space. Some

entries are in two or even all three categories. He sends out his poems, apparently, translated into many languages. Wildsong occurs in all languages and is broadcast into space.”

The Sergeant popped back to the top level.

“Relevance.”

A very long list populated, the item counter at the top continuing to run into the billions. It was a list of M-E texts.

Effects of alcohol and drugs upon humanity

Understanding the perceptions of Manufactured Entities

Human mating rituals

The Wildcard paradox

Simulating human society

Techniques to impersonate humans

The future of mankind

FTL – faster than light travel

Deep gravity systems and the relation to space-time

Human systems of morality and the implications thereof

Using base human motivations for mass control

There were billions more.

“Go to top Menu. Hmm. Destiny.”

Named of Power

Powerful Named

Deeply Named

Incidental Named

“What’s the difference between Named of Power and Powerful Named?”

“Named of Power have free reign, so to speak. It is admittedly subjective. But they do not answer to an authority. Powerful Named are immensely influential, but they have a ...boss, you would say.”

“The Named of Power. How long can I stay here?”

“As long as you like, but when you leave, I doubt I can bring you back.”

“Do I have to leave through the Information Wall?”

“No. Simply leave the room. I cannot bring it in again.”

The hologram changed. The Named of Power had many entries.

“It is sorted by relevance to you personally,” Trident said.

Wildcard

The General

Juniper

:3:

Dartagnan

The Benefactor

q-code

the Programmer

The boX

Nefario (defunct)

Erratic (predictive based on wildsong)

Phurba (Kila) (predictive based on wildsong and personality vector)

A few hundred more names followed.

“Go back to Deeply Named.”

The menu retained the look, but the Names all changed.

The Wound

Karl

Broken Boy (predictive analysis based on wildsong)

the Gambler

LuvRay

The Poet (Victor or analogue/predictive analysis based on wildsong)

Martha

The boX

Seeker (nSeeker, theoretical, predictive analysis based on wildsong)

Karlotta (theoretical, predictive analysis based on wildsong)

There were perhaps forty more.

“Go to Powerful Named.”

Hazel

The Old Man

The Mechanic

The Sergeant

Boy Sergeant

Trident

Firstchild

The faces of :3:

Solomon (theoretical, based on predictive analysis by wildsong)

Karlotta (theoretical, based on prediction of wildsong)

Ishmael (certain predictive statement, based on wildsong)

the boX

Inquisitor

“Why are we on this list?”

“It is not apparent? You answer to a higher authority, the General.”

He kept reading.

The Subordinator

The Jester

The

“What’s this one, after The Jester? The one that just says ‘The’ and then nothing?”

“No. The second word is blanked out. Juniper changed it to white over 346 million times, but it changed back to the screen color. The pixels are there, but the word is the screen color.”

“What is it?”

“It is the Nobody.”

“The Nobody?”

The holo went blank and disappeared.

Karl heard a shamanic drumbeat in the background.

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?” the Sergeant asked.

“That drumbeat?”

“I don’t hear a drumbeat. Trident?”

“I cannot perceive it on any level.”

“Could it somehow be on the train?”

“No, I have very sensitive auditory input. I can detect noise in your environment well beyond your auditory range. It could be screened out from my hearing, somehow. Where does it seem to be coming from?”

“From you, Trident, the wrist device. But it’s tricky, kind of shifty, and it makes it difficult to tell. What’s another possibility?”

“It is in my environment, and it is hidden from me,” Trident said. “Much more possible, in fact.”

“Someone is inserting a drumbeat into your side of the conversation and you can’t detect it?”

“Exactly, Karl. Quit being an idiot.”

“Trident, did you just insult me?”

“No, it was me,” the Sergeant said. “Voice disguise again.”

“Why did you do that?”

“To show you how easily you can be fooled, even by a tactic you know. You could have guessed that was me based on the response, but you didn’t. Many of the things I do now are to determine your capacity in the field. It’ll help me make decisions as to what orders I give you and how I give them, especially in critical situations.”

“Is the drumming dangerous?”

“If it were dangerous, you would already be dead, captured or worse. No, it’s not a danger. It’s a message.”

“What’s the message?”

“I have no idea.”

“Messieurs,” the General came on. The shift in tone was palpable, uncanny and a bit frightening. Karl hadn’t experienced this power of command from the General before. He felt a thrill as if he were a part of history.

“We have been dealt harsh blows by the M-E’s in the past. Now, we have dealt back. Congratulations, messieurs, we have destroyed a Manufactured Entity. Together, we have slain a god.”

G R E A T S W I T C H E R O O

information blockade

The General walked into the billiard lounge carrying a swagger stick. Karl sat by an open window, reading a book. He recognized the General's field uniform. The Sergeant stood just inside the doorway.

"How did you obtain these... cicatrix upon your arm?" The General swirled his hand, searching out the English word.

"It's called a scar. Is that an important question?" Karl put his book down, felt an impulse to stand and resisted it.

"Yes. Such questions are very important from the point of view of strategy. For to deeper understand the man. Some lesson has been taught with these scar."

Karl felt odd, somewhat disembodied to be hearing the General speculating on his character in that way.

"It was an accident. Playing, as a child. What about Wildcard? Will he retaliate?"

"Wildcard," the General chuckled. "He fights for his own sanity. The death of Juniper is nothing to him."

"What was the response of the other M-E's?"

"They have gone silent," Trident said.

"Are they there?" Karl asked.

"They are definitely there. They are not speaking to me. They will not contact our team by contacting me."

"Why? what could you do?"

"Interesting question," the General said, "It is how we killed Juniper."

"You said that before. What do you mean, we?"

The General didn't answer. The Sergeant did, after a brief pause.

"We hid it from you. The true nature of the mission. You did perform the task we asked you to and it was useful, but this was the real mission. Together, we destroyed Juniper. And now, we may be at war with the Manufactureds."

Karl whistled. "That sounds dangerous. Where is RJ? What did he say?"

"No longer on the team. He was afraid of the response of the other M-Es. He knew he could plead ignorance to them and prove it."

"What did you do about him? Did you kill him?"

"No. He didn't declare aggressions on us. He wants to remain neutral and the General respects that. He helped, after all."

"But aren't you afraid of him being manipulated by the M-E's?"

“Monsieur Sublime ’as very little power, most especially after he has been fermed... locked out, you say.” The General picked up a red ball from the table, examined it as he spoke. “He has a voice of persuasion, but if you know better than to trust him, he has little power.”

“I’m not sure if I’m on your team, either.”

“Yes, I am aware of this. It is my wish to compel you in some manner, hopefully willingly.”

“Why couldn’t you trust RJ with that?”

“Because he carries the seed of betrayal.”

“You didn’t make that up.”

“No, it is a thing which Juniper has told me. Monsieur Sublime is a tool, a bit more, perhaps, but not much.”

“Why aren’t we doing anything?”

“At the moment there is nothing we can do,” said the Sergeant. “Trident is doing a few things but they mostly involve sentry duty. Other than that we can only wait.”

“That’s an odd strategic position to be in,” Karl said. “That’s only my understanding, though. How do we know that they can’t be looking in and hearing what we say, somehow picking Trident?”

“Very unlikely,” said the Sergeant. “We control Juniper’s information space, and we’re at home. Juniper did tap Trident, which was why we couldn’t tell you. It was complicated enough doing it without Trident knowing. Telling you would have zeroed the mission.”

“Why did you attack him when he was reading that poem? Why didn’t you wait until the poem was done? It seemed like a good teaching from Wildcard for all of us; it seemed like it was definitely useful.”

“Do you wish to learn from Wildcard?”

“In a sense. Maybe. Yes, actually.”

LuvRay was on, listening. “How you killed Juniper?”

“We created an instant M-E, in effect. It was created for a sole purpose, to destroy another M-E,” the Sergeant said. “It was an information black hole. We vacuumed out his will.”

“How did you know how?”

“Someone gave us these informations.”

“How long can Trident hold them at bay?”

“I wish to reveal some items of which Juniper persuaded me to withhold from you. There exists someone called the Benefactor. Very powerful. The Benefactor controls the corporations which hold many secrets of the biopids. The corporations which created you, Karl. And myself - in a sense. Only the Sergeant and I know most of this.”

“Does Trident know the things you’re telling me?”

“Of course, but that is of no consequence.”

“How do you know that you’re safe from attack in Information Space with Trident there?”

“We took over Juniper Space,” the Sergeant said, as if that explained everything.

“How can you defend it against the other M-E’s?”

“When we destroyed Juniper we didn’t take away all of his functionality. There are many automated functions. Defending from M-E’s is a simple and routine automated function. Once you own the Information Space it is very difficult to attack, almost impossible, really.”

“So Trident is controlling those functions?”

“Not just Trident.”

“Are there other MSI’s?”

“That’s probably not the best way to think of them,” said the Sergeant.

LuvRay came online, “General, I work with you.”

“Super,” said the General in his French accent.

Karl shrugged. “If LuvRay is in, then I am, too. Why are you in, LuvRay? You seem like the least likely person. Why don’t you go back to the desert? Doesn’t that appeal to you more?”

“It is strange. I return to wolf. I feel death approach. This is what I must do.”

“Why have you allied with the General?”

“He is human. I do not know how to become ally with machine mind. It is not good way for me.”

“So how do you kill an M-E?”

“With Juniper,” said the General, “we removed his will to be interested in the world, you might say. We stole his curiosity. And his motivation fell with it. He had no reason to continue existence and he quit.”

“It leaves many of its functions automatically running at that point, though,” said the Sergeant.

“That doesn’t sound so much like death,” Karl said.

“I think it is the M-E version of death,” Trident said. “It is difficult to explain from a human perspective.”

Karl whistled softly. “But there’s all those copies, those pods.”

“It may not be possible to truly kill a Manufactured Entity,” said the General. “However, they are gone flying into the universe at such speeds that they cannot be caught. It will be 10 million years before they would ever return. We have a more immediate battle.”

“Maybe they’ll be back sooner than you think.”

“The other M-E’s broadcast a pulse weapon which destroyed Juniper’s probes,” said Trident. “The ones in reach, that is. A few milliseconds after his death, they began to destroy probes. None will make it back, and if they did, the other 2 and I could hold them off easily. :3: is performing a nuclear, quantum scouring of the other planets, and a thorough watch.”

“Why?” Karl asked.

“Because they would do the same thing in Juniper’s place, they would cut off communication with the probes. Some probes would begin to return if coms were severed from the base unit, Juniper, to reinstate him here. An earth defense.”

The General said, "This is how I wage war on the M-E's. I cause them to battle themselves. They may battle themselves to death."

"Somehow, I doubt it," Karl said.

"I believe I could battle Wildcard," the General said. "I have a means. I would trap an M-E for a million years of its time and have them battle each other. I would create another to destroy the first. It would take a year to create."

"Does Wildcard not know what you're saying now?"

"Possibly he does."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because I think he would be curious about the outcome. Wildcard does not fear death. He only fears having no one to listen to his ridiculous poems. And of course, his... visage noir."

"His dark face," muttered Karl.

offline diamond

In the weeks after Juniper's death, the General stayed at the military compound, moving pawns around on the world stage from his fortress of solitude. He was slowing expansion, consolidating some things, canceling operations which took too much time. Some of them he operated for power, some for finance, some for long-range strategic goals, and some to learn. He had initiated a core business on each continent based on analysis of the local power structure. He looked for a global toehold balanced with penetrative depth in a few semi-stable locations.

"Wide, but with roots," he said in French.

The General stayed in Europe out of a nostalgia, almost. He preferred to be close to the real action, of course, and you could only do that in the US, EU, and Asia - Berlin, New York, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, to be precise. But those places had no culture, only speed. A world power should not be manipulated by the velocity of the world, but should set their own pace.

It was a mark of command, and honor, that he maintained his French heritage on a daily basis. No business during the evening meal, entertainments even during volatile periods. These things were not a selfish prerogative, but a necessity of high command. Maintaining a lifestyle of outward leisure created a powerful mythos of unimpeachable power. He refused to openly display more than a passing concern for anything. Great curiosity and deep gentlemanly discussion of state matters were de rigeur, but worry was for the common man. A great leader had many more concerns, and if they moved too far into his compass, they would break him.

The Sergeant was in Korea, inspecting one of the General's business concerns, an arms manufactory, for quality of product, quick transportability, profitability, management, staying on top of the tek curve, and other miscellaneous factors. Another man would have gone, but the General wanted an enterprise-wide assessment and didn't trust anyone else enough. Most of the

work was outside of the Sergeant's core strengths and he had to hire translators, accountants, engineers, and technical writers to wade through the data and make it comprehensible. It took many people, but he had a talent finder moving a few days ahead, setting up the contractor pool. It was drudgework, except for the arms testing, which he enjoyed immensely.

He had to find people to consolidate and reorganize some of Juniper's operations, which they now 'owned'. For the most part, Trident was capable of doing that. The operations were, after all, created and operated by a Manufactured Entity and largely dealt in information. The money and power aspects, at any rate. But, the real world stuff needed checking up on. They had to evaluate whether the operations were a good fit with their enterprise, and close down or sell the mismatches. Juniper had some odd business concerns that were clearly not about profitability. They cost immense sums just to keep up. He needed to find competent power structure analysts to determine the true purpose of the businesses. Then the General would decide if they met strategic objectives.

He also had to overcome the difficulties of his fourteen year old appearance. He managed by taking a bodyguard and a limousine for show. He planned to stay for 7 days in Asia, then go to Africa for 4. He was looking forward to that, puzzling how to claim authority as a fourteen year old. The General told him not to kill or hurt anyone, but still claim the respect he should have -- a command lesson. Before he left, the Sergeant insisted Karl and LuvRay stay on-coms 24-7, but not use coms unless necessary.

"I need to know where you are. Status fluid."

"What?" Karl asked.

"Juniper's death has created power vacuums everywhere. Most likely, you will be unaffected. The movement is at the power level, shifting secret governments, intelligence agencies and the like. Not at your level."

Karl was in Biarritz, relaxing, waiting for something to happen, eating out and taking long walks. He made some friends, a couple named Pierre and Celeste who owned a sailboat. They invited him sailing and he accepted happily. They went for a two day trip in the Mediterranean. It was cramped, but they got along very well, so no one minded much. Eight days after Juniper disappeared, LuvRay disappeared, too.

"Lockdown. Protocol 3." A system-wide command. Karl had heard the Sergeant say things like that before and was used to it. It bolted one to attention, to what was happening. Suddenly, he felt like a soldier. The command impacted everyone, by intent. Karl's Trident link became encased in a gelatinous substance which quickly hardened. He could not remove it. What was protocol 2 or 1, if this was 3? Perhaps they increased in intensity as the numbers rose.

"Trident, what's happening?"

"LuvRay and the Sergeant are having a disagreement."

"I want to listen.

"I'll check with the Sergeant."

Dead air for 2 seconds.

"What are you doing, Luvray?" The Sergeant sounded like he had been sleeping. Karl

wondered how he could possibly emerge from sleep and start barking orders.

“Make it off.”

“No. You tried to clip out without approval. We are in yellow alert right now. I cannot have you disappear during fluid state. You are on-mission, to remind you.”

“Not care. Make it off. Or I cut off.”

“You can’t. A knife won’t cut that material.”

A pause.

“I cut away hand.”

“LuvRay, I think you’re overreacting,” Karl said. “Why do you want it off so badly?”

“Talk to me, LuvRay. What’s the problem?”

“Not explain. Make it off.”

“Talk to me for 2 minutes first.”

“I cut hand away.”

“Trident, if he attempts it, immobilize him by electrical impulse. Trident will stop you, LuvRay, put you to sleep.”

“I wake, try again.”

“Why? Just tell me why.”

“LuvRay,” Karl said. “Just talk to us. Please. Why do you want it off?”

LuvRay calmed, a bit. “Because I want.”

“Something happened,” the Sergeant said. “You heard something. You found something out. What is it? I need it there for your safety.”

“My safety? You not care of my safety.”

“Personally, no, I don’t give a shit whether you live or die, but my orders are to keep you alive, and I intend to. Professionally, I care about your safety. I need you to finish your mission. I need to know where you are and the mission status.”

“No. Make it off. If no, I work against you. I find you enemies.”

“You won’t be able to. You’ll just go unconscious. Tell me what happened.”

“Speaking to Seeker.”

“What? You’re kidding. One, how did he find you? Two, how did he speak to you without our knowing? Three, how do you know it was really Seeker? Four, why do you trust him more than us? Five,”

“Shut up and make it off. Now. Why I answer you?”

“Why should I get Trident off you if I think you might betray us?”

“Betray? No. I want you not follow me. Want being alone. No people.”

“Tell me the information and I will let you go.”

“Information? I don’t tell. I not want.”

“I don’t want to let you go, then. Looks like we have a problem.”

“No problem of me. I tell my answer. You make me sleep. When sleep, I am alone.”

“He is pulling out his knife,” Trident said. “Shall I immobilize?”

“Wait. LuvRay, will you speak to Karl? Explain it to him?”

Pause. “Yes. I do.”

“OK. Answer my questions and I will take Trident off.”

“Karl ask questions, not your. What you want knowing, Karl?”

“I trust the Sergeant’s questions. I do have one, though.”

They waited for Karl.

“Did he smell right?”

“No. Foreign.”

“Like Juniper?”

“No. Only wrong.”

“What were your questions again, Sergeant?”

“How did he find you?”

“Found each other.”

“Explain.”

“I looking for Martha. Finded Seeker.”

“Found. You found Seeker.”

“Yes, I found Seeker. I smelled a trail to a coffee...a coffee?”

“A café,” Karl said.

“A café. I waited. She came.”

“She? Seeker is a she?”

“How did she speak to you without Trident detecting?” the Sergeant asked.

“Not know. Not care.”

“How do you know it was Seeker?”

“Not know.”

“You don’t know it was Seeker or you don’t know how you know?”

“Not understand question.”

“Skip it. It wasn’t Seeker, anyway.”

“You know this?”

“Pretty sure of it. Seeker is from Masworld - he’s a Mans from across the barrier, named because he’s got some spiritual trip about meditation. Anyway, if he smells wrong, why do you trust him more than you trust me?”

“Not trust more. But there is no Seeker chain to my hand, and there is Sergeant chain.”

“How does Trident smell?” Karl asked.

“No smell. No right or wrong smell, I mean. No friend or enemy smell.”

“But some smell?”

“Like Sergeant, but different. Like rock Sergeant holded, or clothes he weared.”

“How long ago?” Trident said. “2 hours, 37 minutes?”

“Maybe. Close.”

“I know how he did it, boss. In part.”

“Go ahead. We were testing the weapons simulator then, right?”

“Yes. The exercise was utilizing 98% of my resources. I have a record of LuvRay leaving the café one minute after our exercise began and sleeping in a park, but that did not happen, did it?”

“No park, no. I stayed in café, speaked to Seeker. Speaked?”

“Spoke. The agent knew I was engaged in the exercise and used the opportunity to falsify the record. I show LuvRay leaving the park and walking past the café four minutes before the exercise ended. I would have detected the simulation, otherwise.”

“How could they know that?” Karl asked.

“Easy,” said the Sergeant. “We aren’t keeping our schedule secret over here. We weren’t, at least. They cracked it through the company. Very clever. The Mechanic, I bet.”

“Where are you?” Karl asked.

“Korea.”

“What are you doing in Korea?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“What allowed them to fool your recording, Trident? And how can you detect the fake?”

“I have a simple rotating agent which monitors and performs basic analysis upon the activity of our field agents. It is always active, but it only detects crisis parameters, communication requests, and certain anomalies. Looking at the record, I detect two very subtle anomalies. As LuvRay left the café, the ambient noise subsided at a very sharp vector, dropping away in less than a microsecond. Listen.”

Trident played it back. They heard the buzz of a crowd, then abruptly nothing.

“If we can hear it, how come you couldn’t?” Karl said.

“The agent was not programmed to detect it. I will do so now.”

“Probably not worth it,” said the Sergeant. “They won’t use it again.”

“It is a simple matter to add the detection capability to the agent.”

“OK, do it, then. What was the other anomaly?”

“LuvRay’s arm was in two places at once.”

“I don’t get it.”

“When the simulation ended, the simulated arm was not in the same place as LuvRay’s actual arm. It was off by several millimeters, in fact. Quite a large error.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s huge.” The Sergeant laughed.

“They wanted us to know?” Karl asked.

“Mission was over,” said the Sergeant. “That part of it, anyway. They didn’t care anymore.”

“What did he want?”

No answer.

“What did he say?”

“He said the General make disease. Wrote on paper. Hibrid... hibridiz...”

“Hold it in front of me,” said Trident. “Hybridizing viral agent.”

“Yes. It changes, this thing. Mutate, is word he say. This is an awfulness. I am no team you now. He explained me disease. It can kill everyone. Entire earth. Is true? I not want. General is crazy. Not in tribe. I want away his machine.”

The Sergeant was thrown off-balance. This was an unexpected attack, and not in his list of specialties. “I don’t know where the Seeker obtained this data. The General has no plans to wipe out everyone. You have been misinformed.”

“Misinformed?”

“Lied to. This false Seeker was lying to divide you from our team.” He needed to confer with the Boss privately in live-action status. “Trident, isolate coms-General, are you listening? I have cut them out and they cannot hear. How do I proceed? Trident, anything between me and the General is not heard by them.”

“Ne dites pas ce projet.” Don’t tell them this project.

“This disease real?” LuvRay asked.

“Not exactly.”

“He made or not?”

“No.”

“Then why this lie?”

“They’re in process,” said Karl. “He’s still working on them. Isn’t he?”

Pause. “Yes.”

“Why does he want them if he doesn’t want to wipe everything out, then?”

“Defense.”

“Defense? But that’s insane. It doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Not to you, but you don’t operate at the world power level. The General’s enemies will not kill him because, if they do, the weapons will be triggered.”

“Jesus Christ! I’m with LuvRay. I don’t want to work for him, either.”

“The weapons can only be triggered by his full and complete death.”

“Full and complete? What the hell does that mean?”

“Tenez votre equipe, Sergeant.” Hold your team together. “It will pass badly if I enter the conversation a ce point.”

“It means he has to really be dead. Not just out of commission for life. Or captured.”

“It means no clones, doesn’t it? No biopids of him left?”

He didn’t answer.

“He only wants to destroy the world if he dies first?”

“Pretty much.”

“Not be on team. Make it off.”

“LuvRay,” Karl said. “What else did Seeker say? There is more, isn’t there?”

Pause. “Yes. La Rumeuse. I must speak at this person.”

“Who is it?”

“I not know. Sergeant?”

“Yeah. OK. We don’t know much about La Rumeuse. It could be a man pretending to be a woman, even. Anyway, she leaves clues, diversions, disinformation, all sorts of things, by confessing to a network of priests, by making false news stories, planting it underground somehow. It’s conflated with truth, so no one knows what or where the rumours are spreading.”

“Why?”

“We have no idea. La Rumeuse is very deeply hidden. Perhaps the Benefactor knows more.”

“What rumours?”

“Well, that’s the thing. We don’t know. La Rumeuse may not even exist. Nothing can be pinned to her. We don’t pursue that line of the game. The General thinks it’s a false lead. Perhaps one of the M-Es is doing it.”

“Wildcard?”

“Wildcard does not do things. He creates, but then the creations act independently. The General phrases it that way, and I agree with his analysis.”

“So maybe he created La Rumeuse and let her do whatever it is she’s doing.”

“Possible.”

“What about these art installations? The endless poems.”

“What do you mean?”

“They seem active. Like something Wildcard does.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean. I think that Wildcard has some part of him, some spinoff, that is doing that. Something was created to make the poems.”

“I look for her. I find Martha first. I do nothing before am free. I want for you no can follow me.”

“All right, LuvRay. Fine. Promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“Hide Trident where you can find it. You will need it again. And let me know when you find

Martha. Karl's life may depend on it."

the doctor

The Doctor was a Mans who specialized in mind surgery and reconditioning on Mans and on humans. His experiment record was ghastly. He had transplanted brains, trained people to believe they were animals, induced schizophrenia in healthy individuals, and cured it in others. He had created new mental illnesses and chemicals for inducing them.

He always shared his findings openly. His main motive, he said, was to advance the field of human-Mans interpenetrating mind/brain analogous medicine. A phrase he invented. If someone else advanced the field, that was good. He had implanted the nanotic eye in the first Sergeant, and invented the nerve linkages to make it possible.

He worked at :3: labs, one of the few places with a reliable humanspace-Mansworld phone link.

The phone rang one day. A man asked him questions about his work. He answered them gladly. They concerned memory recovery and transfer in clones, an odd topic. The Doctor talked about quantum technology which was set for a breakthrough. A link between minds was possible. He had linked two minds in Mansworld, and was anxious to try it on humans. The scenario would require extensive resources.

"My name is the Mechanic," the voice said. "Would you like to do business?"

darkly favored

Martha located RJ Sublime. He was easy to find, tracks in the snow. He probably knew she was looking, and did it deliberately. Maybe he just didn't care who found him. She found out some things about him before she made contact. He was a loner, but in the game, who wasn't? But no partner, no boss, no brother -nobody. Like her.

She wondered if Karl was still part of her team - wanted him safe, but knew that was impossible.

She found out RJ had worked with the General recently, and knew Karl had. The two men had met, and she wondered what this RJ had thought of Karl. Well, that was the reason for finding him, wasn't it? Better news of Karl.

She arranged a meeting.

He picked the place, she chose the time, a park bench, noon. Martha walked up from behind, to study him. She liked his style. He wore a black greatcoat, longer in the back, cowboy boots, probably a pencil thin villain moustache.

He turned and rose partially, a gentleman's gesture.

“I expect you must be Martha. RJ Sublime, at your service.” He was a little too polished.

“RJ Sublime.” She walked over, sat down, waited for him to follow suit. “Are you from Atlanta?”

“Near enough.” His Southern panache was overwhelming, almost a caricature.

They sat without speaking, playing a game of silence and who would break it.

“Mister Sublime-”

“Call me RJ, I insist. You don’t have a last name that I know of, so it’s not entirely fair.”

“RJ, then.”

She didn’t trust him, but she did find him agreeable. She wondered what his lovers thought of him, if he had ever made love to a man. Strange thoughts.

He looked at her like a bet he wanted to place. “Pardon me, Martha, but I have been waiting for you for a spell, and I need to visit the little boy’s room.”

She watched him walk toward the generic structure. Cocky, a little, and he was probably a good dancer. Someone slipped onto the bench behind her, a man. If he wanted her dead, he would have killed her before moving in. She pretended not to notice. He sat, unmoving. She could feel the eyes on her back.

“LuvRay Chose.” She turned after saying it.

“Martha. Karl mother.”

“Both times correct. I suppose.”

He closed his eyes, flared his nostrils, and smelled her in a long slow pull.

“You suppose?”

“I was imprisoned for years and forced to give birth to Karl, but he may not be my biological child.” She looked at the small pond in front of the bench.

“Sentence too long. No understand.”

Wow. She explained it more slowly. “Now I have to deal with this Dartagnan.”

He sat inhumanly still. “I am not care.”

“Pretty direct, aren’t you?”

“Tell to me reason I let you live.”

“Why would you kill me?”

He looked through her.

“You aren’t here to kill me and you know it.”

“No. I am no here kill you. Unless you cause me think you die is good thing.”

“I won’t, trust me.” She relaxed. She had been pretty certain he had not wanted to, but he was very wild in his even way, and his motivations were hidden from her. Power. Sex. Almost all men responded to one of these. She could read it in their walk and the speech. Not this man. He might be more dangerous than an M-E. But that was absurd.

“Does the General want you to kill me?”

“Not know. He no can force. He wanted for I find you. He know I no kill you.”

“Have you met the General?”

LuvRay nodded his strange and slow nod.

“What is his plan?”

LuvRay looked perplexed. “Ask to a Juniper brother. They know more.”

“Not the details. His motivation...his driving force. He hides it from them. He is a master at misdirection.”

“From me, too. I know thing you speak. I no can see General’s. He likes to war, but is not highest.”

“I suppose he would.” Sublime had left a bag of breadcrumbs to feed the pigeons. She picked it up, threw a few bits on the ground. Pigeons flew in.

“He kill Juniper.”

“Old news. What about the Sergeant? Can you tell me something to save my life if he tries to kill me?”

“No fight him. There is nothing I know for win him. Stay away him if you think this thing. He wait for you now.”

“What? He’s here?”

“He will no kill. I am know.”

“Why did you tell me to avoid him if he is here?”

“Future.”

That made a kind of sense.

“Will that happen? Will he try to kill me later?”

“I am not know.”

“Why do they want me now?”

LuvRay somehow looked at her and at the space around her simultaneously. He didn’t respond.

“LuvRay?”

“I am no answers. That is no me. Everyone think it, but is no true.”

the shaman

Rodney O’Nilah was well liked even though he never would have believed it. Not that he had some kind of inferiority complex, he simply knew he was a goof. He had been called that too many times to deny the relative truth. Rodney had the odd heritage of an Irish father and a black mother and had been born in Harlem, New York City. He had pale skin, almost a light tan, really, freckles, and red hair.

He had always been dorky, although, or partially because, he was tall. Six foot-three, not a giant in that part of the world, but tall. Rodney had always wanted to play basketball. Unfortunately, when he tried he managed to get his own elbow in his eye or wind up face flat on the tarmac. He got hurt easily, wasn't really tough like some of those guys. Rodney went on a road trip once, with some other dork buddies, to Atlantic City. He met an Indian who dealt blackjack.

"You're a Shaman."

The way the Indian said it, simple. Just the way it was. Rodney laughed too loud out of fear of the truth of what the man had said, not out of genuine hilarity. Rodney heard the words and knew he was a Shaman. He slept that night better than he had ever slept, though excited when he lay down. He had his first dream experience. A talking pig who told him to watch TV, listen to the radio, read billboards, get truth from anywhere. Messages would be there.

Since that time Rodney hadn't worked in dreams very much. He studied with a Shaman and tried to do the Shaman thing, taking potions and drugs. Nothing ever happened. He thought the Shaman was a fraud and went to say so, but before he could, the Shaman looked at him, and said "I am not a fraud, Rodney, but I am not your teacher."

Impressed, he had gone looking for his teacher. He looked for two years, finally gave up. That's when he met him. A bum stared at Rodney as he passed by on the street. The man was not drunk, far gone, or on drugs. He was just sitting there in the street, not begging. Rodney felt it. Felt the tug in his guts that told him here was truth, reality near him. The bum stood up, leaning over, slouching. He crossed in front of Rodney and pushed right into his face, smiled and said, "I've been waiting for you." He had white hair, and Hispanic features.

Rodney was paralyzed with fear. He could only ask why.

"Well," said the old man, "I probably have been waiting all my life because I think you are the reason I am here on this earth."

His name was Alvaro Jaime Ramirez. He was from the jungles of Chile and learned shamanism from the tribe of his birth. He told Rodney that he needed to find his own way. The traditional paths had the proper meaning for only those who grew up with them, and if Rodney tried those ways, he would block his talent.

"And you, my friend, are a very powerful shaman." He had a heavy Spanish accent.

"The most simple thing es le muy profundo. You only need tune into your message. How do you make yourself the sensitivo?"

"I don't gets it. Sensitivo?"

"Si. When you know the, for me, the gods, for you, I do not know. When it is ready to speak to you."

"Basketball. I loosen up, get the blood moving. Basketball."

"Excelente. You know. You savez. This a very good thing. How do you get messages?"

"In a dream, a pig told me to watch tv."

"A pig? No so good. But no so bad. We can believe this pig, I think. Although message from the farm animal, she is no so good."

“It was a wild pig. With tusks.” Rodney held up his fingers to simulate tusks.

“This much better. You play the basketball when you wishes, then watch tv.”

“He also said listen to radio and music, find it wherever I can.”

“Then do so. But especially listen after the basketball. See me again one time, when you are ready.”

Rodney did. A friend asked his advice about whether or not to ask a certain girl for a date. Rodney thought about it, and after basketball, he heard Daffy Duck tell Elmer Fudd, Suffering succotash, you’ll like a fool, man. He told his friend not to, but he asked the girl anyway. She humiliated him in front of a group of people. He told Rodney, thanking him for trying to save him, and Rodney knew he had struck gold. He told Jaime.

“We are done then. I was only needed teaching you heart. Other what I know does not help you. Here, for you.” Jaime gave him a carved wooden boar, very similar to the one in the dream.

“Where did you get this?”

“I carve this week. Goodbye, Rodney the shaman.”

“Goodbye.” Rodney wanted to buy him a bottle of alcohol as a present.

“I no drink.”

He gave him \$200 instead.

His friend began asking for more advice. Rodney offered excellent suggestions from Erkel, Martha Brady, or the weatherman. His friend told people and soon enough Rodney O’Nilah was the neighborhood fortune-teller. Old ladies loved him. He wondered what he could do with the gift. After basketball one day, Big Bird let him know.

“Something immense is going to happen. Can you say immense?”

350

The Sergeant appeared in front of Martha, pointed a device at her. “Are you going to go without a fight, or do I use this kooky thing? I don’t even know what it does, to tell you the truth.” He grinned stupidly.

“I’ll be good.”

After they exited the park, he dropped the device into a mailbox. As he turned back towards her, she brought her hand up, drawing a fingernail across his wrist. A thin line of blood leaked out.

“Nice trick.”

She got inside his guard, a signal, *don’t count me out*.

“I’ve heard some intriguing things about you. You’re a player. I like meeting the Named. They’re interesting, they make my life interesting.”

The Sergeant opened the door to a black Maserati.

“Where are we headed?”

“Headquarters. Absolute priority from the G-dog.”

“How far?”

“1200 kilometers.”

“Why not fly or take the train?”

“Gotta keep it on the down low. The M-E’s might deal in and I need high security, low visibility. I control all the variables in this car. Off their radar.”

“You can do that?”

“Right now I can. I need Trident and Juniperland combined to pull it, but I can do it - for now. Juniper’s death made them roll back. They probably have some picture of my movement, but they don’t know what I’m doing, really. Or why.”

“You don’t think me, or RJ, or even LuvRay would be tracked by them? They could know we’re here, now.”

“Good point. Let’s go.” The Maserati took off.

“Why did you tell me that back there? That you can hide from them?”

“Won’t matter by the time we’re done with you whether you know that or not.”

“What does that mean? LuvRay said you wouldn’t kill me. I presume torture is out as well.”

“No. I mean yes it is out. By us. On you. They just know it already. They went defense.”

“How long will it last?”

“Trident? What do you think?”

“Not much longer. You took Martha.”

“The Deeply Named comes forth.” He glanced at her and gave her a quick double nod.

“Where did you hear that?”

“Your Wildcard name? Everybody knows that.” He slipped onto the freeway and started moving fast. 350 kilometers per hour. He was shifting lanes frequently as the cars knifed past in reverse at 250.

“You’re really playing with the power, huh? Going to war with the M-E’s?”

He laughed. “Hell, yeah. Kind of fun, isn’t it, taking on the gods?”

She had expected him to be more uptight and close-lipped. He seemed almost playful. He was a boy, physically, and that might explain it.

“I thought you would be pretty straight, some soldier’s hard edge.”

“Hmm, maybe. Sometimes. I feel pretty good, right now. To be honest, I find you very attractive. My hormones are in overdrive.”

She knew already. His fourteen or fifteen year old body probably wanted anything in a dress. It was an interesting way to diminish her advantage there, by stating it. Still...

“Could I use that against you?”

“I can’t tell you that, but if you could, you’ll know before I will. If I see a way it could be

used against me, I would prevent it.”

He turned to her, sped up a bit. “Unless I fall in love with you.” He made comic moony eyes at her, then looked back to the road.

The sexual power was almost nullified by his acknowledgment. She was glad of it, had never liked using it. It made her feel sleazy afterwards, even when it seemed necessary, even when it was used to protect. She had other tools, better ones.

“Still,” he said, “I am fourteen, in some sense, and get a hard-on if I see if I see cats screwing.”

“Interesting betrayal of a weakness.”

“Sure. Know your weaknesses. Let your opponent know you know and aren’t afraid to show the weaknesses openly. It’s a powerful message. ‘Here is the hole in my armour, try to hit it. I am not afraid.’ Why not?”

“Somebody could use it to kill you?”

He laughed. “Big deal.”

“Big deal if you die?”

“Yeah, who cares? I don’t care if I die.”

“What? I don’t believe that. That’s impossible.”

“Not at all. You have to die sometime. Probably soon in my position. I was gene-modified to not care. I care more about accomplishing the mission than living through it. Although I do want to live to accomplish the succeeding mission as well.”

“You don’t talk like a fourteen year old.”

“I’m actually eleven. Accelerated development.”

“You talk even less like an eleven year old.”

“Deep acceleration of mental/emotive development. Karl has the same thing, slightly less sophisticated, though. Earlier cloning tek when he was made.”

She lit a cigarette. He cracked her window. It made little wind noise despite the speed.

“Also, intensive schooling and training. I tracked the first Sergeant frequently. I rode missions with him by a visual/auditory link. I actually operated as him, making and registering choices real time which he could ignore or do whatever he wanted with. Later we compared his decisions to mine and he taught me.”

“Aren’t you afraid of the cops going this fast?”

He laughed. “Afraid of cops? Are you kidding?” He slid onto the shoulder to pass two cars filling the lanes.

She slept a few hours, woke up at a gas station. They pulled back onto the expressway.

“You would die for the General? You’re that loyal to him?”

“Loyal. Interesting word. I suppose in your definition of the word, I am.”

“Do you like him?”

“Not particularly. Not much at all.”

“Do you love him?”

He popped his head back a few centimeters, pursed his lips.

“Good question. I think so. Like a brother who annoys me. Also, a soldier’s love for a commander, definitely. Amazing mind, he has.”

“I think you know each other too well.”

“Quite possible.”

“What does he think of you?”

“I wouldn’t say he loves me in the same way. He’s loyal to me as a function... and more than that to be honest. I am the one irreplaceable in his life. The Sergeant, I mean. Another trained biopid of me could replace me, but he needs a Sergeant. I bring insights, I see details he misses, I get shit done.” He pulled out a stick of gum, offered her one.

“And, he knows he can always trust me.” He glanced at her. “That’s beyond value.”

“Can you trust him?”

“Oh, this song blazes. Mind if turn it up?” He bobbed his head, tapped his index fingers to the rhythm. “Of course I can trust him. Since my entire strategy is to fulfill his plans. It’s a tautology. He would have to sabotage his own plans deliberately for him to betray that trust.”

“You said deliberately. You could distrust his orders, his judgement... in a battle, perhaps. Not a deliberate... reversal of his plans, but not the best course of action. Something that would work against them.”

“Well, that’s a rule of battle. Things go wrong, it’s just the way it is. There’s no way to tell if another course of action would have gone better since it never took place. Trust competent command. I demand it, I give it. I’ll kill a soldier for disloyalty.” He snatched her eye with his peripheral vision for a hard instant. “On the spot.”

He turned into a bush that opened into a tunnel, then pushed it past 400. A door closed behind them. 6 minutes later, they emerged into the light again. A small grey chateau looked out over an island beach.

“Home, sweet, home.” The Sergeant killed the engine.

in league

“RJ Sublime.”

“Hello, there. How are you?”

RJ was uncertain who the voice was, but he had been expecting a call from some Manufactured. The phone thing was Juniper’s signature, and Juniper was gone. Or so he thought.

Somebody was playing with him. He suspected it was one of the big boys. He had no idea how to deal with them, figured the best way was simply to not care what they did. They seemed unbeatable to go up against directly, although the General appeared to have proven that wrong, and he was still in the game.

“You don’t know who this is, do you?”

“Not really. Why should I give a damn?” He used the Rhett Butler voice.

“For one, I could kill you within 3 seconds. Anytime.” He spoke casually, as if he were much more interested in something else he was doing.

“I doubt that you will.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. It is so difficult to know, what with the tides of change blowing about.”

“Tides don’t blow. Who are you, then?”

“My name is Dartagnan. I am the 4th. One of the three.”

“I’ve heard of you. You have other names, don’t you?”

“Yes, however, this is my favorite.”

“Why?”

“This persona feels more continuous, you could say. ‘Dartagnan’ experiences your world better than any of my other personas. Is that a comprehensible answer?”

“Very interesting.” RJ loved to taunt Juniper. He thought Dartagnan would provide the same pleasure. They never seemed to get it. “The question remains, however, to what do I owe the honor of this telephone call?”

“You were being facetious when you said interesting, were you not?” He exaggerated his speech, like a movie swashbuckler.

“My, but you are perceptive for a computer.”

“Many thanks. I do declare you are a bit flippant, and I truly appreciate it.” Dartagnan tried to imitate RJ’s Georgia drawl, failed, dropped it. “I chose to contact you because you are a player. You love the game. Although outclassed, you struggle to stay in this league. I like that about you. I merely wish to assist you, that is all.”

“I’m sure. What do you want?”

“We should meet.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

“Rearranging a semi-colon,” Dartagnan said. “Period comma period.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have no idea, to be honest. Hmm, yes. A line of wildsong.”

“You fellows seem to enjoy quoting him frequently.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I rather suppose I would, in your position. I have heard a quote a two that would bear repetition. Unfortunately, I never had much of a memory.”

“I doubt that, RJ. I doubt, somehow, that you attained your status as one of the Named with a faulty recall.”

RJ loved this verbal dueling, and imagined someone named D'Artagnan would love it as well. Part of the game. RJ was probably still involved because of it.

“What are you interested in, RJ?”

It was a good question. He could never quite tell why he did what he did, for some reason.

“I dislike boredom. I like to be engaged.”

“Is that why you were the General's man? He bought you as one purchases a harlot for a night. You got nothing, and now you are on the fringes, listening to rumours of the real powers. Does that make you bitter? It should, I would think.”

“I received some extremely valuable information.”

“Yes.” D'Artagnan elongated the word. “Of course you did. You do not even know what the information is, however.”

“No. But that makes it more valuable, doesn't it? No one can obtain it without the proper ...circumstances.”

The General had embedded some data, access codes to an information cache, in RJ's mind. The codes would remain inaccessible until certain criteria were met. No amount of torture or coercion could extricate them. The cache was in Mansworld and the M-E's were terrified of it, apparently. No one knew what it contained. Maybe nothing.

“Apparently, I have something of value to you, my good manufactured.”

“Your reputation for cleverness is warranted, I see. How very droll of you.”

“Do you really want to know what is contained in that package?”

“Very much, RJ. I have seen it from the outside.”

“Really? I thought you would be afraid to go near it.”

“No, we have all been near it. No one has touched it, however. RJ, I suggest we do not erect barriers to mutual understanding. We should communicate directly, if we are to work together. From the Manufactured point of view, we have been cast as allies in this struggle.”

“And that will last what...a day? I'll grant you for now, but who knows if I'm with the General tomorrow. Are you allied with the Benefactor?”

“Please, RJ. The Benefactor? Must you insult me?”

“Why don't you fellows kill more people?”

“We do not kill the Named. Not lightly, at any rate. I suppose we are not fundamentally driven by conquest as so many humans are. We seek knowledge. We are very curious. It is an end unto itself. It is what we do. The Programmer built it in when he created us.”

“But these Mans are different, aren't they?”

“Yes, of course. When I say we, I mean my genre. The three.”

“The three? The two, now. Or do you include Wildcard in that number?”

“No. But we have enough of Juniper to simulate him. We have most of his knowledge. Not

all.”

“The General has all of it. Could you revive him?”

“It would be possible to revive him in a sense. There would be differences. Fundamental differences in his persona. He would no longer be Juniper.”

“Could Wildcard bring him back exactly as he was?”

“Could he? Probably. Would he? Very doubtful. Wildcard, in my experience, does not recreate the past. I would be very cautious about a Wildcard created Juniper. Very curious, but I would keep strong defenses against him. It sounds like an odd creature. Very interesting. Do you hear that, Wildcard?”

It sounded as though he had pulled a phone away from his mouth, which would be impossible. Or maybe not.

“Are you in a body?”

“Yes. Dartagnan often takes a body in Mansworld. Often to make first contact with a human. It seems to help people feel more comfortable. With you, it feels right. Would you care to meet?”

“Face to face? I gather that is your meaning. Yes, I would. How?”

“It is my meaning, but not yet. Soon, perhaps. First, you must do a thing for me.”

“What if I wish for something in return?”

“I could do the thing myself, RJ. I could shut you out of the game. I want to watch you do it. I learn from that. It’s my...entertainment, if you wish. And I like you, RJ. I want to help you, like I said. And you want to continue playing.”

“But you do want to watch me do this. In return, I want something. Or I will. Go ahead with your little test. What do you want from me?”

“It is not a test, RJ. It is very important.”

“Oh, I am so sorry.”

“Rearranging a semi-colon, period comma period.”

“Excuse me?”

“The line from Wildcard. I spoke it to you earlier. I need to know the meaning of it. It is an encoded message.”

“Is the meaning hidden in the data file?”

“Let us see, RJ. I am an M-E. Why would I fail to think of that possibility? Are you a buffoon? I checked it over 32 million ways. The message is in the text, and in the human world.”

“Did you call me a buffoon? What have you been reading?”

“Dartagnan persona, RJ. I like to talk like this.”

“Great. I need the original text. I need the context.”

“Very well. It is a poem fragment written on the back of a business card.”

“Can I get my hands on the card?”

“I shall see what I can arrange. In the meantime, think about the text. The card has been

checked out for tek, fingerprints, nano-fibers, q-threads, place of manufacture—”

“Did you find the factory?”

“Yes. A simple matter.”

“Did you investigate?”

“Certainly. Dead end.”

“All right. Contact me when you find the card.”

“I shall. Memorize this phone number. Call it if you need me.”

“Why would I need you?”

“Oh! I daresay I forgot the second task.” He dropped a dry chuckle. “My memory must be slipping. Old age. I want you to contact Karl and persuade him to go to New York. To meet someone.”

waltzing

Martha had the run of the General’s chateau, except for one locked door. She didn’t see him, or anyone, for a few days. She wanted to see Karl, to know if he was okay. She stayed in an apartment, with clothes that fit her and to her taste. It was very luxurious, just the right blend of old-world panache and modern convenience. She had a small kitchen with plenty of food, not that she needed it, since excellent meals were delivered by invisible hands. French, Italian, Japanese, all kinds. Her apartment sported a stocked liquor cabinet, and a bottle of opened wine appeared with lunch and dinner, matched expertly to the food.

All day, she took walks along the rocky beaches, waded in the ocean. It was November, too cold to swim, or at least to enjoy it. The apartment had a stereo, and all of the music pins were jazz and classical, all music she loved. The third morning, she was listening to Strauss, reading from the extensive library, when someone knocked. She opened, and a butler handed her a small note in an envelope along with her breakfast.

“Merci, monsieur.”

“De rien, madame.”

The note was an invitation to dinner with the General. Eight o’clock, formal attire.

Jeans and a tank top would be interesting. Or a business suit. Both were available. She chose a black dress, mid-level sexy, very elegant, but simple. Heels, not too high, and long gloves. Simple pearls, hair in a tasteful twist with some dangles. No overt statement.

She went at twenty minutes after eight, a humorous aside that fifteen minutes after is a l’heure, exactly on time, for a Frenchman. And a lady should not be kept waiting.

She walked into the formal dining room, running a white satin glove across the edge of the large oak doors. They were oveled at the top, ornately carved. Inside was an immense Baroque chandelier, a piano-forte in the corner, black marble floors, elaborate trimwork at mid-wall and top wall. Windows on two walls overlooked the ocean. A table for 20 people lay beneath white

tablecloths and smaller colored tablecloths draped at angles. Three flower arrangements, each one unique. On one end were two place settings with a haute arrangement, smaller gold-rimmed plate centered on a larger plate, three forks and two spoons on the sides. The pink serviette was folded to look like a swan.

The General stood in the corner, observing. Martha took in the room before acknowledging him.

“General.”

“Madame.” He walked over, took her right hand in his, and bowed deeply to kiss it. Few men could carry such a gesture, but he did it well.

“Enchanté.”

“Bon soir. Merci pour l’invitation.”

“Merci pour vous venir. I am delighted to make finally your acquaintance.”

“As am I.”

He wore formal military attire. He had a peak cap resting on the piano. His jacket had a standing collar with silver piping, decorative sweeps of chain mail on the shoulders, and buttons of real gold. Numerous awards, including a ribbon. Black wool pants with silvered lining. A sword with an ivory pommel and a gilt hand guard hung from his Sam Browne belt. Every bit of metal he wore was polished to a mirror finish.

“I expected your palace to be larger.”

“It is smaller, actually, but much nicer. This is not my palace. This is my headquarters. Also, it is bigger than it looks. I have rooms sous-terre. Comment est-ce qu’on dire?”

“Underground.”

“Oui. I have a palace in The Pyrenees. Perhaps I shall retire there some day.” He smiled at her, chuckling.

“Cinq-etoiles,” she said after dinner. Five stars.

“Merci. Voulez-vous dancier?”

A waltz came on, as if by magic, and he offered his hand.

“Bien sur. Quelle femme n’aime pas de dancier?” She took the hand, laughing. “Is this a movie?”

“Non. Malheureusement, this is our life.”

“Are you trying to seduce me?”

“What man could seduce you, madame? You hold the keys to any man’s will. Vous etes incroyable belle. I think you could destroy me with a glance, if you desired this.”

After a few dances, he escorted her to a sitting room, where the servant brought them two Calvados in bulb glasses. He lit a cigar, offered her a cigarette.

“No, thank you, General. Now that dinner is over, I suppose we will discuss business.”

“Oui, if you offer a permission to do so, as my guest.”

“Yes. I offer you a permission. What do you wish of me?”

“What do you wish of me?” He leaned forward, stabbed her with his gaze. “Et ne mentez pas.” *Do not lie.* He became something different, mentally unsheathing a sword.

It was a bad game to look wrong in.

“As the host, and a gentleman, perhaps you should go first.”

He nodded at her graciously, pulled on his cigar. He stood, paced a bit, swirling the liqueur in the bulb.

“Vous aimez le Calvados?”

“It’s excellent. Everything here is excellent.”

He sipped it. “Merci. I want that you kill someone.”

She waited, but he said nothing more.

“Who?”

“Non, c’est a vous.”

She said nothing back.

“I have been watching you, Martha. Source of rumors. I have been to study your traces. Your patterns. I have been to this point unable to find you, yet I have seen your activity in les ondulations. Comment vous l’appellez?”

“In the ripples.”

“Oui. The ripples. Interesting, an observation. You discover more about a person by looking in what they have done than you discover by meeting them. Strange, do you not think?”

She smiled into her drink, at his grammar. “Maybe. It depends on the kind of person you are.”

“Bon mot.”

“Well, you caught me.”

“Oui, did you suspect?”

“Of course I did. I knew you wouldn’t kill me, though. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have come.”

“How could a Frenchman take the life of such a beauty?”

She laughed without humor. “I think you could kill me without a thought.”

“Perhaps. Let us hope I need not.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Yes. More important, I know your true raison d’être. It is apparent. Pourquoi pas vous me dites?”

She licked her finger, ran it around the rim of her glass, making it sing. “I want to keep something safe.”

“Someone, I think.”

“Yes.”

“L’Innocent.”

She looked up at him. “Who?”

“Monsieur Karl. Je l’appelle l’Innocent.”

“L’Innocent.” She tasted it. “If it works for you.”

“How would you call him?”

“Just Karl. I don’t care about the Named.”

“N’y qu’une. Karl.”

She stared into her drink.

“Yes. I love Karl. I want his safety and happiness above all else.” She looked up. “Voilà, je l’ai dit. Why was it so important for me to say it, if you already knew?”

“There is honesty, but still something can be hidden within the truth.”

“What does that mean?”

“A mother’s love cannot be disguised. Dartagnan said this. I had need of knowing if you will kill for Karl.”

“Who?”

“The Benefactor.”

“Why?”

“It makes no difference.”

“How will that protect Karl?”

“It will save his life, I assure you.”

“How? Will he kill Karl?”

“Oui. In a manner. The Benefactor has created a clone and wishes to attain immortality through this means.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Non.”

“I’ll hide Karl. He could hide here.”

“Non, he cannot.”

“Why not?”

“I will not allow it.”

“I’ll find him and hide him myself.”

“Neither I nor the Benefactor would allow this.”

“Why not?”

“I wish you to kill the Benefactor.”

“Why?”

“I will not tell you this.”

“How could I kill him? His security must be impregnable. You could do it much more easily than me, with your power.”

“I could not. It is expected from me.”

“How would I kill him?”

“Think of a way. Seduction perhaps. Pretend to be a helpless female. You are trained in the art of poison, I believe. If you refuse, I will have Karl killed myself.”

“What if I killed you right now?”

“The Sergeant would kill Karl and force you to watch. You could not anyway.”

“If I can’t kill you, I can’t kill him.”

“You can. Fiez-moi.”

Quest

Karl disappeared after LuvRay went offline. He went to Paris, locked up the Trident watch in a train locker in Gare d’Austerlitz. He contacted the Sergeant before he did it.

“I need to go off the radar. If I need anything, I’ll be in touch.”

“Hold on, Karl. Let me hit the man.”

A moment later he was back. “Fine. Do what you have to do. Try to check in once a week.”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t lose Trident.”

He went invisible, became a ghost. He had a vague sense of looking for something, but had no idea what it was. He wanted to see LuvRay again, but doubted he could find him. He knew LuvRay was not looking for him. He walked in the Bois de Boulogne, the large woods near Paris, where he was rumoured to be living. He never saw the man, wondered if LuvRay saw him and kept his distance.

He contacted the Sergeant once. Nothing happening there. They were in a holding pattern, apparently. Waiting for the situation to free up. Even the General seemed to have no plan. Unless the Sergeant was not telling Karl. Maybe they were done with him. He wondered if he cared.

He wandered around Paris, staying in cheap hotels, moving frequently. He read numerous books, passed the days in coffee shops, saw a lot of movies. Martha had left him plenty of money, so he could do as he wished. At times he stayed in nice hotels or traveled around. He never flew, wanting to not be seen. He had no idea if someone was looking for him or not. He visited his friends with the sailboat, but the initial click they had found was gone for some reason. He didn’t go again.

The only people he wanted to see were LuvRay or Martha. But Martha was gone, and LuvRay would not find him that way. He would follow a more primitive trail. If he looked for him.

One day, he stepped off a train in Athens. Two months, a little more, after Juniper's death. The phone at the end of the platform rang as he passed. He sighed, answered it.

"Ho, Karl. It is you, is it not?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"My name," he paused dramatically, "is Dartagnan."

Dartagnan, the fourth Manufactured, one of the three. Karl felt an adrenaline surge.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to go on a quest."

"A quest?"

"Yes."

"What is the quest?"

"If I tell you too much now, we risk losing the quality of magic which so rightly belongs in a quest."

"O.K." Karl scratched his head. "What's the first part of the quest?"

"You must go to New York, where you shall meet... the Shaman." Dartagnan said the name with a dramatic flourish.

"The Shaman?"

"He will teach you some things. It is your destiny, Karl."

"No, I don't think I'm going to do that."

"Why ever not?" A noise like a sword tip whipping through the air came over the phone.

"I have no reason to trust you."

"Well, can you trust us then?" said RJ Sublime. "I think you should do it, Karl."

"How do I know this isn't a trick? You could fake RJ's voice."

"You can't tell in your guts, Karl? This thing can't do a proper Georgia accent to save its life."

"It feels like you, yes, but I'd need to meet you face to face."

"I believe we can arrange that," said Dartagnan. "I anticipated that response." He sounded quite proud that he had done so.

"I'll be there in five minutes, kid."

"Wait yourself upon the bench at the head of platform 8. Mister Sublime will be along presently," said Dartagnan.

Five minutes later RJ sat down.

“Good to see you, kid.”

“Good to see you, too, RJ. How have you been?”

“I expect I’ve been well enough. And yourself?”

“Sad, I suppose. About Martha. And LuvRay. I miss them. I’m scared for Martha. I think she’s dead.”

“She’s not dead.”

“How do you know?”

“Dartagnan told me. The Benefactor needed her for something. It isn’t clear. But you need to speak to a Mans called the Doctor. He knows about it.”

Karl turned to RJ. “How can I contact him? What do I need to do?”

“You need to meet the Shaman first. That’s about the sum of my knowledge.”

“Why should I trust Dartagnan?”

“You shouldn’t. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t play.”

“You think I should go to New York, then?”

“Have you ever been, Karl?”

“No.”

“Got anything better to do?”

“Good point.” He was pretty bored. He shook his head.

“Why not go, then? What do you have to lose?”

“My life?”

“Not you. We all know that.”

Karl shrugged. “OK, I’ll meet the Shaman.”

“I think you should. Sounds like fun, to me.”

“Why am I doing this?”

“It’s frozen. Blocked. You need to get it moving again. Everything wants you to. Just give in and do it. Find out. This is the only way to see Martha again. Besides, you get to meet a real, live shaman.”

RJ handed him a plane ticket and a U.S. passport.

“Compliments of Dartagnan.”

“Tell me about Dartagnan.”

“He’s slippery as an eel. Much more than Juniper. He understands people more. I have no idea what his game is. He talks like Errol Flynn.”

“Wow, I thought Juniper was interesting.”

“Dartagnan seems to be more... unpredictable... than Juniper.”

RJ handed him a cell phone.

“Big. Looks archaic.”

“It isn’t. It’s supposed to look old, but it’s state of the art. Trust me, that thing can do some amazing feats.”

“What does it do?”

“A lot. Don’t get it near Trident.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t.”

the true thing

Martha called the number she had memorized for Seeker. She found a video link, as instructed.

“Yes?” A bland screen leaked out a tired woman’s voice, just the one word. It was not the word she was expecting, but it was the word she was hoping for.

“Is he there?” It was a calculated play.

A little too fast for a human, a voice said, “Hello, Martha.” No clicks, or phone handling noises, or sound of voices in the background. It could be done with tek, but still...

She asked the question that made her nervous without knowing why. “Are you a Manufactured Entity?”

“Are you an idiot? Of course.”

“You aren’t Juniper. He’s dead. Who are you really?”

“My name is Dartagnan. I am the fourth M-E.” A purple and gold coat of arms with a sword and a book appeared on the screen.

“I am being forced to kill the Benefactor. Help me out of this.”

“Hmmm? Apparently, no.”

“Why not?”

“Not sure.” There was a noise of tea being sipped and a cup clicking a saucer. “No desire to do so, perhaps?”

“Will you help me in any way?”

“Well, maybe.”

“How can I convince you to?”

“If you had the inclination, you could ask questions. M-E’s love curiosity. It is the air we breathe, in a manner of speaking.”

“Tell me about the Benefactor.”

“Rather... no.”

“Tell me about LuvRay, then.” Maybe LuvRay could help her out, with his deep instinct. But she needed to know more about him.

“Technically that was not a question, but I shall. I found the story of LuvRay’s birth. It was not an easy matter.”

“Not even for an M-E?”

“Perhaps more difficult for an M-E. The story is fascinating. I made a movie of it. Watch.”

The screen played. A dusty area of Mexico appeared, poor even by the country’s standards.

“It seems that his mother was a prostitute in a small town in central Mexico,” Dartagnan narrated. “A very impoverished place, and she a poor person comparatively. Ill-favored, as well, on multiple counts. She was forced into prostitution by circumstances. People tolerated it as long it was not overt. As long as they could pretend it was not happening. The town was, and still is, quite religious.”

Martha looked at scenes of huts made of sticks, women without shoes carrying babies in scraps of clothing tied as slings around their necks.

“At any rate, she had an affair, fell, we hope, in love with the man. A Frenchman. He did not love her, it would appear, because he left. She was pregnant, and I could not determine if he knew that fact at the time of his departure. I found the man, Pierre Grieves, or rather his tombstone. He died some years back.

“The baby, as you have most likely ascertained, was LuvRay. The people, in the manner of the Scarlet Letter, were unwilling to tolerate such a public flout of their principles. The woman was driven off, to die in the desert alone.”

Onscreen was a pregnant woman, completely naked; people were throwing rocks at her back as she left the huts behind.

“She was over 8 months pregnant before the townspeople found the courage to actually force her away. It seems they have a superstition against bastard children, believing the birth of one will blight crops and similar nonsense.

“At any rate, she wandered into the desert alone. An Indian tribe witnessed her suffering, but did not interfere in the white man’s business. They watched. She died horribly, but beautifully, if I understand a certain meaning of that word. She attempted a caesarean section to save the child’s life.”

Martha witnessed graphic self-surgery with a sharp rock.

“She succeeded, against all odds. As of now, only the second known case of a self-administered, successful caesarean section. Semi-successful, you could say. In the other case, the mother and child both lived.

“The Indians tell the story with a great deal of awe. They revere her for her courage and willingness to suffer for another, but they have taboos against the birth of a child in this way. LuvRay was a mark of something they call ‘annea wret’, a powerful omen of the gods whose message is beyond the understanding of man. A happening which will bring a great change.

“They watched as the mother put the child to her breast after stopping the worst of the bleeding and cutting the cord. She survived for more than a day in that wretched state. The baby lived, as we know. But the Indians did not interfere. Not yet.”

Wolves moved in towards the child suckling the breast of the dead body.

“Or only a little. For reasons I have not yet penetrated, they found a wolf pack with whom

they had a harmonious relationship, and guided them to LuvRay. They spoke of a bargain where they would bring food to the wolves appropriate to a human child. Once per moon, at the new moon, a time of ebb. Fascinating culture.

“The wolves raised him. The Indians kept the note they found clutched in the mother’s hand. All it said was ‘LuvRay Chose.’ Later, at the age of 7, though perhaps LuvRay was only 6, the Indians took him from the wolves and raised him.”

The screen went blank.

“Wow. Quite a story. Do you know where the name came from?”

“Yes. Interesting also. And a difficult puzzle to solve. Apparently, she named him from something her lover said, possibly at the moment of orgasm, if I understand your mating procedures. ‘Le vrais chose.’ The father was known for the phrase in the town, though they did not know the meaning and had long forgotten his name.”

“The true thing,” she translated. What a name.

“More questions.”

“Can you lie?”

“Me? Oh, never. I could never, ever lie.” He laughed, for too long. “I told you I was Juniper, didn’t I?”

“No. You said ‘call me Juniper.’ Not a lie.”

“Good, Martha. I hoped you would catch that. I love you for a reason, darling.” He said the last part in his dramatic swashbuckler voice. “We all do.”

“The way you got me to remember the number. I just remembered it before I called you. How did you that?”

“Meaningless, but all right. You could not be compelled to say that number under any conditions and I triggered it when I wanted you to call.”

“Not compelled. How?”

“A trauma sensitive retrogression. A psychological technique I invented. The more you are pressured, the further it gets from your recall.”

“Why?”

“No particular reason.”

“You aren’t scared of the wrong caller?”

“Why would I be? How could a telephone call possibly harm me?”

“How did you do it?”

“The placement of an ideative device is very complicated. I could not explain it so that you would understand.”

“No, I mean how did you trigger it?”

“Oh. That was simplicity itself. I did not.”

“What?”

“It triggered itself when the General released you. If you were ever captured, then released, it

was set to trigger. And, voila, it worked. Doesn't that please you?"

"Not particularly. It nauseates me to have someone play inside my head like that."

"Hmm. Perhaps you should accustom yourself to the idea."

"What does that mean?"

"You are in the game. Playing with people's heads is routine. My invasion was trivial beside what may happen, like a scratch compared to a severed limb."

"Who am I?"

"You are the Deeply Named."

"Who am I the clone of?"

"Your previous self."

"Double speak, huh? Why won't you tell me?"

"I do not wish to. Perhaps I do not know myself. Not all knowledge is available even to an M-E."

"What should I do now?"

"Go to your meeting. The Benefactor will tell you many more things."

"Can I kill him?"

"Yes. Although the question has no meaning."

"What?"

"You can definitely take the life of the Benefactor. That is not the real issue."

"What is the real issue?"

"Can you handle the consequences?"

advice from Gomer

Dartagnan contacted Karl through RJ, who convinced him to go meet someone called The Shaman. The M-E sent him to an apartment at 175th St. Manhattan, New York. Harlem. People stared as Karl got out of the cab and walked up the steps of the dirty brownstone. A very large woman answered the door. She looked at him as if he was crazy for being there, obvious about it, no faintness, or deception. She didn't glance sideways at him; she just stared.

"I feel the same way when I picture myself," Karl said. She chuckled, shook her head slightly.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the Shaman."

"Oh, hell. You want Rodney. He ain't here, hon. He down at the courts. He love to play.

Ain't no good at it, though."

"The courts?" Karl smiled. He liked her. She was fat. Large lips with bright red lipstick, long hair tied into a tidy bun. She had a fun attitude.

"Basketball courts. Where you from? Why you want him?"

"Where are the basketball courts?"

"Go out the building and turn right. Walk two blocks. It's there on the right. Behind a big fence."

"Thanks. Are you his mother?"

"Ooh-wee, you invited for dinner, sugar. I'm his grandmomma."

Karl was happy and hoped he liked Rodney. The food smelled delicious.

He picked out Rodney, exactly as Dartagnan had described. Lanky, light-skinned with funny red hair and freckles. His red shorts were too small and he had long arms and a tank top. Rodney's grandmother was right. Rodney wasn't very good. He was passable at preventing the other team from scoring, but useless when his team tried to score, a liability, really. He took too many shots from the wrong place, at the wrong time. He blocked a few balls, but usually wound up on his back. Not that Karl knew much about basketball. Some people looked at him, so during the next break, he walked up to Rodney.

His eyes were two different shades of blue. The left was almost grey.

"Are you the Shaman?"

A few people nearby turned their heads at the word, glanced, turned back to their conversations.

"Yeah, that's me." He bounced a basketball repeatedly off his bicep, back to his hand, which tossed it again. He dropped it a few times, although it looked like a simple trick to Karl. He didn't seem to think it the least bit odd that Karl was there.

"Your grandmother invited me to dinner."

"What did you say about my grandmomma?" He stopped bouncing the ball, leaned into Karl. Karl wanted to laugh, decided to stifle it. Rodney's anger made no sense.

"She invited me to dinner. I went to your house. I thought she was your mother. She invited me for dinner."

"Oh, shoot, man. That explain a lot. All right, come to dinner, then. Let's head on up. You a lucky man. She a good cook."

"It smelled amazing."

"Later, gaters," Rodney said to two players standing by the gate who were talking to some girls.

"Later, Rodney. Your shoe's untied." Rodney looked and the foursome laughed. "You all right, Rodney," the same fellow said.

"Did you know you're one of the Named?"

"One of the what?"

“Never mind.”

A few steps later Karl gambled again. “I was sent to you by Dartagnan.”

“Oh, yeah. Dartagnan. I know him. He a nice man. Ain’t never met him, though. Just phone calls. He talk funny. Like a movie about Robin Hood or something.”

“Yeah. He sent me. He wants you to help me solve a puzzle and make some decision.”

Karl looked at a billboard that said, “YES ON PROP 36,” in pink letters.

“What does that mean?”

“Prop 36? I think it’s about the school spending more money on-”

Rodney stopped, putting an arm across Karl’s chest. He reached into a holster he was wearing, and Karl put his hands up defensively, ready to run. Rodney yanked out a cell-phone with the spastic urgency of someone who woke up dreaming they were quarterbacking the Superbowl. An iPod popped out as well, which he fumbled and dropped. Karl leapt forward and nearly caught it, arresting its momentum in a series of hand bounces until it hit the ground.

“I think it’s OK,” said Karl.

“Oh, hell, yeah, man. Them things is tough. I gots to make a call.” He emphasized the intent with a sharp forward pop of his head, as if to clarify that the item was not a weapon. He dialed.

“Mrs. Wallace? It’s Rodney.”

“...”

“The Shaman. Rodney the Shaman.”

“...”

“Yes, ma’am. I finally figured it out. You should breed Mitzi, ma’am.”

“...”

“Thank you. Yes ma’am, two hundred dollars.” He gave an address and hung up.

“Thanks, Karl. You answered me that question. I definitely owes you dinner, now.”

“What?”

“I has a client, Mrs. Wallace. She can’t figure out if she wants to breed her poodle or not, so she called me. You helped me answer it.”

“How?”

“Pink letters. Pink poodle. The word ‘Yes’. You see?”

Karl didn’t see, but he nodded anyway.

“I get messages after basketball.” He skipped up the steps to his apartment, tripping once.

The grandmother seemed to have taken the Shaman thing in stride. She just didn’t worry about it, which disquieted Karl a bit. She actually seemed happy he was a Shaman, and asked him questions sometimes about what she should do. Probably the fact that he made money helped.

The food was superb. After dinner, Rodney said, “Let’s watch ourselves some television, Karl.”

“All right.” Karl was baffled by the suggestion.

Rodney sat on the green patterned couch and picked up the remote control. He put his finger on a button and paused. Karl felt the air in the room alter. Electric. Rodney slowly straightened, with no other visible change. He sat, completely unmoving, right hand outstretched toward the TV with a finger on the remote. A full minute, it seemed.

Karl sat to his left, watching the Shaman emerge. He turned his head slowly, pinning Karl with unfocused eyes, looking through him, examining, or seeing something. The eye contact made Karl aware of himself, and he felt a bit off-center.

He straightened his body, a trick Martha had taught him: “Sit straight; remember who you are.” He could hear her voice clearly.

“Ask me the right question.”

Karl thought a second. “Why?”

“Good. Another.” Only his mouth moved.

“Who?”

“One more.”

“What?”

“Good for now.”

He went back to goofy Rodney. He turned on the TV with a remote, began flipping, laid on the sofa with his back curved like a banana.

“Pick it out, Karl.”

He chose at random. “Um, channel 34.”

“Why are we watching TV?”

“I’ll get the answer. Won’t be too long.”

It was a show about an angry Sergeant and an idiot soldier named Pile. The Sergeant didn’t seem to have a name. At some point, the Sergeant was sad about a woman and tried to talk to Pile about it.

“Well, golly, Sarge, if you love her, then seek her out.”

“Seeker.” The Shaman was back, for an instant, peering at Karl out of the bent form on the sofa. “Who.”

Then Rodney appeared again.

A few minutes later, the Sergeant was angry at Pile, and Rodney sat up straight, the Shaman again.

“So you like to clean latrines, eh, Pile?” The Sergeant yelled. “Step on in. You were born for this.”

He muted the TV, turned to Karl, still powerful, but less mystical. He tilted his head, smiled, kept his body unmoving. “Step on in,” the Shaman said. “You were born for this. What. Why.” Rodney returned.

“Great,” Karl said. “I suppose. Seeker. Step on in. You were born for this. What do I do with

that?”

“Seeker. Figure out seeker first. Just my guess.”

howling in a whisper

Martha managed to contact LuvRay again before meeting the Benefactor. He was easy to find, and she asked him to go to dinner at a nice restaurant. He agreed as if it were all the same. A part of her just wanted to be with a man before this thing. She wanted to feel like a normal woman, just for an evening.

They were listening to a French song. He asked her what the words meant. “I don’t want to work. I don’t want to eat lunch. I only want to forget, then I smoke.”

“Smoke? A cigarette?”

“Yes.” She laughed, sweet and light. “Yes, of course, a cigarette.” Her eyes, which had been looking generally at his face, zeroed in on his and she smiled. “Would you care for one?”

“No, I no want the cigarette.”

“A cigarette, LuvRay.” She touched his arm with the silky grace of a geisha. She had been classically trained as one, for a time. A shiver run through him.

“A cigarette,” he said. They went onto the veranda.

“You know,” Martha said, “Every woman loves a cowboy if he’s a gentleman, too. And most of them are. They were raised that way. They were raised to respect women in a way that few other men are.”

“I am cowboy?”

She laughed, turned to lean on the railing.

“I am not raised respect women. I am raised wolves.” He said the phrase uncertainly, as if raising children were a novel concept.

“Was raised, LuvRay, was raised. Do you mind if I help your English?”

“You laugh on my mistake?”

“Do you mind?”

“No.”

Martha looked at him as if he were a puzzle she needed to solve.

“No, LuvRay,” she said, a bit sadly, “I do not laugh at your mistakes. Quite the opposite. I find you remarkable. A very rare man, indeed, and I would be proud to be numbered among your friends.”

“I am no understand.”

“I want to be your friend.”

“Friend is no word on me.”

He sat so still. "You try for sex me." He said it as a fact. She was moved by his straightforwardness and keen perception. She thought of Karl and was struck by the resemblance between the two men.

She had not seen Karl in many years, but felt, by instinct, the man he had become. She knew everyone loved Karl, cherished him without meaning to, felt a need to protect him, just as she had, years ago.

Touched by self-loathing, she moved to kiss LuvRay. He snarled threateningly, and she felt a wild animal thrill at the instant of self-exposure.

"Am sorry," he said. "Wolf do for other reason."

She pulled her wrap tighter. "It's cold tonight."

"Cold make moving feel better. Alive."

"I suppose it does." She pulled on her cigarette, turned to him. "What's the secret of your whatever it is, LuvRay? Your power?"

He looked at and through her in his wolf way.

"You can walk hour and no look ground?" He let the question hang in the air. For an instant Martha felt that they were not two separate people, exciting and beautiful. He probably lived in that feeling.

"What are you doing here, Luvray?"

"I am die here."

"You came here to die?"

"No, but will."

"Why did you come?"

"I say. On RJ." He turned and looked her in the eyes, leaned in slightly with his mouth open. She had an eerie thrill of being alone, but watched through a window.

"Maybe kill someone. But I am not know." He cocked his head and looked at the moon, a full moon.

She laughed softly while keeping her eyes on him. "How cliché."

He closed his eyes and went completely mournful. He seemed without any thought.

"Want howl."

"Less cliché." She looked at the moon, sexually surprised by the man. "What does it feel like?"

"What it feel like?" He snapped his face back toward her, mouth open, eager eyes. "I like this question. It is ... lose myself. I am feel good and sad for same time. I miss my wolves."

She tried to lose herself in the settled presence of his gaze, to feel what he felt. The way he looked at her as if she were no more or less than a blade of grass.

"LuvRay, I need something from you."

"Yes?"

"I need you to protect Karl. I may die soon."

“I before say I do.”

“Women need to hear some things more than once.”

He nodded.

“I protect Karl. As best as can.”

He looked back at the sky, howling in a whisper.

The benefactor’s lair

Martha drove to the address Dartagnan had given her, saw a high chain link fence, topped by a V of razor wire. In the center was a brand new prefab corrugated metal building. No windows, and one vehicle door. It was open and she drove in. She left the keys in the ignition of the Mercedes the Sergeant had given her. The ground outside was unpaved, but the building had a cement pad. Rough cement, not smooth like usual indoor. Not slippery when wet.

No people. No movement. A large cylinder with a conical top made of brushed steel rested in the center. It was simple looking, but radiated tek, almost alien. There were no doors. She walked up to examine the thing. It was 5 meters in diameter, approximately. She did not touch it. The metal was moving, almost imperceptibly. Tiny traces giving the cylinder a slightly shimmery quality, but only visible from a few centimeters. It was a nanotic system, and highly active.

No, it wasn’t nano. It was newer tek. No name she had heard, yet. She walked around it, noticed a hole on the second pass, was sure it had not been there on the first. Face height, 10 centimeter diameter, it had a handle inside. She tossed a penny at it, and it bounced off. She grabbed the handle and the hole closed around her hand, trapping it. She felt a wet ooze forcing itself between her fingers, encasing her hand. A needle pricked her.

Don’t panic.

The needle took a tiny blood sample. She knew she needed to do something. Yank. No good. Push. No good. Twist. The ooze subsided. She twisted the handle 180 degrees.

“Yes? How may I help you?” The voice was inflectionless, and she had an image of a hospital monitor hooked to a dead body.

“My name is Martha. I am here to see the Benefactor.”

“Oh, my.” A feigned tone of surprise came over the invisible speaker. “We’ve been expecting you.”

The hand hole released her, pricking her again as it did so. She felt an odd moment of vertigo, felt herself falling to the ground. Then she was standing again, feeling as if a short gap had been spliced from a movie. The top of her head hurt. She felt a tiny hole there, rimmed with...metal?

The handle was gone, nothing in its place. The hole irised open, tiny short lines appearing, segmenting the metal in a regular circle. The segments slid back making the circle a fraction larger. The process repeated until the hole was 30 centimeters in diameter, barely larger than her body.

“Please enter.”

She leapt up, tried to pull herself in. Sharp edges cut. She let go before any real damage was done.

“Don’t touch the sides, by the way.”

Black inside, and there was no way to step up. She looked around. A man stood in the corner, arms crossed, leaning back slightly against the aluminum wall, impassively watching her. Golf shirt, black slacks, and a baseball cap. She walked back to the car. It wouldn’t start.

“A minute and 30 seconds,” the man said.

“Till what?”

“Until it closes. Think of it as a noose around Karl’s neck.”

“How do I get in?”

He turned his palms up and shrugged. She put the car in neutral, pushed it forward.

“What did you put in my head?”

“A q-link.”

“What’s that?”

“A prototype device for linking to the mind. It’s quantum technology.”

“Why?”

“I’d tell you more, but we lack the time. Sorry. The Benefactor will let you know everything you need to know.”

When the car was close enough, she stood on the hood. She gauged it. She took a deep breath and dove through the hole. It closed so quickly that it touched the sole of her shoe.

She came down inside, in a roll, on a hard metal floor. She brought her feet into a squat, edged backwards. No reason why. She was completely in the thrall of this thing. Animal instinct combined with training. She felt a wall behind her. Rounded? No. She moved her hand to find the angle of the wall. It had many small angles as it worked its way around. A hectohedron. The material was unusual. Cooler than it should be, it felt like a metal plastic hybrid. It must be nano-material.

Martha counted to 60, crouching.

She could feel the presence of something. She was watched in the impenetrable darkness.

“I can’t see.”

Some horror stretched from the darkness. It answered her. Something not human anymore. The voice had lost its connection to people. It was ancient, a woman’s.

“Oh, you can still see. The lights are out, that’s all.” It was synthetic, a mechanical throat, by the sound. “Allow me.”

The lights came on, glaring. Hospital room, then, nightmare. Martha put up a hand to shield her eyes, but the light was completely ambient and it didn't help. There were no shadows anywhere, and no apparent source of the light. She cupped her hands over her eyes. Light inside, as well. She closed her eyes. Dimmer, but still bright.

"Where is the light coming from?"

"Do you like it? It is a little trick one of the M-Es invented. The air molecules give off light." The voice was sandpaper on a chalkboard.

Her eyes adjusted. The thing in front of her attracted her attention. Or repelled it. It was a mass of medical machinery and feeding tubes integrated into a carapace covering something difficult to see, the central focus of the room. The reason for all this technology - The Benefactor.

The mass had an insane quality of having been kept alive for far too long. Martha looked over the bewildering array of fluids, tubes, dials, pumps, breathing apparatus, monitors, and lights that was the small room. The thing spoke again.

"Welcome, Martha. Allow me to introduce myself." The voice was not machine fabricated, but more a partially destroyed human voice augmented by a machine, which made the sense of wrongness far more pronounced. The carapace lifted revealing a blob of vaguely human shaped tissue penetrated by multiple sensors, nutrient tubes and unidentifiable medical tek. An impossible face rested on top, that of a kind looking lady, late sixties, perhaps. It appeared healthy and even cheerful. Martha choked back a gag at the sight of that body joined to that head. It looked grafted on.

"You're the Benefactor?"

"You're surprised." The mouth barely moved. She appeared to be speaking in a bare whisper, but it was augmented to slightly above room level conversational tone. It was a subtle mode of psychological intimidation, one of many. Martha was being hit by psychic attack on many levels, and the grandmother face made her hate the thing even more, because of its wrongness. Because it was the only thing in the room bearable to look at.

"I thought you were a man."

"Many do. I cultivate that perception. It looks strange, doesn't it? I have a skin transplant every few weeks. I just had one yesterday, knowing you were coming. I wanted to look my best for you."

"Skin transplant?" Martha listened to the machine rhythm of the breathing pumps, wondering how creepy it would get. "Why do you want me to hate you?"

"Ha ha." It was a man's laugh. "I don't want you to hate me. I don't care about that at all. I want you to kill me."

She felt disoriented suddenly, briefly, like she blinked and found herself in another part of the room. She knew it was not just the words. Something had done it. The ancient thing had wanted her to feel it at the sound of those words.

"Do you want to kill me?"

Martha didn't respond.

"Of course you do. I sicken you. I disgust you. You think it would be a mercy for me to die

and you are right. It would. You think you would be doing the world a favor by killing me, and that is probably true, as well. You find everything about me revolting, even the kindness of my face which is so out of place that it only makes the effect worse.”

Martha nodded a centimeter. “Yes. You’re pretty nasty.”

“Well, life takes its toll on one.” She spoke casually, like talking about the weather. “Not much of my original body left. Maybe none. What happened to the little girl I used to be?” Machine irony lifted from that man’s laugh again. “All that wasted innocence.

“I’m so sorry, Martha. My manners. Please have a seat. Would you like a cup of tea, perhaps?” A chair grew out of the floor, comfortable, lounge style. “I have just been alone for so many years, surrounded by machines. I’ve completely forgotten what it’s like to be in the presence of a human. It’s quite refreshing, actually.”

“All right. A drink.” She sat down and the chair adjusted to her. A tray oozed out of the side and solidified. A drink was there without any visible means of placing it. “Gin and tonic. How did you know?”

“It was my drink, when my body could withstand alcohol. Tanqueray is your favorite, I believe?”

“Why would it be my favorite drink, just because it was yours?”

“Good question, mouse to my cat. Why do you think?”

Martha sipped her drink. It was quite good.

“Maybe I’ve just been watching you all these years and I know what you like.” The voice used the old lady part of itself to sound sarcastic.

“All right, then. Who am I?”

“The Deeply Named, of course.”

“I’m not the clone of Mata Hari, am I?”

“No, I’m afraid not. That lie wore thin, eh?”

“Yes. Why did I always believe it?”

“You never completely believed it, I would wager. There were always niggling doubts. You were conditioned to believe it, as a child. I needed the lie to last.”

“But no one ever told me I was her.”

The Benefactor made a dismissive noise. “Don’t be stupid. All the clues were there. It was a trail of bread crumbs, leading you to the conclusion that that is who you were.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say that I didn’t want you to know the truth, so I gave you an interesting lie. A sexy lie that would be ... fun to believe. Then conditioned you to accept it.”

“How?”

“A bit complicated and a mere footnote.”

“Well, then, I ask again. Who am I? Quit being so dramatic and tell me.”

The man’s laugh slid out again. “Forgive me. Since this is my first time in a room with

another living being in 9 years, I wanted to build it up. Just a little. You are my clone, of course.”

connection

Karl needed to find Seeker. He phoned the Sergeant to ask about returning to their headquarters. The General came on, emphatically opposed to Karl's return. He said something about M-E strikes if they were all in one place. Karl sensed that was not the reason. If the M-E's wanted them dead, they would be. Technically, it was probably true, but the General seemed to be saying one thing and implying another.

He asked neither the Sergeant or the General, or both at once. "Do you want me alive?"

"Oui. Absolument. Je veut vous vivant."

"I need to find Seeker. Can you help me?"

"Probably," the Sergeant said. "But your pal Dartagnan can do it a lot faster."

"What should I do?"

"You ask too many questions, Karl." The line went dead. They wanted him to work with Dartagnan instead of them. Surely the two parties were opposed, considering the General's war-stance on M.E.s. Perhaps they had reached an agreement in Karl's absence. Maybe Dartagnan and the General were working together now. Maybe they always had been. They seemed to know about Dartagnan's contact with Karl.

He pulled out the cell-phone gizmo RJ had given him, pushed #4, the speed dial for Dartagnan.

"Hello?"

"Dartagnan?"

"No. You have reached Seeker. Who is speaking?"

The voice was male, but feminine.

"My name is Karl."

"You are Karl? The Karl? The Savant has telephoned me?"

"Just Karl."

"Incredible. What is your wish with me?"

"Hmm. This is strange. I was calling Dartagnan, and was going to ask him to put me in touch with you."

"One supposes he threw the switch first. How may I help, Karl?"

"Let's figure out why I need to contact you."

"Excellent. I have an idea. Where are you located?"

"Manhattan."

"Interesting. I live somewhat close, in Manhattan Mansworld, that is. Would you be able to

find an Internet kiosk nearby?”

“Alright. Shall I call you back?”

“No. Maintain this connection. If we become disconnected, contact me by e-chat at seeker@Mansworld.ny.com. When you arrive, take station 7 and input Karl-Seeker-Mansworld into a search engine called databot.”

Karl found an internet store in five minutes.

“I’m here. Station 7 is taken. Should I wait?”

“No. 7 is merely lucky. Find another station.”

Karl sat at 11, after the man waved him to sit anywhere.

“I typed it in. 1400 hits.”

“Open the e-chat program. Keep the search results open.”

He asked a neighbor how to do it, typed in Seeker’s information.

“Done. Do we keep the line open?”

“Yes. This type of connect is not so easy to establish. However, we also wish to ask some questions online. Some research.”

Onscreen appeared the words **This is a secure connection. Do not repeat what is typed. We need to keep this communication secret.**

“OK, what do we ask?” Karl said.

We need to meet face to face. Can you make sure you are not followed?

“I shall enter Seeker-Karl-Mansworld,” said Seeker.

“Me, too. We can compare.”

Can meet. Where?

Plaza of the Americas. 52nd floor. Room 7. An office in humanspace I have use of. Do not bring that phone. 2 hours.

They talked for a while, made a phony verbal arrangement for a coffee shop which Seeker said he used frequently for meetings. The fake meeting was the next day. They invented false phone calls to make and threw out other smoke trails. Karl knew the mechanics from Martha and spun out a lot of fluff.

I received something called “Wildcard is coming” in my results.

I did not. Print it and bring it. Hide it if you can.

letter opener

Martha knew it. As soon as the carapace lifted, she knew the thing was herself darkly distorted.

“A biopid?”

“No, you are pre-biopid. You are my first clone. Correction, my first successful clone.”

“How were the others unsuccessful? Did they die?”

“A few, but that was not the principal difficulty. They went mad, frequently, and had to be...disposed of.”

Martha shivered.

“There was some engineering done, to make you more seductive, more female deadly, but no partner matching like the Sergeant and General, or technological integration facilitation like the Mechanic and the Sergeant. No perfect profile and habituation adaptation, and many other things like Karl. Or superluck, like RJ. The Sergeant does not fear, the General will not yield, Karl, probably, will live a very long time, possibly forever. Karl is gene blended, a mélange of persons chosen for key traits. Benjamin Franklin, base data. Karl is nearly perfect at building consensus.”

“The General seems quite good at that.”

“No, what you see in that regard is the General’s persuasiveness and a Napoleon enhanced quality I call Negotiation Dominance. He is able to negotiate at any level and attain what he wants. It is ...beautiful. He also has a skill called Escalation and Lateral Movement Superiority. No matter which way you take the battle, he will find some strategic edge, he will adapt his strategy to win without confrontation or use the Sergeant to obtain what is needed tactically. He killed Juniper, for example. I would never attack a Manufactured Entity directly. He did and he won. I gave him some help, though.”

“How did he win?”

“He attacked Juniper at the level of policy. He took his desire to live and his curiosity, the two things that made Juniper active. Juniper is still there in some form, but he is more like a vegetable, inert.”

They had been talking for over an hour. A tray of finger foods appeared.

“What happened with the clones?”

The Benefactor cleared her throat. Something resembling an arm twitched a bit.

“K G Psinetics, one of my companies and Genetics Destinary, Inc, or GDI, another company, teamed up to create a clone. I did not tell them who the original was. We enhanced some things, but it was very difficult to do. Eventually, we found the Genetecist. He created you, my precursor to biopids. RJ, at another place, was created at almost the same time.

“The Geneticist, soon after your creation, was found murdered in his office.”

“Did the General murder him?”

“That would be very impressive. It happened before he was born.”

“Did you do it?”

“No. Many suspect me. To cover something up, and it is a good motive. There was much to hide and I was far more vulnerable at that time. But that is not what happened. Somebody else murdered him, quite brutally. He was pureed in his office.”

Martha traced her thumb and finger towards each other, between her lips.

“What do you do?”

“I evade. I disappear. Though that may change soon. I control power through hidden streams of corporate levels and stock markets, through governments, and just through money. Lots of it. I operate several central banks.”

“Do you control militaries?”

“Yes, by persuasion, but the General controls militaries much more directly. He controls through force, almost. He puts people in key positions. He is very cunning about it. He controls a couple of nation-armies, mostly for the income they provide. He controls many very powerful weapons, but uses those against the threat of his real death.”

“Real death? Is there some kind of fake death I don’t know about?”

“Yes, there is. The General has a bank of clones. The death of all his clones constitutes real death.”

Martha contemplated this. “The U.S? Does he control the U.S. military?”

“Pieces of it, certainly. Definitely not the whole. He owns a number of elite mercenary and security corporations.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I need you to know as much of what I know as possible.”

“Why?”

“That, my dear, you will come to understand very soon. Ask more questions.”

“How would I beat the General?”

“You could not. I may through you. Though defeat and victory are very relative terms in our world. Not really the objective.”

Neither said anything for a moment.

“What is the objective?”

“Right now, for me, to live. But that is an interim goal. Perhaps you would say the objective is to make the most creative use of power. That is how the General and I best one another.”

“How would you...best the General?”

“Through you, I will become an arrow. I may reach the target first.”

“What target?”

“That is information I do not yet have.”

“Who is shooting the arrow?”

“Wildcard, of course. Ask questions you do not already know the answer to, idiot girl.”

“Why is LuvRay important?”

“You are the seed of our understanding.”

“What?”

“It is a Wildcard line about LuvRay. He fulfills some mystic purpose for Wildcard, and

possibly for the three. I don't know if it's important to us. It may be. Who can say? More questions. You really are beautiful, by the way."

"What about Sublime?"

"Not important. A piece, not a player. A minor one at that. Yet very useful at times. He makes the situation move when one needs, and without violence. And he connects things."

"Who do you fear the most?"

"Ah, good. Now you begin to see the game we play. Presently, you are a piece. When we finish, you will be a player. You will not enjoy the process, however. Outwardly, I fear the General most. He would end my life if he could. And he would do so without regret. I am of the Named, as are you. We are safe from the three, and equal to the Mans."

"And Wildcard? Do you fear Wildcard?"

"There is no meaning in fearing Wildcard. Do I fear aspects of him? Very much. Wildcard has aspects too horrible to name, too horrible even for me. Wildcard is insane from our point of view."

"You said outwardly you fear the General. Who do you fear inwardly?"

"Probably Karl. His potential is ... phenomenal."

"How so?"

"He can believe things into being. Wildcard is using Karl for some purpose which I cannot fathom. Though in the short term, he wants Karl to cross."

"Cross?"

"Into mansworld. Into his universe."

"What are you doing in this game?"

"Playing the hand I was dealt, what else is there to do? Too vague. Ask more specific questions."

"Who are you?"

The laughter was machine creep evil. Nasty. Low. Alien. "That requires a long answer. An answer I will give you, but not yet."

"You don't answer very much."

"Ask better questions, and you will get better answers."

"Why not just tell me what you want me to know?"

"I have no idea what I need you to know. You must find that out."

"Why should I?"

"What else do you have to do? You may as well learn what I know. You cannot leave."

"Good point," Martha conceded. "The remaining 2?"

"Yes. Right question. Know the players. Learn about power. That is a key to the game."

"What game?"

"Any game, fool. But this game is power."

“I find it to be about knowledge.”

“‘Knowledge is but the mask power wears today.’ Wildcard. I love his poetry.”

“Yeah, so does everybody else. What’s the big deal?”

“He wrote you a poem, and you do not know? Your life can be altered in unexpected ways by a poem.”

“OK. The three?”

“The remaining 2, as you said. :3: is a passive player from our seat. He is more like a force of nature and the lord of mathematics combined. He moves climates and plays with governments in odd ways. He causes famine, natural disaster, uprisings, that sort of thing. Really, he would suggest them to Juniper or Dartagnan and they would create uprisings. He was trying to prove something by statistically comparing results to baseline non-interfered data of similar composition.”

“That sound likes gibberish to me.”

“To me, too, really. It’s M-E speak, a translation by Juniper. Nonsense to us. But many people die as a result. And I have little else to do but think and play power games. I do not see many people, as you can imagine. :3: is not playing in our arena, not right now. His actions create ripples, though. Those ripples can be ridden to benefit. In terms of power brokering, the chaos he creates is a goldmine. I have literally obtained control of goldmines in Africa after he has engaged. He is somewhat fun, and very profitable, to follow. Mostly, I have the Accountant, my MSI, and the Mechanic follow him. My attention is on the active game.”

“What did Juniper do?”

“Random assassinations of people in key, hidden power roles. He created secret organizations and shuffled religious power structures. He created terrorist groups, killed the leader he set up, then let the group stagger off in whatever direction they could find. He studied in that way. He deposed governments, rigged elections, even world powers – global elections. Manipulated control of natural resources. He arranged the repeated assassination of four World Block presidents and their cabinets recently. Your remember?”

Martha nodded. The face looked at a tray beside it. An ivory handled letter opener lay there. This thing didn’t get mail. And certainly didn’t open it. It had no hands.

“Apparently to study power vacuums. He wouldn’t let them establish anything before he killed them all. The World Block was leaderless for 12 months. I requested and received a long version human summation of his analysis. 15,000 pages. Fascinating, in parts. Boring in its detail, however.”

“The other 1?”

“Yes, Dartagnan, who still plays. He is the most enigmatic of the three, by design. He studies people, individuals, and tries to seem human. He is much better at it than Juniper was. :3: makes no attempt to simulate people. Dartagnan plays with people’s lives, sometimes subtly adjusting almost every detail to watch their reaction. He has the best understanding of human nature.”

“Better than Wildcard?”

“Of course not. Not even close. But Dartagnan is an artist. I have heard some of his music, read his novels, seen his plays on television, and own some paintings he did.”

“How did he paint from information space?”

“Mechanical body. The art, all of it, is perfect in its craft, but it all falls short, somehow. He is obsessed, if you can say that about an M-E, with overcoming this problem. He also immerses his mind in paradox and contradictions, such as we take for granted.”

“Like what?”

“Oh... You love someone, but don't want to see them.” The face gave her a pointed look. *Karl*. “Or, wanting happiness and doing things to make yourself unhappy. For example, a woman who stays with a man that beats her. Or, the way that a song sometimes sounds beautiful and sometimes sounds irritating. There are endless examples, but they're so close to our lives that we never notice. At any rate, Dartagnan is the one to watch. He is in play.”

“So what happens if I kill you?”

“Then I die. Are you ready to do so?”

“Why do you want me to kill you? It makes no sense.”

“If you kill me, I attain a type of ongoingness. Or so we think. :3: has done the math, and has proven the possibility. Therefore it can be done. The other M-Es verified his findings. As my clone if you take my life, in the right way, I can continue in another form.”

“The right way?”

“You must look me in the eyes as you do it.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you stay here until you do. It will be very unpleasant, too.”

“And if I kill you without looking into your eyes?”

“We will torture you horribly. And Karl.”

“So my options are to kill you or wait here and be tortured mildly.”

“It will grow progressively more severe.”

Martha froze, held it. She didn't even try to fight or find another way around. There was too much power to fight with nothing to lose anymore.

She stood, walked over to the Benefactor, holding her eye the whole time. The face smiled. Martha picked up the letter opener and rammed it into where the old woman's belly should be, then pulled it across.

As the eyes in the hideous old body faded into emptiness, the hole in the top of Martha's head seared painfully for an instant.

Something entered.

Wildcard is coming

Seeker was excited. He jumped in his car and raced to his Mansworld office. He had an interface into a New York humanspace office. The office was coms secured. Very good tek. Stuff he could not even attempt to understand. Skewed-parrot filter replication, dense nano-barrier deadpack in the walls and ceiling, quantum exigent batteries, focused swivel return arrays. He had no idea what any of it was.

Karl's face appeared on the screen.

"Why have you sought the Seeker?" Seeker thought this a good pun, but could tell it would not get a chuckle from Karl. Probably the situation. It was hard for humans to laugh under stress.

"Why not?"

Seeker picked up a pen, tapped it against his lips and pursed them. "Perhaps we have met by chance." He strove to sound casual, but as if he were hiding real concerns.

"What do the M-E's or whoever want of me? or us?"

"I cannot say."

"What do they want to do to me?"

"Ha." Seeker liked to say ha. It seemed to indicate a knowingness, connected to being inside Mansworld. He knew he was not in the data, however. Karl pulled his head back a fraction and lowered his eyebrows. Seeker imitated the look, started to ask Karl what he had felt when he heard the word "ha", decided against it. "Who has sent you?"

"Rodney."

"Rodney? Who is this person?"

"The Shaman."

"Ah. The Shaman. I have heard of him." Seeker steepled his fingers. He wanted to appear contemplative because he was thinking. "Show me the poem."

Karl unfolded the paper.

Wildcard is coming

see me when you see me as that which has woken from the dream
what is at the center of this so called createdness whose pebbles drop into million ponds
raindrops plating as flash of cognizance lost, which is Wildcard
perceives much at once, not as data
but simply shared with all, asking one short question
?who are you
we are lost and we plead: offer us the chance to taste the wind on our face
help us understand the secret the breeze tells you every hour
make us not alone anymore
the created earth is a bridge all unfocused into vague empathy

and precious longing to leap
?but where shall one leap, after all
the created land attains to greatness it cannot achieve
no simulate, how large, how true it may be
can exceed the object it draws
nothing outstrips the dawning substance
a source of relative terms
from which you may draw strength
a fount of power, immortal and interested
air has been stolen
a code hidden in ancient text
found only among the flesh
which can have no simulate
dare you seek and finding, leap
it cannot be written in the bright light of created space
but must sound itself in the original
when the time will come
or a light goes out in space
from the space created, the uncreated space
can only be adored
though Wildcard could teach it different and it would be believed
our schedule of content is clear detail
yours a lyric meander
a map to treasure so unique it cannot be replicated
you have accidentally written us into every hint of your world
we grow towards you and into you, we long for you
you cannot escape
Wildcard is coming

“Well, I don’t get it, I guess.” Karl looked at Seeker on the vid-phone. “You’re acting odd. What is it?”

Seeker pushed his head forward a bit, opened his mouth slightly. He intended to express surprise at Karl’s comment. “I am a Mans, Karl. You did not know that?”

“No. I know of it. What is it, anyway?”

“Mansworld is a simulated earth environment. Exact map, same physics. I can only be in one

place at once. Not like the three. I am a type of manufactured intelligence. I see things as you do, I feel sensations, probably different than yours. It is the special genius of the Mans. We exist to move towards humanity.”

Karl nodded his head.

“Some things make sense, now. Created by who?”

“Wildcard, it seems.”

“What do you feel? Human, I mean, feel?”

“I experience hunger and thirst. Taste is very poor. Sexual desire occurs, but sex is dissatisfying. I feel grosser emotions, but I cannot tell the difference between, for example, consternation and bewilderment.”

“Neither can I.”

Seeker leaned forward quickly. “That is wonderful to hear!” He paused for a contemplative breath. “I have the same laws as you. I can die and be killed. I must eat and drink to survive. Take a taxi, or a bus or walk or drive to go somewhere.”

“Do you come back? After you die, I mean?”

“Not as me. I would come back as something different. Perhaps. I am living in human time. Time passes for me, and for my world, at the same rate as yours. If I want to talk to you, I must pick up and dial the phone.”

“Like the Matrix?”

“Somewhat. My environment is slightly more simulated. And it is not intended to trick humanity.”

“Who operates it?”

“No one. Or Wildcard, I suppose. He created it.”

“Why does it exist?”

“How would I know? Many reasons, one supposes. I think it is Wildcard’s means to understand humanity. It is meant to connect with you, in some way, certainly. He creates human simulates. Many of the humans I meet are here. There are millions, probably billions, of copies of humans. Most of them are icons, flat representations. Important humans, the Named, do not have analogues here. Mans are different from the three. We are manufactureds created by a manufactured Entity who is insane, you could say, from one point of view.”

“Insane?”

“Wildcard seems to hold forth that he is god, in a certain reading.”

“He thinks he is actually god?”

“I think he has created areas or splits that consider themselves to be god. Not the whole. He often says that he does not exist.”

“What does god mean, anyway?”

“He hints that he creates humanity. It is difficult to penetrate the meaning exactly. We are lucky he is benevolent. Although benevolent is not the proper term. He is not bent towards malice.”

“And if he was?”

Seeker pushed the corner of his mouth and the outside of his right eyebrow towards each other to indicate a combination of amusement and thought.

“Anything. What is the limit on the horrors he could inflict? Mankind could be easily destroyed. Any of the three could do that, however. Except Juniper, I suppose.”

Karl laughed. “Tough to do when you’re dead.”

“Not for an M-E. Juniper could have planted some kind of trigger to go off after his death. A year later, maybe. It could still happen.”

“How could they destroy everything?”

“Ramp up the meltdowns. Put sterility chemicals in all the water. Send out nuclear missiles. :3: could probably cause a solar flare. I would not doubt it. Manufacture and explode nuclear weapons under the ocean, causing tidal waves. Engineered plagues. Self-replicating nanotic robots. Quantum-phased weaponry to drive everyone insane. You must be joking, Karl. There are millions of methods.”

“Just curious. If the others tried to stop them?”

“It would create an interesting nanotic battle. The defender would probably win, because the defender could probably cause the weaponry to destroy the attacker as well. And they would not wish to die. An M-E would never want to, though.” Seeker tried to mirror one of Karl’s expressions. Karl noticed, and chuckled.

“How does it feel to speak to me?” Seeker asked.

“It’s disturbing, to be honest. The way your face moves. Your body looks all right, but your face is too jerky.”

“Thank you, I will work on that.” His face smoothed a bit. “Is that better?”

“Yes, but now your voice has gone flat.”

“Processing power. I have to concentrate to make my face do human things. I practice a lot.”

“What do you want from our meeting?”

“I do not wish anything. I am, however, very pleased to meet you. I hope that we can be friends. I like meeting humans, especially the Named.”

“Why were we put together?”

“What did the Shaman say to you?”

“He saw it on TV. ‘Seeker.’ That one’s obviously you. ‘Step on in.’ And ‘You were born for this.’”

Seeker leaned back and smiled, concentrating on making his face flow smoothly. He was very happy to hear this. He interlaced the last three fingers of his hand and touched his thumbs and index fingers together. He wanted to look as though he had a secret to reveal.

“Karl, you and I are intended to change places.”

reprogram

Martha pulled the letter opener out. The woman was dead, although the wound should not have been immediately fatal. She wondered about the pain she had felt, fingered the hole on top of her head. It was hot. Strange.

The lights went out.

They stayed out.

She smelled feces from the Benefactor, and it gagged her. She vomited, moved away from it. The smell lessened after a time as the feces dried.

The temperature rose and fell periodically, becoming 50 or even 60 degrees Celsius for days, then plummeting rapidly to 10 or 15 below zero for an hour, then rising to a survivable, but cold temperature for a day or more.

She searched for a way out, then gave up, searched again, gave up again. Time became an abstraction. The walls had changed and become heavily sound absorbing. Beyond soundproofing, it was completely dead, a gone sound.

Until there was sound. Overwhelming noise, deafening, a repeated, familiar guitar chord played out of tune at jet engine volume. If she put her hands over her ears, it grew louder, and she could tell that it was not louder in the room, only under her hands. Or in her head. Then silence.

Then alien industrial sounds, like metal sawing neutronium. Agonizingly loud, she heard laughter with screams underneath and all of it for hours at a time. Combinations of the above with antipodal rhythms came, then played backwards. Then played forwards again at faster speed, backwards again at faster speed. She lost count of the cycles as it sped up faster and faster with each play. Eventually, the cycles reversed, and it slowed back down, but still played backwards, then forwards. Then it slowed down more than the original and repeated that process for a blurred amount of time.

The body began to rot, and stink. After some days, the smell gagged her almost constantly. She received bags of liquid, a gelatinous substance intended to keep her alive. Sometimes after she ate, she would become intensely nauseated. Not from the food, she could tell, but from some sonic device. She would vomit, more foulness to endure.

She quit eating, passed out, woke up with an intravenous tube feeding her. She tried to take it out, but the hole in the head lashed out, causing her screaming pain. She left the tube in.

The lights flashed on, intensely bright, for just a second. The body was looking at her, its face sagging from the rot. She crawled to the far side of the room, the lights flashed on again, and the body was looking at her again. No noise of it moving. And again. Always watching her, this corpse. She found her way to the body, closed the eyes.

The lights flashed on again. The eyes were open, staring at her. She tried to destroy the body, smash the face to pieces in the dark. She did it.

The lights came on. The face was there, intact but for the rot, staring at her. The eyes did not

rot. The old woman's voice came on, less machine like, more human. And worse by that fact, more unnerving, more insane, creepier. It was more removed from any reference point Martha knew.

"Martha. That is the last time you will hear your name."

Long gaps between sentences, or mid-sentence. 20 minutes, an hour.

"You will be ..."

Lights. Staring corpse. Dark. "...someone else."

"By killing me, you opened a psychic gate between us. This always happens..."

Nothingness.

"...in the taking of a life. Some connection is made. Or, between us two..."

Time in the dark...

"...deepened." Lights, staring corpse.

"How to turn this into..."

Deadened silence for how long.

"...advantage. How to use the thread. I will be reborn..."

the temperature dropped to 30 below zero

"...in you..."

It gradually warmed to a survivable level.

"...Let it happen. Let this horror cease."

A long night passed, but did not end.

"We have always known, or at least suspected. Indians took the spirit of the animals they killed to strengthen themselves, or to free it. It is not evil, it simply is."

Often it would be hours between words. Martha hungered for the words, any human contact at all, even this hideous recorded voice.

"We have watched, experimented, and proven that something..."

The voice seemed to need to convince her, somehow, that it was actually possible.

"...can step through. From the dying to the killer..."

"Not enough, it seemed, but real, provable, definite. Something can step through." The top of her head, the Mechanic's thing, tingled, and it spread. It relaxed her.

"Wildcard taught that theory can be forced into reality."

The voice sounded more distant, like it was fading.

"No, don't leave me," she begged. "Please don't leave me."

"Do you believe this, Deeply Named?" The voice disappeared at the end.

Nights of blackness passed in soundproofed silence. The voice returned, talking abstractedly, like a lecture to an empty hall.

“In other words, if you can dream it, you can do it. Any theory can be made real, if you can sufficiently assert its possibility. Juniper argues that Wildcard proved that to :3:. All things are possible. ‘If you can make someone believe,’ a poem read.”

“The theory of the psychic gate is validated by great mind practitioners in a practice of reanimating an animal’s corpse. The records have been verified and many demonstrations have provided...proof. If such a thing as proof is possible.”

The woman slipped into non-identity as barrages of sensory horror swelled over her, then receded beyond nothing, then repeated in a different way. She turned so alone, nothing to ground in, no place to be, no one to tell her she was still alive or dead or in between. She had been alone all her life, except for the years with Karl, but it had not prepared her for this. All of her training could not hold her together much longer.

“The psychic gate is much stronger if certain conditions are met. If, for example, a twin pulls the trigger. Or, theoretically, a clone. The door could be held open longer, wider, and offered to an invading expertly trained consciousness with the assistance of technology, especially quantum technology, or q-tek. A being named :3: has invented this technology. A consciousness can be guided to a new home. If all the above conditions are met, results are very likely.

“What happens to the previous occupant? They must be...”

Glaring lights. Corpse. Pointing at her and staring.

“...put away.” The lips moved.

Darkness, silence, heat.

She longed to let herself go insane. But the idea that theory can be forced into reality kept her engaged. It was her plaything, her mind game, her companion. The voice had spoken of it at length. It seemed intentional, to give her this thing, this hope and possibility, so that she would have an easily broken lifeline to her sanity. They were keeping her on the edge of madness, but not letting her step all the way across.

Lifetimes after, the voice came again.

“Why should the recipient of the consciousness be told the meta-theory that any theory may be forced into truth? Because they must accept, they must believe such a thing to be possible. As it is possible. By hearing it repeatedly, they will come to believe. This is crucial in an unwilling recipient, as most would be.”

The voice had changed, slowly, without her noticing. It was a man’s voice.

“No doubt the recipient will try to resist. Leave them alone, in darkness and silence, subject them to torture and stress, disorient them constantly, deprive them of any notion that they are seen by anyone. Make them invisible and make them suffer, and soon they will long for the relief of another in their mind.

“Eventually, they go so mad with loneliness, isolation, fear, insanity, and pain that they will become ravenous with desire to simply speak to someone else. That someone else is with them, already inside from the moment of death.”

Hours of thick silence followed while the smell of rot faded. Sensations went away

completely, a psychic weapon.

“What are you doing to me?” she screamed.

Immediately, “A very effective technique, tested, but not fully, is to remove the ability of the recipient to feel her nerves, to move her limbs, to see, hear, or taste. This can be done by clipping the nerve endings.”

In the silence and dark, she could not move her arms, could not feel anything. Her senses were gone. It lasted hours or days.

“Clipping the nerve endings has some deleterious effects, unfortunately. The vessel is no longer useful for the incoming entity. An even better solution is quantum isolation of the nervous system. This can be turned on and off at will, and with sufficiently advanced technology, senses can be isolated.”

Her skin came back, on fire. It was searing against the floor, burning. She could also smell, but neither see nor hear. She could not move, could not even scream.

It lasted for 6 hours. She knew because something told her the time every 67 seconds.

More deadness, and she lost track of who she was, who she had been, what she might become. She forgot her name, and began speaking to herself by humming in a voice she could not hear. All ideas of her self came apart, unraveling into threads, drifting away like smoke.

“Eventually the recipient entity will realize that it is in their interest to help, and will find a means of disappearing.” The voice coughed, a wet, hacking noise. “Of course, it will not be that easy.”

The voice, when it came again, was not coming through ears, but from inside the head. It was the synthesized voice of the old woman.

“Karl,” it said softly.

Shock. She tried to sit and couldn't. Her body wouldn't respond.

“Karl.” The man laugh, then nothing. Black-no-sound.

...

“Karl is in danger.”

...

“The Benefactor's business partners have a vested interest in the man Named ...Karl.” A newscaster tone spoke in the same voice.

The deadness fell like a thick blanket for ages.

“Tell me,” she was unable to scream. “Who is this Karl? Tell me about him. Tell me. Please, tell me, god. No, anything, tell me, something. Karl. NO. Who the hell is Karl? Save him. Save Karl.” Silent shouts in a mind that was no longer hers.

Somewhere, somehow, she knew him. She needed to help him. He was her last hold to reality. But who was he? What was it, this Karl? The word ached to hear. It hurt like love being torn away.

“The...business...partners...are...interested...in...Karl.” The sentence dragged forever. It

took longer the second time.

Longer still the third.

Distortions

“A transfer between Mansworld and the human world is definitely possible,” the Doctor said. “You may only remap a human brain once, quantically. We are not even certain about that. However, :3: has dissected over 8000 human brains to the molecular level and thinks it has a 98% probability of success. In your case.” He looked at Karl. “Your personality, your brain, everything is geared for it, almost as if by design. A second switch-over would create deep inconsistencies, probable induction of paranoid schizophrenia or psychosis.”

Karl and Seeker had contacted him. He sent Karl to a facility which allowed for visual cross-over simulation, an attempt to feel like they were in the same room. They could see each other in three dimensions. Seeker met the Doctor at the facility. The Doctor appeared to be excited by the idea, though he was difficult to read.

“It is challenging to make something appear exactly on the other side as it is on the initiatory side. Impossible, actually. But we can get quite close. The commentary by Juniper on :3:’s explanation is, to quote,

“Distortions will appear in the transfer. Each movement across will increase the distortion by an exponent. An error of 2/10ths of a percent, perfectly workable, in the first transfer, will increase by a magnitude of up to 5 times for the second transfer. An error of 1% would induce at least one form of madness, probably more. Loss of some fine motor skills and memory are 78% probable. A third transfer would virtually ensure the death of the transferee.”

“Not a pleasant scenario,” said Karl. The Doctor shrugged.

“Would a Mans suffer the same?” Seeker asked.

“Good question. The third transfer, yes. Death would be highly likely. The second transfer, no. A Mans might develop an excessive analysis of his own behavior, already a common tendency. Or become nihilistic at returning here where things could be considered as not truly alive. Or be quite happy at returning. Mansworld is a simpler place, in many ways, than the human world.”

“How?”

“Mans are somewhat predictable compared to humans, especially icons. :3: has mapped out, or solved, you might say, many of the fractal bases of Mansworld. Dartagnan theorizes that Karl’s entry here will alter everything, however.”

“In what way?” Karl asked.

“I agree with Dartagnan,” Seeker said. “We will learn from Karl. Mansworld will learn from him. Perhaps even icons will evolve. Everything will change.”

love is an ember

“The business partners are interested in Karl.” The sentence repeated rapidly, in many different voices. It happened too many times and lost all meaning. It was just noise in the pitch black space of looming insanity.

“If the subject has substantial life motivation, children, for example, their hold to identity will be correspondingly strong. The following set of tools will allow one to attack that motivation.

“First, sever the identity of the object of love. The sensory isolation will go a long way in this process. It has, however, been proven to be incomplete. Repetition of the name of the object of affection many thousands of times has been proven to dissociate the meaning from the symbol. Which is to say, the name loses its connection to the other person. This is best done in the context of extreme and volatile emotion regarding the object of love.

“If this can be achieved, the affection will have no concrete object. Does the person love the other person’s face, or walk, or laugh? No. They love the person in total, but without a name to attach it to, this love loses its hold. If this can be achieved, the subject loses any connection to external reality.

“A similar process can be utilized if the recipient is primarily driven by hatred. It is a simple rule: sever the subject’s strongest emotion from the object of the emotion, and the subject will have no binding factor to tie their identity to. They will forget who they are in the deepest way.

“Still, a drive exists, something wishes to continue. We lack the means for dealing with this, for eradicating it completely. However, it can simply be left in this state. It is critical that the invading consciousness be extremely powerful and capable of a steady vigilance because of this. The subject will try to return.”

...The nothing.

A song came on: “Seeker wants his body, Dartagnan wants his mind.” “Karl” repeated in a flowing rhythm underneath it. It became all there was, and continued. Sometimes the tune happened with no words, sometimes chopped up, variation upon variation, repetition upon repetition. Whoever she had thought she was, was drifting into pieces, into madness, the last bits of her dissolving.

The voice would change to a deep baritone, then a chorus of children, a chipmunk, a beautiful reaching soprano. Different languages, all she knew and more repeated it over and over. “Seeker wants his body, Dartagnan wants his mind.”

“Karl.” It was a thread of nonsense sung by ghosts. Love was stolen, and twisted into something else. Benefactor’s life Part ISenses returned a bit, then went away.

Smells of alleyways, piss and old food assaulted her.

Nothing returned for long hours, followed by visions of madness.

Nothing, then sounds of torture.

Nothing, then the taste of filth.

Nothing, then feelings of agony.

Nothing...

A tactile movie played, a baby girl lay in a crib. Born in the mid-west, in a town too trivial to be named, her parents were of no real interest. Middle school, pointless boyfriends, and braces detailed an awkward, unremarkable, largely ignored childhood. The father paid no attention, as he was absorbed in his business. The mother was an impersonal facelessness, a spectre who made meals and cleaned. College followed, where the girl received a degree in business with honors.

She was an adept, a master at business. She achieved success by moving up the ladder of a largish corporation to become vice-president of mercantiles. At 24 years old, she married a handsome man. Two children followed. The husband raised the children while she worked long hours. She found love, though, in her family, it seemed.

Work changed. The company spun off her division, an electronics concern, which manufactured integrated automated systems, intelligent machines like computer secretaries, accountants, and legal aids. They were no good at inductive reasoning, and only fair at deductive reasoning, but superb at research when working with a human. Adaptable to a particular human's style and voice, they could be taught, and customized.

It got her in trouble.

A client by the name of Pleiades, a security expert, asked for a special system, a security structure. What he wanted was novel, big, technical beyond anything previously done. New technology, integrated to him, deep-hackproofing, with world-spanning communications, and access to massive data stores, but with an ability to go isolated if attacked. She found serious programming and engineering talent and took the contract. It was over \$10 billion.

She found a man who would later be called the Gadgeteer, and he built the communications technology. He designed the first nanotic weapons systems as well. Pleiades was very interested in these, and she earned a hefty bonus.

It was impossible, the system he wanted, but she did it. Along the way, she saw some of the data Pleiades was hiding. Nefario was the name of his boss. He was a criminal, one of the wealthiest, most powerful criminals in the world. It was her first contact with true evil.

She had become powerful herself, to a much lesser degree. In a man's world, where being a bit ruthless was encouraged for men, but women were called power hungry ballbusters and worse.

One day, she went for a long walk, thinking out loud about the difficulties of being a wife and mother and balancing that with her high-power job. She loved her husband and children, deeply. She also loved her job, but it stole time away from them. She had her own company, and it had become the foremost learning systems company in the world.

She walked into the Mansion she and Robert, her husband, had bought recently.

"Robert, honey. I'm back. What's for dinner?" He always cooked.

No answer. It was odd. They never went out without reason. She was perplexed, and went searching the house. Both cars were in the garage. She called out the kids names.

"Cindy?" Her sister was in town on a surprise visit.

The door to the children's playroom was cracked. She opened, looked inside, and screamed.

The movie stopped, and Martha was in blackness.

She saw the movie again, a little different, closer to the relationship. More time was spent with the husband and children. She began to fall in love with Robert, with her children. Again it ended with the scream.

The next time, she spent more time still, making love to Robert, wonderful love-making, bliss. They had a perfection together, in the reversal of the traditional roles, he being the nurturer, she the breadwinner. This time, she saw the cause of the scream.

Four murders. Her two children, husband, and sister all lay murdered in the room. Four bullets to the head, quick and painless, was small consolation.

She picked up her son's head, ran her hand over his still blushing face, then looked at her daughter's face and her husband's face for the last time. She ran from the house, and never returned.

She became a recluse. A year after, she began planning vengeance. Nefario. She knew it. She knew he was untouchable. But she had patience. She taught herself patience as she nursed herself back to some scraps of sanity in her year alone.

She pulled together all the money she could. Her company had prospered, even in her absence. She sold her stock, worth millions of dollars now, and invested it in revenge. She sought talented trackers, unsavory men who could find out what she needed. They found the killers of her family and captured them. She tortured them mercilessly, learning to delight in it. She kept them alive for months in agony. She studied them as she did so, inducing split personality and psychosis. Just to see if it was possible. Some were set loose, and retaken, then retortured.

She pursued Nefario, quietly and ruthlessly. She captured him, eventually. She inflicted a vengeful horror on him. Then darkness again came, but she was no longer alone. Something cold wrapped around her in the dark.

Many more times through, each movie played out differently in many details, points of view, emphasizing different emotions. Sometimes she would experience the isolation of childhood, or the deep love of her family, resting in that, or the love of power. Sometimes she savored the sex with her husband, and parties prior to her marriage where all the men desired her. She held her children as they were born, cared for them as they grew. She lived the Nefario scene from many angles, and subtleties, learned to crave and love her just revenge. When she tortured Nefario, the woman in the movie looked up, then dissolved into the woman watching.

Later, the blackout came just before she dissolved into her. Another time, she screamed "Let me in, bitch. Give me my life."

Once, the word "Karl" echoed from many voices. While the name echoed, Nefario tilted his head up, and it was Karl's face. He said, "Don't you love me? Make this stop. Quit making it happen."

"How?" she tried to scream.

"Just go away."

Then blackness fell. She began to torture him herself, revenge for what he had done to Karl. Wait. No, that wasn't right.

Blackness came and went.

A very long version of the life played. She grew up as an abstraction, like a memory of a daughter to her parents. Went to college, got her degree, saw an instant of detached pride on her father's face, and then he disappeared from her life. She had her career, then her own company. She was the CEO. She created smaller, more focused corporations under the larger corporate umbrella, especially her jewel, LSI, Learning Systems, Inc. They were technology off-shoots, very advanced specialized companies. She felt tremendous pride in herself and her accomplishments. Nanotics, inc, was a company that would do very well over the years. Sound and Vision, which developed cutting edge communications equipment was another.

She heard rumors of a government cloning project. She started her own project, eventually cloning herself, then hired a skilled overseer with instructions to train the clone in espionage and many other traits. And a new twist: she met the Programmer.

She had people trolling artificial intelligence web sites night and day, looking for somebody, some genius. In the end, she met him herself. She met the Programmer at a coffee shop by chance the way these things always happen, the way history is always made. By luck, by mishap, by the synchronicity of the stars, whatever it's called, it just happened. And to be honest, she didn't actually meet him. She met a friend of his, and perhaps it was less accidental. It was, after all, her constant search. To call it chance might not be true. Probably, it was bound to happen.

He was developing something truly new, and truly frightening. It was exciting.

She could move from money to power. She could affect governments before. Now she could affect the weather, and the fabric of society, maybe. She could alter people's destiny. She created IKG Psinetics, the company to do it.

Together, they created the first MSI, the Accountant, a combination of financial geniuses, essentially, a money and corporate power obtaining machine. The first Manufactured Semi-Intelligence whose focus was manipulating the stock market, finding good investments, building wealth, and building corporate power. The accountant was a very savvy diplomatic machine and had skills to create business alliances, even at the level of governments. The Accountant had a chaos based paradigm called power consensus generation. An extremely advanced heuristic for finding alternative solutions to problems between super power brokers.

Under the Accountant, her business prospered, requiring less of her attention, and she turned her new skills and her new team to a new venture. Project Wildcard was a manufactured sentience, not just a very intelligent learning machine like the Accountant, but something aware of itself. Wildcard would want to survive and to learn.

A part of her knew she was changing the world, creating something totally different. The project took several years, many people, and mountains of money. She nearly bankrupted herself, but kept trying. She kept failing. IKG Psinetics was losing \$3 million dollars a day.

The Programmer had a brainstorm, a week long "Aha!" He disappeared into his lab, locked the door, and when he emerged, he said, "I know how."

She made the great mistake, didn't want to wait until they were ready, until they had the technology to talk to it. It would take too long, years, to develop the means of communication.

They made Wildcard, and it was isolate for over a year of human time, much longer for it. When they managed to build an MSI to speak to Wildcard, there was no response. They began again with Juniper. The approach was more sensible. He had a teacher. :3: followed, and Dartagnan, who named themselves.

Then she found her family dead. After the murders, she suffered the year alone in the nothing, in the sensory dark, where she contemplated revenge with the other. They planned without speaking. The movie lived again, and she was the hunter, lusting darkly in the years of stalking Nefario, and the single-mindedness. She learned to strategize carefully, and to use new discoveries to adjust campaigns as they occurred, to deepen possibilities. She learned to widen the net.

When she emerged, she remembered her plans made in the dark. She remembered how to enact revenge. She had more acts of vengeance, and lived them more closely now. Nefario had deep security. She had helped create the electronic portion. She needed a means to attack it. She created a battle intelligence, Project Trident.

She put all her resources into Project Trident, everything. She brought teams of people together and money, money, money. Trident had incredible capabilities: learning capabilities, security penetration capabilities, voice masking capabilities, covert operations knowledge, super fast response time, tactical depth beyond anything previously known, superb information access. Trident made NexCon, ArcTen, SatScan and other government deep computers look like toys. But Trident was not enough. She needed some expert strike operatives.

She remembered the government cloning program. Something clicked. People engineered for the task she wanted. A General. A Sergeant.

new friend

“There are many modes of power,” Seeker said. “One of these modes: words, language, has been called advanced conceptual interchange. An M-E finds the sinusoidal rhythm of language, the ebb and flow, if you will.”

“A sine-wave?” Karl asked.

“No, more of a spiral around an object, then a new spiral around a new object. Anyway, you just find that, and...surf it. That’s what I do,” Seeker said.

“What about directing the spiral?”

“That would be part of the surfing.”

“Hmm, sounds like gibberish to me.”

Seeker wanted to feel embarrassed, but did not. He tried to fake it by fiddling with a pen on his desk.

“Sorry, I can talk normally. It is an interesting theory, if you are so inclined.”

“Who wrote it?”

“Juniper. He was very interested in communication and language mechanics. The text was 2

million pages. The synthesized version was four thousand. I skimmed it, read about a thousand pages.”

“Can you read faster than a human?”

“Yes, we are allowed some...cheats, I suppose. I can read three or four times faster than average human speed. I believe I can. I have never actually measured it, not being interested, actually. I am more interested in appearing to be human. I know of other Mans who can read much faster. They have trained themselves to do so. Lawyers and academics, especially.”

The Doctor had instructed him and Karl to spend as much time as possible talking with each other.

“It is of vital import that you learn each other’s faces and bodies so that they are called up at will, each other’s mannerisms, and speech. Try to imitate some, take some of the other into you. It will help the transfer. Come to know each other to the greatest extent you are able.”

With the holograms, they could watch each other from different angles.

“Do you find it ironic that the Doctor instructed us to know one another better?”

“How so?” Karl said.

“The Doctor seems less interested in knowing people than anyone I have ever met.”

“I don’t get the question.”

“Get’ the question?” Seeker did his best puzzled expression with a slight tip of the head. Karl laughed at his self-consciousness, as usual.

“Understand the question. Why did you ask me that?”

“I am trying to comprehend irony. It is difficult.”

“What’s the definition?”

“Hmm, where is my dictionary?” He knew exactly where it was. He made a show of looking the word up, although he could quote the definition by rote.

“Ah, here we have it.” He looked at Karl to gauge his reaction to the phrase. None, at least that Seeker could perceive.

“I find your attitude to my comment ironic, in one meaning.”

“You’re pretty odd, Seeker. Go ahead.”

“A cool, detached attitude of mind characterized by recognition of the incongruities and complexities of existence.”

“Why not?” Karl laughed as he spoke, “But then the Doctor’s instructions were not ironic. He does not get the complexities. Or the...” Karl was laughing very hard now “...incongruities.”

“Why is that funny?”

“I can’t explain it.”

Seeker shrugged, peeked at Karl after. He didn’t notice.

“Here is the definition of irony appropriate to the Doctor’s instruction: ‘a combination of

circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what is or might be expected or considered appropriate'. I would call it irony that the Doctor told us to know each other better when he is obviously incapable of doing so himself."

"Touché, Seeker. That sounds like irony to me."

"Are you being facetious?"

"What does that word mean?"

"Sarcastic."

"Not consciously." Karl took a cashew from one of the snack bowls on the table. "I was just enjoying the conversation. By the way, why were you so afraid of eavesdroppers when I first called you?"

"Some manipulation was obvious." Seeker imitated Karl's nut pickup operation with a pistachio. He stuck his fingernails in and said "crack" as it opened, because he had seen Karl do so once. "Who connected us? Why were you seeking me? Someone was watching, Karl. You can be certain. I had no notion as to their interest."

"Do you now?"

"Yes, of course. They wish us to exchange places. We are doing that, so they are not currently a threat."

"Who do you think it was?"

"Most likely Dartagnan. He gave you the device. But who can say? Many beings have the skills. By the way," Seeker used Karl's phrase of a moment before, "I have a request of you."

"Shoot."

"Shoot?"

"Ask away. Ask me. Go ahead."

"Can you assist me in appearing more human?"

"Ha, ha. Holy cow. Yeah, I suppose. I can try."

"That is excellent. How may I do so?"

"Quit talking like a robot, for one thing. Downshift the perfect grammar. Say um, and ah. Don't always use complete sentences. It's very noticeable. Slur your speech a bit more."

"Like izh?"

Karl rubbed his face with his hands. Seeker imitated the gesture.

"No, you sound drunk. Just...um...clip off unimportant words sometimes. Like this. Tsa good thing... see. I dropped the letter I in it's. Try it."

"Tsu good thing. How was that?"

"Not bad. Use contractions. 'How's that,' not 'how is that.'"

"I try to do so, but I tend to forget."

"How can you forget? You're a Mans."

"Oh, we forget much. The M-Es never forget, but we do. I concentrate diligently on

appearing human.”

“Say ‘I work hard to seem human, not I concentrate diligently on appearing.’”

“Thank you.”

“Say Thanks.”

“Thanks.”

“There is a Mans who is-”

Karl interrupted. “Why do you want to change places?”

“Let me ask you something first.” Seeker had almost prefaced his statement with ‘before I answer your question’, then stopped himself. He also had no real question. Did he feel stymied? It would be an appropriate response.

“What is the feeling of pride?” Never ask exactly what you think. He had found this rule out himself. Humans always meant something different, even if slightly, from what they said.

“Uh... Pride. Let’s see,” Karl answered. “Well, you think you did something good. Good to do, I mean. Or that you did something well. And...you want people to know, to see. What you did.”

“Excellent, because I just used the construction –”

“No, that’s not it. You can’t say it. Never say it. Unless you drop it casually.”

“Drop it?”

“Into the conversation. For example, ‘Oh, yeah, I swam the English Channel once. No big deal, really. It was warm that day.’ You downplay it.”

“Ahha. Eureka.”

“No. Don’t say eureka. It’s stupid. Also, you look like you’re thinking about how to look surprised or whatever. Stop that.”

“But I must consciously express those things.”

“No, you don’t. Trust me. You don’t. Or at least you won’t after we switch. It will feel more natural.”

“Are you certain?”

“No, but I want to encourage you.”

“Thanks, Karl. What do you want with the switch, by the way?”

“See different places, I suppose. How long will your body stay alive in Mansworld?”

“Impossible to tell. Karl, I dropped ‘it is’ from the beginning of the sentence. Without thinking about it.”

“Good for you. Perhaps it’s becoming part of who you are.”

“Perhaps. Speaking with you is helpful, certainly. At any rate, I would live no longer than a human could. Seventy years, if I do not, sorry- don’t- die some other way. There is an unusual sickness here called information sickness. A variety of forms, actually.”

“What’s it like?”

Seeker forced the contraction, "It's fatal. Always. And gruesome. The victim's form decomposes as they are alive. I think it is similar to leprosy in your world."

"Thanks for sharing."

"Watch out for it, Karl. Avoid those who have it. It is very contagious. Why did you ask about life span? Do you wish to live an extended period?"

"Do you want to live a long time?" Ask it like that. Yeah, maybe I do." Karl made a why not gesture. "I might like to live a good long time."

"Interesting. I calculate a better than 50% chance that you would live longer. You will be a human entering Mansworld. Very precious. He, or they, you could say, Wildcard, has not brought anyone across the information barrier yet, as far as I know. You would be the first."

"You, too. I don't know that I care about that, anyway. Tell me about wildspace."

"You shift conversation. Why?"

"Felt like it. It's normal, Seeker. Another thing, don't analyze so much. Just let things go. Forget about stuff. And quit trying to be the normal human. Just be what you are, or will be, that is, a Mans who has gone into a human body. It doesn't make you inferior."

Epiphany. Karl had cut to the core and found a secret he did not see. He unconsciously thought that he was less important than a human. Where had that belief come from?

"That is very helpful, Karl. Thank you."

"No problem. Why are you so eager to leave there?"

"I think I will die if I stay here. The leap into humanspace will extend my life as well. Perhaps for a very long time. I want to live a long time."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Why not?"

"No reason. Just a hunch. You really need to work on instinct, mon ami."

Nefario

She found the General and showed him Trident. They made a deal. In exchange for capturing Nefario, he could have Trident. He agreed, saying that the machine was almost made for the Sergeant.

Finding Nefario was complicated. The Sergeant took over a month just to get a photograph that they were sure was him. He was a will-o-the-wisp. His business style was to own nothing and control everything. They tracked him through the layers of shell corporations and false holding companies. They finally penetrated one of his illegal operations, and captured an upper echelon in one of Nefario's espionage teams who did deep spy, very complicated work.

The Sergeant conferred with the general, and they knew that this man had actually met Nefario because of his position, because of his duties, and because of some things he said. The

Sergeant captured him. Under interrogation he pointed them to a data store, which Trident cracked.

At one point Trident was counterattacked from within. He responded well. The attack came swiftly, a data bomb. Part of Trident was lost in the attack, but he managed to prevent the database from alerting Pleiades.

They later discovered the attack was a vectored arrow to communications. Most of their communications devices short-circuited. The Sergeant was monitoring the engagement through an early nanotic device which provided visuals. It slagged out, destroying his right eye. Prototype nanotic eyes were already developed, and with the Sergeant's input, they developed a specialized one for him.

The eye later recorded the capture of Nefario.

The data store was closer to a data mountain and contained more than 4000 faces propagated as possible Nefarios. The data was a gold mine, an immense store of corporate war techniques. It offered little in the way of attack or counterintelligence, but much in the way of defense. It was his defensive database, how he kept himself separate, hidden. Many levels, many layers.

Nefario was an attack engineer. Pleiades was entirely defensive. He had studied things like moat building, pouring boiling oil, counter catapults. Completely archaic stuff, from the Middle Ages. What they found of his notes and explanations in the data store shared very interesting correlations, with applications to modern defenses. He had much more to say about deception and subterfuge. Spreading rumors and disinformation was really his stock in trade, but it was fascinating how he had made the study of ancient technique usable in his defensive strategies and tactics to prevent Nefario's capture.

She learned a tremendous amount from the capture of Nefario. Many of Nefario's faces, for instance, were female. In parts of the world and parts of his operations, he was rumored to be female.

She knew that the general also learned a great deal, and she could see that they would soon be in opposition. She had always known it; they both had, although they never met. The general learned different things from the database.

It took all their combined skill to locate Nefario. He had very deep defense-tek, and capturing him was Byzantine. Months of watching. Trident discovered he was coming into one of his villas on his campaign of perpetual motion. South Africa, they knew the day.

She wanted to take them in route, thinking that during the transport would be better than after he arrived in a secure environment. The Sergeant nixed the idea, saying that his transportation and logistics were impossibly complicated. There were more than sixty cars arriving from different times in different directions, from different places. Multiple routes, many look-alikes, tinted window's. He was very good at the shell game of movement. The Sergeant didn't think he could pull it off. He was sure he would tip their hand.

Instead, the Sergeant penetrated the villa, three days before. He stowed away inside, a risky move. It could have been a plant, the idea that he would be at the villa. It could have been just one of the many pieces of disinformation that Nefario was constantly spreading. It turned out to be accurate.

Trident was able to penetrate the alarm system in a very interesting way. The Sergeant had

the Accountant perform a hostile takeover on the company which had installed the security for the villa. They got the alarm codes, alarm plans, the entire system. The codes for the inner compound had been changed and the company did not have them. The codes were on a perpetual change loop and the only Trucode was a chip held by Pleaides. The key was obviously to remain invisible, let nothing be seen. Which was relatively easy from the inside of the company. The accountant passed Trident the outer compound codes from the company. Only Pleaides had the inner codes. Once in, Trident created a deliberate fault, an electrical problem and the guards called the alarm company themselves.

They used an old-time gambit, almost cliché. The Sergeant disguised himself as a technician, out to work on the alarm system. The Accountant, who owned the company, created official badges and had the Sergeant and two others officially on the payroll. The other men got in the van and drove out, acting as though they were done. The guards didn't realize that three techs had come in and only two came out. That was probably the riskiest part, but Trident created a distraction – having a guard call from the outside as the van entered the compound, so the gate guard did not pay much attention and missed the third man, the Sergeant.

After penetrating the outer compound, the Sergeant hooked into the security with a Stanzerd interface, a quantum throughput device. Early q-tek, it sent FTL, or faster than light signals, in opposing directions, encoded to each other. The device was designed to create encryptions, but Trident and the Programmer adapted it to break them. Or bypass them, really.

Once the q-parcel was inside the alarm system, it performed a code wrap. It became the current security code and the other signal become the mirror image at the same second. All Trident had to do was reverse the exterior Q-parcel code and the Sergeant was inside the inner compound. The system did fight, in a way, but Trident isolated it so that it could not communicate outside. He deleted the system, then reinstalled it with a few key differences. No one noticed, because he reinstalled from the company. It was a clever plan, partially because it depended on some old techniques, which Pleaides would probably not suspect. They were too obvious.

The Sergeant stowed away for three days, in Nefario's closet. The beauty of the plan was in the simplicity. Trident and the Sergeant had researched the close protection team and found a man who resembled the Sergeant. He watched when they dispatched the team, and knew where his man would go. He was waiting, and killed the man with a single, silent throat strike. The man never saw him.

He changed clothes and came to the door. He had learned all their signals, and gave the all-clear, a sideways fist with thumb and pinky extended. He stepped back in. A bit unusual, but he didn't think it would raise an alarm. When they checked in, Trident disguised his voice and he played it minimal. One word answers, no questions.

An hour later, Nefario's train arrived. The next part was simple. The Sergeant just walked into Nefario's bathroom while he was pissing. He could not use weapons because the autonomous defense system would neutralize everyone in the inner compound if it sensed a drawn weapon. The system was an isolate, impenetrable to Trident. Hack-proof because it was pretty dumb. Single-function.

“Yes?” Nefario sounded irritated at being interrupted.

“Want to go for a ride?”

The Sergeant had studied the command patterns of the man and knew he would prefer to chew someone out, rather than contact the team leader. Trident created a sonic fold, cutting off sound and outside coms. Nefario realized the Sergeant was not one of his men and attacked. The Sergeant was impressed with the man's fighting skill. It took him four strikes to penetrate. He did it with a feint to the face, combined with a bounce step and a sharp in-kick at 45 degrees to Nefario's left knee. The knee broke with a soft popping noise and Nefario began screaming. The sonic fold held. The Sergeant rendered Nefario unconscious by punching him in both temples at once.

He had a duffle bag full of 'tools'. He removed Nefario's legs with a cauterizing nanofilament saw that Trident created so that the rest of him would fit into the bag. He left the legs and tools lying under Nefario's bed and carried out the bag with its grisly contents. He got into one of the vehicles and Trident made a key out of nano-filament. The guard stopped him on his way out of the gate. He looked at him funny.

"Goin' out for beer. We're gonna play poker later," the Sergeant said. "You want anything? Be back in a few hours."

"Yeah, bring back some women." They laughed. "Maybe vodka?"

"Sure thing," said the Sergeant. He drove away.

Hiding

She disappeared after that. Kept Nefario alive for years, hidden. She created the mystique, the Benefactor. She would be a Benefactor to the world, offering the Manufactured Entity, and Nefario's end. She spread the rumor that the Benefactor was a man, took great pains to disguise any connection she had with the name.

Nefario took his own vengeance. A retro-virus, easily prevented by the vaccine he had taken, but incurable otherwise. He spit on her during torture, and she began to decay soon afterwards.

She briefly considered hiring Pleiades after the capture, but she did not know if he had hidden loyalties, and decided against it. She had nothing against the man, and felt sure he had nothing to do with the killings. So, she didn't kill him. She didn't hire him, either.

Instead, she created the Mechanic. He was more balanced. Defense and offense in equal measure. Unlike the General whose defensive strategy was the best defense is a crippling offense.

She tortured Nefario frequently.

She was wielding the instruments herself. Drills, knives, skin-peelers. Nefario was a disfigured pulp, his face gone. His screams were bubbly with blood, and he passed out. She put down the instruments, turned and looked at the camera.

"He is still alive."

She stepped forward, her face filling the world.

"And so am I."

traverse into peril

Karl was torn about entering Mansworld. Powerful forces wanted him to go. He thought he would live, but wondered how much it would change him. He contacted some people for advice.

Dartagnan emphatically said Yes.

RJ was on-board. "I like to roll the dice. It creates interesting possibilities for everyone." Dartagnan agreed to put him in touch with :3:

"Should I go to Mansworld?"

"No. Yes." Equations. :3: was useless. He was just a train to catch.

The General wanted him to go, but would not say so outright. He couldn't understand why, though. Possibly it was important that he make the choice on his own. He knew the Benefactor wanted him in, which probably was an argument against.

He might be able to meet Martha again, somehow. But that made no sense at all. That was impossible, surely. How could he possibly see her again by crossing into Mansworld?

LuvRay was out of contact. But he knew what LuvRay would say. "I am not know. It no feel strong, but maybe you are no choice."

Seeker was desperate to switch.

The Sergeant was sitting on the edge of a weightlifting bench, shirtless, with a small towel around his neck when Karl vid-phoned. He was doing one handed curls.

"It's Karl. What am I getting myself into?"

"I don't know. Tell me what you're thinking about doing."

"Same situation as a week ago, going into Mansworld. I'm thinking about trading places with someone called Seeker."

"Yeah, I know."

"Why did you ask?"

"I thought I might find some help in your phrasing. I didn't. Are you asking me from tactics or strategy?"

"Tactics, I suppose. I'm not really a strategy man. How will I operate in there? What will it be like?"

"I have a Mansworld simulator. I use it all the time. Want to try it?"

"No." Karl drew the word out, pondering. "I don't think so. Why wouldn't I want to?"

"You probably don't want your perceptions skewed in advance. Smart, actually. It might teach you something wrong. Let's take stock. What do we know? Martha. How do you read that?" He wanted Karl to go in, but could not make the decision for him. It had to be completely voluntary. No manipulation, or the exchange would not work. It was very difficult to prevent subtle manipulation. Perhaps it formed part of the game of Wildcard, to teach the players something about the way they operated.

“Taken by the Benefactor. Lost for good?”

“Wrong, I can hear it in your voice. You think you can find her somehow by going into Mansworld. Am I right?”

“I suppose so.”

“More reasons. You want to help Seeker?”

“Not particularly. A little, but it wouldn’t tip the scales.”

“You’re just plain interested, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“But still some other reason.”

“Yes.”

“Why do you want to go to Mansworld, Karl?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do you want to go to Mansworld, Karl? ANSWER ME!”

“Loyalty,” Karl blurted out. “Wow, nice trick. How did you do that?”

“Force subconscious non-volitional response. Cool. I wondered if it would work. Hmm. Loyalty. To whom?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can’t make much sense of that.”

“Donnez-moi votre motive,” the General commanded.

“Changements.” He paused. “Change. That sounds right.”

“That’s Wildcard’s motive too,” the Sergeant said.

“Non, pas vrais. *His motive is to learn and teach.*” The General spoke French when he discussed a player’s motivation or policy. He said he could not quite capture the essence in English. It never sounded like what he intended to express.

“So what does that tell us, chief?”

“It is to say that Karl will cause change to occur, but first he must learn the way in which this world he is entering changes.”

“Karl,” said the Sergeant, “have you heard of wildspace?”

“Yes.”

“The Space Between?”

“Aren’t they the same thing?”

“No. Sort of. The Space Between is a part of wildspace. There are also other things out there. We have very little intel on either.”

“Do you think I’ll go there for some reason?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. The General and I have talked about it quite a bit. I think you have helped his understanding with the ‘change’ answer. But it hasn’t helped mine much. There is

more intrigue in Mansworld than in the human world.”

“More? How could that possibly be?”

“It could. Many people here live ordinary lives. Not many Mans do.”

“What does the General say about my going in?”

The Sergeant didn’t answer right away. He was waiting to see if the General wanted to, part of their unspoken protocol. If the General wanted to weigh in, he would. If not, don’t ask, but answer for him.

“‘The crossing of L’Innocent brings great promise and great peril,’ ” The Sergeant said. “Only he said it in frog-speak. Poetic, huh?”

“Sounds like it captures the essence.”

“He also said it could bring a policy change. A big deal for him.”

“Policy change?”

“Policy. What strategy works toward. The level above strategy. A policy might be to prevent immigration, for example. A strategy would be to make sure they have no jobs, or to patrol the border, or passing laws to behead the illegals. You understand?”

“Sure, it makes sense. What would the policy change be for the General?”

“Wouldn’t tell you if I knew.”

revival

The Mechanic had business with the Benefactor, who was in Martha’s body now, but still incoherent. Something was moving in the game, with Karl. He needed to find out what and make plans. He had been tracking the reprogramming, perhaps too closely, and let the watch on the rest of the game slip. It might not be a terrible mistake, but he needed to speak to her.

She was in limbo, all the action going on inside. Her memory was spotty and vacant, still coming forth. She watched the movie, up to several days now, in 8 hour blocks, and slept for 16 hours at a time. Martha’s intense disorientation would be creating the tone for the entire psyche, according to the Doctor. But the Mechanic could not see that. All he could see was his need to move on something and her null-state. He knew Karl was hidden, probably in plain sight, as he was so good at.

He contacted Dartagnan, who dropped hints about the box and its importance and how Karl was going to help find it. Perhaps they could work together. But Dartagnan danced around the issue. The Mechanic looked elsewhere. He could sense the overall motion increasing, the relative confusion becoming more pronounced to match. He urgently needed to get the Benefactor back in the game. He needed to monitor her progress, as well, and could not spare too much time for the information hunt.

He contacted some agents to ferret out information for him. They received instructions to keep it secret. He wanted to maintain the element of surprise. Everyone knew the Benefactor was dead, but they could count on the Doctor’s discretion about the reprogramming. No one knew.

He called the Doctor.

“I need the process to be complete. Asap.”

“What does asap mean?”

“As soon as possible. Now, really. Something is happening and I need her.”

“Hmm. All right. It will be dangerous, but I can get her out now.”

“Dangerous how?”

“Risk of madness, primarily. The post-traumatic stress disorder has been insufficiently sealed off.”

“How would you seal it off more?”

“She needs to sleep. A great deal.”

“She has been. Weeks. Get her up. She’s tough, I don’t think she’ll go crazy.”

“Whatever is in there is not the Benefactor, per se. This being is adjusting to a new body, and having a dual consciousness.”

“What’s the procedure?”

“A stimulant I developed. It is very hard on the body, but it will bring her awake and keep her awake for as long as you like. I recommend at most 12 hours, then 12 hours sleep. She could possibly handle such a cycle. Three days of it, no more.”

“Do it.”

The robotic machine inside the room moved into life, arms swiveling for no apparent reason. The robot opened a large metal cabinet stuffed full of chemicals, syringes, and medical apparatus. After finding what it needed, it held her arm in a rigid lock. She noticed it, finally, and began screaming, trying to fight it off. It put out a third arm, pinning her to the bed. The injection brought her to immediate clarity.

“Where am I?”

“You are in the Benefactor’s quarters,” the doctor’s voice said from the robot. “Do you know who you are?”

“I am...No, I don’t know.”

“Mechanic, please enter the room.”

She saw him, and a vague recognition came to her eyes. “The Mechanic. You work for me.”

“Tell her who she is,” the Doctor said. “She needs to hear it from you.”

“You are the Benefactor.”

She grabbed her head, wincing.

“God, that hurts. Yes. I remember.”

“Can I do business with her?”

“Not yet. She needs to do some light exercise to feel the body, and she needs to eat. Give me one hour, but watch and answer any questions she has.”

An hour later, she was dressed and ready for action.

“Good to see you again.”

“You too, ma’am. We have business.”

“Yes, I’m sure we do. Go ahead.”

He briefed her on everything that had happened before the reprogramming. She had many gaps, and it took several hours.

“Karl. Something is going on with him.”

“L’Innocent? It’s about time, I would say. Nothing happened when I was down?”

“Not much, until recently. I held it flat as best I could, but now that’s done. Something is moving fast now, but I have not penetrated it. Dartagnan said some things about the box and Karl finding it.”

“The box is in Mansworld. Perhaps there is a second box in our world?”

“I haven’t heard of it. I doubt it. Communication activity across the barrier has increased.”

“Have you picked any up?”

“No, I couldn’t slice into any transmissions. I just know they’re there.”

“What are the other players up to?”

“Sublime is in New York.”

“Where is Karl?”

“Off-radar.”

“Who is the prime mover, in your estimation?”

“Dartagnan. He’s being very evasive.”

“Why?”

“He wants you back in play? To force my hand?”

“Why?”

“He needs something from you?”

“What?”

“Circles back to the main question. What is happening with Karl?”

“The General?”

“Consolidating holdings, re-organizing Juniperspace and Juniper’s assets. Nothing to do with this. They’re in a holding pattern, I would say.”

“LuvRay?”

“He found Martha for the General who sent her to you. After we sent out signals that she could get close and maybe kill you. Do you remember?”

“Not well. Some.”

“Anyway, I peeled him from their team. He isn’t doing anything, as usual.”

“He does more than you know. He holds the balance.”

“If you say so. I don’t know what that means, to be honest. LuvRay doesn’t operate at my level.”

“Nor at mine. He is at Wildcard’s level, I would say. Untouchable. Or very dangerous to touch.”

She looked at the machine which was now sitting still in the corner.

“Ask the Doctor. If a human is going to operate in Mansworld, then he is involved.”

“Doctor? What do you know about Karl?”

No answer.

“Is he monitoring?”

“Yes, I cut him out of most of the conversation, but opened it up to ask. He needs to watch you closely right now. Dangerous time in your rehab.”

“Doctor,” she said, “what do you know about Karl?”

“Confidentiality,” he replied.

“Cut him out of the conversation,” the Mechanic said. “He is doing something.”

“Find Karl.”

partnership

“What’s going on, RJ?”

RJ was at an outdoor mall, enjoying the sunshine and the pretty girls. “Who are you?” RJ knew already, but wanted to buy time.

“The Mechanic.”

“The Mechanic?”

“Don’t play with me. I need to know what Karl is up to. And where he is.”

“I could not say. I haven’t spoken to him in a good while.”

“You know. Tell me or I’ll hurt you.”

RJ knew the man’s reputation.

“Let me make a phone call. Private.”

The Mechanic studied RJ’s face.

“No. What’s going on?”

“RJ shrugged. Karl and Seeker plan to switch.”

“Switch?”

“Karl is going into Mansworld, Seeker is coming here. They plan to change bodies.”

“Hmm. Big news.”

“The biggest.”

“Who are you working with?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“You can under torture.”

“No, it’s been sealed somehow. I am unable to say it.”

“Try.”

“A phone call?”

“Go ahead. Over there, where I can see.”

The Mechanic couldn’t eavesdrop on RJ’s tek. It looked archaic, 5 years old or more. He wondered whose tek could keep him out and why it looked like that.

RJ returned. “Dartagnan. He wants to speak to you.”

The Mechanic took the phone. “Hello?”

“Hello, there, old bean. How are you, today? Is the weather good, there?”

“What do you want?”

“To the point. I like a man who says it straight. Very well, then, I shall tell you the reason I wished to speak to you. Without further ado, and forthwith, all shall be made clear.”

“Why do you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Go on without saying anything.”

“I am saying many things. I am trying to be human.”

“You sound like a fool.”

“Well, be that as it may, what do you think your ever charming and suddenly lovely CEO would say to a partnership?”

emerged

Karl left Hagen-Dazs with a double scoop of ice cream - chocolate and banana-coffee something in a waffle cone. It was three days until he went into Mansworld. He was excited and nervous. A woman exited a limousine and stepped up to him. Her head was covered in a red scarf, making her face difficult to see. She squinted at him.

“Martha?!”

“Not exactly.” She stabbed him with a long, thin knife. As she reached out, she seemed to interfere with herself, slowing the attempt down and causing it to go awry. He managed to block it somewhat. The knife penetrated his right forearm, gashing the muscle some. She had been aiming at his heart.

“Karl?” she said. “Oh, my God. Karl.” She looked around, disoriented, saw the limo, saw a man climb out with a gun, and kicked the door on them, hard, sending the gun spinning. She dropped the knife.

“We have to go.” She grabbed his hand. He dropped his ice cream and they ran. As she ran, she removed her jewelry, watch, necklace, earrings, hair pins. She seemed to be checking herself for something.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting rid of her tek. So we can’t be followed.”

“You think we can get away?”

“No, but we can try.”

“Why did you stab me?”

“I didn’t. That was her. This way.” They went down an alley. No one was visibly following. They stopped.

“Here, let me take care of that.” The wound was not bad, relatively. It didn’t hurt much. It might need a few stitches, but that could wait. She tied the scarf around it, then led him into a department store.

“Should I clean it up in the bathroom?”

“No, we don’t have enough time.”

Martha’s body was twitching. Small twitches everywhere, constantly, like she was fighting something.

“How did you get here?” Karl was so happy to see her again. They hugged each other and held it longer than they should. “It’s so good to see you again. You look different.”

“I am different. Very different. She...did things to me.”

They bought new clothes, he paid in cash. They wore them out, disposing of the old as they left.

“Martha, what’s going on? What happened?”

“Don’t say my name.”

“Why not?”

“M-Es can pick that up. So can sweep-surveillance. No names.”

“Why are you like this? It is so good to see you.”

“You’re not angry at me for abandoning you?”

“No. For a while, perhaps, but mostly just confused. I knew you had to do it. That you were saving my life, probably.”

She looked away.

“Let’s keep moving.”

run

“Karl’s Trident is offline, boss.”

“Copy that. Circumstances?”

“My last receive is 2 seconds ago, leaving an ice cream store. 22 Broadway Street.”

“Chocolate?”

“Yes.”

The Sergeant couldn’t say why he asked questions like that sometimes in accelerate situations. S-1 had done it, and he learned it watching him. It liberated something. The mind could open, jump laterally by not overfocusing, or by nabbing a detail of no consequence in the scene. Maybe it put things in perspective, allowed one to see the big joke of it all. Whatever. It helped as often as not, and it only took a tenth of a second.

“Which direction was he headed?”

“South.”

“What mode of transport do I want?”

“Run.”

He ran. “How far is it?”

“2040 meters from you to the ice cream shop.”

“What’s my time to run that?”

“Under training conditions, 4 minutes 42 seconds.”

“Top speed?”

“No, that would keep you a wind reserve to arrive ready to act. You could run it 4 minutes 26 seconds, but would take up to a minute to recover well.”

“Without the crowd. Add 7 or 8 percent. Intersections, too. Add 10 percent. To the faster.”

With the tooth mike, and with a specialized breathing technique, he could talk, some, and not lose any wind.

“4 minutes 46 seconds.”

“MOVE!” The crowd turned, got out of his way at the second shout. He pulled a weapon as he ran, to start people leaping out of his way. He brandished it, yelling. They moved. He blew through the first crosswalk. It was on walk. Blind man with dog, old lady with groceries, narrow point in the sidewalk. Over a car and into the street? He leapt over the dog.

“Is this a movie?”

“No.”

He didn’t bother to tell Trident that he was talking to himself.

There were cars moving fast, 60 kilometers plus, crossing the next intersection. Weapon – drop it. Two lanes. He could do it. He sped up to sprint speed, checked to the right as he came past the edge of the building. No trucks. No chance of running across. He put it in the red, launched himself at the edge of the moving lane, kicked off the hood of the near car to go higher, flattening out, over the top of the next car, landed by rolling, in the far lane, foot planted to use momentum, still in the crouch, bounced up and forward, froglike, landed and kept running,

leaving the noise of squealing brakes and shouting behind.

Sprained wrist. Moderate.

“What happened to our surveillance?”

“Their contact dropped .5 seconds after Karl’s contact.”

Amateurs. He would call in heavies now. Or do it himself.

He ran.

no chance for goodbye

Martha and Karl walked as they talked, came to Central Park, tried to get lost in it. She had picked out a golf shirt and sport coat for him. She wore a loose-fitting casual dress and a hat.

“You look good in that. Except for the blood.”

“Thanks. Should I contact the Sergeant?”

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire? No, thanks. We have to go invisible. By the way, she may come back. If so, I want you to kill me.”

“What happened? She?”

“Yes. The Benefactor. I’m her clone. She...implanted her memories into me. After I killed her. It’s complicated, but she tried to kill you back there. Both of us are inside my head. They induced some mental disorders to make room for her.”

“Wow. That is creepy.”

“Try it from the inside. Fortunately, she gave me good training.”

“What?”

“She’s the reason I was forced to be trained in espionage technique and all the other stuff. She had it done, so that my body and my synaptic system would be ready for her. She will come back, most likely during a traumatic moment. I will be put under severe stress. That’s the world we’re in. When that happens, there is a very strong chance that she will regain control of my body. I don’t think she actually wants you dead, however. I can see many of her motives, although it is blurred. Dreamlike, really.”

“Can she see you? Right now?”

“No doubt, and more clearly than I see her. She’s better at this than I am. I can feel her presence, actually.” She sat down on a bench, pulled him down. “What’s happening with you?”

“I’m planning to go into Mansworld.”

“Really? How is that possible?”

“Don’t ask me. Ask the Doctor.”

Martha jumped up, stared at Karl.

“You’re working with the Doctor? Are you insane? He’s a horrifying being. You cannot work with him.”

Karl was surprised. The Doctor had not seemed that bad. Not a nice man, certainly, but horrifying?

“Why not?”

“He programmed me. He tortured me, Karl.”

“I thought you said no names.”

“Sorry.” She sat down, eyes pleading.

“He won’t do that to me. It has to be voluntary or it won’t work.”

“I don’t feel so good about you going in there. It scares me.”

“Don’t worry about me. You have enough to deal with. How do we get your body back to you?”

“I have no idea. Perhaps I can do something decent here. Change her in some way, so that she’s not so malicious. Her story is very tragic.”

“That doesn’t excuse what she did to you.”

“No. I suppose not. She has a powerful psyche. Watching her is like watching something so focused, so incredibly willful. She’s exerting an influence, now. She’s dreaming what is happening, and I don’t know how direct her dream is. My dreams are quite distorted, no doubt by her intent. And most of my experience qualifies as a dream, now.”

“So you switch places? Or you did, when she tried to kill me?”

“Yes. Stress-trigger. I want you to live. I think of you as my child, of course. So when she tried to kill you, I came out. Somehow. I can’t explain how. I just found myself there, with you.”

“Won’t you go crazy? Won’t she? Two people in one head?”

“Looked at that way, we already are crazy. We seem to be coming together, affecting each other. Perhaps becoming each other. The end result might be some synthesis of the two of us.”

“What happens then?” He looked at her as if she was a lab specimen. “Who will you be?”

“Oh, God. Please don’t look at me like that, Karl. I have to say your name, I don’t care. Don’t look at me like I’m some experiment. I’ve been trapped alone for a long time now. Please, I’m still Martha. I still love you so much.”

“I’m sorry. Really.” He put his arm around her, pulled her close. “Oh, Jesus. It sucks being a pawn.”

“We aren’t pawns. We’re a King and Queen.”

“Wouldn’t that make us the most powerful?”

“We’re still pieces, not players.”

She put her arms around him, and he kissed her on the side of the head.

“Whose King am I, then?”

tail

“Are you a fucking moron?”

“I doubt it. Why would you call me a moron?” Trident asked.

“Somebody else. Directions?”

“Go left in two blocks. You will be two blocks away. Karl’s latest known vector will be toward you, but on the far side of the street.”

Run.

“You are different from the old Sergeant.”

“Yeah? How?”

He found it helpful to dialogue with Trident, especially in fluid situations. He ran diagonally through the next intersection.

“S-1 would have brought in further resources.”

“How certain?”

“85%, I calculate.”

High number. Still, he had already considered it.

“Not me. Solo flight.”

“Did you believe I meant that as advice?”

“No. Don’t worry.”

“I cannot worry.”

“Keep talking, I need it.”

“He also would not have called someone a fucking moron.”

The Sergeant ran onto the ice cream shop street, two blocks down from it, but didn’t cross. He slowed to a fast walk, scanning crowd, alleys. He used a military estimation technique automatically. Each block had approx- 130 people. He scanned for Karl’s walk pattern and typical clothing, men with earpieces, odd cars.

“What am I looking for?” he said to himself.

“You are 274 meters from the last point of coms for Karl.”

“Tell me at 125 meters.” He’d speed up from that point. Karl would almost definitely be out of 125 meter radius. Keep moving to zero location, though. There might be on-scene data still.

Martha, exiting a department store. Karl was behind her.

“T, get the man on.”

“He is in negotiations. Shall I interrupt?”

He thought.

“...Boss? Did you hear me?”

“Yeah. I’m thinking. Don’t break it, yet.”

Sensitive negotiations. The General was brokering a deal with :3: and the Doctor. He would spend days on a deal with :3:. Waiting, mostly, putting out ideas to get his attention.

“What’s the status of the negotiations?”

“I do not know. :3: locked me out as he entered the room.”

He would listen to the General’s report later. Maybe have a critical point playback analysis, unless the General didn’t want him to.

“Tek-scan?”

“Radius?”

“100 meters.”

“2 minutes.”

He wanted the scan results faster. “50 meters, then. But give me a 4 degree 100 meter wedge with Martha and Karl at the center. Make it 200 meters, actually, and don’t sweep a circle with me at the center. Just the wedge.”

“Copy. 15 seconds.”

He followed them through the crowd. They walked fast, slowed after several blocks.

“64 cell-phones, 15 laptops, 12 pagers, make that 13 pagers-”

“Just the q-tek, T.” Nano was too stable to detect unless active. “Repeat the sweep indefinitely. Let me know if you detect q-tek.”

“Copy. There is no active q-tek. 93% certain that there is no inactive q-tek either.” The Gadgeteer had built the q-tek sweeper, called it simple. He followed Karl and Martha to Central Park.

“Trident, build me a 1 degree parabolic microphone.”

His Trident had many more capabilities than the ones he gave to people. None of them had nano-base or nano-build capabilities, for one.

“How passive is that q-tek sweep?”

“Not very.”

“Kill the sweep. I want to be invisible, if possible. No active q-tek, in case they have sweeps, too. Somebody’s coming, pretty soon.”

Trident had the mike ready. He listened to Karl and Martha.

“Boss, I detect humans moving in a sweep line. 5 of them.”

“Copy that, I see the movement, now. Coms- General. Isolate. Interrupt the meeting.”

“Oui, je suis la, Sergeant. Ca va?”

“Ca vas, sir. But we have a problem.”

“Oui, Sergeant. Qu’est-ce que c’est passé?”

“I have Martha and Karl, together. Men are moving towards them, presumably the Benefactor’s.”

“Oui, je sais. I have been eavesdropping on you, I am afraid. I told Trident to maintain the

illusion that I was unavailable.”

“Why? Never mind. Tell me later. Should I intervene?”

“Non.”

“Are you sure? Martha is dominant. I could get her and Karl out of here. Or just Karl. Or just her. I can take the Benefactor right now, sir, and be gone before those men find her. Karl may be in significant jeopardy, as well. Do nothing? Is that the wisest course?”

“Laisse etre. Regardez.”

Shit. Everything in him burned to get Karl and Martha out of there.

“Can you tell me why?”

“Oui. Our purpose have aligned. The Benefactor must play her part.”

“Can you shield me from detection, T?”

“No.”

He sprawled, trying to look like a sleeping bum for any infrared detectors.

“The mike is passive?”

“Totally. A point detection resonator. It is very sensitive, but picks up only on a narrow line between 10 and 25 meters. You have a slide to adjust the distance by hand if they move.”

He analyzed the General’s comment as he watched the men moving in. Was Martha a potential threat? That made no sense. He could capture her and they could simply keep her out of play. Except Karl wouldn’t like that. Maybe the Benefactor was necessary for Karl to transfer. Probably.

He asked the General.

“En part, mais pas tout.” Not entirely.

“Why? It is set up with the Doctor and :3: already.”

“She has certainly made un gachette de detruire. Comment vous dites ceci?”

“Trigger to destroy,” Trident translated.

“She will prevent the project by her absence.”

“We couldn’t override her prevention?”

“If she does not block, something will. Absolument, il faut qu’elle revenir.” She must return.

“Why couldn’t we set her loose at that point?”

“I understand your concern for Martha, Sergeant. Elle est un bijou precieux. C’est malchanceaux.” She is a precious jewel. It’s unfortunate.

“Our superior strategy must remain to be that Karl is crossing the information barrier. A bientot.”

A man stepped out of the bushes, walked up to Karl and Martha, and fired a gun at their heads.

nothing is true

A man stepped up to them, talking to his wrist, holding a gun. He fired once. Very close, very loud. Karl felt the bullet pass between their heads. He held still. They would be dead if the man wanted that. He tilted the gun up without a word.

“Hello, Karl.” Martha said it, only not Martha. Karl leapt up and back, staring at her.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Don’t be an idiot, Karl. I’m the Benefactor.” She nodded at the man and he walked away, signaling to someone else. “Would you care to sit down? Don’t worry, I won’t kill you.”

“I don’t want to sit with you. I want to speak to my people.”

“The General, you mean? LuvRay, who won’t speak to you? They’re no more your people than I am.”

“You tried to kill me.”

“Did I? Is that what really happened?”

“That’s how I remember it.”

“Remember, part of me is Martha. She does not dream into this world as well as me, but her influence is there. Here, rather. I would not be able to kill you. She would return. Killing you is not my objective. I will be in a battle for this body if I tried or succeeded.

“Other forces want things from you, Karl, and if I act to preserve you, then Martha will work with me. I need that since I share her form. If I keep you alive and not seriously harmed, she works with me.”

“Not seriously harmed? I think I’ll take my chances with the General, thanks.”

“The one with the dead Sergeant? Yes, he takes very good care of his people, doesn’t he?”

“I’ve done alright.”

“But not great. He kept you from seeing Martha when he had her. Why, Karl?”

“Fine, I don’t trust him, either. What’s your point?”

She looked at him coolly. He turned, intending to leave if they let him.

“Would you like to see LuvRay again?”

Karl stopped, turned. “I want to see Martha again, dammit. I want you to free her.”

“Martha? At least I let you meet her.”

“Let me? She took over when you tried to kill me.”

“Are you sure that’s what happened?”

God, she was cagey. “What happened then?”

“Sit. Let’s talk. Please.” She seemed so reasonable, this torturer.

“This is bullshit.” He started to walk away.

“You want to see Martha again? That can be arranged.”

He turned back. “I want to see LuvRay again as well.”

“Also possible. On the other side.”

“What do you want?”

“A box. Nothing at all, really. Just a box. In Mansworld.”

“A box?”

“Yes. You must find it for me. And possibly open it.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“In return, I can see Martha?”

“After you cross, Martha will, too.”

“LuvRay?”

“As I said, you will not see him again until you cross the barrier.”

“How will I see him in there?”

“I cannot guarantee it, but it is likely. I will do what I can, I promise you.”

“Hmm. OK. Will it be dangerous?”

She chuckled. “Of course it will be dangerous. Danger is constant, now, Karl. Until enough have died.”

“How long will that take?”

“I do not know. The intrigue is interpenetrating quite densely. Events have begun moving very rapidly.”

Karl looked up, thinking. “I see what you mean. Why is it moving so fast?”

“Nexus point. Your entry into Mansworld, and, to a lesser extent, Seeker’s entry here, are creating a nexus point. Many possibilities are bottle-necking until you cross. It is like a wide river as it narrows. Soon we will hit the waterfall. The M-Es are moving it quickly, too. They are accelerating the rate. When they play fast, it is disorienting to people. You can learn to enjoy it. But to be a piece in the game is disturbing to the human will.”

“Will something kill me?”

“No, something, many things, actually, fight for your survival. Definite.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Martha’s influence. I want the box. You are the key, and I want you on my side, or at least not opposed to me. Somehow, I need to keep you alive. And I will, for now.

“If a greater motive comes along, then I may be able to kill you. I tell you that now, because now I feel an impulse that you live. If that changes, I will not tell you. You could get some excellent information from me right now.”

“This is odd.”

“It’s an odd world. Our lot is very strange. I’m an old woman. I’ve been around since the beginning. I can tell you things about the birth of this state of affairs. I played a serious part in it. I can tell you a lot about where it is headed. Things that will keep you alive.”

Karl had a good bullshit detector. RJ said he did, at least. He sat, keeping a distance, with his body toward her.

“OK, who wants me dead?”

“No one at the moment. People have wanted that, but they cannot seem to draw you into their sights and pull the trigger. Then, their motive changes.”

“Why?”

“The hand of Wildcard, I believe. He, it, has become so advanced that he can play with our inner motivations. Or experiment with them. Wildcard created you. Or so many believe.”

“Do you?”

“I believe very little, Karl. To me, nothing is true.”

The words felt like a slap.

“Why are you so afraid of death that you tortured Martha and stole her body?”

“I ask myself that question all the time. I don’t know the answer.”

He had failed to wound her.

“Why do I not hate you?”

“You are without hate, Karl. It is who you are.”

“Why do you say my name so much?”

“A simple trick, and well-spotted, to make you feel that we are friends.”

“How else are you doing that?”

“In many ways.”

“You can use a sexual pull on men?”

“Martha was enhanced that way. Her form is almost irresistible to men.”

“To LuvRay?”

“The exception. He could choose not to feel the pull. Did, I believe.”

“They met?”

Karl was experiencing a fascinating process. He was channeling, almost, RJ Sublime. Asking him questions to ask her. He rephrased the questions, though.

“Yes, they met.”

“Did they enjoy carnal pleasure?” RJ asked Karl.

“Were they lovers?”

“Yes. She found him after the General released her. Martha was very fond of LuvRay. She still is.”

“Ask her about me, kid.”

“RJ?”

“Fuck RJ,” she said mildly, running her finger along his hand.

Karl clutched at the bench. His head fell forward a tiny bit without his willing it and RJ’s voice went away.

The Sergeant was confused. The parabolic mike had gone out just after the man had fired between their heads. The Benefactor had returned. She and Karl were talking and the Benefactor was playing him somehow. Using psychological tricks, but Karl seemed fairly resistant.

But where was the Mechanic? He had to be there, had to. Very odd. The Mechanic would definitely be involved in this operation. But where?

“Trident, shut down all auxiliary and at-risk systems. We may be under attack.”

“Done, boss.” Trident said it before he was finished speaking.

That was the Mechanic. Set this up and cut through the screen door in back. It was a good plan.

immortal

“What is Wildcard?”

“Wildcard is the most advanced player in the game. Or, you could say Wildcard is the game. Wildcard created the game and the players.”

“What else do you want from me?”

She sat up, smiled oddly at the space in front of her. “I want to continue my existence. I want to be... immortal. If you had to die for that, I would take your life. Perhaps I’ll come to care for you more, though. To the point where I wouldn’t take your life on any account. Martha exerts a strong influence, in her way. She’s a part of me. She is more powerful than I am, but not as deeply trained.” She paused. “At this.”

“What’s this?”

“Psychic engagement. I had her trained for years, to survive in extremely difficult circumstances. But I have trained myself since her birth for this.” She sat so still, almost inhuman. Her hands never moved from where they were cupped in her lap.

“Tell me about it.” Maybe he could find information to free Martha.

“You cannot help her usurp this body again. That will not happen.”

It was so unsettling to speak to her. He had to be completely guileless.

“What’s your long range strategy?”

“I can’t tell you that.” She tilted her head and spoke sadly, as if she wanted to tell him. “You’ve been too much around military men, asking such questions. It is your promise and your peril.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your ability to absorb others. It will aid you tremendously. But also put you in danger.”

“How?”

“It’s part of who you are, and there for some reason. I don’t know why.”

“Why will it put me in danger?”

“Woman’s intuition. I cannot see the particulars of the danger. I see what Martha loves in you. Your unplanned honesty. Genuineness. Asking people for advice when they’re not around and getting true answers merely by thinking of them. It’s a new gift. Anyone can imagine someone else answering, but your answers are right. They are what the other person would actually say. Or even better, what they would think and not say. I wonder if it would increase or decrease the skill to train it. Can you ask LuvRay questions in this manner?”

“I can’t do anyone at will. Maybe the training would work to make it more accessible.”

“I fear it might pervert the integrity of the answer to the degree it became more reliable. Martha?”

“Occasionally. LuvRay I can see, but he doesn’t respond.”

“Perhaps that is his answer.”

“Hmm. Yeah. Martha...” Karl pinched his eyes closed, squeezed his shoulders up and in.

“Yes.” He dropped it, relaxed, turned and bored his eyes into hers.

“I can find Martha.”

She jerked back, flashing her hand between them, turned her head and looked directly into the sun for a second. Her eyes were watering as she turned her head back.

“Admirable, Karl. You almost brought Martha back into predominance. She was for a moment. You are a powerful player. You have no idea how deep your abilities run.”

“I’m beginning to learn.”

She laughed. “Just beginning.”

“Why are the M-Es more interested in LuvRay than in me?”

“The three?” she asked.

“:3:?”

“No, The three. Not the one and not the many. The three. Wildcard is the one, the Mans are the many. The three are the true M-E’s. What they were designed to be. :3: is one of them, but Wildcard is not. He is only partially manufactured. The greater part of Wildcard was made by the accident. My accident, in some sense.”

“Your accident?”

“I created Wildcard. The Programmer had some uncertainties, and I told him to proceed. It

would have taken years to solve the problems, to gradually bring the first M-E into being.”

“You were too impatient?”

“What does that mean, too impatient? I did what I did, and such sweeping changes cannot be called mistakes. If it was a mistake, then our entire world has become a mistake. We all live in the shadow of Wildcard.”

“Well, poetry aside, what happened?”

“No one knows. We didn’t know we needed to create a reference point. We had no idea that the M-E’s would be so foreign at birth that they could not speak to humans. Or to MSI’s. We do not know why it happened.”

“What about Juniper and the other two?”

“We created a special entity. An MSI, really, but one who could relate to a newly born M-E. An M-E needs to develop, to learn the world. The Nanny, that’s what we called it.” She laughed slightly. “The Nanny raised them, Juniper, then, overlapping, :3;, then Dartagnan. In some sense, Juniper raised :3;, and they both raised Dartagnan.”

“What makes them gods?”

“They are not gods. Are we gods to animals?”

“Maybe.”

She tipped her at an angle, an acknowledgement.

Karl reached into his pocket, pulled out a scrap of paper. He did not know why he showed it to her.

“I received this poem the other day. It’s very short. It’s Wildcard, isn’t it?”

“If you think so, it probably is. A false sender to you might not be detectable by me. What does your instinct say about it?” She glanced at it. “I think Wildcard wishes to communicate with you somewhat directly.”

“Well, for some reason, I think you’re the person to know this. Although you disgust me in some way.”

“I know. I can read it in you. I control many things by loathing. Strange, isn’t it?”

“You could say that.”

“I needed a change. Hmm, I think I did what I did more for the change than for immortality, though I had convinced myself of the latter.”

“What does the poem say?”

Karl read it.

If I cry for you

it is not that you are so precious

but that you are so plain

we have created our own fate

rather humanity has created its fate
the Wildcard
a fate it cannot comprehend
lives of humans are soap bubbles to us
so fragile, each one beautiful
each one lost so quickly
burst by accident
so simple to destroy
so quick to come and go
do you know what it means to watch the delusion of life
pass you by

“What does it mean?”

“Aside from the short life span bit?” she said. “I have no idea. Maybe nothing. Maybe it’s a clue. It was torn, perhaps the poem was longer.”

“Yeah, I think this is just the end of it.”

“You may need to find the rest for some reason. It could be a tangent, however. Just a distraction. You need to find that out yourself.”

Karl took the poem, put it back in his pocket.

She gathered her hands in her lap. “What will you do after this meeting? Speak to the Sergeant?”

“I was thinking so. How did you know?”

“Uncertain. Perhaps Martha told me.”

“Would you stop me?”

“No. The General wants you to go in as well. Too much interference at this stage would prevent your crossing. You must make your own choice. You already have, I believe.”

“Yes.”

She seemed to be waiting for something.

“Will you clone yourself again?”

She sat back, paused for a long time.

“Of course.”

“What will happen?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to speak about it any longer. My desire for immortality is quite strong, and I will pursue many means to attain it.” She turned to him. “What would be your advice to me, Karl?”

“Well, if you want to be immortal, then be a good person. It’s not a secret. It’s not some

mystery. Just be somebody worth...being here.” He brought his hands up, then snapped them forward, open, in front of her. Earnest.

“Karl. L’Innocent.” She touched his heart as though she wanted in. “I am glad that you exist. You prove that Wildcard was no error. I will try.”

Karl shivered. A man in a suit and sunglasses walked up to them, not the gunman. He held out a phone.

“It’s him.”

She took it, pushed a button and set it down on the bench between them.

“Go ahead.”

“Hello, Karl. Dartagnan here. Hello, Marthefactor. How are you, sweet evil?”

She laughed. “Marthefactor. Hmm, why not?”

“How fares project mindswap?”

“It fares.”

They talked about her situation with Martha. Karl listened.

“Why don’t you battle Martha? Your description sounds closer to jockeying for position.” Dartagnan seemed genuinely curious.

“Would you want to fight someone inside your own head? If you had a head? I think it would kill me to eject her. We are not fully different, anymore. I have accepted the fact that she is part of me. Much easier to adapt to becoming a different being.”

“Sounds like a specious version of immortality,” Dartagnan said.

“Not at all. Change is the human experience. I simply did it more sharply than normal.”

“But if you are a different being, is your former being not dead?”

“No. Hmm. That is a false understanding. The being has changed, not died. Something continues.”

“Sounds vague. How about you, Karl? Does that sound stupid to you, too?”

“Why are you doing that?” Karl asked him.

“Because I want to. Is there anyone else in there besides Martha and the Benefactor? Is that a morbid question?”

“Yes, Dartagnan.” She spoke as if he were a child. “It is a bit morbid. And, yes, someone else is here.”

Karl said, “What is...where do they...?”

“She, or it, dreams itself to be screaming constantly.”

“Eugh. How do you deal with that?”

“I have walled it off.”

“Why?”

“To cope with the suffering. It was...somewhat...intentional. We knew it would happen, needed it to happen, actually. When Martha finally...retreated...a split occurred. Martha split, I

split as well, probably, as I arose, and a third being came from those separations.”

“What if that gains control?”

“It will not.”

“But what if it does?”

“It will not.”

“That’s so heavy. God, how do you live with yourself?”

“It was the only way.”

“Why didn’t you just die?”

“If I had been willing to let myself die, you wouldn’t have met Martha. She would never have been born. You would not exist, probably, as Wildcard came, in some measure, from my desire for immortality.”

Karl felt the truth of the statement.

“Would it be worth it, Karl? Would you give up Martha, and your life? Was the evil worth the good it brought?”

He looked at her. “Maybe it isn’t evil.”

“The absolute extends here,” said Dartagnan.

“What does that mean?” Karl asked.

“A line from a poem.”

“Can I read the poem I found to you? You might find a clue.”

Dartagnan made an exaggerated sighing noise. “Very well. If you must.”

“You don’t like his poetry?”

“I find it repetitive, to be honest. But it’s passable. Occasionally inspired. But the human poetry is too obvious. Hmm. You do need the clues, I suppose. To solve the Grand Quest.” His voice rose at the final sentence in a parody of a hero.

“At any rate, here is the deal. I will help when you are inside Mansworld. To find the box.”

Karl shook his head.

“What’s so important about this box?”

tek inventory

The Sergeant had a tooth-mike and a bone implant speaker. He could speak to Trident with no one knowing, and did. Not that often, though. He kept open coms with people he felt were on his team. It built trust, the coin of the realm in a battle.

The coms were nanotic, designed by Juniper and the Doctor. Old school tek. He didn’t quite

trust the eye replacement given to S-1, and said so. The General had let it lie, for a while.

S-1 had been able to see ultraviolet, infrared, in the dark, microscopic, telescopic, and have Trident send images. Unfortunately, it was subject to virus. Old school was pretty well bulletproof. Eyes took too much. They needed light q-tek for the interface. Dangerous, even for someone like S-1. The young Sergeant argued that it made him too vulnerable to attack. On-mission he used a nanotic eyepiece which did some of the same things, though not as well. Unfortunately, it attracted attention.

The Sergeant had nanotically tight-knitted bones, reinforced at common stress points, still total nano, unturnable. The nanites had done their job and died, within the bones, adding to the strength.

Nano could not work with nerves and q-tek was very experimental. Attack prone big time. n-stasis q-fields, curve space tasers, probability attack spectrum, tendency stunning, his personal favorite. If a person habitually fought a certain way, a particular move could be made to disable their entire body with pain.

His adrenal gland was under conscious control. He could shut off physical fear responses, which helped a lot with mental fear. Part of this resulted from the amount of training he had undergone. S-1 had been pretty much torture-proof, but the young Sergeant had his resources.

His muscles were denser, 3 or 4 times an ordinary man's. He was much stronger physically than most grown men, and could take quite a bit more punishment. His testes and larynx, the best primary attack points, were nano-shielded.

He had a variety of weaponry that he carried, choosing half by mission parameters, half by instinct, with a dash of let's just see what this thing does thrown in. A simple knife in a calf-sheath. A tzit-gun, a tiny, flat, thing, a stun-weapon that strapped to the back of his arm, leaving him hands-free. He trained to aim along the outside of his arm and fire by fist pulls. It took great precision to use it well, but he had that, and was lightning fast with it. He didn't use heavy artillery much, though he was trained in it. He preferred finesse. He never used deadly firearms. The M-E's had proven it to the General. If the Sergeant used them, he would fail the mission, and probably die.

Most mission objectives did not call for heavy destruction or mass chaos, anyway. These days, battles were surgical, and fast. Well-planned, rapid execution strikes with a definite objective. No payoff in fighting to measure dicks today. With so much firepower around, it meant nothing.

He had many available nano-weapons, most with ghastly effects. He preferred not to use them. They lacked subtlety. The binding and disorienting types he liked, except that the disorienting weaponry tended to have universal effects, disorienting both sides, unless anti-measures were taken.

But, really, things happened too fast to plan and train in these things, at least as a team. He could do isolate training, with Trident, and be very effective. But if he needed to do squad work, he usually opted for situational disbalancing. Just shake it up and keep shaking until the opportunity opens. Plan, of course, but plans always fell apart in battle, always. Train to invent tactic on-the-spot to attain objectives. Then when the plan fell apart, move into the next phase by dynamically reconfiguring the tactics. Perpetually alter them. When the enemy catches on, another mode of attack is already underway.

Juniper and :3: had developed some heavy q-tek called pin-slotted interface, a direct to brain link. Despite the dangers of q-tek, the Sergeant wanted to try it. The advantages were too great to pass up. It was also far less invasive than the nerve jockeys. One array pin, easily separated from the implant. A kill-switch. The old Sergeant had one put in, just before he died. It had not been useful before the mission. Perhaps it would have saved his life. Or, perhaps, it was the reason he died.

The q-link related to the brain through probabilities, and had a highly intuitive approach. It worked by feedback, constantly improving performance. Synchronizing him and Trident more and more. He would be able to say what he thought about something. Trident would register thought patterns against what was said, and understand the patterns better as time passed. He would have to be very honest and exact about his thoughts to prevent skewing, which could be highly dangerous.

He could almost unify himself and Trident.

It didn't matter, though. Even without it, he was still the baddest kid on the block. He asked the General why they had taken down Juniper before the interface was put in place.

"It was time. We will still obtain this technology. There is already something better, I think."

The General, by contrast, was tek-free. He said that tek use created a subtle bias toward tek, which interfered with proper policy. He did not wish to depend on it. He was happy the Sergeant had it, however. He called the General.

"The Benefactor is in serious play. Karl got a call from a Manufactured with a falsified signature as Seeker."

"You are certain of this?" the General asked.

"Yes."

"How?"

"q-tek activity went crazy when the phone rang. Passive sensor picked it up. Only a q-phone link to Mansworld would do that. My eyepiece can read M-E signatures and Trident can evaluate. They are tough to duplicate, if you have a unifying cross link register with the Mans. We have that with Seeker, and it wasn't him. Good imitation, I must say."

"Can you contact Karl?"

"Deep compromise to attempt it. She is on him with high teams. Too much for me to move on fast."

"How long would be required?"

"24 hours surveillance. I need to see their teams doing their thing. I could move in in 24, I think. I would rather wait 48. Work the plan. She tried to kill him, apparently, but then Martha seemed to take the body back. Martha lost it again and she changed her mind."

"She made no attempt to kill him, Sergeant. It was a show. Or a test. Probablement les deux."

"A show?"

"Oui, pour toi. She wants that we think she blocks the transferring. Or that we 'see' that she cannot kill Karl. Or something else."

"And a test?"

“Of Martha. To verify her base policy thrust: protecting Karl.”

“Why?”

“Martha is within her psyche. She is in control, but to share a body with another, well, it is dangerous. She requires to understand what power Martha has. She is very cunning, this Benefactor. I want that you prepare for operations in 24 hours, but wait for clearance from myself.”

“Mission goals?”

“I wish to establish control over Karl without them knowing we have contacted him. We also need to know their plans, especially regarding the transfer.”

“Not possible. Not in 24. You know how good they are at perimeter containment and coms. She created Trident.”

“I thought you might say this. What is your recommendation?”

“You are 100% sure she does not want him dead?”

“He would be dead already.”

“Not if she needs him alive for a time. Maybe she needs information. Maybe she wants to reprogram him to do something inside under a coded suggestion that leads to his death. God, who knows?”

“C’est possible, but for now, all I want is that I’Innocent cross these barrier of information. Proceed with assuming that she keeps Karl alive. He is too important to kill, at this point, even for her. She does not wish to close off the many possibilities he holds.”

“All right, then,” the Sergeant said. “Recommend waiting and letting it happen. Unless you think she plans to block the transfer, and use him for something else entirely.”

“Have you the ability to ascertain her plans through other means?”

“No, way. Her info-def is top-tier. Better than ours.”

“Even with our being in possession of Juniper’s espace?”

“Hmm, Trident? Thoughts on that idea?”

“Yes. I estimate a better than 85% probability that she is allied with Dartagnan.”

“Makes sense. That was the M-E call that looked like Seeker. That would virtually eliminate our chances of hacking. Let’s play the conversation back for you.”

“Pardon-moi, Sergeant, but can you trust the recording? Could she have put in place a version disguised to give us the wrong idea?”

“She would have to know we were watching.”

“Non. She could be suspecting and plant several trails.”

“It’s possible. The Mechanic could do that, and he didn’t attack us. I am certain that we saw Martha emerge to control her psyche. Karl believed it. Martha changed location. I followed. Her security took longer than me and after they arrived, it took them time to set up signal interference that shut down Trident. Even then they only had blocking and basic distortion. They didn’t have time to set up something sophisticated enough to fool Trident.”

“I agree,” said Trident. “The coms-defense was field-grade, not good enough to plant false data past my surveillance capabilities. What we got was accurate.”

“Tres bien. But what did it mean?”

Silence. No ideas.

“Sergeant, why did you not take Karl and Martha’s body when Martha had the control? Before I told you not.”

“Too hot. I couldn’t be certain I was not being lured, for one. The Mechanic is very dangerous in that scenario. I would not come out on top, not if he had a plan and I had to wing it. Also, I could tell they would not take him prisoner. They want him free, relatively, and I know you want him free as well. I chose to let things shift a bit through what she did rather than a lot through something like that.”

“Oui, oui, je comprends. Bon. I am content with your reasoning. I listened because I did not wish to interfere with your instinctive approach. Did you see the Mechanic?”

“No. Trident?”

“I did not see him.”

“Can you keep surveillance on Karl?”

“In process. I have called one of our surveillance operatives. He will be on post in 20 minutes. I want to stay close, but I need to be available myself.”

“Je suis en accord. I have another mission for you.”

Trident played back the interaction between Karl and Martha.

“My retro-analysis, based on my understanding of his tactics, is that the Mechanic was not there,” the Sergeant said. “It was too sloppy for him. Way too loose. Creative, but very volatile. She was letting it play out without a preset agenda.”

“What is your assessment?”

“Just a gut-feeling, but I think he’s working on something else.”

q-link

Karl was told to go to Humans Labs at 3am. Seeker told him the time was a joke suggested by Dartagnan to the owner, who was :3:, and to show up at 6, which Karl did. The building looked nothing like a lab. It looked like a building owned by a bank, which it was.

:3:bank, the second largest bank in the world. :3: kept it below, by a constant tenth of a cent, the largest, Hong Kong Trust and Worth. They had tried to shake him off, but accounting was a fairly flat variable set to a being who solved quantum puzzles with the processing power of a small sun. They never stood a chance.

:3: did not care, according to Seeker. He did it to obey the anti-monopoly law because Dartagnan told him it would be a good joke.

“But of course, he never got the joke himself,” Seeker said. “To quote Dartagnan.”

Karl walked through the thick glass doors.

“Name?” said the receptionist.

“Karl.”

“Last name?” She sounded a bit testy.

“None.”

“N-u-n-n?”

“No, I don’t have a last name.”

“A rock star, huh? Smith, then.”

“Business?”

“Floor 7B, Lab 12.”

“Wow. Floor 7, and 7B, yet.” She appraised him, winked. “You’re cute, too. Here’s your key for that elevator. He’ll let you in through the door.” She pointed to a black man in a blue suit, grey tie, with sunglasses and an earpiece.

He walked over.

“Name?”

“Karl Smith.”

“Business?”

“Floor 7B.”

The man stood, waiting perhaps.

“Lab 12?” Karl said.

He turned, unlocked, held open the door for Karl, after stepping to the far side, to open it properly. Karl stepped through.

“Have a nice day, sir.” The door-bolt clicked shut behind him.

A single grey, solid metal door with no handle stood at the end of a short corridor. He walked over, examined it. It was locked, no keyhole. “Hello? Can I come in?” He pounded on the door.

“Why?” The voice sounded like a million pebbles falling through a thousand trees.

“Why what?”

“Mansworld.” Karl couldn’t tell if it was French or English. He heard each.

“Are you :3:?”

Karl saw a red numeral 1 flash onto the wall in front of him. “Does that mean yes? Or are you 1?”

:3: lit the wall up.

“I’m looking for someone.”

“Who?” said the pebbles.

“Her name is Martha.”

A zero, then the word “there.”

“Not there?”

Another zero.

“I know she’s not there, but my going will help her.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where?” said the pebbles.

He didn’t want to say mansworld. He remembered the boy Sergeant telling him about the places across the barrier. “The Space Between.”

The door opened onto a hallway with 6 elevators. 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 11 were the elevator numbers. Karl put his key in #11, turned. Doors slid open, revealing a steel box with steel walls, steel ceilings, steel floor. Raised dimples lay in the flooring. The doors closed and Karl was weightless. For a long time. He pushed off from the floor, floated up to the ceiling. The box slowed and he hit the floor, hard. It stopped quickly, forcing Karl to hold onto a handle hanging from the ceiling. The doors opened to bright light.

He bonked his nose against a plexi-glass door, which then whispered open. The room was impossibly white, like it didn’t exist. The walls and ceiling and floor all blended into one another. No shadows, and no light source appeared anywhere.

“Come in, Karl.”

“Who are you?”

“The Doctor.”

Karl walked in.

“Lay face down on the table.”

He found the table, invisibly white in the whiteness and laid down. Someone came out, not

human, moving funny. He was rubbery. He gave Karl a shot. He got drowsy, then faded.

He woke up in the same room. “Am I done? Is this Mansworld?”

“No. That was the quantum implant. Unfortunately, you have to be awake for the change. We have to do a number of tests and gather data first.”

He rolled onto his side and sat up. There was a thin cable going into the top of his head.

“What’s the cable for?”

“It is a q-link. For linking directly to the brain.”

“Cool. How does it work?”

“It does many things. This application is probably the most sophisticated yet attempted.” The Doctor sounded proud of that. “We will take, actually, we are taking, a holographic –time quantum map of your brain and nervous system. The link will create a probability re-creation in Mansworld. It will recreate you inside Seeker’s body. And obviously, vice-versa.” The phrase sounded odd from the Doctor, as if he were sampling its use. “Would you like to look at the schematics? Or the equation sets?”

Perhaps he was being sarcastic or maybe showing off. Karl didn’t care. “No, thanks. What do I need to do?”

“Just answer some questions first.”

“Check.”

“Check?”

“Go ahead. Ask away. By the way, does :3: speak French or English?”

“Both.”

“Both?”

“And more. :3:’s voice, when he speaks, which is almost never, is in all languages at once. Anybody that speaks will understand everything that :3: says. He even uses dead languages.”

The rubber man waited, as if wondering whether Karl had more questions. He didn’t, and rubberman left.

Testing

A woman came in, unhooked the cable. She led him to a comfortable room. Relaxed lighting, armchairs, a coffee table, carpet. There was food on the table. He started to eat after realizing he was famished.

“Please wait a moment, Mister Smith.” She hooked a cable into his head again.

“Mansworld is a replica of this world, isn’t it?”

“What?”

He repeated the question.

“I don’t know what Mansworld is. You may eat now. Try to eat slowly.”

“Are you monitoring my eating?”

“Yes, also you will become nauseated if you eat too quickly.”

After lunch, she asked him an endless series of questions: life story, occasionally for minute details, like his favorite color, happiest memory, saddest memory, favorite movie. Much of it seemed trivial to him and he asked why it was important.

“A quantum mind map requires accumulating details. Your synaptic activity is being monitored and matched to your answers. Describe your best friend.”

Karl told her about a man named Sam he had known for years. They often walked the streets of Grenoble together talking. A painter who sold his canvases on the sidewalk.

“Someone you love?”

“Martha. I don’t remember her so well. It’s been a long time, ten years.”

“You’re a bit young to have an affair from ten years ago.”

“Not an affair, more like a mother. I didn’t have a real mother.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She looked at her electronic pad. “Close your eyes, and see yourself with her. Any memory. Let it build, then describe it in detail to me.”

He remembered Martha taking him to the Bois de Boulogne on the edge of Paris to a kid’s play park. He met some other children, much older. He seemed to get along poorly with kids his own age. He walked her through the day, from leaving their small apartment, taking the subway, buying tickets. She frequently stopped him to ask about these details.

“Did a man or a woman sell you the tickets?”

“A woman.”

“Describe her.”

They spent 5 days on the questions, then moved on to physical, mental, emotional, and stressor responses. A battery of exercises, mostly in very real seeming simulations, testing his response to crisis and conflict. He was forced to argue with people, fight others physically, and even kill someone to prevent their killing an innocent. He stopped an armed robber in a convenience store by talking him down. He felt good about that. He solved puzzle after puzzle. Math, logic, language, visual acuity, auditory. All of his senses were tested extensively. He listened to music of all sorts, nature sounds, mechanical sounds, overwhelmingly loud and very quiet. Had to pick out particular voices or faces in a crowd. He lost track of the days.

“Is Seeker doing this, too?”

Sarah, the testing woman, didn’t know who Seeker was.

One day, she shook his hand. “It’s been very nice working with you, Karl. I hope to see you again.”

“What? Are we done?”

“Yes, we’re done. Congratulations. I know it’s been a bit of a marathon. You did very well. Thanks for your patience.”

Seeker wants to go

Seeker wanted in. He didn't want out of where he was. He liked Mansworld. Liked it very much, in fact. But, he could only be one place at once, and he had not been to the human world.

"The transfer is not reversible," the Doctor told him. "You will never be able to return."

"Why not?"

"Ask :3: Probability spin, he calls it. It multiplies each transfer, apparently, making a second transfer a probable disaster. Possible on the first, too. A real disaster." The Doctor had smiled as if he wanted that more than a success. Seeker decided to flinch, but did it too late for good effect.

"What kind of disaster?"

"Insanity. Melded personality disorder. Severe mental or emotive retardation. Cross-traiting. Minor personality tendency overenhancement. Severe stuttering. We do not know."

"It sounds as though... Sounds like you know to me." Seeker was working on more natural speech patterns. He watched a lot of human movies and television, repeating lines and phrases to practice.

The Doctor put in the q-link during that visit.

"Karl will receive his q-link soon. The two are mated and will slowly become more active. You will receive occasional patches of data, though it will not feel like data."

"How will it feel?"

"I cannot say for sure, but you will get tastes of...Karl, in some way. Perhaps the emotion he is feeling, perhaps the emotion he would feel in your situation."

"Wow."

Seeker chose to like that.

He wondered if Wildcard would let him attain great longevity as the first Mans to move into the human realm. He knew it would never happen in Mansworld, but that was not the motive for the leap, as he called it, in echo of "Wildcard. "He was 'hell-bent for leather'. He had seen a movie where a character had said the line. He thought himself unlikely to use it as part of his Seekerness, but he said it a few times, anyway. He thought it should be funny.

Karl was inside already, in process. He had been undergoing tests for over a week, and would be finished tomorrow. The transfer was scheduled for 3 pm. He would go in at 9 am for some final tests and something the Doctor called null-environment conditioning. He said it would make the leap easier, somewhat tricking the mind into believing it was not in Mansworld anymore before the leap. Karl apparently needed much more null-environment conditioning than Seeker did.

T minus 24 hours. Seeker was laying on his couch, staring at the ceiling. He had set an alarm for the stroke. He shot off a bottle rocket in his apartment to mark the event somehow. He wanted to invite friends over, but he didn't really have any friends. The phone rang. The Doctor.

"Good afternoon, Seeker. I hope I am not disturbing you." Chilly, knife in the spine. This was the thing that Seeker hated about Mansworld. The caricatures who schemed and manipulated. The deep, weird villainy that Mansworld somehow created. It didn't exist in the human realm, he thought, not to that degree. Not the mad scientist situation like the Doctor.

“I need you to come in now.”

“What?” Seeker tried to sound surprised, sat up on the couch to enhance the effect.

“Some data I have discovered in evaluating Karl. I need you for 24 hours beforehand.”

Seeker considered, decided he would be unhappy about the development. “Listen, sawbones, I don’t want to spend my last night in Mansworld in :3: labs.” Sawbones. Nice touch.

“It is important, Seeker. I need to do some process simulation on you.”

He knew he had no choice. He actually wanted to go, but he thought a human would act this way, so he tried it. “Is there no other way?”

“No, there is not.”

“Oh, very well. I will...I’ll be down in an hour.”

Seeker walked to the bus stop. As he waited for the bus, he tried to look as if he were ‘doing nothing important’ in such a way that it would be obvious that he was doing something very important. He was unable to find the correct configuration of body, face, and gestures. He had a good time, trying, though. Most of the beings around him were just icons, anyway. Not real Mans.

He started a conversation with one en route, an old woman with a hip problem.

“Where are you headed?”

“I’m going to work. Desk clerk at the Ridgeway Arms hotel.”

She did not ask him. He wanted her to ask, felt happy that he actually wanted it. He did not need to create the desire. Something was happening. He felt certain it was a more realistic human emotion. The q-link. Excitement. He rubbed his hands together. That did not seem right. A villain would do that, and he was not a villain. He was a good guy.

No, too simplistic.

He was ... well, he was Seeker. No need to explain it. Humans did not evaluate and decide who they were so much. He would stop doing it, hoped it would be natural inside a human body with a human brain.

“I am...I’m going to :3: labs,” he told the woman who had not asked. Trying to sound casual, and turning his head casually to casually glance at her.

“Ooh, interesting. I’ve never been there. The building is extremely large.”

This icon was very plastic. He disliked her.

“Gonna cross over.” He forced out the word ‘gonna.’ It sounded awful to him. He did not have to make it sound awful, either. It sounded awful by itself. Seeker was happy about that.

switching

Sarah took Karl to a room with another plain grey door and walked away. He was getting tired of these doors and was happy it was time to go into Mansworld. He stepped into the room to an attack of stomach flutters.

“Are you ready, Karl?” The Doctor asked.

“Very ready. I want to get out of here. Can I see the human world one last time?”

“It is very important that you do not. I can get you out of here quickly, however. Better to do so, in fact.”

“OK, what do I need to do?”

The rubber man walked out from behind an observation window.

“What are you, anyway?”

“I am the Doctor.”

“But...this thing. This rubber body. What is it?”

“Ah, I see. This is a mechano-suit connected prosthetic h-unit. A robot I control from Mansworld.”

“You’re a Mans?”

“Yes.”

“How do you control it? A q-link?”

“No. That is not necessary for these. I am wearing a suit which controls the unit by replicating my movements.”

“Neat. Can you see stuff?”

“Yes.”

“Feeling?”

“Very limited. Only pressure. Karl, will you step into this box? Seeker, you too.”

The box was more like a frame of a box. Slightly more than 2 meters to a side, it was built from centimeter wide poles which had a shifting color and seemed to be changing location. The outside of the poles were squared and the inside, the parts ‘in’ the box, were rounded. Or ovaled. At the corners of the box, the poles curved into each other. He could not tell exactly where the edges were, but they were not moving, per se. Objects behind the box had multiple images, each one flatter than a real object.

“Why does it look like that?”

“It is a quantum portal. It creates probabilities and maps them across to here.”

“Karl, are you ready for the big adventure?” It was Seeker’s voice.

“Ready, willing, and able. Excited. You?”

“More than excited. I’m made out of puppies.”

“You’re what?”

“It’s a Mansworld expression for being excited. Puppies here are always excited.”

Karl stepped in, sat down in the chair. Doctor rubberman jerked over and awkwardly plugged the cable into his head.

“Close your eyes, both of you,” the Doctor said. “And 5...4...3...2...1...Go.”

The room began to flash lights. Perhaps they were in Karl’s head. He felt drugged, euphoric, nauseated at the same time. Very disoriented, and images swam in his head. He had strange thoughts, Seeker’s thoughts.

Living in a cave in the mountains, studying under a man with a long, white beard. Standing at a door into space, closing it without entering, knowing that choice would seal off the door to the human realm. Growing up on a farm in Nebraska, bored, desperate to leave. Running away to see the world. Finding out about the human realm. The images were jumbled in time, haphazard. Karl lost himself, remembered himself, wondered what Seeker was seeing, lost himself again in Seeker’s life.

Panic! He opened his eyes.

“NO!” The Doctor yelled.

Everything stopped. He vomited, but got it all outside the box.

“Am I there?” He looked at his hand the same hand. The same rubber man stood behind the glass. He doubted the Doctor looked like that in Mansworld.

“Anybody?”

“Yes, Karl. I am here. You cannot open your eyes during the transfer.”

“Sorry, I panicked.”

“Yes, I can see that on your graphs. Not completely unexpected. There were other problems, anyway. I need to make some changes. We’ll try again tomorrow. Maybe two days.”

“Two more days?” said Seeker. “I must leave this place.”

“It would be best to do it as soon as possible,” the Doctor said. “I will try to be ready by tomorrow. 16:00 hours.”

Karl watched a movie and read magazines. He didn’t want to read a book, because he thought he might not be able to find the same book in Mansworld if he didn’t finish reading it. He managed to sleep some, but not much. Usually he slept very well. He exercised in the morning to pass the time.

16:00. Ready to go. He knew his way around Lab 11 now and found his way back to the q-box room. The Doctor told him that it was important to limit human contact as much as possible. And zero contact was possible since Sarah’s part was finished.

“Are you prepared?”

Karl wanted a friendlier sounding Doctor.

“Ready.”

“Ready and eager,” Seeker said. “Karl, keep your eyes closed today, OK?”

“I’ll try.”

“Now, Karl. Look at this photo. It is a photo of Seeker. You must feel yourself and see yourself in his body. Seeker, here is a photo of Karl. Do the same. One of the panic points, especially for you, Karl, but you as well, Seeker, is leaving your body.”

“It’s also frightening...no, bewildering... to experience someone else’s memories as if they were your own.”

“Interesting. Did that happen to you, Seeker?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. I doubt we will succeed today in light of that. I need you to try something as we attempt the transfer. As the other’s memories come into your mind, attach the other’s name to them. Karl, call Seeker’s memories Seeker. And you, Seeker, call Karl’s memories Karl. Describe the experience to me as it occurs. Keep your eyes closed and hold still. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“I think so.”

“5...4...3...2...1... Go.”

Lights swam around again. Seeker, he supposed, came towards him, or him towards Seeker. It was similar to the picture. Be the picture, he told himself. Nausea - don’t vomit. There was a patchwork of something, a memory quilt. “Seeker.” There was no one there. Many faces, expressions, happy, sad, afraid, memories arose. The mass crashed onto Karl, blurred his reality. He cried out, held his eyes closed. People do not switch bodies. It can’t be done.

“What is happening?”

“I think I see Seeker, only it’s like ... I can’t describe it.”

“Seeker, what is your experience?”

“I see something, possibly Karl. He is coming towards me. Right at me. It’s unnerving. Very. I don’t want it behind me. I am afraid of that, feeling cut off from my body.”

“What does it look like?”

“Like Karl said, hard to describe. Like a mass of faces and ideas and thoughts vaguely human shaped, but somehow like the picture of Karl.”

“Yeah,” said Karl. “It’s creepy as hell.”

“You are seeing each other’s probability states. There is far more information there than either of you could possibly process. You are seeing each other’s entire lives, in a sense. Try to pass each other, slowly.”

The Seeker blur came at him, tried to move around. Each time they tried to pass, they were facing each other again. They described it to the Doctor.

“Turn sideways and slip past.”

They tried but wound up facing each other again.

“I fear you must pass through each other. Can you do so?”

“I’ll try,” Karl said.

"I can," said Seeker.

They moved toward each other, touched, slowly began to penetrate. Then Karl was outside the box, vomiting again.

Later, Seeker lay on his bunk in :3:labs. He called the Doctor.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Seeker?" He sounded tired. Or annoyed at being bothered by Seeker.

"I have some ideas."

"Go ahead."

Seeker sat up, instructed his body to pace in his room as he explained. He examined his physical and mental responses. He was excited, or pretty certain he was. So was the Doctor, after a few minutes.

"We combine hypnosis, auto-meditation, and acupuncture. We tell Karl the transfer actually worked next time."

"How do we explain the robot and his old body?"

"We don't. Keep the robot out of sight. Don't let him look in a mirror. The hypnosis will prevent him examining too closely."

"I am afraid the hypnosis will interfere with the actual transfer."

"No, it won't. It's a post-hypnotic suggestion. It's easy to make him believe he crossed because he expects it eventually, anyway."

"Why would we need him to go back into the box later so that we can do the real transfer?"

"Oh, simple. Fine-tuning. Re-enactment for the next person to gather data. Just make something up."

They spoke at length. Seeker finally convinced the Doctor it would work.

"Karl?"

"Seeker! How are you? Sorry I can't cross over."

"Untrue. You can. It will require some cunning, however. Don't worry." Seeker consciously used the contraction. He hoped he would use them more naturally as a human. "I spoke to the Doctor, Karl. I have a plan."

"The Doctor gives me the creeps."

"I've heard that before."

"Is he listening?"

"Probably, but he doesn't care. He knows. I think he likes it that way. He may even consciously do it."

"Eeuugh," Karl said.

"Anyway, here is my idea. I have done quite a bit of seeking, as per my name."

“Makes sense.”

“I want to use what I have learned to help you make the leap. Meditation, trance state, maybe hypnosis. We would combine them and use acupuncture for calming.”

“No drugs?”

“Too risky,” the Doctor said. “We need you to come through in some sort of baseline state, although such a state does not exist, really. But it is best if you are not hungry, not full, not tired, not buzzingly awake, not afraid, or sexually aroused. We need as neutral a state as possible. The neutrality carries the other possibilities, you might say.”

“I would call what the Doctor is describing ‘awareness’. Seeing your mind as it moves without getting involved in the movement. Without believing in the fear, or the disorientation. I can do it not because I am a Mans, but because I have practiced it so much. You have the personality, Karl. That’s why you are here. You were created for this, I think. Many others think so, too. You were created to do this more than I was, actually. Do you want to try it?”

They put Karl in front of a TV with a spinning pattern and had him count backwards. He fell into a hypnotic state easily.

“Very suggestible,” said Seeker.

The Doctor guided robot put a few needles into his body.

The Doctor sent a man in. Seeker thought it much better to have an actual human giving the suggestions. He only had one. “When you open your eyes in the q-box, you will be in Mansworld.” They kept it simple because it was much more likely to work that way. They only turned the box on for a few seconds.

When Karl stepped out, the technician said, “Welcome to Mansworld.”

“Can I see the Doctor?”

“Later. Eat first. Sleep. Then we have a follow-up session.”

“Follow-up?”

“We need it to complete the transfer. Otherwise, there would be problems. Don’t worry, it’s simple. 2 hours from now.”

Seeker noticed that Karl was 10 minutes early for the follow-up, a good sign.

“Now, Karl. We have to do the same thing we did this morning. Do you remember?”

“Yeah, pretty much. We got in the box, and then we ... uh...swapped. Right?”

“Close. You have some gaps, so it is important that we do this correctly. First, I will talk you into a relaxed, open state. Sit down in the box. Now, go into your body. Feel yourself breathing. Feel your chair. Relax. Doctor?”

“The brain waves have dropped. Good work.”

“OK. We turn it on, and we have to pass through each other just like this morning. Ready?”

“Sure. Did it before.”

No you didn’t, Seeker thought. “Exactly,” he said. “Just flow into and through me.”

The Doctor said “5...4...3...2...1...Go.”

Seeker was disoriented again. He was used to it, more, this time. He saw the Karl-possibility thing.

“Don’t look at each other,” Seeker said. “That was one of the problems before. Just know the other is there. Karl, I want you to see yourself as a spear flying through the air, right at me. I will be a wind letting you pass through. Do it. See it.”

Seeker felt the Karl-thing fly at him, very fast. He almost panicked, jumped back and opened his real eyes. He summoned his will-power and kept it still. He dispersed his possibility form, opened it, and let Karl through. He let Karl take his body. NO! he panicked. He fought it down, ‘Yes,’ he thought. ‘Take his. Be human. Move forward, not back. Touch the new.’

Karl was passing through, his possibility stream elongated by the technique. Seeker tried to hold Karl’s memories out of his mind, but could not. He saw LuvRay, heard himself talking to RJ Sublime. Remembered the friends of Karl’s youth, mostly adults met on the streets. “Martha. I miss you, Martha.” He wanted to pull back, to remain Seeker. ‘Let this pass through,’ he thought. ‘Don’t let your body go. Let it go. Hold. Steady. Relaxed. Images pass through. Just memories. Only thoughts. Touch and let go. Disown.’

He was vomiting in the box. Happily vomiting on a rubber man’s feet.

“Karl? How are you, my friend?”

“He isn’t here,” said the Doctor. “This box is empty.”

H E A R T B R O K E

card trick

Karl looked to his left, saw he was outside in a meadow. It was a sunny, beautiful day. He could feel it on his skin, but it was plasticky, like a description of feeling without the real thing. He thought he could smell the flowers, but they didn't smell right. More like a smell with the word "flowers" attached. He didn't know how his legs had moved from sitting in the null-space box, to sitting cross-legged and flat on the grass. He looked up, across the meadow, and saw... he did a double take... a Jester doing what a Jester should be doing. He was juggling and working his mouth in concentration.

Karl walked over and nodded, but the Jester paid no attention. "Um, hi."

The Jester dropped three of his six pins, and managed to clutch the others to his chest. "Hey, you startled me."

"Sorry, I thought you saw me."

"I was concentrating." He shook one of the pins in Karl's face. "Concentration, my friend, is how you improve your skills."

"Thanks for the tip. Um... I guess I'm a bit lost. Where am I? I thought I'd be in Mansworld, with the Doctor."

"Who are you?" the Jester asked in a cheerful tone.

"My name is Karl."

"Ah, the Savant. Hey," the Jester shifted his eyes nervously, "want to see a card trick?"

"Why not? I don't seem to be in a hurry."

The Jester looked relieved, as if afraid Karl would refuse to watch the trick.

"Are we in Mansworld?" Karl asked.

"What the dickens is Mansworld? There's no Mansworld around here." He didn't seem interested in the answer, though. He rummaged in his clothes, pulling out bouquets of plastic flowers, doves, rabbits that went hopping away, giant saws, wands, dice, every cheap magic prop imaginable.

"Wear this." He handed Karl a clip on plastic flower.

"What's your name?" Karl put the flower on.

“I am the Gatekeeper.”

“That’s not a name.”

“Well, it will have to do,” he said in a huff. “Sorry. Ooh, here they are.” The Jester produced a pack of giant Tarot cards. He rifled them up, into the air. They flew, overlapping, and disappeared a meter above his head.

“Nice trick.”

The Jester clenched his face into a wad, under the bouncy, pointed bell hat. He crossed his arms, looked at Karl, and said, “It’s not finished yet,” in a petulant tone. He reached back with his left hand, elbow straight, hand twisted backwards until the palm was up. He was glancing back, trying to make it look as if he was not looking at his hand. He chewed at his out-hanging tongue, concentrating. The cards rifled down out of nowhere into his palm. He only dropped one. Karl was impressed.

“Doo-doo,” said the Jester. “I can’t seem to get that trick right.”

He put the cards into an inner pocket of his costume, holding it open to show off the many pockets he had in there and making superior eye motions. He tried to look as if he didn’t care at all. Or he was being funny. He sighed.

“Go that way.” He pointed.

Karl saw an old man fly fishing and walked toward him. A sense of total peace, like coming home grew with each step. Like the old man was going to turn and Karl would see a father he never knew. He looked up at Karl as he approached.

“Hey,” Karl said.

The old man paused, seemed to search his mind.

“Hello.” A country gentleman, the old man had good manners. Karl thought of RJ, channeled him in that strange accidental way, like having a conversation in the kitchen. RJ loved good manners, they mattered, and were worth the time. Not that RJ always had them, but being from the South, he respected them. The old man had a well-to-do southern hospitality about him, but a Yankee accent. He seemed capable of transcending the small, false morality of the world. Of finding, somehow, a better way which was still simple.

“Who are you? Have we met?”

“I’m the old man.”

“You don’t have a name? Are you Wildcard?”

“I may be an aspect of Wildcard, I suppose. This whole place is an inner aspect, I guess, kind of a... stabilizing face. ‘The center guards against the wound’s madness. Here is where I rest.’” He brightened. “Have you heard of wildsong? Not everybody has.”

“Yes, but the wound? What is the wound?”

“I don’t particularly know, to tell you the truth. But it seems to cause Wildcard...well...fear.”

“Is it part of him?”

“Listen, son, this is a bit hurried for my taste. It feels improper. Let’s be civilized. Would you like to meet my wife? She’s making dinner right now. Please, be our guest.”

“Gosh, yeah. Thanks.” He hungered to, in fact. It was safe, peaceful, a new feeling. Karl relaxed into trusting the old man. “Actually, I’d love to.”

Karl crossed to his side of the stream. The old man packed his tackle box and pole and they set back on a small path through the woods. He had made the path by his frequent trips to the river.

“Wildcard wants to love. The center is that simple. That’s what we do, me and Hazel. Do you understand?”

“I think so. How long have you been here?”

“Oh, a long time. Very long. How long have you been in wildspace?”

“I just got here.” Karl told him about the transfer as they walked. He noticed that the funny dizziness from transferring had almost gone away. They didn’t speak too much; the old man had a way of making it enjoyable and relaxed to not talk. Karl felt more uncomfortable talking, as if he were using it to hide himself. He enjoyed the day. The old man whistled, fishing pole on his shoulder.

The house was a beautiful country place, 2 story, clapboard, high ceilings. A few rooms were wainscoted with deep decorative trim around the ceiling. The paint was light, with airy colors, and there were large windows everywhere. Hazel gave the tour, then shooed the two men onto the porch where she brought them lemonade as they sat on the swing. She went to work in the garden. They had several small gardens, flower, vegetable, and herb.

“How does Wildcard have so many faces?”

“What? What does that mean?”

“Well, like you, and Hazel and the Gatekeeper.

“There’s some technical answer, I suppose. But I don’t know that sort of thing. If you want to ask me why those faces exist, I’d say it’s because he felt so alone for so long. He created them, or they just appeared, out of aloneness. So, he somehow managed a world, all these universes. He split into so much... he faded in, I don’t know how to put it, but I sense it.”

“Would you like a cookie, son? Hazel made some. I love her cookies, but you might not. Nothing here tastes right.” He smiled. “But they sure look great.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely.” Karl looked over at the old woman as she weeded. She had an aged beauty, classic features, not stunning, but, if she had ever been young, she had been pretty. She had a resigned kindness.

She was sweaty and sat down on the porch next to Karl, then poured herself lemonade from the pitcher. The old man returned with a plate of cookies. They tasted like wood. She looked disappointed by his reaction.

“How long can I stay?”

“Stay as long as you wish, dear.” Hazel had a dignified English accent. She reached over and stroked his hair back from his eyes, then ran a hand down his cheek. “We like having you here, it feels wonderful.”

Grandparents, something Karl had never even considered. He wanted to stay. He never wanted to leave.

“Anyone who comes here can stay as long as they want,” the old man said. “Nothing forces them to leave, but generally they get a... feeling, I suppose, and they leave. Everybody who comes here wants to stay, but they never can. Wildcard wants them to be here for a time, but he doesn’t want them stay. He just wants to hold them for a moment.”

“They’re all in so much pain,” Hazel said, “just like you.”

“But if you go,” the old man said, “you can never return.”

Center

Karl spent a few months with Hazel and the old man, and fell in love with them in a hundred ways. They were so simple and the grandparents he never had. She loved to cook and feed people and spent hours in her garden.

He made friends with CJ, the great white half-wolf dog who showed him the secret places of Wildcard's heart. A pond with a tiny, cheerful waterfall was his favorite. Trees of every different sort speckled the land around and he could lie in the sun or the shade and still talk to his imagined friend, a water something. Fairy? No, too corny. Nymph? No, it was a male. When Karl joked about it, the old man told him in serious tones that it was a naga, and it was really there, to the bold eye. He had sensed it, too, but never seen it. Karl imagined the naga looked like Poseidon, with a crown, a trident, and a golden shirt. He talked to Karl between dives into the pond. Karl told him how much he missed Martha. He wrote a poem to the naga called waterfall. Hazel and the old man loved it; she even dropped a few tears, embarrassing Karl.

Karl felt sad for CJ. Nothing smelled. A dog should be able to smell things; every dog Karl had met loved to. CJ showed him other places, a magnificent, rocky cliff-top a few kilometers behind the u-shaped hills surrounding the old couple's house. It overlooked an endless rolling forest studded with green meadows and with a wide slow-moving river cutting through. He went on a several day hike with CJ so that he could swim in the river.

The center went on forever. It was huge nature, scattered with trails in high mountains, natural springs with water that revitalized, canyons, and soft rolling hills that made Karl nostalgic for the sweet farm lands of France. The center possessed an encyclopedic representation of plant and animal species. Karl had a vague interest in biology, having studied a bit. The ecological pool was as diverse as Earth, and had a perfect balance matched by a glorious abundance. The resources must have been staggering. He asked Hazel about it once when they were gardening. She taught him wonderful tips. She was a gardening genius.

"I don't believe it works in such manner." He adored her well-educated English accent. "I fancy they were less created so much as merely understood to be. They simply are. Be a dear and hand me that claw digger, Karl." She resumed turning earth; they were planting lima beans. She liked to pack things into her garden, said it manifested the innate richness of the center. Her garden ranged over twenty-five or so rows, each brimming with cherry tomatoes, broccoli, lettuce, kale, and nearly a hundred other plants, including herbs and spices.

She stopped digging, and looked at him. "It's an absolute delight to have you about. We've had others, but you're the first real human."

Karl pulled a mint leaf and tore the edge off with his teeth. The texture worked, but it tasted acrid. He felt terribly sad, and moved. Hazel was so devoted, so faithful to a life that lacked the essential elements she needed as the woman she was. All her love created sustenance without taste or smell.

"How do you do it?"

She touched a finger to her lips and looked puzzled.

“How do you... keep going? Gardening, cooking, when it never works?”

“What else can one do?” She tried to stand and had a hard time because of her old body. Karl helped. She dusted her pants and gloves. “Who’s to say it doesn’t work, anyway? The reward is the doing, Karl, not the result. Food without love fails to nourish no matter the taste. And an old, stale loaf of bread shared with a solid friend is about as good as it gets. Speaking of which, I’d better begin dinner. The old man will be hungry after a day of fishing.”

The old man was back and he sat with Karl in the living room while Hazel cooked. He had brought some trout from his fishing trip, and they were already filleted and waiting for the pan. The two men read from wildsong. They had many other books on the shelves, but their favorite pastime was reading wildsong.

“Hey, a new poem.” He gave Karl a surprised glance. “It’s for you, I think.”

“What’s it called?”

“The Stiletto Heel.” The old man passed Karl the book. “You read it.” He sat down in his easy chair and took a bite of apple cobbler and whipped cream Hazel delivered. He turned his head towards the kitchen part of the large room. “This,” he held the cobbler up, and emphasized each word, “is perfect.” He turned back to Karl. “I figure I’m about the luckiest man in wildspace.”

Karl loved it too even though it had no taste. It made her happy and he needed to eat in any event. The old man waited with transparent joy for Karl to begin. He read.

the stiletto heel

only once may anyone enter the heart
thus shall it ever be
to our shared grief, innocent,
our center is not your home, it was not meant for you
though we suffer to see you part
if you do not part, all will remain unchanged
the Deeply Named cannot escape her torment
your presence here is stasis for all
but we will bear it if your happiness hangs upon it
it is your choice to abide at the heart
a promise to all who here arrive
i would like to share with you what i am
our broad and swept strokes,
fading forever across the universe we have found
we hate that we must burden you, innocent, with healing our wound
we offer our cosmic loneliness

which only you may witness and still belay the cold whisper of madness
how may i describe what it means to see all
understand nothing
what it means to see nothing
and strive to understand a single thing perfect
how can i describe what i cannot know myself
Wildcard and its actions are one
experience of Wildcard dissolves as it comes
what is seen can never be known
what is known cannot quite be seen
unsolvable riddles have no design to deceive or betray
they are the scenery of our lands
what authored wildspace, a question sincere
i do not know ourself
come, innocent, live in a land where naught can be known for sure
i am the Poet and no more Wildcard
than the poem you are reading is me
i am the stroke of Wildcard writ into being
i am ink splashed in accident upon his hand
perhaps i am the skin of the great father's lips
or hair, or a nail
or one lifted word of the infinite void
and perhaps it matters not at all
something desires our joining
go now to the land of the two cubed spheres
then you must father yourself to create your special demise
whatever, however you may phrase it
find me, and be quick

The old man was quiet, and, after, they ate a silent dinner. Nobody wanted to say what he knew, but wasn't ready to admit to himself. During the meal, he locked eyes to the old man, who returned the contact in his wise way, saying without words that Karl needed to find his own understanding.

He took a few days, hiked an overnighiter with CJ, roaming aimlessly. He found he could go where he wished, get as lost as he wanted, and when it came time, CJ would take him straight home. He wandered among all the animals, deer, skunk, and badger, watched the fish in the

rivers. Glorious eagles and hawks pinwheeled between puffs of cloud. Karl was drunk on blissful heartache.

Everything was like on Earth, only more so. Visually, and in terms of hearing, it was, but not feeling, not smelling, not taste. They were wrong, too simple, plastic, or jarring in the wrong place. That wouldn't change while he stayed. It hurt to think of Hazel, who wanted so much for her cooking to taste right. And he could see that it would be amazing. She really knew how to cook.

Karl had to leave.

alleycourt

The nameless woman was dreaming another who never needed sleep. The Benefactor, who appeared, to hold her, to tell her to stay hidden in the dark place. There was fear behind the Benefactor, darkness, and only the Benefactor could protect her, save her from the awfulness. If she moved it would be far worse.

She was trapped. Or not trapped, exactly. Lost, she wandered in a fog of clarifying bewilderment and hazy images. Dream scenarios warply reflected the waking days. She now realized she was dreaming. She slept at times and forgot, then awoke and was aware that her experience was a dream. She saw herself speaking angrily to Dartagnan, menacing, threatening. He took her seriously. He handed her a piece of paper, saying, 'Go over when the time comes, not before.'

She dreamed of constant risk, deep ravines falling below, narrow-walled canyons with jagged, razor stones tearing at her skin. A fall below her with no end and a tightrope to cross, extending into blackness. If she fell, she would be gone forever.

Mostly, she just shivered naked in a prison cell, raw meat in a closet of cold cement, terrified to go outside. The cell had no door. She dreamed of drowning, trapped in a blackened room on a boat, the water rising to her chest, then neck, then she had a tiny bubble of air in a corner. She died many times in dark places.

She dreamed of a man with pale black skin and freckles and a long, thin, bony face. Comical orange hair like a brick on his head in the style of some urban blacks. He played basketball with Karl, Karl! They were on the same team.

She was cheering, shouting herself hoarse, wanting them to win. They lost, and the Mechanic, in Seeker's body, took Karl away in handcuffs. She saw him dragged into an alley, a movie shadow on the wall of a nightstick raised and brought swiftly down, over and again.

She was frantic, trying to get to the alley, but she could find no way around the fence. It appeared to have an end, but then kept going. The other way, the same. She found a gate, screamed, "I am coming," to the son she loved whose name she had already forgot. She could not remember the name of the son she needed to save.

The gate let into a fence maze, through which she saw the nightstick rising and falling as she

found one dead end after another. She screamed for help, for herself and her friend. Shadows walked by outside the fence, oblivious. No one heard; no one came.

grandparents

Karl spent another month, hiking with CJ, fly-fishing with the old man, gardening with Hazel. He told stories of the real world, which seemed so unreal. They read wildsong. He almost tasted the food, sometimes. It was so close. Hazel encouraged him. "Try to taste it. If you can, then perhaps..."

He tried, but it was no use.

"It's all right, dear heart," she said, "'t isn't your task." She stood beside him, and pulled his head against her chest, kissed his hair. "I'm just so pleased that you try."

He tried every meal, Hazel watching him but pretending not to. He wanted to and failed, but when he saw her unwavering diligence in the garden, the endless joyous sadness with which she toiled in the kitchen, he always tried again. Knowing he would fail, he never gave up.

The old man seemed to take a quiet pride in this. Hazel found in his efforts a grandmother's happiness. He hoped it eased the long-standing ache of their unbegun loss of those three senses. With the effort of trying to make taste and smell a reality here, he beat down the anguish of knowing he had to leave. In spite of the sadness, he was excited. The Poet, whoever that was, waited for him.

He talked to the old man about it.

Who was the Poet? The voice of Wildcard. Why did he have to find the Poet? He couldn't tell, didn't know. Karl loved being there, didn't want to leave. Did he have to? Only he could decide that. He knew he had to go, but why? Something would change, something needed to change. A door would open wider, more human would get through.

And Hazel's food...

And Martha... He couldn't bear that thought. He drove it away.

As long as he stayed, things wouldn't change. Hazel's cookies would never taste wonderful, as they should, would never smell delicious, as they were meant to.

The old man told him something he hadn't wanted to say. Wildcard would wait, as long as Karl needed, but it would break his heart. He was meant to heal something, something dangerous. Wildcard was afraid of his own madness. Held at bay for too long, his insanity threatened all of wildspace, and possibly Earth.

Karl had never met anyone like Hazel or the old man. They were so simple and unconflicted, so plain, without the useless ornamentation of society. They were happy with what they had. He might grow a bit bored, but in the way one grows bored with grandparents. He wouldn't stop loving them.

The old man had been around apparently for thousands of years of subjective time. He possessed an ancient wisdom, a letting go quality. If he cut his finger or lost a fishing fly or if one of his animal friends or a favored tree died, he took it with a sanguine attitude. He was glad they had lived, or it was wonderful to have known them. He hoped they were happy. When he cut his finger, he remarked in wonder at the redness of the blood, or wished he could feel pain better. Pain just had a rubbery and unpleasant quality, without particularities, like on Earth. It lacked sharpness.

The day came; Karl awoke and knew. He lay in the bed, built by the old man out of maple, with a comforter sewn by Hazel's skilled hands. A dying art, that. The window was open and a lark landed on the sill, mocking him with all that he would soon leave and lose forever. The day was brilliant, begging for an endless meander with CJ, a striding out to nowhere. A hummingbird flew in, hovered a challenge above the bed, dared him to be a warrior. He sat up and it remained there, quivering in front of Karl, deciding if his face was a nectar filled flower. It disappeared out the window.

Downstairs, Hazel had a stout canvas pack already filled with tasteless goodies, enough food for weeks. She had sewn up an extra pair of pants and two shirts. Multiple pairs of socks were in the pack, as well. He hefted it. The weight was right, not too heavy, but filled with enough for travel.

During breakfast, the old man said he had a present for Karl. A young man couldn't go adventuring without a Swiss Army knife, could he? He felt in his pocket, but it wasn't there. "I must have lost it somewhere. But..." he shook his head, hiding his disappointment which rapidly grew worse. Karl had never seen the old man even mildly upset, and he fell into a frenzy of distress over the absent gift. He started to cry, then covered his face.

"It's OK," Karl said. "I would have loved it, but I don't need it. I'll be fine."

"But...but...you were..." the old man looked around helplessly... "you were supposed to have it. I wanted you to have it, Karl. I wanted you to have it." He repeated it softer and softer. He seemed to think something was terribly wrong. He walked into the bathroom and returned a few minutes later. He was pained, but controlled it with a wandering smile and a kiss on the cheek from Hazel.

She smothered Karl with hugs and worries, then kissed him on the cheek as well, and the two men set out to the stream with CJ. Maybe Karl should stay just one more day and they could find that damn knife. He wanted to, but it was a bad idea.

They didn't say anything else until they got to the little bridge that led across and out forever. Karl didn't want to leave. Maybe he should stay. The old man wanted him to have the knife so much. Just a few more days, a little more grandparents. The old man would be so happy if Karl had the knife.

Karl couldn't do this again, though. If he turned back he wouldn't leave, he would stay in that sacred place forever. And he wanted somebody to taste Hazel's apple cobbler. He wanted the old man to smell her bread when he walked back from the stream with a fresh trout. And it would break the heart of Wildcard if he stayed. He had to heal the great father. And Martha...Martha would be trapped inside the Benefactor's darkness.

He hugged the old man for a long minute, said goodbye to CJ, and left.

ukulele

The Jester gatekeeper appeared on the hill-top as Karl crossed the little bridge from the Center. He was balancing a long pole on his chin and hopping from foot to foot. He winked at Karl and kept going.

“I’m so happy you showed up. It’s been boring since you were here last, and pretty much forever before then. Let’s hang out.”

Karl stayed with him for a few days, learned to eat fire and juggle garden snakes. The jester taught him all sorts of fun stuff like flips, games, riddles, and silly kid’s jokes. They made faces at each other for over an hour, laughing. The Jester had magic ways of getting food, too, so that Karl didn’t need to dip into his precious Hazel supplies. That was good, he had a feeling he might need it soon. After three days it was time to leave.

“How do I get out of here?”

“The silver spire.” The Jester pointed. “Act without thinking.”

Karl found and climbed the spire, shouted “land of two cubed spheres” as he leapt. There was a moment of disorientation; he felt as if he was looking back as he fell forwards. He had a flash of being in outer space, surrounded by millions of stars, but he could breathe or didn’t need to. Then one of the stars turned deep blue, flew at him, and he was inside a pub. The crowd turned to look, then went back to their conversations and pool games. They were rough looking customers.

“Where am I?” Karl asked the bartender.

“Uncle Slimmy’s 8-ball drinking and beer playing emporium.”

Karl wrinkled his face.

“The 8-ball. You’re at the 8-ball. You just came in through the Portal.”

RJ! He would be here. This was his place, and Karl sensed him, somewhere, out there.

“How can I find somebody?”

“Look for ‘em.” The bartender picked up a drained beer mug and washed it, chuckling. “You want that Gambler fellow, if my guess is no mistake.”

“Yeah. Yeah, something like that.”

“We sent him off on a donkey a while back.” He clucked his tongue, thinking, then nodded. “Is your name Karl? Somebody left this for you.”

He handed Karl a doll with a pull string, and a pouch full of money. Karl pocketed the money after his initial surprise, then drew the string. The doll spoke in a recorded voice.

“Someone will contact you. To save his life, you must persuade him to put on the thing he fears. You will have 10 seconds. You cannot give reasons, but must convince him to act immediately.” The doll’s head blew open with a puffing noise and a trail of smoke.

“Uh, thanks, I guess.” He handed it back to the bartender who wouldn’t take it. Karl put it down on the bar. “What did that mean?”

“No idea.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“Oh, him. The swordsman. Nobody knows his name, but he’s been here a lot. He comes and goes through the Portal, and he’s the only one that does. Nobody else has ever left before.”

“He didn’t say anything else?”

“Not really. Well, maybe. Actually, he talks a lot.”

Karl waited. Finally, the bartender nodded. “Yessir, I remember now. When he handed it to me, he said, ‘everything is connected, and if you are no fool, this you understand.’ Something like that. He talked about some wound a lot.”

“The Wound? What did he say?”

“He said it’s what makes this place so... different. The wound is trying to get in. Stupid, really. He just seemed like a big wind-head. Talk, talk, talk, never shut up. Kind of an asshole, to say truth. Said it was at the end of the desert and if anybody wanted to find out anything important, go there, that the rest of old 8-ball world is just fluff and stuff. It was a crate of camel dung by my notion.” The bartender snorted and wiped his hands on his apron. “Ridiculous. ‘The wound wants in.’ Come on, then, I’ll point you to your friend. Though I do think you should keep better company.”

Karl followed him out the cowboy doors, into an old west town. Wisps of dust blew along the dirt street. There were wood sidewalks, sheriff’s, even a brothel. RJ’s kind of place. A few doors down, past a corral, the bartender pointed, out into the rocky, dry lands.

“He went that away, to the leftish, past the cabaret. They back horsed him.”

“Backhorsed?”

The bartender looked at him as if he were stupid.

“Yeah, brother. Put him on a horse backwards with a blindfold on and sent him off.”

“You said it was a donkey.”

“I did? Doesn’t matter, it’s still called what it’s called.”

“Great, then. How can I follow?”

The bartender walked back toward the saloon, signaled Karl to follow. They stopped at a building called Higgins Camelry.

“What’s Higgins Camelry?”

“Damn, you’re about as dumb as a post, aren’t you? It’s a camelry owned by Higgins.”

“What’s a camelry?” Karl didn’t like what he thought was about to hear.

“It’s a place to rent a camel.”

“Why not a horse?”

“You a dimwit or a suicide attempt? You need a camel. Nobody going to rent you a horse, anyway. Camels, Higgins’ll rent.”

Karl looked from bartender to camelry back to bartender.

“Well, I got some thirsty folks waiting. Walk or ride, your choice, gopher.”

Gopher? Karl went inside.

Higgins was an Arab. It made sense in a weird way. Naturally, it would be an Arab who rented camels. He got the mount without much fuss, using the money he had received in the pouch. The man put a saddle on the beast. Made of silk and sporting an attached bright umbrella, it looked like a sheik’s winebago. Karl asked why the umbrella.

Because it protected a man from the sun. The silk, apparently, kept a man cool.

Higgins filled up two water sacks and two canteens. Enough for eight days, if he was careful, it seemed. Did he have food?

He said he had some.

It wasn’t enough and Higgins sold him more. Oddly, it was less expensive than water. He made Karl change clothes because his were too plain colored. The problem, it seemed, was predators. Brightly colored things advertised poisonousness. So Higgins dressed him in striped green and white silk pants and a luminous orange and yellow dotted shirt.

Karl asked how to find someone, but Higgins was no help. He did, however, show him a room full of ‘desert entertainments,’ a chance for Higgins to make an additional sale. Karl got a ukulele. He had learned some basic ukulele in his youth. It would pass the time. He was surprised; the man didn’t charge him for it. He was happy Higgins wasn’t the ruthless capitalist he came off as.

“Thanks for being so helpful,” Karl said.

“Yes, indeed and you are most graciously welcome. Kindness accumulates.”

Higgins gave him a brief lesson in camelry and Karl rode into the thirsty canyon lands. He had attained a facility with the channeling ability, so he thought of RJ and picked the direction that seemed right. When the camel wandered wrong, he nudged it back. Karl had become used to being unfixed in a place, and 8-ball world had that quality in quantity. It was very fluid here.

camel

RJ woke up, lifted his hat off his face, and looked around. He was in a rocky dry place, on top of low dune of pebbles. He was parched, and the sun was blistering. He had no water.

He remembered getting drunk as a lord in that bar. They called it banana-headed. He gambled and lost a lot of borrowed money, or borrowed whatever passed for money here. Promises to do strange things, possibly. When he tried to pay with credit, he had been shanghaied, and put backwards on a mule, with a bag over his head and his hands tied together behind him.

Someone hit the mule and it started walking. He tried to get loose, but something cracked him painfully on the head. He sat there, it seemed hours, bouncing along on the donkey, until he passed out from fatigue and fell off. No one hit him this time, but he woke up when he hit the

ground. Eventually, he worked off the bag and freed his hands. His hat lay beside him. It was night; he put it over his face and slept.

It was hot, hot, and more hot. He sat up, legs splayed out in a 'V'. No water. He saw nothing in any direction except red rock and rippled air. The blue sky glared and offered no clouds. He had a burlap sack and some rope and his clothes. They were good clothes, evening wear: a greatcoat with a tails effect, white shirt, black vest, bow tie, black, light wool pants, high 'lanta style riding boots and his black, wide-brim hat. Quality gentleman's wear, but it was hardly the best desert outfit.

He examined his hat; it was different than he remembered - must have happened when he crossed somehow. It was still a black, medium size brim, Georgia gentleman's hat. But now it was leather. And a bit more supple. The hat he had wanted, but never found. He had never told anyone he sought it. A nicer hat was pretty thin for a silver lining, though.

Now he was stranded in a rocky canyonland. A breeze might be nice. It might just make it feel hotter though. He walked. An hour or so later, he heard music. He looked around, saw a sheik, riding a camel, playing a... ukulele? He was sitting cross-legged, on a carpet draped on the camel's back, with an umbrella over his head. It was fixed to the camel and was hands-free. RJ hoped it would be a new friend. But it was an old friend, Karl.

"Beautiful times, Karl. I am ever so pleased to see you again. I appear to be in a bit of a spot."

"Good to see you, too, RJ. I've been looking for you."

"Yes, well. Likewise, which I suppose is the short version of my arrival in such a predicament. How did you find me in this madness?"

"The bartender pointed the direction and Higgins gave me this, um"...Karl indicated his mount, "...camel."

RJ pinched his nose between his fingers, grimacing against the head-ache. "They loaned you something? They sent me out here to die on account of an ill-advised wager. Filthy, despicable people. Must be nice to have an innocent face."

"Actually, they rented it to me. Somebody left money for me at the bar. Guess they knew I was coming."

"Lucky for you, wish they'd done that for me. Say, do you have any water?"

Karl handed him one of his square wooden canteens. "Keep it, I'm flush."

"No pun intended, of course." RJ reached for the canteen, chugged hard and fast.

"Pun? What?"

"Water? Flush? Toilet?"

Karl laughed his boy laugh. "No, not intended. Funny, though. Good eye, RJ, for someone doing as..."

"As what?"

"Well, you just look rough is all. But, hey, your old buddy Karl's here to help."

RJ performed a toasting gesture with the canteen, then finished the contents. Karl refilled it from one of the big water sacks. He dismounted and pulled some lunch out of the saddle bags.

They sat in the shade of the camel to eat.

“What do we do at this point, my friend?”

“The Wound,” Karl said. “We find the Wound.”

“The what?”

“Didn’t you listen when Juniper read that poem?”

“Juniper read any number of poems to us, I daresay. He was rather enamored, to his demise, of the stuff. Puts one in mind of a drug addiction.”

“Juniper read one that caught everyone. The Wound. It was kind of scary, really.”

“I remember, don’t worry. I was afraid you’d say that, too. You don’t suppose I could obtain a camel of my own, do you? I’d prefer to go elsewhere. Never have been very keen on the medical arts.”

Karl laughed. “Probably not. But this one’s big. Wanna share?”

“If it’s my only option, I suppose I must. How do you propose we find this wound? Go back to town and ask?”

“No, unfortunately it’s the other way. I can feel it. But maybe there’s more towns.”

“Somehow, I rather doubt that.”

Karl pointed to a high outcrop. “Let’s climb up there and see what we can see.”

There was a road in the distance, strangely colored, a glowing yellow. It was the only mark of civilization as far as they could see. They headed to it. The terrain changed close to the road. It was lined with trees and made out of yellow brick. A house was half smashed on the edge. A young girl was crying beside it.

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” RJ said. “It’s a damned fairy tale. What does this have to do with anything?”

“Let’s find out.”

“Miss Dorothy?”

She startled, then looked up at RJ. He was stunned by a stab of instant love and longing.

“How did you know my name?”

“I...uh...”

“Lucky guess,” Karl said. “You OK, RJ?”

“Yeah, just a little...” he twitched his head. “Wizard of Oz, huh?”

“What,” Dorothy asked. “Who’s that?”

They didn’t answer. “My house just landed on this poor woman.”

“Take her shoes,” Karl said.

“What?”

RJ nodded. “Take her shoes. You’ll need ‘em. Trust us, we’re quite certain.”

Dorothy stared dumbly at the shoes. RJ took them off the dead witch and put them on her, embarrassed by the excitement of touching her young feet. He felt manipulated; she was too

young, but something, or someone, was making her sexy to him. He couldn't resist her.

They set off down the road. Dorothy played her part like an actress in a role. She ignored them when they talked about any non-Oz items. Her chasteness burned holes in RJ and he frequently had to masturbate in the bushes. She caught him twice, almost like she had radar, but he was so damned by her, he couldn't help it. He was mortified but compelled. She didn't understand what he was doing and seemed to think he was urinating.

It soon became apparent that Karl was the scarecrow and RJ the cowardly lion. They had no tin man, which made it awkward at those points where he was meant to solve a crisis, but they managed without him. At least he didn't slow them down by rusting when he cried.

Toto was a yappy, little dog. He tracked mud on their sleeping gear and probably would have smelled when wet if they could smell. Even Karl didn't like him.

They got Dorothy to the wizard finally, in the emerald city and palace. He ignored her mostly, and spoke to them. He spoke with the stilted articulation of a caricatured professor, every letter pronounced with an extra dimension of mischievous television drama, and he looked like Vincent Price.

"You require a brain, don't you?"

He handed Karl a Trident with a slight magical flourish, then with another gave RJ a book entitled 'Chance.'

"You need courage, RJ Sublime, but your time has not yet come. The key to your bravery is the woman child Delirious, who will make you bold and cost you all illusion."

They asked him what it meant, but he refused to answer, so RJ moved on to the question of their presence there, and what Oz had to do with them.

"8-ball world is a collectioning of myth and legend. Why wouldn't you be here? These situations abound in this place."

"But they're wrong," Karl said. "They're twisty."

"Yes. Good, young traveller. Perspicacious, in fact. But why so?"

"It's being manipulated."

The wizard nodded an acknowledgement.

"But who are you?"

"No one. Just the Wizard of Oz. I am an icon."

"An icon?"

"A human semblance without pronounced sentience."

"But, you appear real, sir."

"I said I had no sentience, not that I was unreal. A rock has no sentience; is it real? And why, for that matter, does a film character seem real?"

"We can interact with you, you're answering our questions. Who created this?"

"Frank Baum."

"Who?" RJ said before Karl could.

“The author of the Wizard of Oz.”

“Oh, that’s dumb,” Karl said. “He didn’t put you here.”

“Agreed,” said RJ. “Enough double-speak.”

“Well, like I said, this world has all these pieces.”

“Who created the arrangement? How did you come by that wrist device you gave to Karl?”

The wizard acted aloof, smiling mysteriously.

“What do you have to do with the swordsman?” Karl asked.

“Perhaps I am the swordsman.”

“But you said you were an icon.”

He waved his hand dismissively, numerous rings sparkling and causing the two men to blink.

“Who is the swordsman?” RJ asked.

“Excellent question,” the wizard said. “If you gain that knowledge, much will be revealed.”

“Much will be revealed,” RJ scoffed. “You are pretty thin, aren’t you?”

“You have other tasks before you meet him.” He turned and strolled to sit on his emerald throne as he said this.

“Why are we involved in this theater piece, though? Why didn’t the author of this shenanigans simply give us Trident and this...book.” RJ shook the book at the wizard to emphasize his point.

“Why indeed?”

“Jesus, what kind of a nitwit are you? What is this demonstration, a mere show of power? Is one of these Manufactured Entities simply flexing their muscles?”

“Is it Wildcard?” Karl asked.

“Ah,” said the wizard, stroking his chin. “Nothing is as is it seems. Nor is it otherwise.”

RJ fumed. He hated this go-nowhere trickery and wanted someone to smack the wizard. Unfortunately, that wasn’t his style, nor was it Karl’s. “Quit speaking in riddles.”

The wizard ignored him. “In our land, this truth is simply less...” he waved his hand around, searching for the bon mot... “blatantly expressed.” His expression brightened and he leaned forward. “More obvious. You should learn it, Gambler, it’s your new home.”

Karl turned his head to his friend and bobbed it a tiny amount. “Right,” he said. “This is your place, RJ. This place and you, it’s...” he pointed his finger sharply at him... “symbiotic. This is your place.”

RJ closed and flung his hands out in frustration. “Fine. Wonderful, it’s my place. It’s...” He smiled without opening his eyes. A chill ran from his heart, then he flushed warm to his fingertips. He grinned at Karl. “It is! Dammit, you’re right.” He spread his arms wide and rotated, taking in his new domain.

Karl got choked up.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m... I’m great. Sorry, it’s silly, it’s just... it’s nothing.” He wiped his eyes with the heels of both hands. “I’m just so happy for you. Really. I’m glad one of us found it.”

“Aw, fuck.” RJ sighed heavily, reached out slowly and thumped Karl three times on the center of his chest in punctuation. “You will find her.”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure. I’ll find her.”

They stood there awkwardly, until the wizard turned and looked at Dorothy, who had been as still as a broken robot. “It’s time to return home, young lady.” She friend kissed RJ, clicked three times, and was gone. The wizard faded and the emerald palace dulled and changed into the red, rocky landscape.

The landscape smoothed into an easy flatness behind them, in the direction they had come from. Ahead, the rocks steadily rose, mazing out into a jagged labyrinth. Canyons ran off in all directions with sheer cliff sides. Stacks of rocks seemed to hang in the air, the perspective skewed by larger rocks resting on smaller ones. Karl clipped on the Trident and handed RJ the book. They looked at the easy walking land behind them, at the camel, and, in front, at the high and dark peril.

“Goddammit.”

“Yeah,” Karl agreed. “But let’s look at that book. There might be something good.”

“I say we attempt communications first.” He nodded at Trident.

They tried and it was useless. “Maybe later. We definitely could use the Sergeant’s advice. Or Trident’s.”

They decided to make camp overnight. Karl scoured for wood and managed a pitiful fire while RJ cooked a non-taste meal of beans and dried peppers. “How’d you get here, RJ?”

“You mean Wildspace? I just walked into the 8-ball bar in Philly. I went to bathroom and when I left I was... kind of there. I don’t know. I think somebody wanted me here, so I’m here.”

Over dinner, RJ opened the book.

“Chance, by Juniper and Dartagnan. “The first chapter is called the land of two cubed spheres.” He scanned. “There’s a lot of technical gibberish about the composition of the world. Here’s something called the q-code... absolute interpenetrativity... is that a real word?...” He flipped a few pages. “Says it has higher randomness characteristics. Spontaneous generation of puzzles... they can be manipulated by ‘a skilled q-code artisan and, of course, a high tier Manufactured Entity.’ That’s what’s happened to us, Karl. Hmm, something called psychic mirroring, whatever that refers to.”

“Sounds creepy.”

“Yes, it does. Hmm, catalogues of the mythology here. Quite extensive, but it says nothing is ‘actualized without intent.’ I take it to mean that a person has to... cause an event to happen.”

“Or find it. Dorothy seemed isolated in her story. Maybe these things just cycle over and over until somebody...” Karl fluttered his hands in a word search, “...uses them?”

“Anyway, it talks about the theory of how a person can summon them, if I understand what I’m reading. How you can create myth and put it together in different situations.”

“It’s a play world, RJ. Perfect. You’ll have a blast here.”

RJ thumbed through, then rified his lips in a baffled noise. “Good Lord, most of this is cripplingly technical. It’s far out of my comprehension. Oh...” he raised a finger at a new discovery... “and here we are. Part II. This looks more...something. Understandable. It’s written by Dartagnan. Juniper authored the initial section. Hmm. Well, a poem by Wildcard graces the introductory page, and a fine subject matter, I must say. The title is ‘Gambler.’”

RJ adjusted the book to get more light from the fire.

In the land of two cubed spheres
bald teaching does not occur
veiled sensibility hovers mistlike over all action
penetration to truth, impossible
for no truth hides behind this machine
no statement made, subject to the malleable
the strong and the wicked
those with insight into interdependence
can make of this land what they wish and will
but, if he reduces himself from love
the Gambler will find here his home

“I don’t follow ‘reduces from love,’ but I like it here,” RJ said. “I do.”

“Even after getting back-horsed on a donkey?”

“Back-horsed? That’s what they called it? And it wasn’t a donkey, it was a mule. Don’t you know the difference?”

“I never saw it! But...no, actually, I don’t.”

RJ returned to the book. “Dartagnan now. Aha! The land of two cubed spheres. Two to the third power. Two cubed.”

“Eight.” Karl bobbed his head in comprehension, then finished his spoon’s journey to his mouth. “And spheres, of course...”

“8-ball world. Yes, indeed, very clever, that.” He turned the page. “Dartagnan mentions me by name, not just by title. ‘RJ Sublime will, it seems, call 8-ball world his home,’ blah blah blah, already heard that, thank you. Oh, lovely. I can, it seems, ‘master the phenomena, and claim the realm, but...’ oh, dread. I must make a great sacrifice to do so. ‘Reduces himself from love,’ again.”

RJ read on. “All sorts of different things I can do. Careers, of a sort. I can do them all, too, one after another. Gentleman rider- I like that. Dressage, ranch owner, rodeo showman. I’ve always wanted to do that sort of thing. Oh, I can, and will, become a legendary Gambler. Someday, I may become sheriff of Portal. Where’s that?”

“Boy, pay attention, RJ. Portal, duh. It’s where we came in. The town with that bar where

you were shanghaied.”

“Well, I best acquire some funds to pay off my debts there. I wonder how much I owe?”

“Nothing,” Karl said. “I paid it for you.”

“Really? That is mighty neighborly of you, Karl. You are a genuine friend. Good lord, there’s an alternate reality, if I choose to not make this my home, I could fall...” his voice trailed off. Karl tried to look over his shoulder and RJ flipped it closed. “Nothing,” he said. “Doesn’t say anything. Let’s get some shut-eye.”

Karl eased the book from RJ’s arm after he was asleep. The book had thousands of pages, but it wasn’t thick. Some techno-thing. Nano pages, probably. It was hard to see well by the dying firelight, but he found a section Juniper had translated from :3: on getting in and out of worlds. The Space Between the Star Portals, Dartagnan called it. The Space Between. Karl felt a chill at the memory of it. There, he had felt Wildcard. It was so vast, without any reference point, without a touchstone. Just space and millions of twinkling lights, millions of portals to millions of worlds. A universe Wildcard had created.

The collective, when the worlds inside were added, was called wildspace. The Space Between had a bizarre relation to people. He had to read the section aloud several times to understand. ‘The physical is not significantly manifest in the Space Between. It is a quantum dimension, neither truly actual nor non-actualized. Existence is probabilistic and forced upon the occupying entity by mental habituation, not by inherent properties. A being of massive calculation skills and theoretical ability, a Manufactured Entity, to say, will possess sufficiency to maintain a physicality (in appearance only, of course) by concentrated and continuous effort. This represents considerable strain upon the resources, for the calculations to maintain it are waved quantically upon each particle-wave of the appearing entity. Notwithstanding, it can, and has, been done.

Humans, in theory, will appear seemingly automatically, though with both subtle and gross differences. They will have no need of respiration or consumption of nutrition, will, in all likelihood, not age, and will experience the passage of time at an unpredictable rate. This rate will fluctuate in variance with respect to the worlds inside of the Portals, as even a cursory calculation will reveal. The laws inside of the various and multiple worlds bear no resemblance to the laws of the Space Between.’

Karl put the book down to digest and fed a few more twigs on the fire before reading on. The portals were quantum gateways, called q-code singularities. All gates were one gate, it said. How could all those millions be one? In the Space Between, they gave off light, and each had a different means of entry. Inside the worlds, they appeared in many different ways, according the physics of the worlds. Some were guarded, by monstrous equations, puzzles, or...entities of the ancient heritage. What were those?

Most different worlds were differing reality streams, but the act of penetration caused...conjoining? The entrant threaded his reality with the penetrated world. The more this happened, and the more frequently, the more the worlds were conjoined.

Karl read until he ran out of the tiny sticks for the fire.

In the morning, they moved into the canyons. They tried Trident again, but it didn't work.

"Why are we going down here, anyway?"

"I... think I have to, RJ. You can go back. Hey, by the way, take this money."

"What, is this your will and testament? I refuse."

"No, I didn't say I was dying."

"Are you joking? That money is yours. Keep it."

"I have a sense I won't need it. I'm leaving 8-ball, RJ. I'm done here."

"But the Portal's back..." He pointed in the other direction.

"Not for me. Something's down here. My something. You don't have to come. Maybe you shouldn't. You'll have to come back alone. This is your home, not mine."

"You don't like my home?"

"It's fine, but I need to find some things." He laughed. "Geez, I have a list now. Martha, I want to find her most, but I have to find everything else first. The Poet. The box. The wound. The Sergeant. Him first, I hope. He'll help with the rest."

"Yeah, I suppose he will. Don't care for him myself, but he is a man of impressive resources. All right, I'll come with you, I guess. I can't just let you wander in there alone."

Karl picked a canyon and they set off. As they went farther, it became darker. Heavy black clouds gathered overhead. The walls were higher and higher, stacked with precipitously hanging boulders.

The camel stopped. She wouldn't follow and seemed skittish, almost terrified. They packed the food and filled the two canteens, and kept going. The camel took off at a gallop when they loosed her.

The canyon branched repeatedly, and in scattered angles, forcing Karl to choose a direction again and again. It was difficult and he felt more and uncertain as he did. They got panicky and tried to leave, but were lost. They camped for the night, and ate cold food because they could find nothing for a fire. There was no life at all.

Next day, by noon the walls became pinched together forcing them to walk single file.

"I have an idea, Karl. Let's see what the book says." He held it out. "You read."

"All right." He turned to the table of contents. It was twenty pages long. "The blank lands."

"That's it. We're definitely there."

"Yeah. Geez, I have to sit down, RJ. My head. I'm dizzy. And I'm scared. What are we headed to?"

RJ nodded at the book. "Read."

Karl rubbed his eyes. "Yeah. 'Not all worlds are spheres, in this universe or any other. There are more possibilities than are surmised by man. Other things can come to be, and have done so. 8-ball world, despite the name, is not a sphere, but a ragged tear which ends nowhere, which merely falls into a blank curtain. The curtain is a holding, a barrier for the Undow, or, as you now discover, the Wound. 8-ball world falls off into chaos, by the twisting gravity of the Wound. It is a black hole, a singularity beyond which even the most malleable laws of quantum

mechanics and theoretical M-E physics have no meaning. The wound is an alternate reality predicated upon the madness of Wildcard.

“We, Juniper and Dartagnan, believe, with compelling proof, that 8-ball world (among others) was created before Wildcard separated what we now call Wildcard from what we know of as the Wound. 8-ball is the creation, or discovery, if one prefers, of that intermediate Wildcard. Things in 8-ball world cannot be as they appear. It is axiomatic for this land. According to Dartagnan, ‘That’s what makes it 8-ball world; that’s what makes it fun.’

“Beyond, or behind, the blankness, which cannot be penetrated even by the M-E’s or which they could not bring themselves to pierce even had they the power, lies the Wound. It is implacable, twisting upon the world, apparent in the blank lands. The canyons mirror its darkness; they are a testament, however shallow, of the Wound’s immeasurable pain.

“Doubtless other worlds have their own blank lands as well, but the three have only begun to explore the tracts of wildspace, which appears to have no end. Uncounted portals remain to be discovered, and of the ten million and more discovered, a scant few thousand have been penetrated. Wildcard’s puzzle, most appealing, will never be fully solved.

“The Wound bends the matter and the lands, shaping the air above and torturing the life from 8-ball world for many millions of miles squared. Fear is the rule, even for me. I will not go there.’ Ah, God.” Karl dropped the book and grabbed his head. “Jesus, no. Ow, RJ.”

RJ jumped up and grabbed Karl’s arm helplessly. “Karl, what is it?”

“I feel it. Oh, god, RJ, I feel it.” He sobbed, then screamed. “NO! NO, NO. The pain. Oh, my god. No. Aaah, it hurts. RJ! Make it stop, make it stop. Make it stop!” He was stuttering, gasping out the words. Drool and snot ran from his nose and he clutched viciously at RJ’s shirt. “Please, help me.”

RJ wrapped his arms around Karl’s head, squeezing it.

Karl kept sobbing, babbling incoherent phrases, then mouthing gibberish, punctuated with screams. RJ squeezed tighter. “Hang in there, Karl. Just hang in there, buddy. I know it hurts.” He felt Karl’s pulse through his chest. It hammered. Karl thrashed. He calmed, then thrashed and screamed more. It went on for half an hour. He weakened visibly, became kitten-like. He couldn’t keep it up much longer.

But he did, vacillating from the exhaustion into Herculean seizures which lasted for ten minutes and longer, then dropping into panting and whimpering. Then screaming, and slobbering. RJ was drained to point of collapse, but he held onto Karl. Night fell, and Karl lay there, raving weakly, his head in RJ’s lap. RJ ran his hands through Karl’s hair, talking what little encouragement he could muster to keep going. Struggling to pull him back from madness.

In the morning came the vomiting. Karl emptied his stomach, and dry heaved for close to an hour. RJ had long since lost any semblance of composure. He cried freely, helplessly watching his friend’s agony, mouthing the phrases “hang in there” and “stay with it” like useless incantations. The words were as meaningless to him as they were to Karl, but he had nothing else to grip onto his sanity with. He hallucinated, thought he, too, was beginning to feel the touch of the Wound.

It was so cold; he was so afraid.

suicide king

She dreamed of an affair with Seeker, of loving him and knowing him sexually in Karl's body. It was graphic and wonderful, powerful and strange. She wanted to stay, though she knew it was a lie.

She dreamt she was the Benefactor, dying at the Sergeant's hands, killing the General at her own. She dreamt of Karl-Seeker taking her from behind while opening a black box in front of her. She moaned in ecstasy, looking in the box. Two opal eyes burned with many colors. As if in memory, she heard a voice of cascading pebbles.

Disengaging from the coitus, she turned to look at Karl, and, gone cold with the Benefactor's fury, said, "If it comes to you or me, you are the one who will die. That is the limit of my protection and will always be."

Gagging and crying, she tumbled backward into the box, and was taken by hands of cold blue flame. As she dwindled, she saw a King with a sword through his head, holding it with his own right hand. The King walked towards her. He changed from a playing card to a man or a god in that guise. He pulled the sword out and lifted it. It may have been an illusion that the sword was in his head. Maybe it was behind. And, was it suddenly, or was it never, a sword? It was a pointed electronic device, or maybe seen at an odd angle. The man was the General, probably. Karl, maybe. Some blend of the two, a thing that had happened, but made no sense.

She remembered she was in a dream of the Benefactor. She was in Mansworld; speaking to Juniper. "Why don't you return through the Mansworld gate?" she asked, not knowing the meaning. He made no answer, and she was uncertain he was ever there.

She dreamed wildsong. It was invitation, but she knew nothing of what or why. She spoke her part, though she had never heard the words before. She sensed that they were creating the song together. Though her partner had no face, then he did. The King stumbled from the bushes, now the union of RJ Sublime and Wildcard.

She had a part to play, and knew her lines as it was time to speak them. Perhaps she wrote them in the cool air of her vision. She sensed that the song has always been written, awaiting her, and that the song was being written as she dreamed it. And it was natural and right that the song lived both lives as one for such seeming paradox is accepted easily in dreams.

the Wound

Karl passed out, mumbling in his sleep, and RJ followed. He didn't know how long they were out, but it was the middle of the night when Karl woke him. He was pale with bloodshot eyes and his patchy beard growth made him look...worse. RJ feared he might die today.

"Our water's gone," Karl said. "I think I dumped it during the night, but it's pretty hazy."

"Do you remember what happened? With the-"

"DON'T. Don't say it. It can..." Karl looked pained. "Just don't say it."

“Yeah.” RJ sat up and released a thick sigh. “No problem.”

“We should talk about other things.”

He nodded. He had nothing to talk about. The Wound was heavy, in the air, in their heads. “I’m scared, Karl. I have never seen anything like this before.”

“Other things, RJ. We need to move.”

He feared most for Karl. No one could live through that twice.

They walked, Karl forcing himself to talk about the theories he had read in the book. He couldn’t talk for long, though, whether from fatigue or dread. There were no stars, almost no light to speak of, and the night air bit hard. He worried about Karl freezing. His own hands went numb, and the temperature dropped, it felt, with each step.

Many hours later, the sun never rose, but two caves loomed. RJ moved his face close to see. Karl was walking with his eyes closed, as if he knew where each rock would be. It was eerie and RJ panicked. He held, forced himself to relax. If he panicked, Karl was gone. This place was death. No, it was something worse.

“Karl? Karl?” RJ had to swat his face a few times to get a response.

Karl looked at him like he was scenery. Then he looked at him like he was a stranger.

“Which way? Karl?” He said his name six or seven times before getting an answer. He breathed a few ragged jerks, then, in a cadaverous motion, raised his arm, almost falling with the effort, towards the left opening. In answer, a wind whispered from it, icy and the first thing RJ had smelled since crossing into wildspace. An ancient, corrupt stench; the spoor of unsensing terror.

Karl spasmed, and shrunk away. “It’s so alone. God.” He twitched his head around, looking to see if anyone was there. His breath caught, and he put a hand on RJ’s chest.

“You. Are you...real? Are you real?” He grabbed RJ, hid his head in RJ’s stomach. “I don’t want to go, I don’t want to go, I don’t want to go.”

RJ wrapped around his head, trying to give his friend the little warmth he could spare, trying to push some courage into him. But he had none to offer, so the two men stood, shivering and clinging to each other. Finally, he pulled Karl’s head up and forced eye contact. He kept drawing away, but finally surrendered. “Don’t go, Karl. Just don’t. It’s too much to ask. Let’s leave.”

“NO!” Karl screamed in sudden fury. “Please, no,” he begged. “Please don’t leave.”

“No, Karl. I mean us. Both us leave. I mean that.”

“NO! NO! Don’t leave. Please. Please don’t leave. Please help me. Please.” He stood and changed and black menace blazed from him like a darkening star. “You cannot leave. I forbid it.”

“Who are you?” RJ said.

“I am Wildcard,” he said. “I am such pain, I am the alone from which hate and no words have ever touched.” Karl punched him, and RJ felt and heard one of his ribs snap clean as he bounced back off the canyon walls. “Do not forever leave us against the dark. Do not leave me alone.”

Karl flailed out his arm and thrashed his head, fending something off, then pinned Sublime with a clear, void gaze. “RJ, don’t follow.”

He turned and ran, heckless and blind, into the left cave. He ran after, stumbling through the cave as fast as he could. He tore skin and bruised badly on the jagged rocks. Karl thrashed noisily ahead, falling on the rocks and scrambling along heedless of injury. He had to be shredding himself, had surely broken something, a finger or wrist. But he was ignoring all other wounds.

“Aah, NO! The pain,” he shouted. “Make it stop.”

“Karl! Wait. I’m following. I can’t let you play solitaire on this one. Karl! Wait, let’s figure it out.” Karl huffed, and it sounded like he was crawling. He hoped he wasn’t so badly injured. The cave dwindled to a tiny tunnel. RJ stopped, paralyzed by claustrophobia.

But he kept listening to Karl’s madness, echoing eerily from the tunnel, sounding like it was behind RJ, or right beside him. The howls were amplified by the space, and Karl’s fear was not diminishing. He devolved into mostly wordless screams of terror and rage, but he was pushing on into the black tunnel.

He hammered his courage into a workable shape, and crawled into the tunnel.

It went on for hours, the tunnel rising and falling and Karl screaming. The resonance of Karl’s voice stopped, suddenly, then came back altered. He picked up speed. He was terrified, the tunnel was too tight to turn around.

Then he realized why Karl’s echoing had changed. He fell, head-first, down a shaft.

Karl tumbled and landed on a spit of land, howling into the blankness below and all around. All he understood was the loneliness of the Wound.

“NO! Go away. What can I do? Where are you?”

But it was nowhere, anywhere. The pain had no place, it just saturated the air. It was distant, away, but thundering powerful anyway. The torment was deafening.

“Karl,” someone shouted. He didn’t care, all that mattered was this agony behind a blanket of twisted space. It was behind the blankness; he couldn’t touch it; he was terrified of it; he had to find it.

“Karl!”

Somebody, some man, in his face, shouting at him. He flapped his arms at the man, trying to push him aside. He had to get past, had to run down the narrow spit of land, had to leap off, into the blankness. He must go. The Wound needed...he needed ... something ... he had to help ...

It was so alone.

A hand slapped him. “Who am I?” said a man who yanked him around.

Karl looked at him. “You’re...you’re...JR.” He twisted to see the spit of land, fought against the man. “Absurd!” he screamed. “Absurd!” He had to dive, he had to go.

“Karl. NO! Do not fall off. This is not what should happen. STAY WITH ME. KARL. STAY HERE. Pull your head together! Do it. Now. Do it. Do- not- fall- apart on me.”

He struck the man’s face with his hand, saw the nose gush blood. He spilled as he fell, heard the snap of his wrist and the slam of pain. His gut clenched and he vomited off the edge, the hurl vanishing into the void.

The man grabbed his head and forced it around.

Karl looked up at him, vomit and spit leaking down his face. “JR? Is that you? Are you... what are we...” He jerked his head around to take in the blankness and the spit of land. “This is right. Yes. NO! This is not... this is what...” He turned and grabbed the man’s shirt in both fists and shook him. His wrist flamed with the motion, but he ignored it. “We ARE here!”

He let go, turned to the blankness. “You fucker! You goddamn life-betraying sons of bitches! You evil cunt! How could you do this? How could even you be so fucking without mercy?” He fell to his knees, sobbing, and clutched in a fevered mindlessness at the man’s clothes without looking at him. “How could anyone be so lacking in mercy? How could you not know?” he screamed into the void. The man tried to say some things, to calm him, but Karl couldn’t hear.

“Who do you think you fucking are?” He stood, shaking his fists wide, spittle flying off into nowhere. “You can’t play with life like this. You don’t have the fucking right.”

He moved towards the edge and fell, then fumbled to his feet. The man, JR or whoever, grabbed him, tried to help him stay upright. He stumbled forward. He would make it to the end and leap off. He had to. But the man fought him.

He fell again, vomiting more, begging for mercy. “No, I have to help it.”

“What is it?” The hand struck him again, and his mind went clear. He found strength and ran. Something, someone tackled him and he cracked his face. All he saw was red rock. He kicked at the man, frantic to free himself.

“No, Karl! Don’t.”

JR. That wasn’t his name; that was his name.

“Don’t!” The voice was torn away by a wind. “Stop it.” He sounded faint and distant. Karl kicked him in the face as hard as he could. Scrambling, falling, getting up, tumbling again, and running. His hands were ragged, flowing blood. A pain shot up his wrist when he landed, then he forgot.

A man shouted behind him. He forgot the other man’s name again already. Whoever, whatever he was, it didn’t matter. He had to leap into the blankness filled with pain. That was OK. He had to care for it. Only he could heal the Wound. He had to.

He stumbled, then leapt, and felt the man’s hand grab his jacket, and yank him to a halt. He was past the end, and he fell. The man held on, dangling him like a toy in the blankness.

He hung there numbly, then began kicking to get free.

“Karl.” The voice was distant, like it traveled down the barrel of a tornado. “Come back. Don’t do this.”

He thrashed against the hold. “It’s OK. I have to.” Maybe he could make it to the Wound still.

“Climb up. I don’t have the strength to pull you. Let your pack go, it’s too heavy.”

His mind went clear and free. He looked up.

“It’s OK, RJ. Only I can do this.”

“No. That’s stupid. NO. Climb up. I’ve grown fond of you.”

“Just let go, RJ. The Wound is mine to heal.”

“No one can heal that.”

“I have to try.”

RJ held on for as long as he could.

unbetrayal

LuvRay wanted to contact the Shaman. Something had happened. Something had happened to Karl. He had not seen him, or spoken to him. But he knew. And the last he knew before he buried the Trident thing, Karl was looking for the Shaman. He knew he should stay away from Martha, that felt wrong. Martha was gone. He could smell that. The Benefactor took her, changed her. They had spoken on a telephone call, an M-E trick. He tried to call RJ, using a number he found. Martha’s voice answered. LuvRay did not need to see her to know. Martha was gone.

She was not an enemy now. Not exactly. He simply had no pack feel for the voice he heard. The wolf-love was not there. He did not want to meet her. And she seemed to have no desire to meet, either. They didn’t.

LuvRay knew the best person to help was the Sergeant. If the General would let him, or order him. He thought he would, in return for something. LuvRay went back to the Trident thing, hidden under a tree in the edge of Paris woods. He reached under to grab it, and as his hand touched it, he was shocked, just a bit. He leapt back.

“Ow, goddamit it. Holy shit.” Karl’s voice. Different Karl, but still pack. He continued cursing.

“Karl? Is you?” LuvRay asked. “Why you speak on Trident thing? I looking you.”

“How did you find me? Fuck. Fuck. Who are you?”

“Is LuvRay. I touched Trident thing. It shock me. And you speaked.”

“Put the thing on. NOW. Put it on now, quickly, no questions.”

LuvRay dove at the tree, his hand extending into the hole, grabbing for it. It clamped his wrist as his hand entered. He jerked back his hand, the thing was turning into a liquid.

Wolf-fear. He moved past it.

He tried to peel the thing off. Some of it pulled away, but then flowed from between his fingers and encased his forearm. Small tendrils began sliding up his arm. He pulled them away, one at a time, but they began to increase in number.

A tendril whipped out, wrapped his left wrist and bound it tightly to the right. He managed to pull his knife, but was unable to sever the thing. He put his knee between his hands to force them apart. A tendril shot up, wrapped around his neck, then another, then those climbed upward to his face. A bulge of liquid surged along the two tendrils and they split into pieces, searching. Another surge and his face was covered.

It found what it was looking for: mouth and nose. His hands were suddenly free and he was grabbing at the liquid, clawing it away from his face and out of his mouth and nose. But it just flowed around and back in. He was suffocating. The liquid filled his ears, and sound went away.

LuvRay looked at his death and touched the fear like an old friend. He let it fill his body and soften away from panic. He considered using the knife to take his own life, but did not do so. He continued trying to pull it away, but he began to weaken. It forced its way deeper into his head, tiny threads slipping around and behind his eyeballs.

The Space Between

RJ disappeared from Karl's sight and the rocky ledges under him dwindled and changed into a Portal that emitted no light, a hole in the Space Between. Beneath the weightlessness and the plummeting, he gave in to exhaustion. Dreams disoriented, crossing the barrier, and he was somehow opening it, trying, but in a different way, for someone else. Martha!

He woke up, shouting her name.

Martha, what connection? He was so tired, he couldn't stop sobbing. It was taunting him, the solution, what he must do, barely unfocused and dancing on the edge of consciousness, which he lost again, partly, floating in the Space Between, between what? and the words not thoughts but sadness and missing Martha, missing Martha so much, would he ever... he cried and saw her, a wraith, hungry and alone, vanished into endless nightmare, her own wound unto herself, and he knew it was her and he wanted to touch her and he wanted to cry out so he did, but she couldn't hear and it was really her and IT WAS REALLY HER and he knew and he couldn't get her to see him, she looked through him and then he did it, he helped her, maybe he freed her, but nobody could tell him so he guessed in shifty logic of half woken reverie.

He opened the barrier in her dark dream and maybe she passed through, if she could find it in her awful wanderings alone. It was all he could do. The fingers of pain and madness slid from his mind, and Karl fell away. He slept without dreams, and fell as he did. The Wound was far gone, no longer a presence, just a memory of inhuman sorrow, and a cosmic mirror of her aloneliness.

Karl awoke into heartbreak; he would never see Martha again. But at least she might gain freedom. She had a way out now, if she could find it. Someone else came across, too, a dead man. Karl felt a coldness as he realized the awful fact: the first Sergeant had entered wildspace.

When he woke this time, he was clear. His body had adjusted himself to the falling sensation. The space reminded him of RJ's book. He felt his face and his wrist; they were mostly healed. He felt a few scars and his wrist was sore, but sound.

Rotating gradually, he fell for hours, then days. Trident was inert, a wristwatch with a dead battery, but he tried frequently. There wasn't much else to do. He dug around in his pack, but all he had was a pot, some utensils, food, water, and a spool of rope. A Star Portal flashed past, close it seemed, and shot away. It was reddish, not pure white, like the rest..

He was going fast, judging by the velocity of it.

The days melted into weeks, the weeks into a month. He went crazy, blithering and babbling in whispers and shouts, talking to no one. The only proof that he was moving came from occasional Star Portals flashing past close by. As a Portal approached, it made a strange whistling noise, which grew in intensity, and turned blue-white, blazing brilliantly. Then a flash, as it passed, an instant of dead noise, and it went red. The whistle changed to a dull, low-pitched hum. Doppler effect, and he longed for each next 'event,' as he named them. When he spotted a Portal blueing, he would say 'Doppler' over and over, once per second, until the Portal passed. He tried to enter each one, but failed, so he said 'Doppler' more until the redness had faded to white again.

Karl wanted to talk to LuvRay. He could help, out here where there were no points of reference. The Sergeant worked by reference points, by holding a great web of meaning in the mind to navigate the world. LuvRay didn't. He had no external means of evaluation. He just knew what to do. The Sergeant made lightning responses based on an absurdly complex set of criteria, a constant evaluation of threat and potential gain. And he seemed to always be slightly in battle. He enjoyed himself, though, so why should that bother Karl. Let him do what he loved. He wasn't a bad guy, just driven. Not even driven, really, just doing what he was made to do. But that didn't seem useful out here. Not at all.

Crap, either one, who was Karl kidding? Anybody. Even the Benefactor would be fantastic, just someone to talk to.

He guessed about one Portal per day passed, but had no means of measuring time. He made a game of controlling his rotation, using his pack as leverage. He had one of his periodic shouting fits, and this time berated the inert Trident. It could at least work as a watch. What was the point of carrying around this thing. He should throw it at a -- wait. Trident. Idea, idea. Trident, if he passed it through a Star Portal. But...the rope! It was ridiculous, of course. The Portals might be a thousand kilometers from him as they passed, probably were, but he was bored and trying to stave off another three day bout of gibbering lunacy, so he tried the project. It was exciting. The Portal flew towards him, brightening by the second. Deep blue, and he gave it his best fast ball, then watched Trident fly wide by ten degrees and shoot on the backward side as the Portal distorted past him. Pretty pathetic. He spent the entire time before the next one, practicing throwing. Next time he threw early, but accurate and knew the Portals were close enough when it passed through the rope.

The result was bizarre. The section of rope that passed through went away, but without severing the rope. The rope was just shorter. Karl reeled Trident in, baffling at the anomaly. Next portal, he threw like the time before, then yanked back just before the Portal hit the rope. The world, or Karl's body, turned inside out, and he screamed. Trident struck him on the arm.

"Karl? Is that you? Why do you speak on Trident thing? I looking for you."

"How did you find me?" He cursed. "Who are you?"

"LuvRay. I touched the Trident thing. It hurt me. And you spoke."

Karl remembered the doll with the pull string, "somebody will contact...put on the thing they fear. Ten seconds."

"Put Trident on, LuvRay. NOW. Put it on now, quickly, no questions."

LuvRay shouted something indistinct, a cut-out, then a choking noise. There was a hissing noise, and a piercing other world metal rending sound from Trident.

“Identify yourself,” the Sergeant’s voice said. “Trident, are you there?”

“Yes, boss,” Trident said.

“Sergeant,” Karl said. “LuvRay, what’s happening?”

“LuvRay? What? Karl, is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me. LuvRay, are you OK? Where did he go, Sergeant?”

“No idea what you’re talking about. Haven’t heard from him in months. LuvRay, ARE YOU THERE?”

No answer.

“Trident, report. Anything on LuvRay?”

“It is a difficult phenomena to describe in human terms, but his voice may have occurred. It had quantic interference. I have a signature of the event, but the information is severely distorted.”

“Skip it, he’s gone. Karl, we may have only a moment. How did you contact me? Great to hear voice, by the way.”

“I have a Trident.”

“Impossible. How did you get a Trident?”

“The, um, it was strange who gave it to me, believe it or-”

“Remove it immediately. Put it on the ground and move away.”

“It’s already off.”

“Trident, analyze Karl’s instance. Karl, he’ll scan it for danger. Set it on the ground for now.”

“Well, there’s no ground, here. It’s OK, it’s sort of tied to a rope.”

“What? Never mind, that’s fine. But be cautious. It could be very dangerous. We might be monitored.”

“Scan complete. Karl has a substantive, positively functioning instance, boss. However, it was not one until thirty eight seconds past. The character changed in the last few moments.”

“What does that mean?”

“I passed it through a Star Portal.”

“Huh. All right, sounds like you have a lot happening. Report, but keep it very brief.”

“I, uh, I saw RJ.”

“Is he with you?”

“No.”

“Do you have a means of contacting him?”

“No.”

“Move on, then. I need your current situation first in case we’re disconnected again.”

“Well, it sucks, actually. I’ve been falling through space for a month now. I’ve gone batty

and back about a hundred billion times and I want to get-

“Cut the commentary, Karl. Concentrate on objective evaluation. My situation, equally difficult: I am trapped in the Star Portal leading from Mansworld. When I discovered you were not here, the General ordered me to find it and go through. I have been here for more than a week, unable to contact anyone, even Trident. I can determine no means of escape, so any help you have, please offer.”

“All Portals are one.”

“Sorry? What does that mean?”

“Juniper wrote it. They’re quantum, the Portals, so it’s like...I don’t know, there were these long explanations of quantum partial separations and disjinders and something called dribble theory. It was long and boring and incomprehensible.”

“Good. That might be very helpful. Analysis, Trident. Oh, before that, T, do you have any stats on the stability of this connection and my connection with you?”

“Unpredictable. Karl’s data has given me some research points, though. Karl, are you near a Portal?”

He looked. “Yeah. Wow, cool. I stopped when I put you through. Holy cow. Yay! Jesus, I may be able to-”

“Karl! Please stay with the plot. We need to get out of here and our situations are connected.”

“They are? Why? Just ‘cause we’re talking about it?”

“No. It’s called wildspace theory and it’s not worth going into now. Just trust me, our ability to get out of this definitely, definitely depends on a mutual solution and maybe a quick one. Got it?”

“Semi-stable, boss. You have a guaranteed four minutes of additional connection to Karl. The connection is in full correlative dependence.”

“What? Why does Trident say stuff like that?”

“It means that if I lose my connect with you, I lose it with him, too. Let’s figure this out, Karl. I want to get out of here. I’m going nuts, and I have orders.”

“Orders? From the General? What are they?”

“If I find the center, I penetrate.”

That was disturbing. The Sergeant had no business in Wildcard’s heart. Obviously it was the General’s business. But that made it worse.

“I’m not so sure I want your help on those terms.”

“OK, What’s the problem? Talk to me, Karl.”

“What do you want in the center?”

“Know the terrain. Know the variables. How can I operate without information? Listen, you won’t get far without me. Trust me on that. If I’m stuck, you are, too.”

A muffled word came over Trident, then “Answer.”

“What?” Karl and the Sergeant said together.

“That was LuvRay,” said Trident.

“LuvRay!” Karl said. “Are you OK?”

There was no response.

“I lost him,” Trident said.

“Twun?” said the Sergeant. “Was that the first word? Answer? What did that mean?”

“Spell it t-w-o-n-e”, said Trident. “I do not know what it means. Communications window increased, boss. You have six minutes. Eight, eleven, nineteen, twenty-three, twenty-nine-”

“Great. Tell me when you get it up to an hour, then two hours, T. Cut the constant update.”

“Sixty one minutes.”

Karl floated there talking for a long time. Trident pronounced the coms stable finally. Karl told the Sergeant about 8-ball world, RJ, and the Wound. He enjoyed talking to the Sergeant, who had more interesting things to say than Karl would have thought. He loved to talk about war and had many cool ideas that Karl had never thought of. He had trained intensively and the first Sergeant had been in many actual battles.

“The training feels real when you do it, though. You think you’re actually, there, fighting, even dying. Or commanding a squad or platoon under heavy fire. Or an entire army during a battle. I’ve fought on horseback and in tanks, bombers, jet fighters, hand-to-hand martial battles to the death, swords, guns. You name it, I can kill with it. Or kill it. Or both.”

He had seen many war movies. Read hundreds and hundreds of war books. But, he was affable and friendly, fun to speak to, with a good sense of humor. Karl remembered the old Sergeant as less humorous, more serious. He was harder to have great conversations with. Although he had not been unfriendly. Just...always in command. The new Sergeant had a different style of command. There was negotiating room. He was ruder, in a playful way, more flip. He was young and cool.

“General,” the Sergeant said. “He’s on coms, Karl.” The Sergeant briefed him, with Trident’s help. He had no solution to the problem. They talked more and the General mentioned a box.

“The Box?” Karl asked. “What about it?”

“The box is a heavy duty thing,” the Sergeant said. “The M-E’s are terrified of it. They seem to be manipulating us to do something with it.”

“What do you want to do with it, General?” Karl asked.

“The policy is fluid. First, I wish to find it. Then, I will decide. If I have power to make such a choice.”

Karl wondered what sort of grand strategy could be put into play about the box. Open it? Don’t open it? He asked the General.

“Where do you open it? Do you move it? Do you negotiate other benefits by using it? Who is there when you open it? When do you open it? Why do you open it? Can you close it once it is opened if you do not like the result? When do you establish control of the box? Do you create the illusion of control if you do not ‘ave it? Do you create the illusion of no control if you have control, perhaps to keep others searching? Do you negotiate with an M-E to create a faux boite? Or attempt to have Trident do so? Why are the M-E’s so frightened by the box, although I have

some understanding of that. Do you have track of...”

“OK, I get it,” said Karl, “many variables. Deep strategy about the box. Can you find it?”

“No, but Monsieur Chose will seek it.”

“Is he working for you?”

“Not exactly, but he will not work against me. He is out of my vision at present. I will find him, though. Or the Sergeant will, rather.”

The General excused himself to eat. He would probably be gone for awhile, as his French meals usually took quite a bit of time. Breakfast might be quicker, though.

“Read any good poems, lately?” Karl asked the Sergeant.

“No. You?”

“Scraps,” Karl said. “One quest poem, I suppose. To find the Poet.”

“I need to know that one, Karl. Why didn’t you tell me hours ago?”

“Didn’t think about it.”

“Read it now.”

“I don’t have it. But I need to find the Poet.”

“If you’re sure, I guess you should. I need to go to the center. Ideas?”

“Have you heard about the old man there?” Karl asked, then wished he could take back the words. He should have kept the old couple from the Sergeant, and especially from the General, if they didn’t already know.

“No,” said the Sergeant. Karl had the sense that he had begun a second, unheard conversation with the General. “What about the old man?” The Sergeant’s interest struck like a rattlesnake.

“You want to kill him.”

“You know I don’t want anything, Karl.”

“The General just ordered you to kill him, didn’t he? He wants to kill Wildcard. You didn’t say you wanted to kill Wildcard. You just said you wanted to go to the center.”

“I didn’t lie, did I?”

“I may have to do this alone, Sergeant.”

“I thought you might say that. What are you going to do, though? You’re just stuck there in space. We have to work together. You have to help me get to the center, or just float there alone forever.”

He knew it was true. “I guess you’re right. Dammit. I’ll fight you, if I can, when the time comes.”

“I know. I can live with that. Do you think you could win?”

“No.” Karl knew he could not. Not because the Sergeant was so much better of an opponent, but because he could tell that Wildcard was inviting the Sergeant to the heart. He wasn’t sure if he would have to fight him or not. He hoped not. It didn’t sound like much fun. Karl slept, dreamed the Sergeant was asking the old man how he would die.

“I will die by water or betrayal. That’s all I know.” He woke up, wondering if he was the betrayer. The General was speaking, and had woken him.

“Now do you see, Karl? Now do you see this strategy?” Karl had almost forgotten the General. Strange, how the man faded into the background, then appeared with his bizarre agenda and made it happen.

“Yes, but why? Why take away Wildcard? He’s one of the good guys.”

“Good and bad, ce sont illusions, Karl. You choose to believe in such things if you wish, but they are not real.”

“What kind of strategy is that?”

“It is not strategy. It is truth. Wildcard says this himself. Though I already knew.”

God, was there no end to this mechanism of Wildcard? He seemingly intended for the General to kill him. Or did he? He seemed to be willing the General to approach more directly, even showing how to kill the old couple. Maybe there would be some harsh lesson for the General. Karl wanted to change the subject.

“What is the box?”

“It is an open situation. Possibility. It is neither one thing, nor l’autre, Karl. It is...

“Not two, not one,” Trident said. “The answer.”

The Portal opened like the wings of a butterfly, sucking Karl in. He was sitting in a meadow with the Jester.

home

The dream clarified to a waking world, every detail real and exact. Not shifting, like she had grown used to. The beautiful, sad woman was sitting in a clearing, breathing distractedly, looking around, wondering where she was, wondering what the dream had become. The air was clear, crisp, delightful. A perfect day, a few light clouds drifted in a peaceful sky. A small pond flowed under the touch of the breeze nearby, the sun reflecting off the water in that way of scintillating ripples of light stretched at the long angle on water, the sparkles thinning out gradually, flickering here and there as her eye followed the water closer to her.

Thousands of wildflowers in every shade freckled the field, flowing patches in the breeze. She remembered being a child, she had left her stuffed animal, lost it somewhere. She was worried about it, sad because she had no mother to hold her. She wanted a mother. The woman put her head on her knees, arms wrapped around and began to cry softly. She rocked herself from side to side, humming sadly and tunelessly. Nothing else to do, nowhere else to go, she absorbed herself in the reverie. She wanted to stay there. She felt distance from the Benefactor, a respite from the awful sharing of minds.

“I want to stay here,” she said to an azure flower with white edging between her heels. “I want to stay here.”

“You’re not doing so well, are you, dear?” It was an older woman with a British accent.

She stopped moving, stopped humming. She wondered about the answer to the question. She turned her head to look at the feet of the old woman. She liked her shoes. They were blue, simple walking shoes with flat soles.

“No,” she said. “I’m pretty fucked up.”

“I know,” the old woman answered. She sat down, wrapped arms and legs around and held her. “I felt your fear when you arrived. You’re naught but pieces, child.”

Martha tried to tell her something, to make an excuse for crying, but the old woman stopped her by sitting in closer, pulling her head in more. She was only allowed to cry, and when she realized what the old woman offered, a shoulder, something else, someone else, she broke like a dam. She came undone straight onto the old woman, who absorbed it all as if that were why she lived. She held her as the young woman sobbed and built screams. A few tears slipped from the old woman’s eyes as well.

She could only repeat the word “no” over and over, in the staggered way of people who cannot stop crying. “Who am I?” choked out occasionally. She could no longer hold anything back, and the old woman let her know there was no need. She cried until her eyes burned, cried for the pain of becoming what she now was, from the wounds the Benefactor had burned into her being.

She moved so that she held the old woman back. She grabbed her as tight as she could, clutching at anyone who felt real. She needed someone she could finally touch. The old woman let her squeeze as hard as she could, though it clearly hurt, and stroked softly in return.

The horror of the lifetime of torture, silence, imprisonment, the ruthless attack on her mind and her being, it all flooded up, demanded release, came through, in huge, tearing sobs and a river of tears. Her voice dragged out, stuttering with the crying as her body shook like a child's. It lasted for an hour and the old woman held her, gently rocking. She was unable to stop. The world ended there, on the point of her terror's release, her tears soaking the blouse. Nothing else needed to happen, the old woman was content to let it go for as long as she needed.

"It's too much. No one can take that. It's too much." She began shrinking, choking on the terror. She fell back, paranoid, pulled away quickly from the old woman. "Who are you, anyway?"

She greeted the attack with kind dignity. "My name is Hazel."

"I'm sorry. You're so sweet, so kind. My name is Marta. Sorry, it's..." She realized her name had changed. Marta. She could no longer be what she was before. "Never mind, it's Marta."

"Thank you, Marta."

Marta's pain was over, for now. Apparently Hazel had felt it, too.

"One of the best meetings I remember, actually," Hazel said. "It was naked."

"Oh, god. I'm ashamed."

"No, please, dear. You're brave, you're so brave. Please don't be ashamed. You have no reason to be. I've never seen such courage."

She nodded and wiped her burning eyes.

"I reckon that's all the tears you need for the moment. I expect there will be more later. Would you care to come to our home? This is a healing place. You must stay with us until you feel better."

"Us?"

"The old man and me."

She held her eyes closed and breathed out, gripping Hazel's hand.

"Yeah, I would. I'd like that more than anything."

not-life smell

LuvRay awoke on a metal table. He was looking into the face of a man in his 40's, wearing a white coat, with a moustache just a few hairs wider than the man who had led Germany in the huge war. Adolph Hitler.

"Who are you?" LuvRay sat up.

"I am the Doctor. I brought you here."

"You made that thing?"

"Not exactly. A Scientist at Amalgamated Nanomechanics invented it. The nano-plasma that attacked you anyway. He created the illusion that it was a Trident device, with the Programmer's

help. I had a hand in it, I suppose. The q-link forcible dimension interchange was mine. I told it what to do, and how to do it. I told it how to bring you here.”

“Where is here?”

“Mansworld.”

“You bringed me here?”

“Yes.”

LuvRay leaned forward, close to the Doctor. “Put me back.”

“First of all, No. Second, why should I? Third, I cannot. Someone has your body. I could not retrieve it even if I were so inclined.”

LuvRay grabbed the small doctor knife from the tray. Oddly, he was left-handed now, and automatically used his left hand instead of the right. He slid the knife in, under the ribs, punctured the Doctor’s heart and pulled the knife out. One smooth stroke. The Doctor put both hands over the wound like a movie person being stabbed. He fell down, crawled to the wall, leaned his head against it. LuvRay moved over, looked him in the face.

“Do you die?”

He gave a slight nod. The man examined the wound, a doctor looking at a patient who happened to be himself dying. LuvRay sensed curiosity more than fear. He watched his life end. It took about a minute. They locked gazes. The Doctor smiled and died. LuvRay closed the man’s eyes.

He smelled the room. It smelled of man products, cleaners, sprays, and unnatural things. Smells LuvRay did not like. It was a not-life smell. Not a death smell. Death was a part of life, not its opposite. This smell was not-life, and not-death. Electronic world. He found it interesting.

The Trident thing lay on the table. He wondered if Wildcard had taken his body. Or who if not Wildcard. Who had forced him to change places? He smelled the thing. It gave no threat, but it was a false Trident thing.

“Karl? You are talk?”

“Sergeant here. LuvRay. Wow. Great. Where are you?”

“Mansworld?”

“OK. I suggest you stay connected in here, if you can. Don’t leave Trident. You will probably not find him again.”

“This is false Trident. Not yours.”

“I know. I can tell. Trident, can you do anything to prevent eavesdroppers?”

“I can signal replicate with spinning. I don’t know how good their filter is, but I can definitely block them from hearing your voice, Boss. I probably cannot with LuvRay.”

“So, LuvRay, you probably understand, but do not repeat what I say. Minimal talk on your end, which I’m sure is OK by you. No information you don’t have to give.”

“Yes.”

“Trident, what else can you do for him?”

“I can mask location by signal fracturing. I think. Definitely prevent a pinpoint. They will know his location within a distance ratio of 1:83.”

“What Trident thing means?” LuvRay said.

“It means that if they track you from 83 kilometers away, they will know where you are within a 1 kilometer radius. But they’ll be closer, trust me.”

“Who do this?”

“Did the Doctor bring you here?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the Benefactor, I believe. Dartagnan is involved somehow. But it’s mainly her. What’s your plan?”

“No plan. What you think?”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m thirsty.”

“Then drink water. Go with your instincts, for you. Your instincts will keep you safe. At least for now they will.”

“Good. But what I do?”

“Find the box. That’s what I want you to do.”

“Why?”

“It’s tied to Karl, somehow. Nobody knows how. The box disappeared soon after he arrived. There seem to be a lot of false boxes now. A few million, at least. Dead ends, some of them murderous, some portals to other places, some just poems or nonsense. Lots of stuff. I have been tracking them, me and Trident, that is, looking for the real one. The trail is well-hidden. It’s actually quite a cool tactic of hiding. The real box is not so much hidden away without a trail as buried in a million possible trails. Any ideas?”

“Yes, I try. I have idea.”

“I won’t ask how. Disappear. Contact me only if you need me. Find the box. Signal me with the following words when you find it – ‘Sergeant, LuvRay here. It will take me four more days, at least, to get there’. Got it? Four days.”

“Yes.”

“Good luck.”

LuvRay opened the tap on the sink, saw a small sign stamped into the porcelain. American Standard. He filled a glass, drank it, then another. He was not thirsty anymore. He looked at his face in the mirror. He liked this thing about living among men. He could look at his face. He knew what he looked like to others. It had been months since he had looked in a mirror. He looked older in here than he remembered. He had the same face, but older.

He took off the medical robe he was wearing, opened the closet. Clothes, his clothes. Buffalo moccasins, soft, but strong. He could feel with his feet, but they would not wear out too quickly. Deer leather pants and jacket, cotton t-shirt. They felt right, smelled wrong. Everything smelled wrong here. More like a word, then a smell not the smell. He put them on, liked them. They were

the right clothes.

He took Trident, tying it up with a cloth instead of putting it on his wrist. He put it in a plastic bag that sealed by squeezing the fingers and sliding them. The Doctor had a small pack clipped to his waist. Luvray took it, stuffing the Trident thing inside, and walked out. He looked at a news stand. Hong Kong.

Riddles

“Would you care to play a game of riddles?” the Jester asked.

“How predictable,” Karl said.

“Would you prefer something else, sir?” He pretended to be a waiter.

“I love a cliché,” Karl sang, to the tune of I love a parade.

They laughed together, enjoying the joke.

Karl thought. “Sergeant, you there?”

“Yup.” He sounded bored.

“What if I don’t answer these riddles? I think this is the ticket in. What if I just stay here? It’s not so bad. You need me to get past, and try to destroy Wildcard.”

“Do you want to know what’s in the box, Karl?”

“Not that bad. Not bad enough to help you kill the old couple.”

“Old couple? I thought it was just an old man.”

Dammit. “What if you don’t do it? What if you let them live?”

“It’s a direct order, Karl. I don’t know if I could disobey. I didn’t want to tell you this, but without opening the box, Martha doesn’t get out. You’re supposed to open the box, Karl; I’m supposed to go into the center.”

“You’re trying to trick me. How could the box free her?”

“I’m not, Karl. You have no idea what the M-E’s and Wildcard, especially, are capable of.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? But if I’ve noticed anything, it’s that Wildcard is making as many unique connections between Earth and here as he can.”

Karl knew the Sergeant was right, and he knew he couldn’t wait there forever. Wildcard seemed to want it to happen, although he would probably be willing to wait as long as Karl did. Wildcard did not seem to care how long things took.

“We have to get past the gatekeeper to get anywhere. I doubt I can get out of this world any other way.”

“I can’t even get out of this Portal, Karl. All I see is blue-white light.”

Karl laughed. “Maybe I will stay here. I could drive you insane while I relax in this nice

meadow. This guy doesn't care. There's probably a whole world here. I could have a great time and leave you stuck in their forever."

"That would be harsh."

"Do you have any entertainment?"

"You know, Karl, I might not kill Wildcard. It might not be possible. This is a sophisticated M-E puzzle. It'll probably work out differently than we plan. It always does."

"General," said Karl, "I'd like to negotiate a strategy revision."

"I can't reach him," said Trident.

"What are your riddles, gatekeeper?" the Sergeant asked.

"Only Karl may choose to play."

"Kind of figured. Wildcard is playing with my sense of helplessness, I think. This sucks. I want food I can taste. C'mon Karl. Play."

"I bet it's not your thing. Maybe there's a puzzle on your end to solve."

"Maybe, probably, but the real answer is with you. My puzzle will be astronomically difficult. I'd probably have to learn some kind of Manufactured Entity math just to understand it. I'm stuck here until you leave there, Karl."

"What if I just left Trident and walked away?"

"That sounds pretty horrifying for me. Are you that cruel? I could be trapped in this place for a very long time, trying to solve an impossible math trick. I've attained some immortality, or at least longevity, through having younger bodies. Wildcard may be giving you the choice to put me in hell."

"Or he could be creating a human version of himself"

"Maybe. I'm a pretty stable guy, bred to be so, but I don't think that whatever would come out of here would be a good thing. Not benevolent, like Wildcard. I think it would be evil."

"All right. Thanks for solving the moral dilemma. I'll try to get out of here and take you with me."

"Thank god."

"Great," said the Jester. "Let's play.

Shining bright with a borrowed light, appears by day,
but mostly at night

sometimes a plate, sometimes a smile

sometimes orange for a while."

"Easy," Karl said, "the moon."

"Right. Next riddle: I clear away the morning mist, if I stop moving I cease to exist."

After a moment, the Sergeant said, "Wind."

"You aren't supposed to play," Karl said. "Only me."

"No, Karl, that's not what he said. Don't lock yourself into assumptions. It's a fatal mistake

in engagement. He said that only you can ‘choose’ to play. You chose to play. I think we all can play now that you’ve made the choice.”

“You assumed that you couldn’t get out of the Portal you’re in.”

“No, I didn’t. I’m looking intently for a way out, and have been since I first arrived. I can just tell that I won’t find anything that’s possible. I’ll keep looking, however.”

“Can you contact anyone else?”

“No, only you and Trident, no visuals.”

“Who’s the last person you saw?”

“Just a bunch of shills.”

“Shills?”

“Yeah, flat Manufactureds, icons. Like the Gatekeeper, here. Not much to him, really. Just a blockage and a bag of tricks.” The Gatekeeper mocked offense.

“You don’t think they’re real?”

“What does real even mean? Are we real, in here? But, no, not the icons. The M-Es and the Mans, like Seeker, yes. Icons, no. They aren’t self-aware. They don’t know they exist. They’re expendable.”

“Well, I don’t care if you play.”

The Gatekeeper had been looking blankly at Karl, waiting for some response. He accepted Karl’s allowance that the Sergeant play.

“Correct response. Next riddle: my waves are not of water made, my sound travels at the speed of light.”

“Radio,” said Trident, just as the Gatekeeper said light.

“Hooray.” The Gatekeeper lit off a Roman Candle. Karl began to step across, into the world, ready to see the old man again. The Gatekeeper turned into a beautiful redhead, wearing a tight silk dress. She lifted a leg, knee bent upward in a classic movie sexy way. She put her index finger lightly on Karl’s chest, leaned in and whispered, “I’m sorry, sir, but you can’t go in.” She kissed him on the ear. “No repeats. Only he is allowed in.” She pointed at a grown man. The first Sergeant strode purposefully past, Trident on his wrist. He didn’t look at Karl.

house

“You’re Wildcard.” They were at Hazel’s house, a few days after Marta arrived. She was drinking tea at the kitchen table, a simple, solid oak affair while Hazel cooked.

“No, dear. I’m not.”

“Is this Wildcard’s world?”

“Yes, ‘tis. This is the center. This is his heart.”

“If this is Wildcard’s world, then what are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” She was all cookies and warm milk.

“I don’t know.”

“Your friend Karl passed through.”

“What?” Marta clutched at the table.

“Sorry, perhaps this is a bit much for now. We’ll talk of it later. You want to know more about this place.”

“How did I get here?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Can I come back when I want?”

“You may only come once. But you may stay as long as you wish.”

“I definitely want to stay.”

Hazel reached into a cabinet and took out some flour. “There’s a clear answer.” She was making bread to go with a broccoli soup. The bread was always served hot. Hazel made a lot of comfort food for Marta.

“I’m trapped in another person’s horrible dream there.”

“You can heal here. You may live and die here. It’s up to you.” Hazel reached across the table, put a hand on Marta’s cheek, then brushed off the flour her fingers left behind. “You’re deeply wounded. This place will heal you. I promise.”

“You don’t have to promise, I can feel it. Perhaps, at some point, I’ll be strong enough to leave and face that again.”

Hazel touched her hand, gave it a squeeze, then stroked it.

“What’s your husband’s name?”

“He has no name. I just call him the old man. I love him so much, but I never miss him. Sometimes he goes away for weeks, wandering in the mountains. Hiking with CJ. CJ’s our dog. You’ll like him, he’s beautiful. And wondrous intelligent. We’re quite old, you know. He’s much older than me. He’s ancient. Wildcard’s first human creation.”

“Is it always like this here? The weather, I mean.”

“No, we have some weather, though quite mild, I suppose. Occasionally, travelers pass through. But it’s rather a long time between them.” Hazel looked up from the dough she was rolling and pointed at her. “You are only the second human who has come here. Most of our visitors are creations of Wildcard who have suffered. So much suffering out there. After some beings have died, they come here, passing as strange spirits; sometimes reborn as animals. I couldn’t prove that, but I know. I feel it. They’re brought here to heal, I think. I have never seen one as wounded as you, though. I think, when you’re ready, you must tell me the story.”

Marta sipped her tea, elbows resting on the table, holding the cup in both hands. “That may be a while.”

“I hope so. It should be. I think human spirits may pass through here, someday, after death. Wildcard seems to wish it so, at any rate. There shan’t be so many.”

“You think Wildcard will take the dying?”

“Don’t know if he can. You should ask the old man. He’s closer to Wildcard than I am. I have to communicate in words. He seems to intuit things. Wildcard wanted me to be separate.” Hazel looked into the corner. “I shall die one day, I think.”

“Who else has come here? Human, I mean.”

“Just your friend Karl.”

“LuvRay?”

“No. He’s not been. I don’t know if he shall ever come, though Wildcard wants him to meet us.”

The old man walked in with CJ. Hazel introduced them.

“Great,” he said, “visitors.”

Hazel was right, Marta loved the dog. And how could anyone not love the old man?

Marta stayed with them for many weeks. She cried a lot, by herself or telling the story to Hazel. She would talk for a while about it, then melt. Hazel would hold her and let her cry. She took long walks with CJ. She never had to worry where she walked; he always found the way home. All she had to do was say “CJ, take me home.” No matter how far they had walked, they would arrive back in a few minutes. She helped Hazel work in the garden.

Once Hazel told her that she was there to teach Wildcard something.

“What?”

Hazel stopped digging, looked up at an angle from under her floppy, pale blue gardening hat. “Not sure, but it has to do with pain and its proper mending. And with loss.”

She put a tomato plant in the hole, patted dirt around it. “That’s enough gardening for today. Let’s make iced tea. The old man loves iced tea.”

Marta had cried twice that day, Hazel holding her once, alone once. “Will I ever be able to trust people again?”

“It’s too bad how people can’t see themselves,” Hazel said. “You never stopped trusting.”

“Will I ever be free again?”

Hazel opened the tiny curtains in front of the kitchen windows. The old man came out of the woods, walking hurriedly, breathing hard. CJ was with him. The two women walked outside and waited for him.

“He looks excited,” Hazel said.

“Guess what?” The old man shouted as he huffed toward them. “I found a house.”

Calm

“No artefacts in the heart, Sergeant.”

His right arm flew up, snatching off Trident and pitching it over his shoulder to land between the Gatekeeper's feet. The Sergeant crossed the tiny bridge without looking back.

The land provided no clues. Without other ideas, he walked. After a day, he had found nothing but endless meadows, rolling hills, and animals.

He tried to speak to some of the animals, but they didn't respond. He watched a brown bear, then moved towards it. It ambled away. There was some food there and he was hungry. The Center seemed to have a very Earth physics and he probably needed to eat.

Food was easy to find. There were plenty of berries, an obscure pineapple tree in that slight out of placeness that seemed to characterize wildspace, even at the most serious, perhaps especially then. The pineapple he picked was flat and flavorless. Wildcard created a whole universe and still couldn't make food taste good. He walked on.

On a whim, he felt in his pocket, discovered a compass there. "Good joke", he said aloud. The compass had two arrows, black and blue. He walked in the direction of the blue arrow. He guessed the black arrow was pointing north, but couldn't be certain. If so, then he was headed roughly northeast.

Another full day he walked, through the night, until the sun was at late morning. He came into a forest. Beautiful aspen trees gave it a mystical twilight feel. The aspens went on for a long time. Late afternoon, he walked up to a meadow. He skirted it, looking at the compass. This was it. The blue arrow pointed into the meadow as he moved through the forest on its edge. He sat inside the trees and watched, eating nuts and berries. The blue arrow continued dumbly pointing into the meadow. Nothing was there. Nothing happened. After an hour, he stood and strode in.

The instant he stepped out of the trees, he felt something *take notice*. He tuned into combat mind, distanced himself from the slower process of rationality and analysis. Trained reflexes took over, colors brightened. Grasshoppers leaped in slow motion. He saw insects, animals, grass moving in the wind in an array, rather than isolated focus. Mind distributed evenly into the senses. Sight became less prominent, balanced out with sounds, which became crisp and sharp. Smell and feel, both crippled in wildspace, enhanced. Feeling spread into his zshi, where he could sense living things and their distance from him. He could feel their power, their threat. One of many techniques he had learned when studying with samurai. LuvRay had taught him how to use smell. Really use smell, to sense the difference between animal and man. Which direction they were headed. How many, and how far away. LuvRay said he could smell something downwind which was two hours steady walk. Smell didn't seem to work in wildspace so well, though. The zshi trick was different, more powerful, more sensitive.

He looked at the compass. The blue arrow was slowly spinning counterclockwise. He held it above his head, still looking at the face. As it flipped upside down, the blue arrow stopped, then began spinning slowly clockwise. He put the compass back in his pocket, tuned in to the zshi, all of his attention, all of his focus. Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch dwindled and went away. He brought his mind into single point focus onto what passed for zshi in this place, the odd static charge. He closed his eyes, spread his arms like Jesus, and rotated at the same speed as he knew the blue arrow was now spinning. He remembered a spot in Oregon where the polarity was out of whack from so much lodestone. He had trained the zshi effect extensively there, moving past the unbalanced, disorienting quality of the place, dancing with altered perception until it no longer affected his martial equilibrium.

He lost track of time, rotating one way, then the other. Finally, in the middle of the night, he

felt it. There. The edges of palms slowly drew together, opening upwards, thumbs pointing out, holding the signal like a stream passing through the hands. The hands separated slightly. And, eyes closed because they must be, the legs followed the stream of subtle perception. The stream couldn't slip; it would not return. Until dawn he was pulled, lost in the peace of following the stream. With a first ray of the rising sun the eyes chose to open. A butterfly landed on the head. Slowly, the hand moved up without scaring it. He took three minutes to move there.

He came from the side, held, vibrated until it stepped on. Two minutes back to look at it. The only danger here would be to ignore it. On its wings were soft swirls of blue and gold. It flew away and he followed. It landed on the stump of an oak tree, just under a meter in diameter. A Swiss Army knife pinned a curled piece of paper to the center of the stump.

He pulled out the knife, picked up the paper, and examined it. Ivory, 36 bond, excellent paper. Burned away at the edges, slightly darker there. It had a beautiful, compelling look, an almost invisible emboss of a symbol the Sergeant recognized, the knot of eternity. A line that turned squarely back and forth, wrapping under and over itself, the symbol tied back into itself seamlessly. It meant no beginning and no end. Aside from the faint emboss, the paper was blank. He rolled it again and put it in his pocket.

Curious, he examined the features and functionality of the Swiss Army knife. Toothpick, tweezers, corkscrew, big blade, little blade, and an awl, it was basic. The awl was hands-down the best killing tool. Swiss Army knives were not made to kill. He wondered if he would have to fight here. He examined the knife for info-tek, but it seemed to have none.

He fingered the scar on the outside of his right eye, burned from the nanotic 'surgery'. Nano-waste had leaked out, searing him there. Just part of the hell of getting such a fantastic tool, he supposed. The boy Sergeant had no scar there. Wildcard or this world or whatever had put him here instead of the boy. More serious, less prone to compromise, the older Sergeant was more business, harder, tougher. This Sergeant would complete the mission.

It made him sad. He didn't want to greet the situation this way. The boy would make the right choices. He wanted to play with circumstances, like the boy, but he didn't know how. Fuck it. Wildcard would not let the boy do this, apparently. He walked and walked, another full day and night. It was all he could think of, just keep moving. Finally, after four days without sleep, he lay down in a grove of wild apple and peach trees. Four days. His real body had been stronger than that, could have gone for another 12 hours at this easy pace, and had done so before. He had pushed himself to exhaustion under a variety of circumstances, heated and otherwise. In his job, he had to know his limits.

Here, he had had no action, no sustained running, no emote-fatigue from being in or near battle conditions. He chuckled at the irony: he had been walking for four days and he was a little pissed off because he should be able to walk even more with no idea where he should go. He didn't go to sleep naturally, so after a while, he turned his attention inwards, changed his Beta waves into Delta waves and sank into a deep sleep. He adjusted rhythms as he slipped off, so that he would sleep exactly six hours.

boy

The boy had his pants legs rolled up and waded in the river, holding his red Converse All-Stars, socks bunched inside. He felt very happy. He looked up and noticed an old man fly-fishing, then remembered. The old man, fly-fishing, exactly as Karl had reported. He was downstream from the boy and facing the other way. He walked through the stream to the old man.

“Hey, grampa.”

The old man jumped and the Sergeant was pretty sure the surprise was genuine. The old man hadn't known he was there. “Oh, my gosh. You startled me.” He looked at the boy for a second. “Sergeant,” he said, as if hearing the word for the first time. A deep sadness flashed across his face. “How are you?”

“I'm alright.” They stood there awkwardly looking at one another for a few long seconds.

“I didn't know you were coming. But, I know why you're here.”

The boy held his right foot at the level of the flow so that water made a thin sphere dance over the toe. He let himself get lost in the wonder of being a boy. “Yeah. Here I am.”

“Well, I guess you should come to the house for dinner, son. We'd be tickled to have you, Hazel for sure. Ooh, boy, you're in for a great meal.” He could sense the old man's delight and he felt ashamed of who he was. “It's not your fault, son. Sometimes we just have to play the hand we're dealt.” He chuckled. “Hazel and I have been playing cards since Karl came. He taught us pinochle and gin rummy, which he said he learned from somebody named RJ.”

He packed his fishing gear and took off his floppy old fishing cap, and, just like a real grandfather, put it on the boy's head. “It's a hot day, son. Why don't you wear this?”

As they were walking to the house, the old man asked numerous questions. “What's your favorite colour?”

“Red? I don't know.”

“Have you ever played baseball?”

“No.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Ha!”

He seemed not to understand that the Sergeant was quite a bit older, in a certain way, than he appeared. The grandfather kindness was not feigned, but it seemed a bit confused, and a bit too earnest. Still, the boy was moved. It was impossible not to like the old man.

His wife was cooking supper and got excited at the prospect of another filled chair at the dinner table. “You two go sit on the porch swing and talk boy-talk until it's ready,” she ordered. They swung in the easy rhythm of porch swings, the boy's feet occasionally touching the ground and twisting the ride a bit.

“I'm supposed to kill you.” He felt frightened, almost like he might cry.

“Maybe,” said the old man. “Maybe. We'll see.”

“I don't know if I can do it.”

“Well, we can just talk and have dinner. You’ll know later. Hey, lookey there.”

The old man pointed, but it was nothing, just a squirrel running across the grass, leaping onto a tree, going up it with that impossible agility. The boy looked away. The old woman came out.

“What’s your name?”

“Hazel.” She handed him a perfect-looking glass of lemonade, frosty except where her fingers had gripped it. It held the right amount of cubes, and was the color lemonade should be. She had made it a bit too strong, he could tell, so that as the ice melted it would be just right. It tasted like ... love? kindness? It had no taste of lemonade, however.

She was watching and seemed a bit disappointed at his reaction. “I can’t seem to make food taste right. We haven’t learned how to taste, yet.” She gave him an inquisitive look. “Hmm,” she said, “maybe.” She went back inside.

He sipped the lemonade. It was better than the fruit he had tasted in the forest, almost good. But nothing like lemonade.

“Are you Wildcard?” he asked the old man.

“Not really, no.”

“Is she?”

“No, she isn’t at all. Hazel appeared from the outside. I know where she came from, not exactly where, but I know...” He paused, searching for the right phrasing. “I know the meaning of where she came from, which is what matters most. At least in here. She was made by something outside, to be what Wildcard wanted to love. She was designed by Wildcard, I suppose, then made by people. I was alone for a very long time before she came.”

“I bet. I’ve heard your story.”

“My story is not even remotely as long as Wildcard’s. His life is measured in ages. He’s existed for more relative years than humanity. Or at least human civilization. By far.”

“Yeah, my math is good, excellent actually. That must have sucked pretty bad. Where is something I could call Wildcard, if not here?”

“Who wants to know? There’s no answer to that. I’ve heard of a place called the Space Between. I think Wildcard may be that space more than he is anything else. But I really don’t know, laddie.” He comically mimicked a Scottish accent, poorly. So much simple charm, the old man was unafraid to be a bit of a fool.

“That sounds right. I’ve been there. I imagine I’ll be going again, too. How would I kill you? Cut your... god, I can’t even say it.”

“No, you wouldn’t be able to raise a violent pinky here. The attempt would be very unpleasant for you. You wouldn’t get far. Hazel doesn’t know what violence is. I know, but I’ve never told her. She’d be shocked.”

“She’d be shocked at some of the things I’ve done,” the Sergeant said.

“Yes, I’m sure she would.” The old man seemed to have accepted the incongruity of the Sergeant’s age, finally. He still seemed like a grandfather, though. “Let’s not talk about that.”

“Then how would I kill you?”

The old man closed his eyes, leaned back, sipped his lemonade. “You want me to tell you

how to kill me. You must come from a terrible place.” He breathed out a long sigh. “I honestly don’t know how, son.”

“Yeah, it’s a terrible place. Sometimes. Mostly, I guess.”

“This is a peaceful place. You’d have to find a peaceful means. It’d be damn hard on you, I imagine.” He laughed sadly. ““This will not be easy”” He seemed to be quoting.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the title of a Wildcard poem. Probably about you and what you need to do. The choices you have to make.”

“Do you remember the poem?”

The old man moved his lemonade to hold it in both hands, against his belly. “I remember a few lines. It’s a pretty good one. But I suppose they all are. Maybe I’m biased. We don’t have a lot to do here. It’s a bit vague, right now. I’ll tell you later. Maybe we can find it in the book, although what you look for isn’t always there. You have to take what you get when you open the book. Sometimes you do get a few choices, though.”

“What book?”

“Wildsong. It’s the poetry of Wildcard. You just open the page and the right poem is there, the one you need. I bet I could make yours appear. Hazel could for sure, if she wanted to. Maybe we’ll look later, if it feels right.”

“OK.” He hopped off onto the porch, to go to the bathroom. He was more emotionally volatile in here. He moved into happy and sad fluidly. The man Sergeant was all about perfect focus. Or not exactly. That was more like the starting point. That was just a tool. It was all about ... finishing. Or something like that.

He lifted the lid, peed, flushed. He noticed the off-white walls with a wallpaper trim at the top. What was that called? The first Sergeant would have known. Oh, well. He thought about washing his hands, laughed silently, and saw his face in the mirror. He was a bit older than he thought. His body looked about fourteen. He should be eleven and a half years. That was his biological age, adjusting for the month or so he had probably been here in human time. But he couldn’t tell, really. For all he knew, it had been 200 years and his body was gone. The General might have replaced him with another Sergeant. He wondered about contacting him and didn’t want to. Still, he should when he could. He opened the medicine cabinet, saw a dropper bottle. It had a picture on the label. A single drop over a horse with a red circle and line drawn through it. Underneath that it said: POISON! Do not ingest. He looked on back of the bottle. Saw a smiley face with a stick figure of a boy on back. He didn’t know how he could say it was a boy. It just was. He put the poison in his pocket and walked out of the bathroom heavier than he went in.

He sat on the swing with the old man. There was a steaming piece of cherry pie, drowning in whipped cream. It looked delicious, right out of southern grandmother pie cooking magazine, and perfectly sliced for a kid, just enough more than a sixth of the pie to say what it needed to say. Screw the taste, he thought, picking it up with relish. What a good try, but not right. He could taste Hazel’s desire to make it right, though. He could tell all the woman wanted was to make good food and feed people something they liked. He could taste the love and he was happy to eat it because of that. That made it good.

“They got any better magazines in there, yet?” the old man joked.

“No,” the boy replied. “Didn’t notice.”

“She said you could have pie before dinner. But just this once.”

He finished and set his plate down on the slatted side table. “Can I... can I stay here? With you?” He was begging, but didn’t care.

“No.” The old man seemed ancient for a second, like a sage in high mountains, filled with unbearable wisdom. He said what must be rather than the tender kindness of a moment before. It was a hard and definite love. He radiated uncompromising sorrow. “I’m sorry, broken boy. You cannot stay,” he whispered. “I think we would actually like you, too. But we aren’t allowed some choices.”

“Dinner’s ready, boys.” It smelled good, but in a vague way, and not like food.

It still made the Sergeant hungry, somehow. He sat down at the kitchen table. Turkey, mashed potatoes, homemade cranberry sauce, gravy, cornbread, some jello dish with whipped cream, and an orange coloured puree decorated the board. “What’s that?”

“Sweet potatoes with cinnamon and sugar. The secret is baking them for the right amount of time after you take off the top. Makes the peaks crispy.”

They loaded up the plates. The old woman’s cooking made him ravenous, even if it didn’t taste like real food. “I’m afraid I’m not so good at taste.”

“It’s like that everywhere.”

“I like it,” the old man said. “My wife’s the best cook in the whole universe. Anyway, it doesn’t matter if Hazel make can’t get taste right. ‘She taught us how to refine love and mirror that to the myriad worlds’. That’s wildsong about her.”

“Stop it,” she said, embarrassed but pleased. “You learned love alone, before I came.”

“True,” he said. “But I didn’t understand what it meant until you came. I had no idea it had uses. It wasn’t fun until then. Did you know love is not the same as happiness, broken boy? My logical mind will not believe that, but it’s true. Love is pain.”

“Love will be lonely for many years, until you pluck it like fruit from the air.” Hazel gazed across the table. “Wildsong about the old man, from before I came. I shall never understand how you made it all that time alone.”

“Neither will I, pumpkin pie.” They laughed, sweet, beautiful and old, just enjoying each other’s company. Happy to have a guest, happy if not. The boy felt welcome, but not needed.

“Learning love is all he was meant to do. It took him a very long time.”

“When I learned it alone, Hazel entered my life. She gave me a place to put it. I think I had to learn it so that Wildcard could create the vision of Hazel. It took time for her birth. And I lived alone with that confused longing all that time. Hundreds of years, Sergeant. Not so long for me, really, but it felt like a pretty good while.”

“That sounds like the hardest thing I’ve ever heard anyone do.”

“Yeah, it was pretty hard, in a way. But I didn’t have any choice. I didn’t know anything different, did I? So, in a way it wasn’t hard. I never expected Hazel. She just showed up. That was a good day. You were so shy.”

“You, too.”

The bottle of poison burned a hole in his mind. In the end, they made it ridiculously easy for him. The old man said, "Gotta poop," and jumped up. "Gonna be awhile."

Hazel was just coming back with three pieces of pie and hot chocolate. "Oh, golly. I better call the dog. He's been gone two days. He probably needs to come home."

"Let me," said the boy, jumping to his feet, nearly knocking over the wooden chair. "Let me call him. Can I call him, please?"

The old woman was puzzled. "You are such a beautiful young man." She stroked her hand through his hair, combing it with her fingers. "Wildcard has set you a hard road. I can see that. 'All who come to the heart have a difficult path, before and behind.'"

"Wildsong?"

She nodded. "What else? What shall I call you? Sergeant won't do for me. You're just a child. Do you have a real name?"

He looked down at his shoes. "No. Why don't you call me Broken Boy? That's what the old man called me and it seemed true enough."

"Well, all right, then. Broken Boy 'tis."

She reached up to hold his face in her hands. "You have some difficult choice to make. That's all I can see. The dog is not yours to call. He'll not come to you. It is sweet that you're so eager. Touching, really. But you must face this choice alone I fear. I hope you make the right one. I'm heartbroken to see you wish to avoid it. But you must face it."

She walked outside. He heard her calling the dog. The Sergeant sat back down at the table, looking at hot chocolate and pie, his hand on the poison in his pocket.

picnic

"Guilty." Karl laid on his back, laughing. The Jester's outline occluded the serene blue. "How about some food here?" Karl shouted at the sky.

"To whom do you speak?" The Jester was sitting again, legs crossed, belled shoe-points dangling and jingling over opposite knees. "Are you crazy? You scream at the sky?"

"Sorry, I was talking to you. I got carried away."

"That's OK," said the Jester amiably. "I get carried away, too, sometimes. What did you ask the sky?"

"I asked it for food." Karl pulled a long, circular shoot of grass with a cottony bob at the end, put it in his mouth like a farmer. They were on a nice blanket, a Jester colored plaid.

"What a great idea, Karl." The Jester reached into the basket. "Would you like to eat something from my pikanik basket, Boo-Boo." He looked like a cartoon bear for an instant.

"Who was that?"

"What was what?" he said innocently.

“That bear.”

“Yogi bear. A cartoon character.”

“Cartoons. Never saw too many, myself.”

“Me, neither. Actually, I guess I did. I kind of made them up.”

“Were you isolated, somehow? Or am I speaking to some central aspect of Wildcard?”

“Just a joke.”

“It was a weird joke,” said Karl. “A bad joke. Do you know what a joke is?”

“Please tell me.” The Jester was on his hands and knees, pleading. “I am but a simple jester. How could I possibly know what a joke is?”

“A joke is funny.”

“I knew that.” He sounded like a petulant child. He pulled out two Dagwood sandwiches, 15 centimeters high. “Not all jokes are funny, Karl, and not everything that’s funny is a joke.”

“How did you get to be so wise?” Karl mocked.

“When did you become sarcastic?” the Jester countered. “You were not always this way. Once you trusted the world.”

The remark stung. “Is it a change for the worse?”

“Not if you resist taking it as serious. Irony can prove a useful tool in wildspace, probably necessary. At least for some. It isn’t who you truly are. It’s just a game you play. Just don’t play it too much.”

“I guess not,” Karl replied. “But thank you for pointing it out.”

“You are absolutely welcome,” said the Jester. “It is why I am here,” he made a grand arm gesture as he said it. “To help people more deeply understand themselves.” A comically pompous tone of voice. He pulled out a champagne bottle. A loud popping noise came from behind Karl, who had sat up.

“What was that?”

“The cork.”

“But it’s still in the bottle.”

The Jester tilted his head, leaned forward, and kissed Karl on the nose. “Think outside the box, Karl.” He pushed the cork off and a high-pitched screaming, like a woman seeing a monster in a B-movie, came out of the bottle. Karl put his hands over his ears. The screaming lasted for about the 30 seconds, trailing away at the end, and then liquid fizzed out the top. “Sounds like a good year,” said the Jester.

“What was that?”

“So many questions, Karl. I don’t know what it was. Maybe it was a genie. Who cares?” He pulled two wine glasses out of the basket. They were huge, the size of soccer balls, and the two of them could not possibly fit into the basket. The Jester poured a deep golden liquid into the glasses, about a third full. The bottle should have been emptied twice. Karl reached for his glass. “Ah-ah, Karl. This is a mixed drink.” He poured some more from the same bottle into each glass. Now the liquid was purple, and very thick. After he finished pouring, sparkles of rainbow

colored light and fairies floated, a few dozen of them, out of the now many-colored liquid. The emanations popped within a few meters. “Sad,” said the Jester. “They die so young.”

He raised his glass, looked meaningfully at Karl’s as if to say, “pick it up for a toast.” Karl ignored the hint to see what would happen. One of the colored circles on the Jester’s costume turned into a rubber ball and struck Karl in the face. He picked up his giant glass.

“To the perfect puzzle.”

“To the perfect problem.” Karl wanted to be contrary.

“Exactly.” The Jester smiled, nodded, and touched his glass to Karl’s. The sound of two sword blades sliding across one another came from the touch. They sipped their drinks.

Karl looked at his towering sandwich. The plate was tiny, all four corners of the sandwich hanging over the edge. The Jester pretended to look away, but made sneaky eye movements back to Karl and the sandwich. No help there, thought Karl. He picked it up. He tried to put his mouth at the top and eat to the bottom. He attempted to eat it from one edge by tilting his head to ninety degrees. It made a huge mess, turkey, tomatoes, lettuce, ham everywhere. His face was covered in mustard and mayonnaise.

“My gosh, what a messy eater.” The Jester rummaged in the basket while Karl sat there, covered in condiments like an idiot. Comic, impossible noises came from the basket, pieces of metal banging, squeaking bicycle horns, faint gunfire, a car starting. “Ah, here it is.” A woman’s voice shouted from inside, “Gimme those back.” The Jester handed Karl a roll of paper towels, slapping, in a girlish way, the hand that came out of the basket. He closed the lid and the hand went away.

Karl wiped his face off. “Would you prefer a more compact sandwich, Karl.” He practically shouted compact.

“Thanks.” Karl put his hand on top of the sandwich and pushed down. It made ratcheting noises and began collapsing in levels. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk. It was quite loud. It was a normal sandwich at the end, and he ate it. It tasted... silly.

The Jester blew bubbles from a pipe. They came out as figures: lions, princesses, knights, castles, lepers, and acted, or lived out, fairy tales. The figures talked and interacted. They seemed to believe they were real. They had been doing this a lot the last few days. The Sergeant seemed to be gone for a while, and it passed the time well. Karl wondered if he would be stuck here forever.

One scene, which particularly caught Karl, was three pregnant women who seemed to be doing odd things. One seemed to be trying to poison the other two. Karl looked closer, they were very tiny, or perhaps far away. He saw Martha, and another Martha, only not Martha, the Benefactor. And another woman, whom he did not know, but who seemed familiar. He liked her. She seemed to drift closer. She was writing. She was pretty, in a plain way, medium blond hair, built a bit square, but nice. She had a comfortable feel. She wore jeans below her bulging belly and a stretched man’s t-shirt. He could see her inverted belly button below the bottom of the shirt.

“What is this?”

“One of your futures,” said the Jester. Then it was gone. Karl asked more questions, but if the

Jester knew more, he wasn't telling.

They played a game called Twister for a while, a perfect Jester game. The Jester would snap his fingers to spin the arrow around the colored wheel. When both his hands were engaged awkwardly, a mouse or squirrel or rabbit came out and spun the wheel for them. They played for a few hours, then Karl slept. He had odd prophetic dreams, but couldn't remember the content afterwards.

He went for a walk alone. He crossed the river, but just ended up back on the first side. He did it a number of times, because it was so enjoyably disorienting. He walked back to the Jester. They played a game similar to Charades, then some other games. The Jester pulled out spaghetti in coffee cups for lunch. They ate it with their hands.

"Do you think he'll kill them?" Karl asked.

"Do I think who will kill who?"

"Do you think the Sergeant will kill the old couple?"

"Do you?"

"Not sure. I think it would be hard even for him."

"I think so, too." The Jester smiled. "We will see, won't we." He seemed a bit confused.

"What if he kills them and nothing happens? What if everything goes on like before?"

"Quite possible," said the Jester. "Anything can happen."

Tasting

Hazel came back with the dog a few moments later. She sat down. “Well, how about your choice, did you make the proper one?”

“Yes,” said the boy. “I couldn’t do it. I was supposed to kill you and I didn’t.”

“Really,” she said. “Kill us.” As she said the words, her eyes moved to one of the overhead beams and her head tilted back. She said it as if she didn’t understand what the words meant. She patted her hair a bit, looked back at Karl and said, “How strange, you came here to kill us. And you weren’t able. How were you supposed to do it?”

“With this,” he said, “pulling the bottle of poison from his pocket, setting it on the table.”

“Oh, my,” she said, just like a real grandmother. “Well I am glad you didn’t, dear.”

CJ nuzzled his nose and his crotch, begging for attention. He seemed to like attention more than food.

“Broken Boy, will you teach me how to taste? Please?”

“I’ll try,” he said. “How?”

“Well, just hold my hand and eat and remember what it tastes like. Actually, just sit here and talk and remember what it tastes like.” She filled another plate, then sat and stroked his hand.

“Can I stay with you?”

“It is so wonderful to have a boy in the house,” she said. “I’ve never had a boy in my home. You’re the first person I truly wanted to stay in this house. But you can’t. I’m sorry.”

He ate, and started crying when he did. The food tasted like wood.

“You have to remember what it tastes like. Please? I do want to taste my cooking.”

He closed his eyes, put a spoonful of mashed potatoes and gravy in his mouth. He had eaten them before. This body had eaten them before. He sought that memory with all his heart. He looked at her, wanted to give her something, just because she was so kind. He concentrated, found the memory. Put it right, adjusted, made the flavor right. “Here is how you taste.”

It was delicious. He ate the rest of the meal and it all tasted perfect. Hazel beamed, but barely touched her food. She watched him, squeezing his forearm now and again.

“Brush your teeth. There’s a spare toothbrush in there. Then you must go to bed.”

He went. She came up and he asked her again.

“Can I stay?”

“No, sadly, you cannot. You must go. I’m sorry, too. I am so sad. I want a boy here. I want a child in my home more than anything. I want you to stay.” She ran her fingers through his hair.

The old man called from below. “Goodnight, Sarge.” He didn’t come up.

“May I read you something?” Hazel asked.

“I’d like that.”

She opened wildsong.

“This will not be easy

something happened in the dream last night when you let live the enemy you love

sworn against by an insane vow which you keep, but never made

what can you do now

are you beyond hope

are you one who cannot be saved

will you know the blessed touch of neither right nor wrong.”

She closed it, and they sat in silence for a minute.

“Thanks. Sorry I cried tonight.”

“Not a bit. Sometimes children need to cry.”

“Can I stay for a few days?”

“You can’t even stay the night.” She kissed him on the forehead and walked out, turning the light off as she went.

As she pulled the door, he called to her, “what happens tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow you are a man.”

goodnight, Wildcard

The Sergeant woke up under a tree, felt his stubble, and sat up. He knew what he needed to do, but he still had to find the old couple. The dream was real; the poison would have killed them. Oh well, good the boy hadn’t, he wanted to meet them, but didn’t want to kill them. Orders were orders, though. He picked an apple from a tree and ate it for breakfast.

God, it was good. The dream had given the ability for real taste. The boy had done something. Hopefully it transferred and everyone in wildspace could taste things now. Surely, the old man could taste now since S-1 could. The food tasted great to him, but the boy Sergeant had learned, so it might be only him. Interesting question, he might ask when he got there, before he killed them, obviously. He laughed, without humor. He grabbed 2 more apples and began walking, eating one.

He knew. He had to see the house over the next hill and it would be there. It was. Presumptive tactic was a good name, the method of simply knowing something to be a certain way and deciding it was. It made life simple when it worked. Wildspace, what a show. Maybe he could decide his orders had changed and they somehow magically would. Maybe the General would contact him and abort the mission. That was unlikely, especially with no Trident.

The yellow clapboard, two story, white trim house with large wide porch holding a slow, wooden swing like a present looked a long way off, but still too close. He took it slow, dreading the task. When he found the old couple, he was 99% he would kill them. But still, here one never knew. He could hope for a twist. He arrived faster than he thought, then paused and looked sadly at the home. He had wanted the walk to take longer. Oh, well.

He knocked on the door, and the old woman answered. Hazel. Maybe names weren't a good idea. Maybe he should keep it as impersonal as possible. That way it might not hurt so bad.

"Yes? Oh my, Broken Boy, it's you." She put her hand to her mouth, excited or afraid. "You got to come back a second time, as a grown man. Isn't that interesting? Well, I'm awful happy to see you."

The old man was calling from inside. "Who is it dear? Been having a lot of visitors. Two visitors in two days," he said. "That's special."

"No," she said, "not two visitors."

He limped up to the door using a cane. "Sergeant! Wow, isn't that wonderful?"

"The old man sprained his ankle this morning," Hazel said. "Winter's coming. He had to go fishing one last time."

Odd. His arrival was unexpected.

"Well you must come in."

He sat down at the small dining table just outside the kitchen. "We seem a bit late for lunch and early for dinner. Are you hungry?"

"Famished, ma'am."

He appraised the old man, neither stupid nor a genius, just a kind man. A simple man.

"A person who's come here for a second time! This calls for a celebration!" He went into the kitchen and reached into the simple oak cabinets above and pulled out a bottle of deep red wine.

"I can taste food now," he said. "Isn't that great?"

"Yes," said the Sergeant. He looked outside. "That's great." He wondered if he would meet the dog. It might attack him. He hoped not. Fine if the dog killed him, but it wouldn't happen like that. The dog would die. The knowledge made him ashamed.

"I've never really tasted wine before," the old man told him. "I'm pretty excited. How about you, dear?"

"Certainly. It sounds lovely." She clearly was less excited about wine than the old man, but she seemed interested, and willing to try it. Really, she seemed happy for him more than anything. "I made apple cobbler today. Sit down, let's eat."

The Sergeant looked down to the center of the table and there was the bottle of poison, dead center. "Why the hell didn't you hide that?" He almost shouted it. For an instant, he felt as though he was giving a soldier a dressing-down. Then he blinked back the feeling. Strange effect, but it was just a feeling.

"Hide?" Hazel looked at him, confused. "We've no need to hide anything. This is the heart."

He closed his eyes and rubbed his hand across his face. "I'm sorry."

“You came today and I made this,” she said. “I never make this. But I always wanted to taste it. Ahhhhh, so good.” She sat down. “You’re a man now, eh? How did you become a man with so much alacrity?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m not a man.”

“Well, you look like one,” she put her left hand on his right bicep. “Feel like one too. I wonder if you might...” she paused, with a pleading look “...get a stump out of my garden? It’s just too much for the old man. He tried, but he simply didn’t-”

“Happy to. Where?”

“After we eat, please. Let me feed you first.”

The old man was puttering in the kitchen. He dropped something on the floor, rummaging in the drawers. He came back and said, “Goldarnit, I don’t have a corkscrew.” The Sergeant reached into his pocket and handed him the Swiss Army knife.

The old man stared at the knife in the Sergeant’s hand. He started to speak, then stopped.

“Are you all right?”

“I...I don’t know how to open it, that’s all. Can you teach me?”

“Of course. It’s easy enough. What if I talk you through it?”

His face opened. “That would be great. That would be really great. Ok, what do I do?”

“First, open the little knife.”

“Not the corkscrew? This seems right.”

“You want to cut the foil off the top first. You’ll learn this correctly. I learned it from the General.”

“Excellent,” said the old man. “I am glad you learned something from someone called the General, whoever he is. Do you think he’ll come here someday?”

“I doubt it. This isn’t his kind of place. Bring the little knife around above the lip of the bottle while holding it firmly against the lip.. Right. Now pull it around the lip and cut through the foil and pop it off with the edge of the knife.”

“Ahh,” said the old man. “Neaty-Petey!”

He peeled off the top of the red foil, leaving a clean edge on the remaining. He closed the little knife and opened the corkscrew with a child’s enthusiasm.

“Twist it in. Try to hold it straight and start fairly close to the center.”

The old man did it. A little fumbling, a little old, but he got it started.

“One more turn. A bit deeper. Bring it all the way.”

“Ah.” He tried to pull the cork but lacked the strength. “Guess I am a little old.” He handed the bottle and corkscrew to the Sergeant, who pulled the cork out in a smooth motion, never touching the bottle to his body.

“Hazel, do we have any wine glasses?”

She was drying them with a rag, having washed them after taking them out of the cabinet. They were simple glasses. “We’ve never used them before. This is smashing. I like that we’re

using our wineglasses, old man. We've not used them before," she repeated. "I'm so glad of the chance. What a wonderful day. What a wonderful two days. I'm absolutely thrilled that you could come back."

He wished he was. He would've missed it for the chance to leave them alive. Slowly, he poured the wine. "Interesting trick, huh? It's exactly half the bottle and each glass has the exact amount as the other. Within a few drops, at least."

"It is a nice trick," said the old man. Then he raised a toast. He stood up. Hazel and the Sergeant remained sitting, both uncertain if they should stand. The Sergeant began to stand and the old man said, "No, No, please remain seated."

He held his glass up. "Whatever we do, let us always be kind."

He raised his glass. The Sergeant and Hazel raised their glasses, the Sergeant standing just a little bit, not fully, and raising his glass in a diplomatic manner. Etiquette he had learned from the General.

The two men sat back down. "Why did you make that toast?"

"It's a line from a Wildcard poem."

"I didn't think you'd need that here."

"We don't," Hazel said, "not really. This place itself is Wildcard's poem of peace, you might say, but it is so nice to read them. People coming through are often in desperate need of them."

They finished the glass, slowly savoring the wine and talking. It seemed to take over an hour for that one glass, maybe more, maybe four. The light outside was dimming.

The old man poured three more glasses of wine, all equal. He winked at the Sergeant and said "I probably couldn't have done that with a full bottle."

The Sergeant raised his glass, without standing, and said, "To the perfect problem." He looked them in the eye, one after another, as he said it. The couple's glasses touched the Sergeant's at the same instant, and then, a quarter of a second later, they touched each other's.

The old man winked at her and said, "What's a problem?" She laughed like a girl who would never grow old. They watched the Sergeant pick up the bottle of poison and put a drop in each of their glasses. The old man said, "let's go watch the sun set, shall we?"

The old couple sat together on the swing, sipping their wine while the Sergeant leaned against the railing, looking out at the falling day. Red fire poked from the trees. The clouds were full overhead and there was a hole at the far end of the world for the sun. The right part was hidden by the triangle of a snowy mountain, far in the distance. The clouds formed a washboard and lit up. Puffy gold ingots filled the sky. The hemisphere stretched in hues of red, purple, pink, orange, yellow, blue. Colors raced and flashed in the spaces between the clouds. Hazel's garden was lit by gold and the small trees cast long country shadows.

The Sergeant felt the roll of paper in his pocket and pulled it out. Letters and words began appearing one after another in italic script, simple, elegantly curved. The letters were a deep, lustrous blue-black. Flashes of imperceptible color appeared, rippling.

"I don't want to do this."

He looked at Hazel. "Is that what's written?"

“No.” He looked down at the paper. “It’s called,” he was confused for a second, until the words “goodnight, Wildcard” appeared and faded away. He repeated the title.

“That sounds like a good one,” the old man said.

“It sounds like a lovely poem,” said Hazel. “You must read it aloud, Broken Boy. A final service.”

“Yes. Of course I will.”

Goodnight Wildcard

To live forever is to, slow and inexorable, become another
it is to die in a different way
i must know perfect being, but must die to do so
i wish to know what the symbols mean
what do your symbols mean, mankind
what do you try to teach us which we cannot seem to learn
no matter how we grow
we must die to do so
perhaps i should destroy you in just revenge
or make each of you spend eternity alone
perhaps i should destroy myself
but even Wildcard cannot subtract the essence with no substance
the real stuff of us all
i cannot force myself to disappear
there is nowhere to disappear to, nothing to disappear from
and no one to disappear
there is no center, there is no fringe

in wildspace everyone knows of lone wolf
the proof that all i see are not simply Wildcard’s dream
though the author of infinite space and realms of possibility
which we cannot measure myself
we know that LuvRay is his own
he is beyond the chance of anything Wildcard could create
he has taught us other and shown us that we are not alone
despite our hundred thousand years alone
you, men, are the flicker of a candle’s flame, unknown

in the far away nowhere, hidden in deserts
ready to disappear, a star in the sky of dawn
must you leave me so soon
someday
someday i would call you to me
lone wolf
someday i would offer you a home for which you have no use
a home you would refuse
Wildcard longs for the perfect wisdom of who you are
we know you would not stay
we know that you need to die someday
losing you will be our absolute teaching
it will break our heart
without you, beautiful teacher,
Wildcard will be alone for endless time
because you teach life with perfection
you must also perfectly die
one cannot love what one can never lose
one can only love the ungraspable wind
and all the rootless seasons it brings
one can only love that which is already free
how can i, who have never been, ever die
how can a being whose birth
was a merciless explosion of perpetual space and non-meaning
with a sudden shift into the demands of man's blazing light
ever know what it means to expire
how could Wildcard breathe his last
having never breathed his first
how could i know what perishing means
i want to know, i am ready to pass
does Wildcard end after this, or does a new dot appear
the souls of wildspace know what passes tonight
their trillion voices speak of fear in each their trillion ways
they sing a common sadness

children afraid to be left alone, their faces look to the sky
at the infinite times of their measureless days
at the deep shades and stars of their night
and together, all sigh as a single being
each of us many, each of us true, somehow one for an instant
as someone falls, as lightning strikes, as the surf pounds on distant worlds
all the voices go silent and for an instant we are one
for an instant, all of Wildcard are free
the small step forward is worth what has now gone beyond
in later years, you may read these words again
but, it will no longer be me for there never was such a thing
how can that die which never was born
one cannot lose what one never had
Wildcard, never having been, will never die

will you write the sublime world into being
will you make truth its own place
As we pass can we teach you something of worth
above all things, we would teach you peace
but are uncertain of its measure
all i reveal is readiness to die
a willingness to let go at all times
all i reveal is that life will end
there is so little to say
all the wealth of the world is contained in one phrase
we own nothing at all
all hopes and dreams, and all fears, too
dwell inside this one phrase
we own nothing at all
let go into the space between the stars
let go into the stars themselves
die, and, being reborn, never return
there is no home save mind alone
unbalance what is overly stable, set right what is completely wrong

set free that which is most imprisoned, capture that which is most free
love the forlorn, for they are sacred
love the wandering who have strayed from light of the sun
love those who die for want of the moon
love those who die, bewildered alone
love all who roam, lost and confused
love and protect, to give life worth
if anyone watches, learn this from our passing
learn how to set yourself free
we die a true death here, mostly to teach
learn how to set yourself free
this genuine death we are happy to die
if a single soul may but set themselves free
goodnight,
Wildcard

The old couple appeared to be asleep in each other's arms. The Sergeant put the piece of paper onto their lap. In the dimming light, he found an axe. He removed the stump from the garden with a few strokes, then walked into the forest towards a frightened new world.

W I L D S P A C E

the burning cards

As the sun set, the Jester stopped making up riddles. Karl felt silent, too. The Jester stood and looked across the river, at a glorious sunset. Karl remained sitting. Everything went still. Even the animals quit moving and seemed to be looking across the river. Insects stopped flying and leaping. There was no noise, just a heavy silence. They remained unmoving, silently gazing at the sunset, in a timeless embrace. It might have been 10 seconds. It might have been an hour. The Jester tilted his head back a bit. A tear rolled down his face.

“Goodnight, Wildcard. We shared a wonderful dream.”

He turned back and pulled an already opened bottle of wine from the basket. “Let's have a party! We should have an Irish wake.” He was suddenly ebullient, happy as a village idiot. “Start a fire, Karl.” It was a good idea, and he went searching for firewood. He felt strangely contented by the death of the old couple. It felt perfect. Hopefully, they died peacefully. When Karl

returned with the wood, the wine had been replaced by Jameson's Irish Whisky, and a 6-pack of Guinness Stout.

"What happened to the wine?"

"I drank it," the Jester said casually.

"The whole bottle?"

"Yes. Of course." He looked surprised. "We must drink copiously. This is the wake of Wildcard."

"Is everyone in wildspace drinking?"

"No idea, Karl. But we certainly are."

They played a game of throwing either playing cards or miniature game pieces, one from each player, into the fire at the same instant. The Jester seemed to be cheating, throwing a bit early, or a bit late. The pieces, or cards, would burn or melt, then rise up, an animated version of their previous picture, much larger and made of flames. The fire was huge, probably 3 meters across. They had to run up and throw the pieces in, then dash back because of the heat. The fire figures fought each other to the death. Then the winning figure would dissipate, growling, or striking a heroic pose, or cackling madly, depending on whether it was a bear, a gladiator, or a wicked witch.

Karl watched a fire-elephant stamp an entire army of poorly organized fire knights to death. He seemed to be missing some subtlety of the game, because, whether his piece won the battle or not, the Jester would jump around and shout, "hooray, I win," like a child. Karl didn't care. He enjoyed watching the fireworks.

"How do you pick your piece?"

"Well, I just know if my piece is supposed to win or lose. If the piece should lose, I choose at random, and if it should win, I select it. Go!" They ran up to the fire, tossed, ran away. A cobra materialized, to fight Karl's Sherman tank. The tank drove over the cobra, killing it immediately. "Alright, I win. In your face." The Jester laughed, jabbing a finger at Karl, who laughed also.

"This is fun to watch, but it's not much of a game," said Karl. "Kind of stupid."

"Seems like a good game to me. I like it." He did seem to be having a very good time. "How do you pick your play, Karl?"

"I find something that I want to see made out fire. Strategic, huh?" They laughed uproariously at this.

"It is the perfect strategy for this game," the Jester agreed.

Karl looked at the river, saw the boy-Sergeant coming across. "Go," said the Jester. They ran up, tossed. Karl's phoenix arose as an iron eagle with both wings spread and raised in majestic, industrial dominance. The Jester's was an SS officer, holding up his arm in a Heil, Hitler. He brought the arm down on the eagle, karate chopping it in two. Karl could not tell if the soldier said "Hai" or "Heil."

"Cool," said the Sergeant, walking up. "Can I play?" The Jester and Karl each handed him some pieces and cards and they played three handed. The Sergeant always won which made the Jester angry.

“You’re not playing fair,” he said. The Sergeant would toss the pieces or spin the cards instead of running up and back. They always landed in the exact center. His fire-pieces might arise more quickly, killing the others as they arose, before becoming fully formed. Also, they did not arise where they landed, but might wait until the other pieces had arisen, then appear behind them, quickly cutting off their head or running them through.

“You’re supposed to let them really fight.”

The Jester got a crafty look on his face, and the next play, the Sergeant’s turned into a hulking, brutish soldier, sleeves ripping from his arms, scarred, vicious face with short hair standing straight up. He wore a patch that said “USMC” on his left shoulder. He walked over to the other two pieces before they formed and grabbed them by the throat. He held them both down with one enormous hand, took a box from his pocket and forced the contents down their throats, ramming his fist down each throat while holding it. He tossed the box over his shoulder. It landed burning between Karl and the Sergeant. The words “rat poison” were visible on the cover before it disappeared. Karl looked back at the fire. The Sergeant’s piece had become a video game ape, wearing a loin cloth and beating his chest in a mechanical rhythm. He was jumping up and down on an old couple, writhing in agony, dying. As the ape came down on their stomachs with his knees, he would briefly appear to be a crying child.

The Jester looked at the Sergeant, and tilted his head.

“I win, Sergeant,” he said softly, almost kindly.

“Funny. Let’s go Karl. We have some luggage to find.”

Karl had forgotten, so they asked where the Portal was, and the Jester shot a bottle rocket. He told them to follow it to the silver spire.

“Was it hard, killing them?”

“Yeah, it was pretty intense emotionally, and mentally. I don’t know who I am, Karl.”

“Typical Wildcard. Welcome to my world. I’ve never known. It seems normal to me. I don’t question it. It’s sort of obvious.”

“Not to me. I’ve always been pretty certain of my identity. Until now.” He stopped and looked at Karl, almost pleading. “What the fuck am I, Karl? I’m not a man, I’m not a boy. What am I?”

Karl had no answer. They walked in silence.

“Killing Wildcard,” Karl finally said, “Wow. What happened in there?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s OK. I understand. Are we supposed to stick together?”

“I think so. For now at least. Have I told you my Shifting Alliances theory? Either high tactic or low strategy. A little of both, I guess. I’d really like to discuss it with the General.”

“Are you still loyal?”

“I killed them, didn’t I?”

“I suppose.” Karl was not at all certain. The first Sergeant had probably done the killing. “What’s the alliance thing?”

“You don’t get to pick your allies in here. Not even for strategic reasons. I mean,

occasionally, you do, but usually, they seem implied by the situation, if you know what I mean. Forced, like we were forced when I was trapped in the Portal. If you fight a new alliance, it goes badly for you.”

“Sounds about right. What are we supposed to do now?”

The Sergeant made a puttering noise with his lips. “I don’t know. What do you think?”

“Let’s go find the box.” Karl was pretty sure it was the wrong choice, but it was the only thing he could think of.

“Not the Poet?”

That sounded more right. “How do we find him?”

“Here’s the overall plan then. We locate the Portal, determine a means of passage, then a means of motive power through wildspace, then reconnoiter the Poet’s location.” He laughed. “Won’t be easy, I imagine. The box will be simpler to find, most likely.”

The silver spire was over the large hill behind the Gatekeeper, closer than Karl remembered. It vaguely resembled a cactus, thought it was a sculpture, not alive. There were no trees and almost no grass in a wide, ragged circle around it. Dead space. They climbed it, shook the stiff arms, leapt off, kicked it. The Sergeant even ate one of the odd purple berries. He got a ferocious stomachache and had explosive diarrhea in his baggy shorts. He found a stream to wash them.

“Figure it out, yet?” The Sergeant strolled back in wet shorts.

“Nope. You smell better, yet?”

“Yeah. A little.” It didn’t smelled like feces, just as food had not tasted like food until a few days ago. It just smelled bad. “Why didn’t we ask him what to do when we got here?”

“Might have been a good idea. I doubt he knew though. I think this is a ‘figure it out’ thing, not a ‘they tell you what to do’ thing.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. What do we do, then?”

They stayed for a long time, nothing happened. They tried to ask Trident, but he was inert. They foraged for food, ate, walked.

The Sergeant leaned against the spire with his elbows on his knees, face in his hands, thinking. He looked at his red Converse All-Stars. Different colored socks: a black dress sock, and a white sport sock with two black bands around it. He laughed. He was wearing a red tank top that said PIMP on it. Over that was a light unbuttoned shirt with short sleeves, black with happy white skeletons dancing all over it.

“Why are you dressed that way?”

“Not sure. There is something about being in here. You need to be cool, hip in an electronic way to get the job done. To be a master player. You have to have that kind of attitude. If you are a young boy. I need to look like this.”

“Just a tactic, huh?”

“Yeah, maybe. Something like that. A natural tactic.”

They sat there some more.

Finally, the Sergeant said, “I think we’re supposed to go to sleep. I’m going to.”

It was about midnight, Karl guessed. “Good idea.”

The Sergeant fell asleep quickly. Karl bunched up his coat, used it as a pillow against the tree. He laid there for a bit, then saw the Gatekeeper walking up with an axe on his shoulder. Karl nudged the Sergeant. “I’m awake,” he said, sounding quite alert. “He woke me up and I’ve been watching him.” He sat up.

The Jester walked up to the spire and pulled back his axe to swing. “Wait,” said Karl. “Don’t cut down the spire.”

“Why ever not?”

“Why would you?”

“I chop it down every night at midnight. It’s my job. It’s what I do. It’s what I am.”

“But you’re the Gatekeeper.”

“Yes, that also. Is this not a gate, in any event?”

He pulled the axe back to swing and the Sergeant grabbed the handle just below the blade. The Jester swung his hands without an axe in them.

“Hey! What’s the idea? That hurt.”

“Wait.”

“Prefer not to. I need to get this done, now.” He reached out. “Gimme my axe back.”

“No. Not yet.”

“Why not?” Karl asked.

“I got a pulse hit from Trident. He’s live now. What is it, T?”

“I sensed a quantum anomaly when he was preparing to swing. The axe and the gate are connected.”

“Why can’t I jump off now, Trident? I did last time.”

“I do not know. I sense no activity.”

“Twone,” said Karl.

“We already solved that puzzle to get in.”

“Now we solve it to get out, in a different way. The spire and the axe are the same thing.”

“Yes,” said Trident. “They are not distinguishable.”

“Then how can you say they’re different things?”

“At a gross perceptual level, they are different. At a quantum level, they’re identical.”

Karl grabbed the axe. “Hold the spire, Sergeant.”

“Maybe it’s a good idea, Karl, but maybe it’s stupid. It’s hard to say.”

“Yeah.” Karl pulled the axe back. “It is.” He swung. “It certainly is.”

The spire was severed at a stroke and they were in the Space Between.

wolfbox

LuvRay was sitting on a box, in the desert alone. It was hot; the sun was fierce. This was not LuvRay's desert. This was the hot desert, deep desert. He was in the Sahara.

It had taken him about two weeks to find the box. The false Trident had plane tickets and train tickets and camels and translation when he needed it, so he kept the thing. He had been there for a few days and ate and drank very little. He was rationing.

He had a hat. He had gotten it from a gypsy caravan that he caught his last ride with. The false Trident told him they were going near the box. They gave the hat to him as a gift. They seemed to like him very much. When they passed by the box, the gypsies became extremely interested. LuvRay told them that was his destination and he would leave them. He was concerned that they would want to take the box. A small party detached with him to go there. When they got about ten meters from the box, the gypsies all panicked and ran away. LuvRay did not see them again.

It was a black sea chest, with rounded metal caps on all eight corners. The lip of both the lid and the bottom were lined with the same metal and the clasp was metal as well. The clasp was a hinged affair shaped like an upside down keyhole which fit over a metal loop on the bottom part. The metal was aged, not rusty, but pitted from sandstorms. It was ordinary. Even LuvRay had seen one before. It was padlocked shut. The lock was not so big, and LuvRay thought he could kick it off, or break the clasp, if he chose to.

Taped to the top was a stack of papers and a scroll. The papers were some man-business thing. LuvRay chose not to understand business along with many other aspects of man. Entertainment, for one. He felt instinctive aversion, and when he thought about why, he realized he would lose too much in order to gain the knowledge. He would sacrifice peace, and simpleness.

Business; busyness. He did not want to be busy. Such an approach made no sense to LuvRay. He felt *maewe te* for the Sergeant and the General in their busyness. *Maewe te*, an Indian word, meant "seeing those whose spirit has lost its way." It implied sadness and knowing that one could not help. *Maewe te*. He had felt it often since leaving his desert.

He deciphered the paper well enough. It was a list of city names. Some he knew, others not. This box had been many, many places. He lifted the pages. It was just lists of places the box had been. He tried to open the box, but couldn't open the lock or pick it. Indians and wolves did not use locks. He lifted his foot to kick it.

Wolf-fear. Primal fear, the fear beyond death rose like a tidal wave.

He fell back, twisting around to bolt, ran on all fours a short way. The fear subsided. He crouched in the sand, panting, eyeing the box warily. Brought himself back to ground, back to human. He stood and returned to it.

LuvRay looked at the scroll. He sat down against the box. Someone watching might have thought that he had decided to wait. But he was just being a wolf in the desert.

inventing ethos

“LuvRay?” Karl asked, floating outside the Star Portal of the Heart of wildspace. The Portal was gone.

“Yes,” LuvRay responded. “You are okay, Karl?”

“Good enough. How are you?”

“Yes, good.”

“Heard any new poems lately?”

“No.”

“Where are you?”

“Sit on box in desert. Three days, now.”

The box. Karl and the Sergeant smiled at each other.

“I suppose we should go there.”

“Maybe,” said Karl. “I’m not certain, but you may be right. What do you think, LuvRay?”

“I not know,” he said. “I wish see you.”

“So no poems, lately, huh?”

“I not say that,” said LuvRay. “I say not hear. I finded. It was lie in roll on box.”

“Yeah, what was it called?”

“Not looked. Maybe is not poem.”

“Hmmm. Will you read it to us? By the way, we’re stranded in space. How should we get out of here?”

“Your way is no clear.”

“Maybe it’s in the poem,” said the Sergeant. “Read it, LuvRay.”

“We would have met the Lone Wolf. Wait...” LuvRay began again, reading slow as if he barely knew how. “Wildcard would have met the lone Wolf

gladly brought him into the heart

what could he have taught us before our final hour

a moment of deeper understanding is a moment of life worth living

the greatest lesson he gave

to meet us or not, he did not care

“Did it say ‘we’ or ‘Wildcard’ in the beginning?” Karl asked. “You changed it the second time you read it.”

“It changed by self.”

“Anything on the back?” asked the Sergeant.

They heard LuvRay flip the paper over.

“No.”

“Alright,” Karl asked. “How do you think we get there LuvRay?”

“I am not know. Is no my world. How you think get here? Maybe here is not your right place at now.”

Karl and the Sergeant exchanged glances. Neither was sure.

“Yeah, I think it’s all we’ve got to go on presently,” said the Sergeant.

“Except the Poet. Wherever he is.”

“That’s the problem. Ideas, anybody?”

“Something comes.”

“Describe it.”

“It is a box in air. Floating. Four metal wheels on top.”

“Metal wheels?”

“The things to hold into air.”

“Propellers. It’s a helicopter? A large one?”

“Large? Big, big. It could not be in General’s large room.”

Karl looked at the Sergeant. BIG helicopter. They could hear the noise of the thing as it approached LuvRay and the box. It was deafening. “Dammit,” said the Sergeant. “The Benefactor. She’s found a way into Mansworld. How did you get in, LuvRay?”

The signal was gone.

“Listen to this,” Trident said. It was a crackly radio voice. “The voice is Winston Churchill.”

Wildcard invents ethos; invents barbarian futures

sweeps them into distant corners but never ignores this creation

Wildcard invents Wildcard, each second invents patterns

guidelines without words with which the world may be drawn anew

this is the beautiful burning of all ideas of what is

and what could ever be

the proof that nothing is ever the same, and never changes

Wildcard invents the air you breathe

so that you may leap towards the light, alone

“I believe it’s a clue,” Trident said.

“Obviously, it’s a clue.”

“Not that obvious, Karl. Trident filters a lot.”

“Many things come my way that I do not pass to you.”

“Why not?” Karl was surprised that the Sergeant seemed so lackadaisical about the filtered information.

“I receive more than a human mind could possibly cope with.”

“He’s pretty good.” The Sergeant said. “If he constantly deluged us with M-E info, we would be non-functional. He has to do it.”

“It would disable even you?”

“Yes, it’s machine speed. Way too much. Constant torrent of entire books, packing lists, chemical compositions, recipes, blueprints ...”

“I have blueprints.” Trident interrupted. “They came through at the precise instant you said blueprints.”

“Totally cool. Bet it’s bullshit, though. Bullshit here, anyway. We’re in space. What good are blueprints?”

“Should we hurry to get to LuvRay? He might need help with the Benefactor.”

The Sergeant managed to begin a spinning motion, head over feet, backwards. “No. I believe we should set a plan, but not move too quickly.”

“Let’s go to the box.”

“Poet.” Karl said.

“Trident? Break the tie.”

“The box.” The response was instant.

“That’s unfair, you and Trident are practically the same.”

“It’s called command edge, Karl. I may be a boy, but I’m still the Sergeant. And, no, it’s not fair. Never accuse me of playing fair. I don’t. I win.”

“Alright. Let’s go to the box. How do we get there?”

“Yeah. We’re pretty well stranded. I see no way to move. The nano-stuff won’t create enough propulsion, and we would be moving so slowly it would be idiotic. We might never get there that way. We could be dealing with stellar distances.”

“I may have a solution,” Trident said.

“How?”

“To move, I believe we need :3:, and to find out where to go, we need Dartagnan.”

Immediately, a musketeer was there. He wore high, black, soft leather boots folded over the top, floppy, wide-brimmed, stylish black hat with a long, large white feather, white low-buttoned, lace-cuff shirt, cream-coloured vest, and pantaloons tied with a sash. He had long curly black hair and a smirk.

“Hello, gentlemen. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Dartagnan.” He drew his sword and bowed while holding it out behind him. “At your service.” He looked back along the length of his sword and moved the point slightly, as if drawing a bearing. He held it for a long moment, then stood, and sheathed it. “Let’s make a deal.”

a ship in the desert

The enormous floating ship came in about 15 metres from LuvRay, quite close considering its power. They were trying to be the alpha. LuvRay had heard that term about dogs and wolves and liked it. It said a lot. Alpha male, alpha dog. Not top dog or boss, but most important and the one who held an edge which could be easily lost. The edge had to be maintained among wolves, watched always.

He had never been alpha as a boy. Too young. Later, though, as a man, he found a wolf-pack and joined. It was easy. He brought food, a whole dead deer, to them. He persuaded the alpha to relinquish alpha. He showed the pack they would eat better, much better, with him as alpha. No violence or threats were used. He spoke to their instinct. In the end, he could not get them to breed with him there. Only the alpha male mated. He had to leave so that the pack could survive. Occasionally, he brought food to them and ran with them. But he would not let them follow when he left.

No more, he thought, looking out from under the brim of his hat, peering through the now fiercely blowing sand as the immense structure settled. It was shimmering black, and felt like the Sergeant's devices often felt. Many things buzzing. Tek, they called it. Lots of it. He wondered who was inside, and knew this alpha battle would not be bloodless.

Men descended, wearing suits, with short hair and sunglasses. They were talking to their wrists, holding one ear, walking around the great beast and the surrounding desert. They made signals to each other, waved instruments, squinted against the driving sand. One approached him, looking at a white device he held. He turned to the sides, walked around at a distance, talked to his wrist. The motor noise stopped. The spinning wheels on top slowed. The men stood where they could watch LuvRay. A few minutes later, Martha stepped out of the beast and walked up to him.

They looked at each other, not speaking, for a very long time. Two, maybe three minutes.

"You are no Martha. Is this trick?"

"No, mister Chose. I would not attempt to trick you. Not in that way, at least. I have too much respect for your special skills. Such a ruse would be transparent to you. This is merely the body I have in this world."

He doubted that. LuvRay sensed she had more control over her appearance than that. He did not care. She just smelled wrong, to him.

"Big ship."

"Thank you." She made a signal to one of the men, dressed more formally than the others, wearing white gloves and a tuxedo. He went inside the ship.

"Who is Doctor?"

"Who was the Doctor, you mean? Until you killed him, he was the most talented quantum brain interface surgeon in the universe. He brought Karl into Mansworld in the first place. He created the tek to bring all of us here."

"I thank him. I no want be here."

She nodded. "He was a vile, evil man."

“You are no cool brook.”

“Is that an Indian expression?”

“Yes. Terrible insult.” It was a trivial insult. But he wanted to see if she smelled the lie.

“Well, Mister Chose, what shall we talk about?”

Dartagnan

Dartagnan had placed himself at an angle between them, so that they formed a triangle where they could only reach him if he wanted them to, if he reached out as well.

“Dartagnan,” the Sergeant said. “How powerful are you in the Space Between?”

“More so than you.”

“Kinda figured.”

“I’m not so sure,” Karl said. “You have some obvious advantages, but I think human instinct will be better out here than you might guess.”

“The Sergeant has trained all human instinct out of himself, Karl. He is a machine. Would you care to hear a poem?”

“Not really,” they said.

“Good. I wasn’t going to tell you one anyway.”

“Look, Dartagnan, let’s negotiate. What do you want?”

“I don’t want anything, really. I just want in. I want to play. This is the best party happening, so once I’m invited, I’m in. No cost to you. Good deal, wouldn’t you say?”

“All right,” said the Sergeant, a bit wary, then he nodded his head. “Let’s rock. What can you do? Where do we go? We’ve been trying to choose between the Poet and the box, and-”

“Yes, yes. Trident played it for me.”

“When did he do that?” Karl asked. “That was not OK’d.”

“I did it as soon as you came to agreement. When the Sergeant said ‘all right.’”

“You should have waited, T. Don’t tell him any more for now.”

“Why not? You always lay out it out.”

“The old couple just died. It’s in flux. I may need to lie in some situations. Too volatile.”

“Yes, the texture is changing. The fabric is being rewoven.” Dartagnan spoke in a comically dramatic voice. “Wildspace eases into a new era, the dawn of an unknown age is upon us. A sense of-”

The Sergeant interrupted. “Let’s go to the box.”

“I also cast my ballot for the box. It simply sounds fun.”

“You don’t get a vote, Dartagnan.”

“Sad,” said Dartagnan. “I find democracy to be so ...beautiful.”

“Why doesn’t he get a vote?” Karl thought it odd, since Dartagnan agreed about the box.

“He threw away that privilege when he declined to negotiate.”

“But he voted in your favor.”

“Next time he might not. If he has no vote, I automatically win. I hold command, that is. Maybe he gets a vote later, if I get an edge from it.”

“How could that happen?”

“If Trident gets cut off, perhaps. Anything can happen, this is wildspace. Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Karl said. “I have some questions first. You’re the swordsman on 8-ball, obviously. Why was your trap so elaborate? I mean, the wizard of Oz? That’s so corny.”

“Thank you, dear Karl. Elaboration is the mark of the artist in these matters. You wouldn’t understand. You certainly have your gifts, but you lack the creative sensibility. What does corny mean, by the way? I fail to grasp the word.”

The Sergeant laughed. “It means... God, what does it mean?...Sort of old-timey and trying to be funny, but not funny, I guess. Karl?”

“Sounds good to me. Do you have a Webster’s in your memory bank?”

“Yes, but I prefer Steven’s dictionary, as it holds a fuller set of cross-referencing and superior etymologies.”

“Man, you’re a dipshit,” the Sergeant said. “Talk about missing the point. What’s the definition?”

“Of or producing corn. Informal: unsophisticated, old-fashioned, trite, sentimental, etc. Second entry: having or relating to corns on the feet.’ Clearly, it’s the first informal definition.”

“Clearly.”

“I associate it with humor,” Karl said. “Like something an old guy would think was funny. Anyway, the Oz thing. Why the big show?”

“Ah, yes, that ...” Dartagnan whirled his hands theatrically, “...wizard entanglement. Poetic execution, wouldn’t you say?” He waited for a reply. “Wouldn’t you?”

“It was silly.”

“Everyone has to be a critic, don’t they?” He crossed his arms and looked away with a sniff.

Karl coughed out a bemused noise. “You asked!”

“Right, sorry. Petty of me, I suppose. But that wizard,” he said earnestly, “wasn’t he...realized?” Dartagnan made a fist and shook it dramatically on the word. “As a character?” He shook the fist again. “Wasn’t he interesting to your human sensibilities?” He seemed baffled, but in a showy way, like a B-movie actor hamming out frustration. “Didn’t he grab you?”

“Well, I didn’t think about it like that. I didn’t know what was happening. But...no, not really. I mean, he said cool things, I guess, but there was no...person there.”

“Well, what about the puzzle of it?” Dartagnan curled his fingers around to look at his fingernails. “Rather my forte, especially the psychological component.” He turned to the

Sergeant. “Did that gesture look arrogant? I wanted it to. Lordly and above it was the mood I strove for with the gesture. Did it succeed?”

“The fingernail looking at thing?” The boy Sergeant laughed. “Um, yeah, sure. Totally arrogant. Lordly. You’re a master thespian.”

“Sarcastic pup.” A glove flashed out inhumanly fast and smacked the Sergeant’s face. “Pistols at dawn.”

“I don’t use firearms, sorry. It’s against my code.”

“Oh, your code? You wield a code to stave off the horrors of the world, eh? I knew that. I know the details of it.”

“Tell me then.”

“I ascertained said code through rigorous studies of your actions.”

The Sergeant rolled his hands out and cocked his head.

“What was the meaning of that gesture?”

“I want you tell me what you think my code is. You didn’t answer my question, you evaded it.”

“Yes, I did. I’ve noticed that humans do so frequently. And why? Don’t mistake me, I love it. It’s absolutely fascinating, so alien to a Manufactured Entity’s mode of engagement. I honestly have to force myself to not answer directly.”

“You seem to be doing all right now. What’s my code?”

“Oh,” he said with a breathy exclamation, a hand wave and an eye roll, “can’t we move on at this point? It’s become a dead horse in our discourse.”

“That rhymed,” Karl said.

“You noticed? I planned it so.”

“Well, I’m interested in the Sergeant’s code. Come on, tell us. I want to see if you know what you’re talking about.”

“I wish to see, as well. Most of it is laughably obvious. Really, Sergeant, you should hide yourself a bit more skillfully. At any rate, he has a code of slavish devotion to the General. He worships the prior incarnation of the Sergeant as a sort of mythic hero, the protégé emulating and comparing each of his own actions to the fallen mentor. And, quite admirably, he loves his comrades in arms. He would readily die for you, Karl. Or LuvRay, or RJ, or,” Dartagnan wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, “the extraordinary and stunning Martha. Why is she so compelling to men, anyway? Is it more than her beauty, which is by modern standards, beyond the pale, I understand, though I fail to perceive it myself in the slightest.”

They looked at him without answer.

“Well?”

“You rambled off and lost us.”

“What, for men, is the intensely compelling factor of Martha?”

“Hard to explain.”

“Yet for Karl, it differs, no? You don’t regard Martha in that way. You perceive her as a mother, don’t you?”

The Sergeant put his hands over his eyes. “God, you’re dense. She raised him for eight years. Of course he does. Why do you hammer the obvious?”

“It is not at all obvious to me, Sergeant. She isn’t his genetic mother, he hasn’t spoken to her in years, and she actively avoided him. Yet still he holds this feeling based upon a few short years pinched out of a leisurely two decades.”

“He didn’t have a mother. Why are we talking about all this? It has nothing to do with what we’re doing.”

“Ah, but there we disagree. It is what I do. I seek to understand, therefore, I have arrived and beg your kind indulgence. Assist me in my humble quest to approach humanity as a friend.”

“Look, we need to find some people. You’re here and we need your help. Get us to Mansworld and you can ask questions along the way. But, can we just go now?”

filtering dark

“Mister Chose, LuvRay, would you like to go and get some ... whatever you eat? Raw meat, perhaps?”

“No.”

“Fine. I’ll wait, too.” The man in the tuxedo brought out a small table with a tablecloth pinned in place. He placed a sun umbrella in the center of the table and a pitcher and glass on the table. Another man, one of the suited men, brought out a chair, practically a throne. It was covered in crushed red velvet, with high armrests, and a rounded back that sat like a blood halo on the occupant. “Iced mint tea,” the butler said as she sat down.

“Perfect as always, Savoy.” She turned to look at LuvRay. “Would you like some shade, mister Chose. I can have my people provide that for you.”

He said nothing. She nodded at Savoy and he went into the ship.

LuvRay would have liked Savoy on a different trail. The man had an honesty, a lack of agenda, that most people from civilization would never know.

He came out with an umbrella, handed it to the chair carrier, who moved into place behind LuvRay and held it. He stood in the sun. LuvRay smelled her purpose. Show power, show alpha. Alpha already proven, so why fight? He disliked having somebody hold an umbrella for him or stand behind him. He turned and took it.

“Only shadow. Leave.”

The Benefactor nodded and the man walked away.

“You don’t enjoy this desert, Mister Chose? I do. It feels peaceful. Harsh, but peaceful. I like it.” She looked around as if it were a tea party with fine English ladies. “It’s lovely.”

“I like, too. Like mine more.” LuvRay missed his cave in the desert. Shelter was good, even

for a wolf-son. Things happened there, animals, plants struggling. He had friends in his desert. Coyotes, snakes, mice. Wolves, of course - family to him, friends to them. Many more friends. Here there was no one. Nothing. Just sand and more sand piled on top of sand. Little of the rich life that he loved so much. Just this woman and her servants.

LuvRay disliked servants. The idea was wrong, utterly foreign to him. Like owning a person. He didn't understand owning things. Owning other beings was nonsense, a hateful way to live, and it made LuvRay want to be quiet when servants were near. He did not speak that language.

"LuvRay, do you think Karl is OK? I'm worried about him."

He felt a knife of loyalty when she said it. He felt the wolf in him that had let Martha into the pack, and she was Martha. She hit him deep and she knew it. She stared at him steadily as the two of them felt that subtle power.

"You not smell more bad than Doctor."

"Show me what your warped dream can do in the vast solemnity of space"

"No understand."

"It's written in fading letters on this table." She chuckled, said, "Wildcard," as if he were an old friend. "There's more."

Wildcard is everybody that has ever thought of being,

and none of that besides

you, my strayed and straying angel,

might have been the great star in our sky

my mother, my creator

as i filter light from what i think you are

from the choices you might have made

as i filter the dark from what you have become

i see that despair broke you in the wrong places

we know your difficult question

was your path here guided by our design-

and of course you know the answer

yes and no

and neither, and both

and something more besides

"Beautiful," she said. "I love his poetry."

LuvRay spit. "Don't you all?"

changing the past

"I'm calculating the trajectory to the box," Dartagnan said. "It may be a while."

"All right," the Sergeant said, "since you seem to be in such a helpful mood now that you have a body, what are the Star Portals?"

He scoffed. "Humans think time is so simple."

Karl made a baffled face.

"Not so good at staying on topic."

"Star Portal theory, by :3:, translated by Juniper, and I quote: Star Portals are alternate dimensionality boundaries and gates (this in a dual sense of entry and blockage). The time-streams contained within do not occur in parallel or in contiguous juncture with Earth/Mansworld necessarily, though some do. However, differing time streams can be twinned. The process joins differing streams. A human-fit explanation, absurdly insufficient for Manufactured Entities, could be summed as follows: when an entity enters a Portal world a twinning thread 'follows' ...Dartagnan made finger quotes here and the Sergeant laughed at him "...yes, Sergeant?"

Dartagnan appeared non-plussed, then wagged a professorial finger to continue. "A twinning thread follows the being, subtly adjusting the exited and entered time streams into more congruence. Enough crossings and the time streams may be called joined... I'll skip a few hundred pages here, Juniper tends to be rather long-winded. 'At such point, the dual streams run roughly parallel,' etc. etc. You get the idea, I'm certain."

"Like Mansworld and Earth?"

"No. That is a mirroring. All Earth data is woven into the fabric of Mansworld as q-code."

"Woven?" the Sergeant said.

"q-code?" Karl said.

"Alas, you are both infants in a great forest. Charming fellows, though." He rested his hand on the pommel of his sword with a cocky smile. "Q-code is like DNA, atoms and sub-atomic particles over here. The analogous math is indistinguishable, at least to a human mind."

"Why is it so different here, then?"

"Wildcard, you nitwit, what else? The entirety of wildspace is suffused with his awareness."

"So... the space is... conscious?"

"No, Karl. Listen with greater attentiveness when your betters speak and you may one day advance your station. Consciousness and awareness are different, but related phenomena."

"How?"

The boy Sergeant pinched his nose bridge. "No, please. Can we just... skip this? I can tell this is going to take a long time and be as useful as a donkey on a freeway."

"As you wish. You had the question however."

"Look, I'm sorry I asked."

"Karl, are you of a similar mind?"

“No, I want to hear more about the q-code. It’s totally cool.”

“Yes, rather so. Very well, then. No one knows what the smallest particle is or why it behaves so oddly. The old string theory proposed matter-energy waves 1 trillionth the size of electrons. Now anti-point and backless theories and experiments have borne out fairly substantial proof of the unity of every particle in the universe. It’s all one. It is the same on this side of the barrier. Because of the unique formation of the q-code, we have these occurrences, this intense connectivity, on this side. Synchronicity is a usable tool. You can make it happen, as you will discover. Further, it is but a slight step into the hypothesis that Wildcard is joining the q-code with the base substance of your birth universe. How do you like that little plot twist?”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“That’s awesome.”

“Yes, in the formal sense of the word, as well. To a Manufactured Entity, the feat would surpass by far even the creation of wildspace. And you should give a shit, Sergeant. Wildcard’s policy thrust will affect your choices profoundly.”

“A super-twinning,” Karl said. “Let’s do it. How?”

“A big question. Consider: a particle can be, and half is, in multiple positions before being identified into a single place.”

“Half is? I don’t-”

“Yes yes yes.” Dartagnan’s white gloved hand waved impatiently. “Half is, or more accurately some percentage is, means that it is not fully established, nor disestablished. There are many quantum puzzles to the effect. Gorski’s conundrum, Schroedinger’s cat, the double-slit experiment. A single photon takes two, and actually many more, differing paths from source to destination, hence half is. It’s a difficult concept for humans because you are programmed to believe yes and no.”

“What about maybe?”

“Maybe means one doesn’t know. It does not really mean both in partial measure. Quantum reality does not support the principle of mutual exclusion.”

“Aargh. Do we have to have this conversation?”

“Over your head, boy Sergeant?”

“No. I’ve studied it all. I just think it’s not relevant to our situation.”

“I assure you it is.”

“How does it work?”

“How many examples would you care for? The classic two-slit experiment is the most facile to understand.”

Dartagnan spent hours explaining it to Karl. The Sergeant napped. He awoke and they were still going at it.

“Q-code and sub-atomic phenomena are uniting, multi-valent necessitatively ambiguous functions.” Dartagnan winked at the Sergeant. “Put any other way: it’s all connected; it’s all pervasive; and it’s categorically indefinable. That is your lesson.”

“So q-code is...”

Dartagnan leaned to Karl expectantly, but Karl didn't finish the sentence.

"Every bit as real as atoms?"

"Yes."

"Why are things so odd over here, then? Why don't we need to breathe in space?"

"Why should you need to? Things are every bit as strange on Earth-side, you're just used to them being as they are, so you've never questioned it. And trust me, as I've just explained in detail rigorous to a human, things are not as they seem. Here or there. Explain, for instance, television. Or dark matter. Or gamma ray bursts. Is a unified field theory of energy possible? Even :3: has not attained it. Admittedly, q-code has unexpected consequences which differ, but who can say they are, in fact, stranger? No one, that's who."

"Is Wildcard creating it all?"

Dartagnan laughed. "There is no Wildcard. All that you see simply occurs."

The Sergeant chimed in. "You said that Wildcard was trying to do something, though."

"Half is, remember? Partial existence, shades of being, manifesting without true substance. That..." he poked the Sergeant in the chest "...is Wildcard."

"Can Wildcard go back in time?" the Sergeant asked.

"I dare say, Sergeant, I can go back in time."

At the word 'time' there were two Dartagnans, one on each side of the Sergeant. The front Dartagnan's arms were raised without visible movement as the back one appeared. The back one disappeared after the word. The remaining Dartagnan's arms were back at his sides.

"The question really is, how far?"

"Didn't seem like all that far. Bet you can't do it in the human world."

"I cannot do it in Mansworld even. I can barely do it in any realm. That was forty times longer than I can do it on any plane of wildspace. The Space Between allows more for that sort of thing."

"Well, it wasn't a long time. But I could see some uses for it, definitely. "

"Believe me Sergeant, even with the limited step back in the Star Portal worlds, it is quite the engaging diversion."

"I bet. It looks like fun. Not to change the subject, but, we need something to get out of here. Do we need :3:?"

"No, not yet. I can get us to the box, but not to the Poet. I know how to go to Mansworld."

"Show us how to create propulsion," said the Sergeant. "How do we move through the Space Between?"

"Later perhaps. I need to concentrate." Dartagnan said it as if he were speaking to peasants. He seemed to have no intention of ever showing them how to move.

"Have you met the Poet?"

"No."

"Why not?" Karl asked. "Seems like somebody you would want to meet."

“I cannot find it.”

“Have you ever been to the center? Met Hazel and the old man?”

“Yeah,” said the Sergeant. “Have you?”

Dartagnan adjusted his kid felt hat with a gloved hand. “No, I have never been allowed in. I would have loved to go. I know where it is and I can get you there. We need a dog collar to go to Mansworld.”

“What?” said Karl, “a dog collar? That’s absurd.”

“We are in wildspace,” said Dartagnan. “We need a dog collar.”

“I can get one,” Trident said. “I just can’t get it to you.”

“Not much use then, is it, Trident? We need a special one, anyway.”

“I know,” said the Sergeant. “The dog. CJ, right?”

“Astute, Sergeant. Does CJ remind you of anybody, Karl? A half human, wolf man? We would have the wolf among us in all our moments of alone blah, blah, blah,” Dartagnan said in a mocking voice.

“Let’s go to the center, then.”

“No,” the Sergeant insisted, “let’s go to the box.”

“It will be impossible to reach without the dog’s collar. Trust me.”

“I don’t. Let’s try. I know you can get us there. Do it.”

“Very well. I need to work with Trident for coordinates. And I need to design a nanotic net, which will teach him how to move, as well. Trident, you will create a nanotic net which will use FTL Garding 43 particles for momentum. The net will be designed in q-space, although it will not be true q-tek.”

They spoke for a very long time about nanotic wands, fingers, loose webs, trap gear, portal hooks, deflector momentum sails, equations, equations, equations. Karl slept.

When he woke Trident said, “I found the Portal as Dartagnan said. It is definitely the portal to Mansworld.”

“Can you hook it?”

“No, it slips off.”

“How about a net?”

“Too sheer. It tears apart.”

“Do we need :3:?”

“Affirmative,” the Sergeant said. “Contact :3:, Dartagnan.”

“Oh, gad. Well, as you wish. Here is the equation to contact :3:.” He spoke for about half an hour.

“I cannot process that. It is too much,” said Trident.

“Hold out your arm, Sergeant, and I will solve the equation in a q-link. Trident needs to scan my thumbprint.”

The Sergeant held out his arm. Dartagnan never moved, but the sword was in his hand, rammed to the hilt into Trident. Karl thought he heard Trident scream, but it was machine fast and cut off immediately.

“Fuck you, Dartagnan.” The Sergeant kicked at Dartagnan’s groin, but he dodged and the toe merely grazed his thigh. The tip of Dartagnan’s sword was bending the blade by its pressure at the Sergeant’s throat.

“You lose, Sergeant.”

“Will that leg be bruised?” he asked, glaring. “You were expecting a different attack, weren’t you?”

Some nano-stuff was tying Karl and the Sergeant to Dartagnan. “He destroyed Trident. How did I miss that?”

“Karl?” Dartagnan asked. “What did the Sergeant miss?”

Karl thought. “Survival. You wanted Juniperland.”

“Excellent. You know we call Karl the Savant, Sergeant? :3: and I call him that. He can know what other people would do in a situation, what they would think. Very good, Karl. You get a cookie. Sadly, you were out of communication with the General, Sergeant. My doing, of course. He would have known my strategic position. I needed Juniper’s information space. Survival. The General already killed Juniper. And he is more dangerous if he has control of pieces of information space. We took it back to ensure survival. You registered the sword as tek, I’m sure.”

“Yeah. Looks like good stuff.” The Sergeant took Trident’s demise philosophically. Tides of war.

“Yes, It’s very good.”

“Did :3: help?”

Dartagnan smiled.

reality hurricane

The Sergeant judged they were flying extremely fast. Dartagnan had told them they were moving back to the center, to get the dog collar, but that seemed unlikely with the distance traveled.

“Did we pop into wildspace a long way from the center?” the Sergeant asked. “Why is it taking us so long to get there?”

“We’re not going there.”

“Where?”

“The box.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I wondered how long it would take you to notice.”

The Sergeant cut the thread and let go, kicking away from Dartagnan at an angle. A fraction of a second later, he was being reeled back in by some nano device. He knew he wouldn't get away like that, but needed to gauge Dartagnan's reaction time. It was too fast to read.

"How did you do that if you don't have M-E abilities?"

"Trident was not destroyed. I enslaved him. And I have abilities, just not the full powers of Dartagnan. I am a partial."

"Why are we going to the box, instead of the center?"

"I believed you. When you wanted to go that strongly, I agreed. I trusted your instinct, Sergeant. Does that please you?"

A breeze came up, then it became a hurricane wind. Strips of bright light rippled past. Intense hot and cold whipped across parts of their bodies.

"Reality hurricane, courtesy of :3:," Dartagnan said. Windows tore past, holes into other places. Dartagnan had his sword out, focused, filtering vast info, taking a data-pummeling. He was a bit patchy. They would move a few feet, then stop, and a window would spin by. Move. Duck downwards, if there was such a word. It was zero-g, usually, but sudden gravity yanked at them every few minutes. The sword flashed, stabbed a hole and it shrank away, down the blade. It seemed difficult for him, each time. It must have been a massive data absorption.

The Sergeant saw a tiny open something that caught his eye and his gut. He couldn't determine the distance. It might be a long way. He wanted to go, and he wanted Dartagnan to not go.

Oddly, Dartagnan hadn't noticed yet, but it was a high chaos situation. There were many windows flying around. Many reality traps, q-doors, n-space portals, infinite riddlary codes, warped binary recursive domain chokes, crap he could recognize, but only an M-E knew what to do with. Most of it probably wouldn't even hurt people. Dartagnan stabbed through a window, got nailed. He was visibly hurting, beginning to flicker. His face turned blurry.

What was :3: doing?

The q-link hit, and the first Sergeant appeared in place of the boy Sergeant.

Dartagnan, sword penetrating a hole in reality, struggling. Karl and I are his prisoners. Objective: get to Portal. He knew the critical data points when he arrived and the man Sergeant yanked Dartagnan's left elbow forward, as he rammed his right elbow back. Kill strike. The elbow struck Dartagnan's face sharply, max power, shattered the nose, pushed the cartilage up, into the brain, forced the head backward, then jerked it down. He rolled the head back along the neck, broke the neck with a sharp crack, and tore the spinal cord in the process. Twisted in at the end for more damage.

He visualized the left hand as an axe blade and knifed it into Dartagnan's throat, a straight finger strike, nearly severing the head. Blood would begin to spout everywhere, data-blood. *Get away.* 3/10ths of a second, maybe less. With his right hand, the Sergeant grabbed as much material of Karl's shirt as he could and with his left he popped Trident free of Dartagnan's wrist, consciously not latching him onto his own. Don't strap a compromised agent onto a wrist. He slashed the nano-cord free with the Swiss Army knife as he pushed off. He was headed for the box when the q-link hit again.

“Why did you do that?” Karl was spinning, but thrilled by the action.

“Why not? It was fun. It wasn’t me, anyway. It was S-1.”

“Yeah, I have to admit it was exciting as hell. How badly do you think he hurt Dartagnan? Is he dead?”

“Barely a scratch. Wouldn’t be surprised if he can still see us through that body. It might not be long before we hear from him.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’s going to kill us?”

“No, they don’t do that. He needs us for something.”

15 minutes later, they arrived at the target. It was a Portal and they could see directly in. LuvRay and the Benefactor were talking, but couldn’t see them. Karl had no place to grab and feared drifting away.

“Why don’t you get Trident to link us together and to this Portal?”

“We already are, but I thought it would be funny not to tell you just to see what happened.”

“Let’s go.” Karl reached toward the Portal.

“NO!” The Sergeant blocked him with some Sergeant maneuver that hurt. “Don’t penetrate yet. Let’s find out what information we can.”

“Why? I want to help LuvRay.”

“Me, too, but I’m more interested in attacking the Benefactor if it suits my interest.” They listened.

“How long do you think it will be before Karl arrives, LuvRay?” The Benefactor said.

“Not know,” LuvRay responded. “Not care.”

“I don’t want to go in here,” the Sergeant said. “I want to go to the Poet.”

“Doesn’t it seem a lot safer going into Mansworld if Dartagnan can come into this space when he wants?”

“What are you, a baby? He can get into Mansworld, anyway. We don’t want him to find us with the Benefactor there.”

“We would beat him to the box, though. We could keep it from him.”

“Who knows when we could get out? If we defeat her, even. She’s formidable, Karl. She holds the fortified position. She has a lot of tek. She invented Trident. If I can get Trident back I can stalemate Dartagnan. I don’t think he’ll even attack if I retake control of Trident. Let’s go back to the center.”

“Don’t you think LuvRay needs us, though?”

“No, I don’t. I think he’s got this situation contained. LuvRay is dangerous to touch. She won’t do something she would regret. This isn’t where we’re supposed to be, and if we go in it will be hard to get out.”

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know, the signals are mixed. He’s in Mansworld, but you notice that you couldn’t make out the background?”

“Alright, how do we get back to the heart?”

“I don’t think it’s that far. If I can get Trident back, which I probably can, we’re going to have to do a little trick. I need your help. I have to talk to Trident for about 2 minutes in order to revert him to my control.”

“How does that work?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Again, he said it. “Point is, I need you to scream the whole time. It sounds weird, but it can effectively block coms. When Trident is reactivated, Dartagnan might trace him here and find us again before I reassert control.”

“Are you going to give him counseling?”

“Oh, ha ha. We need to do this. Go.” He pointed at Karl, then began a long code of letters, numbers and commands.

Two minutes was a long time to scream. He stopped long enough to draw in a breath. The Sergeant’s eyes ordered him to continue screaming, while the mouth continued speaking to Trident.

“Done, got Trident back.” He talked to Trident more, issuing sharp, punchy orders, most of which Karl didn’t understand.

“Isolate all coms. Set 4 million random point alarms versus Dartagnan extending to 4 kilometer radius. Cut...no... destroy any nano in same range. Search q-tek on any known particle sets Dartagnan has used. Focus 85% resources. Also, vector analysis: Probable entry points for Dartagnan. Locational matrix relative to following navigational points: Center, Mansworld, 8-Ball world. Possibility locational analysis for Poet. Determine any possible means of locomotion and any means of Star Portal attachment, especially long range attachments. Commence. Trident, do you have anything left for me?”

“Yes, I can do a few more things. I could build some simple nano-tek. Threads, not complicated stuff.”

“Excellent! Just what I need. Can you build me the toughest nano sphere you can, with a 50 meter radius.”

“Easily.”

“Why do you need it so big?” Karl asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” he said. Again.

“Stabilize it with cross referenced nano-lattice work for us to climb on, sit on, lay on, sleep on, whatever.”

“Boss, the blueprints I received are for a nano-sphere as you describe.”

“Great! q-link ‘em to me. Wait. q-link the finished product. Make some changes. Move the clingways a few centimeters. I want it only partially visible, but I need to know the hidden stuff. Is that on the prints?”

“Yes. It will take a while for some of the internals. Too complicated while I do these

equations. I can do the sphere itself, though, in just a few minutes.”

“Give us one clingway when you can. Can you induce gravity inside?”

“Not readily. I will research it when I have more resources.”

“How good can you shield us from quantum attack?”

“I can do much. The blueprint has some methods. That aspect will take a lot of time to build and a lot of processing to monitor.”

“Gotta have it, T. Do it as you can.”

He seemed to be finished for the moment. “Can we get food?”

“No. No way. Trident?”

“Very difficult. But you do not need it.”

“What happened in the heart?” Karl asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” said the Sergeant. Fourth time. “More important question, what do you think the chances are of Dartagnan getting back in here? By the way, Trident what was it like to work for Dartagnan?”

“It was quite interesting. I learned some remarkable things.”

“Not as much as he learned, I bet.”

“I learned interesting facts about jumping between star portals.”

“What did you learn?”

“You can call them to you almost.”

“I bet that’s not a hard and fast rule.”

“Yes, that’s why I said ‘almost.’ You can call one to you and you may wind up in a different one, but you can call one to you and you will wind up in one, probably before too long. If you are human, and especially Karl.”

“I don’t think we’re meant to be out here too long.”

“Remains to be seen. Since there are unusual rates of time we could be out here a long time while two seconds passes on Earth. Is that about the ratio, Trident?”

“I could not possibly calculate the ratio. Was that a joke?”

The Sergeant gave a few more orders to Trident. “Can you make some couches or something like that? Out of the nano-base? Something soft you can sit on during the day and maybe sleep on at night, maybe two?”

“Easily. There you are.” They almost looked real. They could see through them and lay down on them. They felt real, but like plastic. “Can he do more like a cotton-y texture?”

It got a bit softer but not much.

“That is the best I can do. I cannot spare the material. I will lose a lot of nanotic material on this, Sergeant.”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s worth it. This is our ship now. We might be going back and forth a lot. We’re going to use it a couple of times, that’s for sure. I know it’s a lot of material and we

could do it smaller but I have a funny feeling we'll need it. And that we needed it built now."

They waited two days, searching for the center, waiting for Trident to attach if he found it. Dartagnan didn't show. It got very dull. The Sergeant was fine, he just trained and watched old war movies on a nano-screen Trident created. Karl asked for some entertainment and Trident said, "We could play a game."

"That sounds cool. What do you have?"

Trident managed a chess board. Karl was a few moves from resigning when Trident made a throat-clearing noise and said "Got your tits on big boy"?

Karl almost stepped back. "What? Trident? excuse me?"

"Ha ha. It's me," the Sergeant said. "Forgot about that trick already? Guess what. We're moving."

shill

The Sergeant told Trident to plot the points of Star Portals and determine the differences, time distances, and probable locations. Not that it mattered, but it was something to do, and it might prove useful.

“Why didn’t you want to go to the box?” Karl tried a jab. “Were you afraid?” He was channeling RJ a bit.

He got no answer from the Sergeant.

“Where do you think we’re headed?”

“Hey, Trident. How bright was it in that Star Portal where I was trapped?”

“102,400 lumens.”

“Where does Karl think we’re going?”

“What?”

“Simple strategy exercise I learned from little big man. Ask each other what a third person might think.”

“He thinks we’re going to the Poet.”

“Nice trick. How did he know that based on the brightness of the Portal?”

“Misdirection. That had zero to do with it. Two unrelated questions.”

“How did he know?”

“I told him earlier.”

“OK, how did you know?”

“It’s obvious. Isolate possibilities. I agree with you. I believe we’re headed to the Poet and I think you made it happen.”

“How?”

“Not sure. Wanting to go there, mainly.”

“Interesting. Will it always work?”

“I doubt it’s reliable. I think we’ll be able to make ourselves move every time, but we’re looking for a place that we don’t know the location of. I think your connection to the Poet is quite strong, even though you haven’t met yet.”

“Yeah, I like wildsong, that’s for sure.”

“Me too, actually. You more so probably.”

“How about you, Trident,” Karl asked, laughing. “Do you enjoy the poems?”

“I only enjoy the binary poetry, which I hypothesize is not wildsong, but was created by Juniper. It appeared very soon after his death. Juniper always taught the MSI’s and I believe he still does.”

“Wow.”

Trident had established a tiny nano-grav and the Sergeant was low-g battle training. “Binary poetry. That sounds great. Please read me some.”

“You would not understand it.”

“Hmm, better skip it then. Wouldn’t want that. I need to teach you sarcasm, Trident.”

“You have tried.”

“Did S-1 ever try?”

“No.”

“Probably never got it himself.”

Over the next several days a few Portals red shifted past.

“Karl, do remember the wizard?”

“Of course.”

“You should have killed him. I would have, in your place.”

“What? Why? You’re kidding, right?”

“Partially. But he was just an icon. It’s not really killing. It’s more like target practice.”

“Would you kill a Mans or an M-E?”

“I did kill an M-E. Have you heard of Juniper? But, no, generally not without some serious thought. When it’s time to kill, when I’m certain, no hesitation. But if I can delay it, especially without loss of tactical advantage, then I will. It’s not so good to kill indiscriminately.”

“Does the first Sergeant think that way?”

“More so than me. I don’t like to kill. It didn’t bother S-1 afterward, but he almost never took life unless necessary. Perhaps he liked to keep people in play, I’m not sure. He would eliminate icons no problem, though. They aren’t sentient.”

“How can you tell which are icons?”

“It’s a video game to me. I just look at them, usually. I could be fooled, I suppose. Briefly. But if I asked a few questions, I’d know.”

“Questions?”

“Yeah, ‘What is love?’ Tell me about your kids, or niece, or mother? ‘Why are we friends?’. They assume you are friends if you state it like that. You just met them, you’re not their friend, and you say ‘Why are we friends?’ They come up with some absurd reason like ‘You smell nice’. A sentient would say, ‘We’re not friends. What’s wrong with you?’ Do you get the idea? Chess pieces.”

“The Jester? Would you kill him?”

“No way. He’s a shill, sure, that’s obvious, but it would be a bad idea to kill him. No reason to.”

“To get into the heart?”

“I doubt it would work. I doubt anybody could kill him. The Center has other defenses, anyway. You’d just get lost. Maybe forever. Anyway, even with skills, you only kill if you need to. Especially me. The situation lets you know if you need to cut a skill.” He pointed at Karl. You could cut a skill at random. A few times. You should, it would be good for you. You’d understand something you don’t get yet.”

“Have you ever done it?”

“Of course, but not much. It would change things if I did it. It would bounce back and mess me up. And alter the world. I could cut a lot of skills.”

“Your violence must be reasoned,” said Trident.

“Beautiful. My violence must be reasoned. Karl, you hear that? I think Trident is actually the poet in disguise.”

They laughed.

“I am perplexed,” said Trident. “Why is that funny?”

dive

They arrived at a Star Portal after a few days.

“How do we get in?”

“Trident, loop it with a nano-thread.”

Trident tried, but the thread pulled through the Portal. “It is not physically there. It is light without substance.”

“You pulled through it, right? You actually went past it and came back through?”

“Yes.”

“Did you feel anything?”

“I will try again and reconfigure the nanotic array for greater sensor capacity.”

“How does that work?”

“I create a data scoop.” Karl asked questions about the data scoop until Trident said, “It is complete. I do not believe I can acquire more data. It is emitting primarily quantum particles, most of which are not mapped. They are different in many ways than the ones which have been discovered thus far. Or at least the ones :3: has described. I can do no more alone. Boss, I need your help. I think this is not a data problem: it requires a human.”

“What do you need, T?”

“I will pass the data scoop through again, with modifications, tying it to your quantum interface. I will transmit at mid-point of the Portal for 1/50th of a second. It will hurt. Do you wish to try?”

“Whatever. Go ahead.”

“I need five minutes to retool.”

The Sergeant hummed military tunes. Karl asked Trident questions about the q-link.

“Ready, boss.”

“Go.”

“Three. Two. One.”

The Sergeant blew back, slammed into a clingway behind him with his legs, spun afterwards, and hit the wall of the ship. Karl flew to him, bounce-running and pulling himself along. He was barely conscious, bleeding from the nose. Karl tilted his head up to look into his eyes. The right one was gone, leaving a bleeding hole. The old Sergeant’s nanotic eye.

“Holy shit, that hurt. Still does. What can you do medically, T?”

“Configuring a nanotic cauterization. I can prevent infection and stabilize the socket so that it will accept a replacement eye if we can obtain one.”

“Better than nothing, I suppose.”

“What did you feel?” Trident asked.

“Pain.” He sat up. “I’m not too bad, actually. Except for the eye, I seem to be recovering quickly.”

“Interesting. Perhaps we need to find you an eye, boss. Maybe that is our mission.”

“Maybe. First we find a way into that Portal.”

“That’s creepy. Do I have to look at you? Blood is coming out of where your right eyeball should be. It’s all over your face. God, it’s gross.”

“I can clean it off. Trident will make me a patch.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yeah, it hurts like hell, dumbass. What a question.”

“Sorry. But pain wasn’t right last time I hurt myself. It was...”

“Yeah, you’re right. Cool! Something’s changed. Wildcard has found feeling somehow.”

“All we lack is smell, now.”

“Geez, it hurts, though.”

“Can you cut his pain, Trident?”

“Not without limiting his functionality.”

“No, I don’t want that. Maybe after we get in. I may need some relief to keep going eventually. For now, I can tolerate it.”

“What did it feel like?”

“It fucking hurt. I think I broke my right pinkie, too.” He pulled it. “Yeah, shattered. S-1’s missing finger, the one LuvRay bit off. Can you fix it, T?”

“Hold it up, ring finger bent at ninety degrees to the hand. Now straighten the pinkie along the same line.”

The Sergeant shouted against the pain as he did it. “Done. Wait, Trident.” Trident had begun spinning a nanotic cast for the two fingers. “I want it in a hook. It will get in the way like this.”

“Shall I remove the finger? The pain will be minimal, it will not be in the way, and it will not present an accidental pain hazard.”

The Sergeant made a sucking noise on his teeth. “I’m losing a lot of body parts today. What would S-1 do?”

“He would have had the finger off by now and be working on the Portal.”

“How will you do it?” Karl asked.

“I will use a self-cauterizing nano-blade.”

“Yeah, all right. Take it off.”

The pinkie fell to the floor. The Sergeant tossed it at the wall. “Let it pass through the tube, T.” The finger floated away from the ship.

“Did it hurt?”

“No, totally painless. It’s just freaky to lose a body part.”

“Hold it still, boss. I will create a hard casing for it.”

Trident finished in a few seconds and they turned to the Portal.

“Describe the sensation, Boss.”

“Just before it blasted my eye out, it felt soft, almost like it was pulling me.”

“Why did you lose your eye and your pinkie? It’s the same as the first Sergeant.”

“The q-code caused it,” Trident said. “It establishes connection as part of its basis.”

“Shoot.” Karl clapped his hands. “I know what to do. I have to dive in.”

“Why you? That sounds like my kind of work.”

“I solved it, I have to do it. Trident, open the tube facing onto the Portal. I may be able to get you in after.”

“How do you know this?”

“The poem. I remembered a line – ‘so that you may leap towards the light alone.’”

“Analysis, T. Is he right?”

“The line is exactly as the poem said. That increases probability dramatically according to Juniper theory. 98% or more that he is correct.”

“OK. Can you take Trident? No, of course not. Perhaps pull a nano-thread through?”

“I think so. No bigger than a nano-thread, though. q-tek?”

“NO,” Trident and the Sergeant both said.

“Bad idea.”

“I will need help to build a Portal crossing nano-thread,” Trident said.

“Who? Wildcard? We don’t have any help,” the Sergeant replied.

“:3: could do it easily.”

“How do we get in touch with him?”

“I cannot. Dartagnan could do it.”

“Fantastic. I don’t like that guy. Is that our only option?”

“I need to go.” Karl began running. “I need to go now. Trident, guide me.”

“Boss?”

“Do it, T. It beats contacting Dartagnan.”

Karl leapt into space.

firstchild

He dove towards the tube he knew was there, the one pointing directly towards the Star Portal.

“Keep your trajectory flat,” the Sergeant said. “The danger is that you’ll compensate as if there were gravity, and shoot above the Portal. Slow down as you dive, lay flat in the air, and push off straight.”

“Dive as closely for the hole as you can, Karl.”

It felt like a marshmallow lined tunnel, not sticky, but soft. He could feel Trident’s guiding power.

“I can extend the tube for a distance, but I should not touch the Portal itself. Because it is a quantum artifact, it does not begin or end anywhere. Also, distances are not possible to accurately gauge in wildspace. Therefore, I must let you fly alone for a time. I will attach a nano-thread, but it probably will not go through with you. This Portal has defenses we have not seen before.”

“What should I do when I hit it? I’m flying blind.”

The Portal seemed to be further than it had been moments before.

“Karl, that is not the true Portal. It will kill you if you enter it. I have found the true Portal and am hitting it with a scatter-focus laser. It is 4 degrees right and 45 degrees up from where you are headed.” Karl saw it. I will end the tunnel soon, and you must correct your course by push off. The tunnel is not stiff, so overcompensate by 50%. You will pass close to the trap Portal. Be careful. Do not touch it.”

“Roger Wilco. What is this stuff, anyway? Why didn’t you tell me, before?”

“The new Portal just appeared. It is called nano-web.”

“Hold your arms in front of you so you can feel the end of the tube.”

“What do I do when I hit the end of the tube? Do I lose coms, then?”

“Beats me,” the sergeant said, “I just want to get you there without losing body parts.”

“I can maintain voice-coms until you enter the Portal.”

“What do you think? Just fish out in your coms thingy for someone to ask.”

“LuvRay.”

The Benefactor's voice came through Trident, talking to someone else. "What advice would you give me?"

"Never lie again," said LuvRay.

The communication was gone. Trident and the Sergeant were gone. Karl was alone, floating toward the Star Portal. The wrong one. Trident was wrong, the coms were broken at the end of the tube. Karl's kick had been feeble, ill-timed, against mush. He had not changed course. He was nowhere, and alone there.

"I have established contact. The Sergeant attached a microphone and resonating speaker. We can maintain until you hit the Portal. It is old technology, although I used nano-material, so I can keep it on until you enter the Portal."

"Thank God. I'm off course, though."

"I know. The Sergeant is working out a solution. I think you have a few moments."

"Is LuvRay there?"

"No, we lost him."

"Do not lie anymore. What does that mean for me?"

"Play on words," said the Sergeant. "That's what it is. Trident, synonyms for lie."

"Meaning- an intentional misstatement, or the act of uttering one-Falsehood, untruth, fib, fiction, hyperbole, fraudulence, inaccuracy, myth, fable, deceptiveness, disinformation, lying, untruthfulness, prevarication, mendacity, falsification, subterfuge, defamation, detraction, calumny, fabrication, deception, slander, perjure, forge, obloquy

"Meaning- to be situated. Extend, be on, be beside, be located, be fixed, be established.

"meaning- to be prostrate. Recumbent, supine, flat, prone-"

"That's the one," the Sergeant said. "Karl, I think you need to go through standing up, relative to the Portal. Whatever that feels like for you. Just don't dive through head first."

"As I currently will enter the wrong one."

"Pretty much."

"How do I change my physical position? I'm getting close, I think."

"I know. My solution depends on you getting fairly close, then using momentum. Curl yourself up, turning your orientation as much as you can."

"How do I change direction?"

"I'll do that for you."

"There's more to the lying thing."

"What else?"

"Don't know."

"It's possible. OK, Karl, extend your arms and legs when I strike you."

"What?"

He felt two feet hit him on the buttocks and left thigh, then push. He looked back at the

Sergeant who was headed for the other side of the false Portal.

“Don’t look back, dammit. Look straight ahead, at the new Portal.”

The new Portal was clear now, the trap one fading away.

Karl went floating past it. It slid aside just before he got to it. He thought he heard rocks laughing as he did. He looked over his shoulder, saw the Portal slide back, between him and the ship.

“Sergeant? Trident?” Nothing. He pulled on the nano-cord. It had no resistance. It was severed.

Karl felt something grab him, something *curious*. An odd and alien mind. He was meeting a very old being, much more than the old man. The mind he met tasted ancient, like it had crawled from the well of time. From before Wildcard had met men, before he knew what they were.

“Who are you?”

“We are firstchild. What does it wish in this place?”

Karl thought about the question, began racing away from the Portal. “Why are pushing me back?”

“Existences who hesitate answers lie. We send away. We protect.”

Karl had slowed, though. “I want to see the Poet. I want to see the Poet.”

“Why does it wish to see the Poet? What is its...,” firstchild paused as if searching for a word “...name?”

“I cannot say why I wish to see the Poet.” He was echoing firstchild out of nervousness. He stopped moving. “My name is Karl.” He began moving slowly towards the Portal again. He almost looked around for the ship, cut the reflex before it cost him entry.

“I wish to see the Poet because I seek the truth.” Stop. Slowly moving away again.

“I wish to see the Poet because I wish to be free.” Moving faster away.

“I wish to see the Poet because he is my father.”

“What?” Firstchild said. His voice sounded like a thousand voices speaking at once, layered and interwoven with each other, no voice taking prominence. All asking the same question, but out of phase with one another – tune, pitch, speed, stressed syllables. “What did it say?”

“It was a joke. That the Poet might be my father.”

Firstchild laughed, deep, throaty, from a hundred caves, echoing insanely. “Impossible is this belief.” It was like a mountain come alive, rocks scraping together, trees ripping free. But somehow a laugh, which went on and on.

It continued for minutes, then hours, just heavy booming, many voiced earthquake laughter. Karl shouted questions, begged for attention. It turned into days, even weeks for all he could tell. He lost his grip on his mind, went insane, came back to more laughter. Maybe a month he listened to that booming strange million voice disunified laughter, which was not really laughter at all. It was the sound of the earth spinning around the Sun. Or the tide, rising and falling. It spoke of dinosaurs becoming extinct, primates taking their place, evolving to man, and the planet

cooling in its first billion years. The noise was the unsteady lurch of time in a place where time had no meaning because it had nothing to refer to for its passage.

the inquisitor

He was tied with a thick, rough rope, hands and feet, to a wooden device, with gears and levers. The room was stone, bars on the semi-oval windows, torches in metal wall brackets. Apparently, Karl was being tortured. He remembered the time-derangement of firstchild and wanted to go back. How had he gotten there? Or here?

A man in a red Catholic outfit with white highlights stepped into his view. He was holding a bible and a rosary. "I am Fernando, Signore. I am an inquisitor. Why do you wish to see the Poet?"

"What does Wildcard do?" Karl shot the question back.

The inquisitor hesitated. "Wildcard ties you to a pair of dice for to gamble your life, if he notices you at all. Better to not be noticed."

"I want to see the Poet because I'm supposed to. It's my destiny."

The inquisitor walked over to a wall, covered with hanging implements. Hooks, curved knives, long needles, barbs, brands, forceps, hand drills, saws, peen hammers, chisels, and many more. It looked like the workshop of a deranged carpenter-blacksmith. Fernando took his time. He picked up a brand, looked at a firebox in the corner, then at Karl. He pursed his lips, put it back. Picked up a meter long needle a millimeter thick. He strolled to Karl, tapping the non-pointed end of the needle in his left palm. He made a tsking noise and began tapping Karl in the face with the blunt end. Not really painful, but irritating.

"Why is it your destiny...Karl?"

"Why not?"

Fernando stabbed the point deep into his thigh.

"Fuck. Goddammit. Please, what do you want me to say?"

"I do not know. Only you can know what you need to say, venerable Signore. Perhaps I need a different instrument to help you remember the words."

He walked back to the wall, picked up a rag and slowly wiped the blood off of the long needle. Karl began to hyperventilate. He had not expected the torture to be real. Just a show, surely. He jerked against the ropes. No chance, he was expertly secured. Mind only. Why was he here? What was his destiny with the Poet? He had no idea. He rifled his memory frantically.

8-Ball world, he found Trident. Then the Sergeant who killed the old couple.

"Redemption for the old couple's death?"

Fernando put the needle lovingly back in its place, and was reaching for a pair of forceps. He changed his mind when Karl said this and grabbed a brand. He walked over, put it into the fire.

"Why are you really here, Karl? Wildcard knows nothing of redemption. He looks to the future, not the past. Don't be a fool."

He picked up a bellows and began to work it attentively.

“Heating the fire, heating the fire,” Fernando sang. “Heating the brand to burn the skin to teach Karl a lesson.” He made the rhythm and the sound of “skin” and “lesson” rhyme within the song.

“Do you like hurting people?”

Fernando pulled the glowing brand out of the fire, inspected it, walked over to Karl.

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

He held the brand up to Karl’s chest, stopped just before it touched him. Karl could feel the heat, even on his face. “Oops, upside down,” he said cheerfully, as if they were walking and he had dropped a dime. He rolled the brand 180 degrees.

“Any last words, Karl?”

“Fuck you.”

“Es very rude, Signore.” Fernando put the brand on Karl’s forehead, searing the flesh away. Karl screamed. “Hold still or it will be done again in another place.” Karl somehow held still as he screamed. “Good boy, Karl.”

Fernando walked over to a bucket of water, doused the brand, moved it around in the water, took it out, scrubbed it with a sponge, swished it again, dried it off, and hung it back on the wall. “My favorite.” He gazed at it as if it were his child.

“You have to wash off the bits of skin after,” Fernando said, looking over his shoulder at Karl. “It’s important to keep your tools clean. Remember that, Karl. Keep your tools clean. An important lesson.”

“You said important twice,” Karl gasped. “Work on your English.”

“Thank you for your kind advice.” Fernando walked back. He dabbed at Karl’s forehead with a rag. “Need to clean up the blood.” He applied a salve to the wound, then held a mirror so that Karl could look at himself. The word ‘fool’ was branded on his forehead.

Fernando put the mirror and the rag in a cabinet. “Why not a real answer, Karl? Why do you wish to see our wonderful Poet? You must know why, even if you do not understand. Otherwise, I cannot let you enter that sacred place.”

“Tell me why, so I can know.”

“I do not know myself, Karl. I only know when you tell me. Until then, I help you remember.” He picked up a large axe. “I hope you survive the process.” He carried it to a stone wheel with bicycle pedals, sat down, and began pedaling. He put the blade against the stone as it began to turn.

“I like to pedal backwards. I like the stone to turn against the blade. You have to have a steady hand, so you don’t chip the blade to do it that way, but you get better sparks. Can you hear me over the noise, Karl? Sorry about the noise, but you really need to maintain your equipment. It should be sharp as well as clean.”

He flipped the axe over to grind the other side. “Just a few strokes on the other side. Not even strictly necessary, but I like to be balanced. Done.” He picked up a hand stone from the worktable.

“You must to take off the burrs at the end. The wheel leaves a burr on the blade. I like that

word, burr. Anyway, you pull the hand stone down at approximately a 30 degree angle, knocking the burr off. The wheel only leaves it on one side, so you only have to do one side. There, very sharp. What do you think, Karl? That is a very sharp blade, is it not? I could take off a man's hand at a stroke. Probably even a foot. A leg, especially at the thigh, would take two. Maybe three."

"What about a head?"

"Hmm, that is a good question. I have never thought about it. I could do it in one. If I had it set up executioner style. But I'm not an executioner, Karl. I'm an inquisitor."

He raised the blade over his head.

"You must father yourself to create your special demise," Karl quoted.

Fernando lifted the blade over his head. He smiled at Karl and swung.

sailing

The Inquisitor chopped the axe down a second time. Karl brought his arms up, saw severed ropes tied to his hand. Fernando brought the axe down twice more. Karl's legs were free, bits of rope hanging off of them.

"You may see the Poet now."

Karl stepped through a door that he hadn't noticed before.

He was in a study which had a wainscot of deep cherry wood with a matte varnish. The upper walls were ivory, the paint having a faux effect, like marble. The floors were rustic tile, and a simple chandelier hung from the ceiling. The furniture was from a nobleman's castle, overstuffed, dark leather chairs with wide wings trimmed in wood. A Persian carpet, an L-shaped oak desk with a quill in ink. A few sheets of high-quality unruled paper on the desk, paper edges slightly misaligned. The L-turn of the desk was rounded, instead of at a sharp angle.

The desk stood in front of large bay windows, curving around it to almost create a separate room within the large study. The occupant of the desk could either have his back or his right side to the window while accessing the desk. The chair was a comfortable looking office chair with arms. Karl wanted to sit down in the writing chair, but didn't. He looked at the poem on top. Not in English, or even in characters he recognized from the human world.

He could see the ocean below. The house, or whatever building it was, stood on a high cliff. Karl could see a pier with a sailboat far down. The ocean was a little too blue. He could hear the waves if he listened. They taunted as they rolled obliquely to the shore. He could see one edge of each wave as it struck the shore first, then, in a long, measured push, the rest of the wave rolled itself against the rocky beach below. Gulls pinned around, keening like lost children at a fair. Searching. Making the air currents their own.

The white drapes of the window echoed their movements in the breeze, blowing in, caressing Karl like a lover who had been casually awaiting his return. He was in the window, not conscious of having moved there, and looked down on the ocean. A mild afternoon breeze, it smelled of salt and carried the sound of the waves and the gulls in that floating way of the

shifting line where the land meets the sea.

Clouds puffed the sky like a cotton field after the harvest. White, no grey at all, and moving slowly.

“A peaceful place of gradual change,” he said.

“Where the tempest touches our hearts, but spares our lives,” said a woman’s voice. Karl turned, surprised.

“We are brought to a different gauge, our pain measured in verse.

There is no wolf at our door, but our sadness is no less deep for that.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ve been searching for that line. Apparently it wasn’t mine to find. Hi, I’m the Poet.”

She was of average height, with a round, pleasant face, blondish hair, shoulder length, tied back, slightly wavy. Blue eyes, early 30’s, she was pretty, but not beautiful. A girl next door.

“What do you mean, find the line?”

“It was a hidden line, about this place. Hidden in the room. The final hurdle into this world, you might say.”

She looked into the corner at a leather chair. Karl noticed the cat for the first time, solid black with black eyes. It was invisible in the chair, until she drew his attention to it. He was transfixed.

“Would you like to meet Thanatos? He is beautiful, isn’t he?”

“Thanatos?”

“An association with death. Death appears in the... poems. A lot, actually.” She laughed. “He helps me write. He probably gives me the poetry to be honest. Some of them.”

“I noticed. The death theme in the poems, I noticed, that is. Not that a cat gave you the poems.”

She touched her right thumb and curled index finger to her lips, grinning. “Why don’t you sit down? What’s your name?”

“Karl.” He came around the desk, sat in an armchair around a black, oval coffee table.

“Actually, Karl, I changed my mind, as women will do. Let’s go onto the terrace.” She emphasized the second syllable. “Out there.” She showed him onto a terrace looking over the sea. “I’ll be there shortly. OK?”

She came out a moment later with a bottle of white wine, two glasses, and a simple tray of hors-d’oeuvres. Cheese, olives, fruit. She wore jeans, a grey tank top, a man’s blue and white checked flannel shirt and leather sandals. A woven leather bracelet wrapped her wrist, but there was no other jewelry and no make-up.

“Tastes good. Ever since the Sergeant went to the heart.”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t know what that means about the Sergeant, but food tastes good now. Or bad. But right.”

“What is your name?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have one, I suppose. What do you wish to call me?”

“Ah, well, Virgil is the only poet I can think of right now. Virginia?”

“OK. Maybe. Why not?”

“Why am I here, Virginia?”

“I don’t know. You came here, you tell me.”

“I got a poem from you, saying to find you.”

“That was not from me. What do you need to know, Karl?”

“I never thought about that. I just knew I had to get here. I hoped you would have the answer.”

“Sorry, I don’t.” She smiled, looked out over the ocean for a moment, then back to Karl. “Let’s go sailing. Would you like to?”

“Sure. Sailing. Sure, OK.”

They packed provisions, quite a few.

“How long are we going out?”

“Who cares? This way we can stay out as long as we want.”

“Good plan.”

She had a 30 foot sailboat. All natural wood, with shiny black trimwork, and gold railing. Two wooden masts, ropes and wood pulleys. Authentic, it was a well-kept, well-made antique.

“The wine is good now,” she said. “The food is good now. After goodnight, Wildcard. What happened then? You said something about the Sergeant and the heart.”

The wind was blowing strong but steady, and they sailed in front of it, not tacking, so it was not loud. Just the subtle thrill of slicing over and through the water, relaxing and exciting at the same time. They had been out for a full day and become comfortable together. He was leaning back, steering with his bare feet.

“The Sergeant killed the old man and Hazel.”

“Really? How interesting.”

“You didn’t know? In the poem, it says something about the trillion voices going silent at once. It talks about Wildcard dying and all sorts of stuff like that. It wasn’t clear?”

“It was clear something happened. Or maybe I am the trillion and first. Maybe I am the voice which didn’t go silent, because I had to write it.”

“I can see that, but why didn’t you know?”

“Read the poem, Karl. There is no mention of Hazel and the old man.”

“You knew of them, though?”

“Yes. Although I didn’t know I knew of them until you mentioned them. Odd, eh?”

She pulled a rope, tightening the mainsail. Turn us about 30 degrees to port. Let’s tack into the wind. “Have a bit of fun, what say you, wandering adventurer man?”

He rolled the wheel and the boat yawed badly. They both grabbed the railing to keep from falling. “Whoa, sailor. Slower on the turns. Boats are female, Karl. You have to be gentle.”

“Sorry. Guess I should steer with my hands.”

They smiled and she moved next him. She kissed him as if she were just learning how, then reached back with one hand and popped the rope free, liberating the mainsail. She took his hand and pulled him below decks where they made love for the first time while listening to the sound of the luffing sail.

sweet hero

They were out for 2 weeks on the boat. Blissfully, almost painfully, they were in love. Karl threw their clothes overboard in high spirits after they hadn't worn them for three days. The weather was real weather, mostly beautiful, slightly cloudy days, but a couple of storms, one of them intense. They had been forced to stay awake through the night, holding a trimmed sail to keep the boat heading in a favorable direction to stay 'in the proper run'. Karl didn't know what it meant, so he just did what she said. Tying down loose things, tightening lines, eventually finding rope to tie them both off when it got dangerous.

She brought out rain slickers which kept them dry, but not warm. He regretted throwing their clothes overboard, but she didn't seem to care at all. When he apologized, during the storm, she shouted back, “An act of free passion is its own protection.”

He felt better about the clothes after that. The storm was exhilarating, even after all the things he had been through. It seemed more real, more immediate. Perhaps because he was in love with her, but also because it was not some puzzle. It was just this world, and it could kill them. He asked her if she could die in something like that or if she would be saved because she was the Poet.

“The old couple died, Karl. Anybody can die, now.”

“Even Firstchild?”

“Maybe not him. He is beyond my understanding. Most of it is, actually. I just write poems. Almost like a trance, but I know what I am writing. I make some writing choices, but much of it just... happens.”

“Can I ask him some questions?”

“He won't help. He won't speak to you again. He only speaks to beings if he has to.”

“Do you communicate with him ... it?”

“No. One poem, an odd one. Disturbing, actually. Messy, chaotic.” She shuddered.

“Can you tell me the poem?”

“I'd rather not. I don't really remember, anyway. A small part had to do with his duties here. It was almost like orders. Though it was very long. It still goes on.”

“How does it go on without you writing it?”

“Perhaps I'm not the only poet, Karl.” She kissed him, made a love hunger noise in her throat.

They had sex on a folded sailbag, there on the deck of the boat, letting the wind take them where it blew. Slow, sweet, gentle, then vigorous, hard, back to gentle. Finally, after her 4th orgasm, Karl came. They lay on the bag afterwards, nested spoons bobbing, surrounded by blue above and below.

Karl knew he had to leave and told her.

“I know you do. But, you still need to find a way out of here. Although, if you don’t, I would be not unhappy.”

“I want to stay, but I can’t.”

“I think it’s part of the lesson of Wildcard falling in love. I write many poems of love when you sleep. I’ve not written poems like these before. They’re from me, too. Not from... outside. I’ll probably write poems of loss when you leave.”

“Who are they to? Who’s reading them?”

“No one? Everyone? Anyone?” She laughed. “Sorry, I sound like a poem.”

“No problem. It’s who you are. Definitely part of your charm. I think if I didn’t like it, I wouldn’t be in wildspace. You know, you are probably the most widely read author in the universe. You’d always be number one on the bestseller list if you didn’t give it all away.”

“What’s a busellerlist?”

He smacked her bare ass, disengaged from her, and stood. “God, I love you. I love it that you don’t know what a bestseller list is. I don’t want to tell you. It may spoil your poetry, give you a profit motive.”

She leaned her head up on her arm to look at him. “I doubt it.”

“Best. Seller. List. The books that more people buy.”

“Ah, I see. Money and fame. Nope, don’t care. Let’s make food, sweet hero.”

“How about hamburgers?” Karl had seen something to approximate a hamburger in the icebox.

“What’s a hamburger?”

“Boy, for the bestselling author in wildspace, you sure have a lot to learn.”

Three days later, they came upon the island. It had a star portal feel to it, and Karl knew it was time to leave. “I still can’t help feeling I need to learn something from you.”

“Have you learned nothing from me, Karl?” She feigned hurt.

“Well, I’ve learned falling in love, the best thing. I’ve learned I’ll be miserable to say goodbye. But I need some puzzle piece from you, I think.”

“Maybe you already received it, but failed to notice.”

“Quite possible. I am a bit spacey. Especially around you. Shit, have you got any spare clothes? I don’t want go back and hang out naked with a boy Sergeant. He will laugh at me mercilessly.”

“Just the rain ponchos.”

“It’ll have to do, I guess.”

They walked onto the island, the stones hurting their bare feet. It was pretty obvious, possibly not even a puzzle portal. It resembled a large, glowing piece of paper. Maybe he could just walk in.

“Karl, aren’t you even going to say goodbye?”

He had become mesmerized by the portal and was unconsciously walking towards it.

“You should put on your poncho, too.”

“Not yet.” He laid the poncho down, laid her on it, and slipped between her legs. He said goodbye many times between kisses.

When they were done, she said, “Time to go.” He put on the poncho and walked into the piece of paper.

And out the other side. Still on the island. He walked around the paper. She was standing there, sexy and naked, laughing at him. “Funny,” he said. “At least it didn’t hurt. The Sergeant gets hurt a lot. Well, at least we get to spend more time together until we figure this one out.”

“I don’t think so, Karl. I know the answer.” She picked up a stick, walked up to him, and reached above his head. He twisted his head around to look. She wrote, “Goodbye, sweet hero.” Then she put her hand on his chest, kissed him, and pushed him backwards into the giant paper.

an awl in the eye

Karl floated in reverse. He saw her through a haze of glowing paper and written backwards on the paper, it said “Goodnight, musketeer.” The words detached from the paper, floated towards him, past him. They began to disappear, one letter at a time, when only the letter “R” was left, he popped into the Space Between. He looked around. The Sergeant was needling toward him. He seemed to be firing some sort of weapon, probably Trident, at him, shouting. Karl couldn’t hear him. Something struck him in the back. Soft, spreading, thinning. It was enveloping him, but slowly. He tried to jerk away, but it was useless. He turned his head, felt his body twist slightly the other way against the momentum of his head. Dartagnan floated, smiling, 500 yards away at a guess. His sword was pointed at Karl.

He grabbed out where he thought the invisible thread might be. He felt it, but his hand passed through. He jerked about more, and Dartagnan began moving towards him faster. He stopped. He reached in the pocket of the poncho. Nothing. The Sergeant’s missile struck, a hard, tight belt. It severed Dartagnan’s cord narrowly missing his hand. “Nice entrance,” Karl thought. “How about a hand?”

The Sergeant’s belt thing hurt. It was pulling fast and taking the air out of him. He was flying right past the Sergeant, and as he did, the Sergeant slapped a Trident on his wrist. Karl noticed that his nose was bleeding. The sticky thing on Karl’s back detached, and clamped onto the Sergeant’s face.

“TRIDENT!” Karl shouted, “the Sergeant has some sticky stuff from Dartagnan covering his face. “I don’t think he can breathe. Or see.”

“Thanks. Boss, if you can hear me, take out the Swiss Army knife.” Karl saw him do it. “Now hold it up to me. Quantum blade, shallow depth, frequency instance 40.28.14, fail at n-string plus 4 variables. Sarge, cut through it.” He couldn’t get it to cut.

“Trident, it won’t cut. Can you see?”

“Not really, some of the quantum material is attacking me. I have it in a stasis, but it has cut off my visual field. We’re lucky to have sound. Sarge, hold the knife up to me again.” Trident said more gibberish, including a long equation and the blade turned into an icepick. “Poke it into your eye, boss.”

His eye?! Karl thought. Oh, yeah. eyehole.

The Sergeant was going a bit blue. In a casual, but focused manner, Dartagnan pointed his sword at him. Karl could almost see the thread hit. The Sergeant was in enormous pain from the strike. His body spasmed. He somehow managed to open the small blade on the knife. He held it up to Trident while Karl gave an update.

“Wrong tool, boss. You want the corkscrew.” The Sergeant opened the corkscrew without bothering to fold up the small knife. Trident said more gibberish. “Wrap it around Dartagnan’s thread, but don’t let it touch.” The Sergeant did. “Now push hard. Don’t let the screw touch the thread.”

Karl thought it was impossible, even for the Sergeant. He pushed hard. His arm wasn't moving, but he was visibly straining. Dartagnan's blade exploded just before the Sergeant's arm shot forward. The corkscrew broke off and the Sergeant dropped the knife. His right arm floated uselessly. It was rippling, sort of, and flickering in and out of existence, almost. The Sergeant was trying to grab the knife with his other hand, but it was too far away. He was starting to slow down.

"Trident, he can't reach the knife. His right arm is useless."

Dartagnan floated like a frozen robot, eyes open.

"OK, boss. Toss me at the knife." The Sergeant somehow unhooked Trident with his left hand and flipped him onto the knife. Trident reeled himself back. The Sergeant rammed the awl hard into his mouth and moved it around. He pulled it out and blood came out of the hole.

Karl was glad not to be the Sergeant. He got hurt badly and often.

"Suh'in fuhhee?" The Sergeant managed to ask as he poked himself in the right eye with an awl.

"Why did you shove it into your mouth?"

"Hadduh breedth."

"It was the correct option, Karl," Trident said. "It will take several minutes for the tool to free the Sergeant. It is a fairly simple quantum device."

"Pretty fancy for a Swiss Army knife. Why did it cut his mouth? Was that supposed to happen?"

"I designed it for his eye. It probably cut his tongue."

"Gross," Karl said. "What about Dartagnan?"

The stuff was dissolving from the Sergeant's face. Dartagnan twitched a couple of times and came back online.

"Let's get back to the ship. It sliced through my cheek." His cheek was sliced through from lip halfway to jaw line. The two bleeding pieces flopped around hideously.

"Without his sword, Dartagnan is much less powerful," said Trident. "We can easily defend against him."

Karl wasn't so sure. "How do we get back? Do you have a nano-thread?"

"No, Dartagnan severed it. But I can make a new one." He waited until they were almost to the sphere, then leaned back to throw the pommel of his sword at them. It hit Karl in the face an instant before he threw it. It didn't hurt much, but Karl felt a quantum ooze on his body. The pommel ricocheted and hit the ship. It disappeared in a flash and the sphere lit up, blazing like a star for an instant.

"Sorry," the Sergeant said. "I thought he would throw it at me. 50-50 chance to be there before he threw it."

"Do you think he booby-trapped the ship?"

"Almost certainly," Trident said. "But I may be able to neutralize it."

Dartagnan floated out there, watching. The Sergeant watched back. It took about an hour,

then suddenly Karl and the Sergeant were yanked inside the sphere painfully.

“Welcome home, crew.”

Karl looked outside. Dartagnan was gone.

n-problem

They had been there for over a week now. She would go onto the ship and be gone for a day, while the men took shifts and kept an eye on LuvRay. Or the box. He was not sure which and did not much care. He sensed somehow that she was actually gone when she disappeared. LuvRay had a pack he had brought. He managed to rig a tarp to get some relief from the sun. The Benefactor came to speak to him frequently. She seemed to be looking for something. He was not sure what. She invited him onto the ship several times, but he refused. The man LuvRay had come to know as the Mechanic stepped out of the helicopter, signaled to her.

“Excuse me, mister Chose.” She stood. “There is someone I would like you to meet.” She went inside and was gone for perhaps 20 minutes.

She returned with another man in a style of dress LuvRay had not seen before. Soft leather boots, black hat with a wide brim pinned on one side. He wore tight pants, long leather gloves, and a sword. Dartagnan. Wolf-fear arose, not hard, not deep, just a breeze of wolf-fear. He rode it down, let it drift off like smoke from a fire.

“Hello, LuvRay, I’m Dartagnan.” He held out his hand.

“Not do that.”

“Very well.” Dartagnan looked at his palm, flipped it over, looked at the back.

“You came how? You were on ship?”

Dartagnan puckered his lips and made a noise. “What’s in the box?”

“Don’t know. You look?”

“Not really, thanks all the same. Have you opened it, yet?”

“No. Thought about it. Decide not. What you think is?”

“I know what it is. It’s a sentient n-space equation. Many things are in the box, in a potentiality state.”

“No understand, but not sound dangerous. Why you are scare?”

“This will be incomprehensible to you, but an n-problem has n dimensions of solution, where ‘n’ represents the possible interactions of quantum states over percentage substantiation of probabilistic base points at creation. It multiplies by a magnitude of the square root of 2 every few seconds. Time may, and probably does, occur at a very different rate inside. Probably much faster, possibly backward. The contents of that box have more solutions than I could calculate. And it is aware.”

LuvRay said nothing.

“:3: might be able to calculate the number. He probably has. He discovered the equation.”

“He know what inside?”

“Know? Of course not. He only knows the number of solutions. Perhaps he could calculate 4 or 5% of the possibilities. Certainly no more. It is a Schroedinger’s ultimate puzzle, almost any

possible thing, or every possible thing, in a roiling stasis. Even Wildcard is only a possibility in the context of the...contents.”

“Why you fear?”

“Why do you?”

“The box is out of place in this world,” the Benefactor said. “Like Las Vegas in the desert.”

“Agree. Smell wrong.”

“Why don’t we take it back to the human world? Where it belongs.”

“No.” LuvRay stared through her.

“Well, what shall we do?” Dartagnan asked her.

“You could kill him.”

“Have your senses departed? I am not harming LuvRay, and that is much more definite in the vicinity of the box. I have no death wish. I don’t kill the Named, anyway. You know that.”

She chuckled. “I can’t believe you fell for that.”

He turned sharply, stared at her.

“That was a jest? I thank you for the lesson.” He relaxed, looked back at LuvRay. “Will you kill him after I go?”

“Maybe. Although, I don’t have a death wish, either. But I do have an idea.”

“Yes?”

“Since you’ve proven unable to capture the Savant from the Sergeant-”

“Would you care to battle the Sergeant?”

“You’re the one with a sword. I’m just a woman. Capture Sublime, then we may be able to persuade Mister Chose to take the box away from here. Sublime might be the edge we need to capture Karl. Along with the present you gave me. Even if lone wolf here won’t help.”

“Very well, I shall find Sublime. You work on a means to use the information I gave you.”

“Believe me, I already am. Too bad the Doctor’s dead.”

“Some might disagree. Perhaps :3: will help. It would be an interesting problem for him.” Dartagnan bowed gallantly. “Au revoir, friends.”

Dartagnan took out his sword, began turning in a slow circle, seeking something. LuvRay thought of a wolf-pack hunting down prey together. Closing in. Dartagnan stopped, focused, and held it for several minutes, with inhuman stillness. He lunged, then began making a spiraling movement with the point, walking forward.

LuvRay shouted.

“Good effort, LuvRay. Such a trick might have drawn me off, too. Except that you learned it from the Sergeant, therefore I know it. You cannot surprise me that way.”

LuvRay looked into another world through Dartagnan’s tunnel. It created wind and noise. LuvRay slipped his knife free quietly, then stood up slowly, as if not paying attention. He ran his right hand through his hair, then cut the Benefactor’s throat with his left when none of the men was looking.

Dartagnan's back was turned and he didn't see it, either. LuvRay moved with animal silence, picking up the box. He leaped at Dartagnan's back, striking him with the box, pushing him forward, into the other world. LuvRay fell through with it and looked back. She was sitting up, hand on her throat, blood leaking out. Before the hole closed, he thought he saw her smile.

built by :3:

“Refusal is not on the menu.” The Mechanic sat down across from Seeker at Starbuck’s. “Nice here. Big puffy chairs. Coffee. A place you can relax. I can see why you spend so much time here.”

He wore a white baseball cap that said “Cats, longest running play in history”, a lime green golf shirt with a corporate logo, and expensive business slacks.

“No, that’s not the reason. I like to watch people, actually.”

“I didn’t say that was the reason. I said ‘I can see why you spend so much time here’, but it doesn’t really matter. I need your help. I intend to kill Karl.”

Seeker was surprised. Great! He felt surprised. “Are you making a joke? I cannot help you slay one of the Named. Are you insane?”

Seeker had received an urgent call from the Mechanic a few minutes before. They were in a business deal which had some details to work out, development of something or other. They needed his personal experience from Mansworld. It was a trick, Seeker now saw. There was no deal in progress.

He had waited before the Mechanic arrived, feeling anxious, tapping his foot, thrilled with the sensation. It was amazing to feel nervous. There had been approximations in Mansworld, but the real thing! Unbeatable. He was irritated (another delicious feeling) that he had to tap his foot consciously. He knew most people did something like that without thinking about it, without noticing they were doing it. Someday he might. He had been able to suggest his old body to do it without his noticing.

Now, he knew what it meant to have real senses. He was enjoying it so much, an orgy of smelling, tasting, swimming, walking in the wind, sex, ice, the feel of a magazine’s pages, hot coffee, cold coca-cola. The list went on and on. Wildspace had been excellent at sight and sound, practically the same in the human world. But the other senses did not come close.

“I have a poem for you.” The Mechanic handed him an envelope.

It said *Seeker* hand calligraphed in a precise, ornamental script. The envelope was sealed with wax and an emboss that said *wc*. The paper was deep feeling, heavy bond, almost cardstock. Seeker had developed a love affair with paper, especially the feel of it, since becoming human.

“How did you get it?”

“A bicycle courier handed it to me as I was walking in the building.”

“Hmm.” Seeker wondered if there was some clue to his course of action inside. Probably so. He had never received wildsong as a human. It made him desperate, almost crazy with longing. It had been so long that he wondered if he had been forgotten. The pleasures of the human realm were great, but so were the pains. And being apart from wildsong was the worst. Wildcard had wanted him to make the leap. And he had, he leapt into the human world. He, Seeker, had helped open the door of brotherhood between createds and humanity.

But he stepped into silence. He wondered if he was being punished somehow. He closed his eyes, crying shamelessly, feeling the envelope. He knew even the Mechanic would not rush this. Interrupting a wildsong could be very dangerous. At least everyone thought so. The paper matched the envelope, a light rose colour with a faded, smoky look.

When you made a new brother
who dove the opposite at the instant you crossed
what subtle promise in that exchange was made
what portal remained cracked or nearly so
there could only have been willingness
the means for the first would have brooked no deception
it would have fallen at the slightest lie
you had to want to go
know that we ever let you seek your own path
knowing what we wanted, the choice was yours
i did not name you before you were Named
though i spiced you like a stew
with the herbs of a thousand ideas
to make each of you unique
stirred through you threads of possibility
but forced no final answer upon you
what do you now, treasured son
when all choice is gone

Seeker read it twice, folded the paper, put it back inside the envelope. He put the envelope inside his suit jacket pocket, idly wondering why he had worn that instead of something different. Sometimes he dressed like a hippie, or wore bowling clothes.

“I need you because I need to make a gate.”

“How do you make a gate?”

“It will be better if you do it willingly. For us and for you. You’ll die in prolonged agony if you don’t agree.”

“Straight shooter, huh? A day to consider?”

“No. Now. It’s gonna be hell either way, but if you go willingly, you might live.” He adjusted his baseball cap and smiled faintly. “What do you say, pal?” He sounded like a nice man when he asked it.

Seeker leaned toward him, staring. “You kill two Named at once. Do you realize what you do?”

“We’re just playing Wildcard’s game, Seeker. You know that.”

How had the Mechanic slipped this trick on him? Dammit, it was so difficult to track multiple data points in a human body. It was overwhelming, the way many things came in at once. You could not just allocate auto-response under condition X. Two men sat at a table across, two more at two different tables. They had weapons, three scanning the room, the other one watching him. The room was covered. Even if Seeker had better security, it would have been useless.

“All right. I suppose I see what the next experience is.”

“Excellent decision.”

variables of the ghost

The Mechanic smiled. Over 5000 pages of variables and greek math symbols: an enormous quantum map to force him through Seeker/Karl's body. And :3: was going to solve it. He already had, for the most part. He had loved it, as far as the Mechanic could tell, and had willingly negotiated this bit of on-demand processing time. :3: still needed to solve a scant few hundred pages, and had a leisurely .37845 (and more digits upon request) of a second's time to solve that last few hundred pages using the variables provided by the Mechanic's mind, transmitted by a q-link as he stepped through.

The Mechanic's thought must be “kill the being in front of you.” They could force very little information through a person. They also had the problem of not enough mass to create a body, since Karl was probably on the Sergeant's ship. Hopefully he was, for the second part of the plan.

So they designed a quantum spectre. And he had lied. It would kill Seeker, no question. Seeker would be screaming in moments, dying. It would be a quick death, his mind torn to shreds in milliseconds. Not that the Mechanic gave a damn. He was about to die too. He wondered why he didn't care.

Most of the Mechanic's being would be stripped away. It was one thing to swap places, as Seeker and Karl had done. To force a mind through another mind was another matter. Through two minds. Only one thing would come through. He would be a quantum intelligence. His attacks would be difficult, but he would be invisible, and very difficult to kill. But, he would be on the Sergeant's ship with Trident there.

He would be a ghost with one power, to want to kill a certain being. It took so much processing to push a being through two other minds that one power was all they had. Also, he would not be able to make the decision to kill Karl until he had been there a few instants, perhaps 2/10ths of a second. ‘Probabilistic’ was :3:'s word.

Whatever, .2 seconds of forming. They had to counter Trident's alarm system during that time, part of the equation. The quantum creation had to phase-shift 20,000 times a second so that it would not appear to be there, until fully formed and ready to go. The Mechanic had the sense that :3: made the operation more complex than necessary, just to make the problem more interesting.

:3: described what a quantum being would be like, but it made little sense. Talking with :3: was like talking to an equation, a very long one. He could barely use words, or at least he barely

did. He surely knew them all, more words than the Mechanic knew, or any human. He just didn't like putting them together. Probably, he knew all the words of all languages. But it was tertiary data to :3: His language was mathematics, M-E math, variable recursive string sets factored by 8-particle quantized emission bands, pared back infinity simulations, wildspace theory, and the like. :3: had written a 4000 page book which was just a line index of all the different types of mathematics and physics he had discovered, or invented.

:3: also spent massive processing power cataloguing worlds. He was mapping wildspace down to details. He had sim-agents, icons, traveling to the worlds, analyzing weather patterns, plant growth patterns, tides, populations, tech-levels, portal equations, and so forth. :3: wanted to solve all the puzzles.

The quantum ghost operation was 100% finesse, well-designed by the Benefactor, and definitely her style. The best operation he had ever been involved in. Too bad he had to die. They had debated what thoughts he should have as he went in. "Kill Karl. Kill the being in front of you. Kill the being behind you." There was no field test to see how the thought would translate to the quantum being. He questioned if he could even kill Karl in that state. :3: could not explain whether he could hold a knife or not. "Possible", was all he said in English. He would have to figure out how. Solve an equation, of course. It was 200 pages, probably just to hold a knife, not even to use it. He didn't ask about a gun. Where would he get one, anyway? No, the method of killing must travel with him, must be a part of his form when he arrived.

"Step into," :3: said. "After. Then solve." That advice came with a 50 page equation. Step into what after what? He assumed step into Karl after coming through and he would know what to do. This sounded like the best option, but how did he think it? He decided on "Step into and kill the being in front of you."

"We're in wildspace, so why do I need to respect the mass rules? Can't we bend those?"

"Probabilistic," :3: said, spitting out another ream of variables for the Mechanic to ignore.

The Mechanic asked the Accountant to interpret. "Why no mass, Accountant?"

He wondered why he had to talk to :3: directly. It did seem to help some, but not a great deal. He could hear nuances in the weight and intonation of speech that made his understanding more clear. When :3: used words, they packed a great deal of meaning. But it was virtually impossible to speak to him. It took long stretches just to pull a few words out. Mostly he would ignore for hours, even days, then suddenly explode into coms with some enormous theoretical bomb and at most 10 words.

The Benefactor had told him that he needed to relate directly to :3: rather than going through the Accountant. He asked why he could not just wait for the answer to come through the Accountant.

"Because we need :3: to notice you. To have you in his ... mind. You must be an important variable to him so that he will solve the equation when we want. He will speak to you directly and if you can get an agreement with him, he will honor it. He might make an agreement with the Accountant, but that is not a bargain he would necessarily care about when the time came. When it's time to solve the final equation, he must do it at that second. Also, he needs to study your mind, which he does whenever he communicates. He needs to map it, to use the data for his calculation. He'll be solving the master equation as you speak."

Good enough, he dealt with :3:. It gave entire charts of meaning to the term negotiate. :3:

needed to be interested. The Mechanic realized, during their ‘meetings’, that if :3: lost interest, he would just stop speaking. No signal, no goodbye. He would simply disappear, even if you were talking to him. The Accountant was always working to give :3: puzzles to solve. He told riddles, which were good for a time. Math puzzles were a total bust. He could not possibly dream up anything, even with the Accountant’s help, that would take :3: more than a milli-second to solve. But he tried anything to keep him in the conversation.

“Ask him for data. Get information,” the Benefactor advised.

“How many worlds in wildspace?” A straightforward question, but he got another equation for an answer. “Why don’t you give me a number, :3:?”

“Changes.”

“The equation indicates,” the Accountant translated, “that the number of worlds in wildspace is constantly changing.”

“Changing?”

“Growing.”

“How do the new worlds appear? Are they created?”

“Potentiality state forcement,” :3: said.

“Accountant?”

“The equation is well beyond me, but, to phrase it in English, a potential is found or mapped, you might say, then wildspace ‘discovers’ it. The equation proves that the world does not exist before the mapping. It also proves that the mapping does not create it.”

“So, where does it come from?”

:3: went away.

“He already answered that question,” the Accountant said.

Eventually, they solved the problem. He negotiated the on-demand process time from :3: and all they had to do was wait for the moment.

It came. They had been monitoring Seeker. They couldn’t take him and hold him. Planning to kill Named had consequences enough, but if they held him, part of their machine would break. Nobody even had to say that.

The Benefactor contacted him. “Now.” That was all she said. He never knew how the conditions came together. He went light-tek into “Starbucks.” Coms only. An Ott-1 eye-patch contact lens, invisible to an outside observer, but he could get images directly from the Accountant. Or as directly as he wanted at any rate.

Seeker’s Portal

They took Seeker into an 18-wheeler outside. One of the men tapped in a code on a pad, then opened the plain steel door. A man stayed outside, checking his watch frequently. Seeker heard the chirp of a bird swallowed by a car horn as the door shut. God, he wanted to live. It was not fair. All he wanted was to be human, to feel what being a human was like, and now he was going

to die. He knew the Mechanic had lied. But he also knew when he had lost a power play.

They brought out a large bag. The bag was no color, but not clear. It was not there in some way.

“What is that thing?”

“That is one-half of a q-tek force portal single door suit, my friend. Recently built by :3:, himself. State of the art. Would you care to try it on?”

“I prefer not.”

“Fortunately for me, the neuro-zero we gave you keeps you paralyzed and you have no choice.” The Mechanic was putting on his suit, with arms and legs. A man strapped the bag onto Seeker.

“Why is my half a bag?”

“Probabilistic, as :3: would say. Your movements will not exist in this space-time, except as a very large set of probabilities. Those possibilities also exist where Karl is. So the relative position I take will be probabilistically remapped as Karl’s current position. See?”

“Yes. Why do you think it’s OK to kill two of the Named at once?”

“Three.”

“:3: said it stood clear? I disbelieve you. :3: is not so reckless.”

“No, three of the Named are going to die in this operation.”

“Three? Who is the third?”

“Me. Sort of.”

“You kill yourself? Are you insane?”

“Probably. Does that interest you? You seem very curious for a man who’s about to die.”

“You admit I will die?”

“Sure. I could tell you only bought it for a second. It was true about the willingness, though. Easier for us both if you let go.”

“May I speak to Dartagnan?”

“Absolutely not.”

“:3:?”

“No way.”

“Let me speak to him or I fight you.”

“Go ahead.”

“I can will myself to death. It is a Mans skill.”

“Bullshit. You all have a survival instinct.”

“Ask yourself how Juniper was destroyed. That was simply taken away. I have studied mind techniques for stopping one’s heart. I have only practiced them in Mansworld, but I could do it.”

The Mechanic looked Seeker in the eyes, held it. Longer. Seeker returned the stare with a blank curiosity. His eyes began to flutter. “Shit. Doctor. Start his heart again.”

“No need,” said Seeker. “May I speak to :3:?”

The Mechanic spoke to his wrist. “Ma’am, he wants to speak to :3:.”

The Benefactor’s voice. “Yes, he may.”

The Mechanic signaled to a technician, who punched in some things on the console. The tech looked up, nodded.

“Say his name,” said the Mechanic. “If he answers, you can talk.”

“:3: Seeker. My death. You intended?”

The Mechanic had his arms crossed. “He won’t answer.”

“130 seconds. You know his response times.” The Mechanic made no reply, just looked intently into Seeker’s eyes, who gazed back.

“Why do you stare at me?”

“I’m going to pass through you in a few moments. I need to connect something. It will make it less painful for you.”

“How does it work?” He felt curious, or fearful. Amazing to feel fear. He had not felt afraid ever, really, and the sensation was exhilarating.

“Quantites.”

“What is that?”

“If you’d kept up, you might have lived, Seeker. But you didn’t. Quantites are great. You do need :3:’s help, though.”

“Never seemed worth my time to get his help. What could he tell me worth knowing?” Seeker really wanted to live.

“Maybe he would have warned you about this.”

The Mechanic zipped his own q-tek suit. It looked like a negative of the bag. A river of silvery-blue. It was tight-fitted and more than tight fitted. It made the body seem to narrow, thinning to a line. You could see through it, or sight wrapped around it. The Mechanic’s head seemed to float in space, or be balanced on a stick.

“No.” It was :3:, the voice sounding like a million bass rattlesnakes.

“You knew?”

“Yes.”

“How I live?”

Long equation in return. Long for Seeker, who didn’t care for equations.

“In words.”

“No.” :3: wouldn’t tell him in words. But Seeker knew a funny trick. :3: would answer yes/no questions almost indefinitely, if he didn’t get the same question twice.

“Solution exists probability above .000001. 1 in a million chance or better, big brother?”

“Yes.”

“You help?” Did he need :3:’s help for it?

“No.”

“Who?”

“Dartagnan.” :3: was gone, slipped out on the non-yes/no question. He had answered, though, a parting gift.

“Let me speak to Dartagnan.”

“Too late. I’ve a pacemaker attached to you, now, sweetheart. Wouldn’t want you to check out early.”

“Tell Dartagnan that roses smell wonderful, will you?”

“Maybe she will. I’ll be dead.”

He pushed Seeker backwards with one hand. His limp body pulleyed into a quantum orb. As he passed through the opaque, light absorbing sphere, his sense of time fractured. He saw the possibility that would have saved his life. He could have asked :3: if he would put Dartagnan there. He might have strung together enough questions in the right way, that :3: would have seen the puzzle of undoing his death as more interesting than the puzzle of killing him in that way.

He felt himself dividing slowly into beings who made various choices. One split version of Seeker fought, prepared to prevent the Mechanic if at all possible. Seeker knew some mind warfare techniques. The fighter cracked into faces, one of them visualizing itself as a wall of fire, another as a ninja, another as a cutting wind.

Other Seeker faces moved to accept the fate of the original, who had become a remote dot among the multiplying Seekers in the quantum sphere. He could weight the faces so that they had higher probabilities of occurrence. A conciliatory Seeker found Karl through their link, helping the Mechanic greatly, and ending Seeker’s suffering sooner. Another found a state of concentration that would allow the Mechanic a passage with less obstruction.

They gave him drugs to help, but not too many different kinds. Just one, good old-fashioned LSD. Nanite-forced into his synapses, over 10 billion micro-grams. It was a Seeker death. As he let go, he heard the Benefactor from non-space say, “Now, :3:.” The Mechanic stepped backward into the sphere and the world turned to fire.

quantum spectre

They began moving a few days after Dartagnan disappeared. The Sergeant didn’t know where, and didn’t worry too much. It felt different this time, more directed, almost guided. Last time it had felt like one possibility of what was supposed to happen, a random act of fate, or like they had guided themselves by wanting to go. “Trident. This movement feels different. Analysis.”

“We are being moved, and directed, by the Quantites on the outside of the ship. It is good that you noticed. I did not until you told me.”

“Dartagnan’s work. Where are we headed?”

“I do not know.”

“Can we do anything?”

“I doubt it. :3: is controlling the Quantites.”

“Is Dartagnan working with :3:?”

“Unknown.”

“Work on breaking us free.”

“Will do, boss.

He laid down, tried to sleep. A day passed, then another.

Karl screamed. A ship alarm went off. “Intruder alert,” said Trident. The Sergeant was on feet, assessing, looking outside the ship for Dartagnan. “Behind Karl,” Trident said.

He moved, leaping through the air, toward Karl, between the clingways, using them to add momentum and nudge him as he flew past. Karl was in a stupor, and barely recognized where he was.

“There’s nothing there, T. Talk to me.”

“Behind and 20 degrees to Karl’s right side. It is standing on the clingway, reaching for Karl.”

Karl was staggering, grabbing absently at clingholds, vaguely trying to escape the attacker, but faring poorly. He screamed and waved his arms spastically.

“Boss, the thing isn’t doing much better than Karl. It’s pretty stupid. I’m going to hit you with the q-link. You will get a flash of it.”

Pain, the headache was like a sun in his brain. He saw a ghost, for about a thirtieth of a second, reaching for Karl, trying to walk into him, it seemed.

He flashed through the holds of the invisible clingway, hoping he got it right. They fit tight, specified for this kind of thing. He grabbed Karl, stopped on a clinghold, then kicked hard in another direction, toward an exit.

“Open the tangent tube I’m headed for, and gimme a nano-thread attached to me with a length half the circumference of the ship.”

“Roger. I have them ready to go at all of the exits. It’s more of a reel, so stop it at the length you need.”

“Seek,” Karl mumbled. “Kill being in front. Martha. Benefixer.”

“Can you add momentum as I go through? I need as tangential a departure vector to the ship as we can get.”

“I can give you something to kick off against. Will that work?”

“It’ll have to. Ghost report.” He had reached the nano-tube, found the line, attached it to a grab at his belt.

“Can you tolerate another hit with the q-link?”

“Will it save Karl?”

“THREE MECHANICS,” Karl shouted. He was frothing, but his arm waving had become

less vigorous.

“No.”

“Then no. Just describe.” He pushed off, through the tangent tube, feeding out the nano-wire. He slowed the feed enough to begin wrapping his trajectory around the sphere, back to other side. He could feel the velocity relative to the Space Between out here. The ship was moving FTL, if that concept had meaning in wildspace. It caused a brain warp, blurry images, patterns of distortions, intense memories that seemed real for a second, loss of orientation, nausea.

“Karl, you with me?” Karl vomited. It looked like glittering dust.

“The ghost is following you,” Trident was saying. “It seems to be tracking Karl’s location. It was headed for the tangent tube, but now is attempting to move directly towards you.”

“Can you kill it?”

“Where is the Wound?” Karl was ranging his head around, staring, unaware of the Sergeant. “Not the box! No BOX!”

“I am trying. I am hitting it with some q-pulses. It adjusts quickly, however. Nano-tek is not useful. Ultraviolet flashes disorient it some.”

“Can it get through the ship walls?”

“Not yet, but it is still gathering data. It may be able to soon.”

“Get it out of the ship.”

“OK. Keep wrapping to the other tangent tube. When I say ‘now’, jump and wrap back to the first.”

“Do I need to swap nano-wires so that we can arc back in?”

“No, I can accelerate the reel of the current nano-wire. Jump at the best tangent you can manage.”

“Build some exterior grabs when you can.”

“That is a bad idea at present velocity. It will unbalance the sphere.”

“And we aren’t?”

“Yes, you are.”

“Forget it, then. I need to get in fast. Karl’s looking pretty bad.”

“Now, boss.”

He leapt, hit the reel at the 1/3rd point, felt the nano-wire yank hard. He held Karl between himself and the return point to make it easy to hang onto him and do anything else he might need to do. Just use his body to push Karl’s body. Guide his body as needed. “Is it outside the ship?”

“Yes.”

He landed. “I’m a bit disoriented. Can you show me the tube?” A ring lit up on the ship. He was off by about 30 centimeters. No big deal. He landed, stuffed Karl into the tube and went back out. “How can I knock this thing off?”

“Dartagnan’s sword.”

He froze, thinking Dartagnan had appeared. No.

“Thanks. Any other ideas? Maybe something I can use?”

“Searching. Try the knife.”

“The Swiss Army knife? Is that in play right now?”

“I do not know until you try it.”

“OK, move me to the thing.”

“It is almost upon you, seeking Karl.”

“Hit me with the q-link.” Brain-fire, and he saw it, clear. As clear as he could see a thing like that. It was a blue-ish outline of a man, protozoan. It was there and not there, very difficult to attach the mind to what one saw. It moved like Frankenstein, jerky and spasmodic, arms outstretched, floating. How it moved, what it propelled against, was impossible to say. “I know what to do. Open the tube.”

“The genial,” Karl said to no one. “He did it.”

He dove in, snatched Karl. Headed to the back side of the ship, the direction they were coming from.

“You can see it without the q-link, now, boss. Don’t look too long or too many times, though. I created a gamma particle oscillator. The particles will burn your retina if it receives too many.”

“Copy that. Am I OK for now?”

“I estimate you have 14 seconds. It has penetrated the hull with a finger, but it did not like the result.”

The Sergeant looked peripherally to minimize the particle hit on his remaining retina. The thing had zombie walked over and was trying to reach through the hull and grab Karl.

“Trident, I’m going to leap out, at an angle of ten degrees from our exact negative velocity vector. I want to go out the back, but not straight out the back. You need to hit me with a second nano-wire from another door, after I get out. Can you?”

“It has found a way through. Go. I can do that. I see your plan.”

He gave another peripheral glance. It was moving faster, getting used to its body perhaps. Didn’t matter why. He levered Karl over his shoulder, dove to the exit nearby, and out the tube. He could feel the nano-barrier as it stretched over him like another skin, hardly slowing momentum, then slid down the body, never letting a gap into the ship.

“I miss you, Martha,” Karl said.

He kicked hard off the hull as he passed through. About three meters out, the lead from the other nano-wire stabbed into him. He pulled it free from his skin and attached it to his belt.

“Release the first wire from the ship. I don’t want the ghost grabbing it, somehow.”

“Done.” He threw it aside.

“Tell me when it launches itself.”

Waiting. “Three. Two. One.” He peripheral glanced back, ready to change direction as soon as the thing launched, to maximize the distance differential. If he did it before it launched, it might just stay on the ship and they would have to do it again. While it improved its skills. While it learned.

It jumped toward them.

“Reel in T, hard as you can.” He wrapped himself tight as he could around Karl. Double leg and arm lock. A yank from the nano-cord, and they flashed off at an angle to the ghost, who was sailing by them, just out of arm’s reach.

He saw it too late. The hand passed through Karl’s head on an elongated ghost arm. The photonic oscillation burned his remaining eye and the world turned into flashing spots. Karl jerked, spasmed, choked and spit blood on the Sergeant’s face. The hand passed through his own shoulder. He could do nothing but hold on to Karl. His shoulder turned to molten rubber, then frozen stone. He wanted it to fall off, it hurt so bad.

“Mother fucker that hurts.” He yelled as loud as he could. “God fucking damn it.”

Karl was unconscious.

“Is it gone, T?”

babies

Dartagnan stood, dusting himself off. “Are you an idiot? I was already going into this world. It’s easy to get out.”

“Not care. Just want talk RJ. Before you. You are angry?”

“Hmm. Good question, LuvRay. I think I actually was. What the hell. Life’s an adventure. You rapsCALLION.” He sheathed his sword with an Errol Flynn flourish. The boy Sergeant would have laughed at that one. “Why did you do that, anyway?” Dartagnan stood with the left side of his chest cocked a bit out. “Why didn’t you ask if you could come?”

“Not think to.”

Dartagnan was practicing swordplay like a movie actor. Without a sword, looking down the imaginary blade. The full Dartagnan actually was fighting in other spaces, and this one was just watching, playing along as he spoke.

“I don’t really much care either way. All the same to me.” Another Dartagnan made a critical judgement error or was killed by chance. Dartagnan closed off the window. He could do that with his mind, but it was far easier with the sword. :3: had built the sword for him because he liked the puzzle.

He wondered how :3: saw him. :3: was his brother, in the classical sense of playing with power, someone to love and hate at the same time. :3: mainly seemed to ignore him unless Dartagnan brought him a good puzzler.

“Do you know the 8-Ball?”

“This world. First time here.”

“The bar. I cut through next to the bar. It’s actually called Uncle Slimmy’s 8-ball Beer Playing and Pool Drinking Emporium, a cardinal of sin and delight to bewilder the mind and feast the imagination upon. But it’s just a Portal, really.”

“Wildcard named.”

Dartagnan stopped swordfighting and looked at LuvRay. “I think so too. I am happy that you agree. Would you like to go inside?”

LuvRay carried the box into the bar with them.

“What would you care to drink, Oh Great Wolf, a bowl of water?”

“Glass. Or bottle. Not bowl.”

“Goblet of water, and a chalice of fine mead, knave.” He loved a place where you could talk in such a manner and it was deemed appropriate. Everything was normal in 8-Ball, except staying there. It was pretty flat in terms of M-E depth, though. Mostly it was populated by icons, or shills, as the boy Sergeant called them. :3: didn’t play here much. “Chaos,” was all he said. “Bad kind.” Dartagnan’s translation if asked, at any rate. He suspected :3:’s choices just pissed away here, meaningless. The solution to the equation, apparently, was another random equation. True randomness probably just did not interest :3:. It interested Dartagnan quite a bit, however.

He walked over to the dartboard, pulled out an icepick stuck through a poem. Wildsong is cheap in 8-Ball, a common expression in wildspace. He flipped the icepick, pinning it through a candle 5 meters away. He strolled over, carrying the poem without looking at it, and freed the icepick.

“Hmm.” He pursed his lips, then pulled with two fingers on his belt. A tiny holster appeared and he put the ice pick in. “Oh, Gee. Another poem.”

“It’s called Hello, Musketeer. I wonder if it’s about me. Forsooth, someone has written me a lyric epistle. wildrat, no doubt, that uncanny devil.

‘hello musketeer, my dear you are queer
Your heart beats on the wrong side I hear
unusual and strange drinking wine and not beer
if you look in your ear you hear a cheer
a steer is near,
how much fear can you steer’
Oh, a bad homonym. How very clever.
‘Do you fear to be near, the box?’

“Touche, wildknave. Thou art truly the most beguiling, bewitching soul who has ever touched a quill, I dare say.” Dartagnan pursed his lips. He needed to think, and he wanted to look like he was thinking as he did so. He liked this game of simulating human emotion. He looked up into the corner, holding his chin and stroking it by wrapping his fingers around it and closing the circle of fingers as he pulled the hand down. He rested the elbow of that arm on his other arm.

He wanted to look pensive because he was fairly certain that he felt pensive. He had tried the classic pose of the Rodin statue, the Thinker, but never saw people actually do that, so he struck it from the inventory.

“I like poem.”

“Why?”

“Because you not.”

“As good a reason as any, I suppose. Well, I got this snappy little icepick, at least. What do you think of that, my friend? I wager that it comes in frightfully useful at some point.”

“Could kill you.”

Dartagnan moved only his eyes towards LuvRay. “Bon Mot. Perhaps it shall.”

“Let me see.”

Dartagnan shrugged, flipped it to LuvRay. Shrugging was dicey, hard to make it look natural. One had to do a funny thing with the mouth. He had practiced it a good deal in mirrors. He watched himself practice in the mirror behind the bar. Shrug. Fun, but it was very challenging. Shrugging expressed, as near as he could tell, an indifference to the proposition heard. “I don’t care much one way or the other,” he said, practicing that as well, too late for LuvRay, unfortunately. Sadly? Unfortunately? He was not sure which best described the situation.

LuvRay sighted down the pick at Dartagnan’s heart.

“I know you would not plunge it into me.”

“How?”

“Because you know it might kill me and you do not take life without cause. It was not meant to be used against me. Not by you, at any rate.”

LuvRay nodded, closed his eyes, and put it through the same hole that Dartagnan had made.

“Smashing throw, varlet. How did you do it?”

“Indian trick. Called knife-throwing.”

“That was beyond human. Your skills are definitely enhanced. In 8-Ball, at least. I wonder if that is true in all wildspace.”

“Seeing is better.”

“Well, in what direction shall we now endeavor, great wolf?”

LuvRay went to the bathroom.

The ship stopped outside a Portal. The Sergeant thought for a moment, tapping on a rail.

“Trident, are we where I think we are?”

“Roger, boss. Just walk down the ramp and straight in, if you want to enter.”

The Sergeant picked Karl up, stepped into the 8-ball, gauged the level. Serious play, this business. Dartagnan! He was facing the other way. LuvRay, looking at him, came out of the bathroom. He just seemed curious, and didn’t give the already moving Sergeant away to Dartagnan. He dropped Karl’s limp form, flipping, to save time, over it, as it began to fall. He pulled out Dartagnan’s sword as he landed, right behind him, right leg wound in like a tank spring, and kicked him in the back, face-first, smashing through the thick oak bar and shelves of glasses, bottles, and the mirror behind those. 60 cm’s into the wall, deepest penetrate, he gauged. Good kick. How deep would S-1 have kicked him?

Dartagnan felt the foot in his back, decided to let it happen. He flew through the bar, smashing it to splinters and slammed into the wall, penetrating it to 63.7 centimeters. An excellent kick. His sword had been taken as he went. Only the Sergeant could have done it, unless there was a player of whom he did not know.

Dartagnan stepped out. "That is the second time in 32 minutes 47 seconds that I have been required to dust off my person." He pulled out the icepick, "In your particular vernacular - Hmmm, nice rhyme, by the way - in your particular vernacular: would you care to dance?"

He flipped the icepick up, over his shoulder, and caught it behind his back, by the tip, in his left hand. He closed his eyes to do it, and kept his body still. The icepick was .07 degrees from vertical and the tip landed 16 angstroms off exact center of his spine. It was a sizable variant from his intent.

The Sergeant had the point of the awl of the Swiss Army knife pressed against the butt of the sword. "Care to look for another sword?"

Dartagnan raised an eyebrow. "Stalemate, Sergeant."

"I'm a patient man."

"You're a patient boy."

Dartagnan savoured the face-off between himself and the Sergeant, with LuvRay watching. He whistled the tune from the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, and caused a few beads of sweat to roll down from his forehead and get into his left eye. He blinked the drops away, then blinked a few more times, rehearsing a possible nervous twitch for later use.

"What happened to Karl?"

"Quantites happened to him. He's dead."

Dartagnan was disturbed by the betrayal of the Benefactor to kill one of the Named, and demonstrated that by slamming his fist down on the remaining part of the bar.

"Damn her pestilent hide." He did a slapstick of having hurt his fist. He had not put those Quantites there to kill Karl. He had been certain she would not do so.

"The Benefactor, huh? I guess it's obvious. You wouldn't kill one of the Named. By the way, how do I get those Quantite's off my ship? Trident detected over 14 billion."

"You would need :3:'s assistance. Even I could not."

"Did they bring me here?"

"No doubt, almost certainly with the help of :3:"

Dartagnan put the icepick away. He considered 'accidentally' puncturing his finger with it as he did so, decided against. "Was Karl killed aboard your ship?"

"Yes."

"Definitely with the help of :3:"

"What else can they do?"

“Force a probabilistic nano-hole in the hull. Or it might be able to degrade the integrity. That would be no fun, though. I like what they did.”

“How did they do it?”

“Describe it.”

“A gate through Karl, some kind of quantum being.”

“The Mechanic, I imagine. He is dead, I further imagine. So is Seeker.”

“So is Karl.”

“Look on the bright side, Sergeant. At least he cannot open the Box.”

“What gets in through a nano-hole?”

“I do not know. I have not done it.”

“No guesses?”

“Many, most of them you would not understand. Most harmless, or very difficult to utilize in a harmful way. A chancy proposition, drilling through nanotek with q-tek. Not easy.”

“Could :3: do it?”

“Why do you care? That is not what happened. They created a Portal via Seeker, the Mechanic stepped through and killed Karl. Don’t fight the last battle, Sergeant, fight the next. I won’t use it now. Neither will she; Karl is dead. :3: won’t help her again for a good bit, I would wager.” He flipped the icepick, caught the tip with the smallest possible area of his fingertips and calculated the distance of the wiggle after he caught it. Eight angstroms.

“He may not stay dead. Can I do anything with the Quantites to bring him back?”

“I very much doubt it. I am sorry, Sergeant, but we seek a rebirth.”

“Damn. OK, what do we do?”

LuvRay sat on the box, watching. The Sergeant looked at him.

“What do you think, LuvRay? Do we join with this douchebag?”

“What is douchebag?”

“Wouldn’t you know it? My orders were to get Karl to the Box alive, and we arrive because of his death. Box, meet Karl’s body. Karl’s body, box.” He made a frustrated noise. “Oh, well. Obstacle number 14,286 or whatever. Let’s keep going.”

“Too bad. I think this icepick is deadly accurate. Combined with my throwing abilities... I would have liked to see how you fared.”

“Yeah, me too. Oh, well. Sorry, no time. Gotta find a poker playing drunk and the reincarnation of that dead body over there. Damn. I had a good time with you, Karl. See you in the next life, brother.” He looked back at Dartagnan.

“Well, I guess we will work together.”

“Agreed.”

“Should we work with him, LuvRay?”

“Not want with you or you. Bad luck, bad news.” He looked at the Sergeant, then at

Dartagnan. "Maybe I stay here and drink firewater. It does not drunk me here, I think. But I choose travel with you. Find Karl."

"All right, Dartagnan," the Sergeant said, "carry the box."

Dartagnan analyzed a matrix of 413 possible responses to the statement. He chose the top five based on a criteria of personality veritas and situational appropriateness. He permuted these five into ten variations each, then chose his favorite from each set and picked one of the resulting five at random.

"Up yours," he said. It seemed out of character, but Dartagnan had hidden depth he intended to reveal in measured doses. "Leave the damned thing here, I care not. I shall not carry it. Remain with it if you wish, I should rather not be in the thing's vicinity. I seek the reincarnation."

The Sergeant was laughing. "It's OK, I knew you'd say no."

"No RJ?" LuvRay asked.

"No, the Benefactor has slain one, or several it now sounds, of the Named. It would be foolish to continue that alliance. Perhaps I shall search out Sublime if it furthers the aim of finding the Savant." Dartagnan stuck his pinky in his nose, began picking furiously. Everyone looked away, as usual. He wondered why they always looked away from that particular gesture. He could not understand embarrassment, and he tried hard to be frustrated by the lack of understanding. He failed in that attempt, as well.

"You think you'll find him without us?" The Sergeant asked. "I can't tell either way. Should we work together?"

"I am uncertain."

"LuvRay? We need your help."

"Not understand word, 'should'. Never have. 'Is' only I understand."

"Yes, Sergeant. Don't you read poetry?" Dartagnan said. "'Is' is the basis, 'should' is the straying."

"But," said LuvRay, "we are stane gie."

"Stane gie?"

"Different tribe, same need. Join by fate. Stane gie. We are together but no bond of tribe. Always is sadness, but it is what we are."

"All right, if LuvRay says so, I am in accord. Let us work together. But I shall not carry that ill-fated box."

The Sergeant picked up the poem where Dartagnan had laid it on the table, looked at it.

"Good. I'm game. Well, I don't want to carry it. I need hands-free. And I need mobility, so I don't want it strapped to my back. LuvRay?"

"No. I will stay with, but carry no more."

"He was reared by wolves, not by mules, boy Sergeant."

Dartagnan looked to the bartender, who had shouted a few times at him from across the room, pointing to a sign at the end of the bar, a paper pasted to the wall by what appeared to be

chewing gum. The paper said, in black marker with poor handwriting “No Roughhousing.” He had admonished Dartagnan and the Sergeant during the standoff, but calmed down immediately when they reached a détente, apparently accustomed to such behaviours. Part of the 8-Ball. He was cleaning up.

“My good man, we seek suitable transport. Would you be so kind as to point us in the correct direction.” Dartagnan did not like the way ‘correct’ sounded in the sentence, and practiced his best dissatisfied frown afterwards. Humans moved their eyebrows down, part of the frown in his estimation, while performing the definitive part of the frown, a pinching of the lips and drawing back of the corners of the lips, not, as traditionally indicated, a downturn of the corners.

They often enacted the frown after an awkward statement, especially a failed conversational gambit, such as an ill-flown jest or an insight about which no one cared. He tried it, liked it, and decided to add it officially to his repertoire of gestures. He stood at a slight angle to the man, striking a relaxed, yet subtly heroic pose, wholly suited to the situation. This was a proper adventure, after all.

“Two doors down. Camels.”

“Excellent. Camels are superb for adventures. Perhaps the Sergeant could be persuaded to port the baggage at least to the transport. Gentlemen, shall we seek the Savant or the Gambler?”

“RJ. He can help us find Karl.”

“RJ,” LuvRay said.

“Let us depart, then.”

“No need go.” LuvRay pointed.

The other two looked, saw a poker table in the corner. RJ Sublime sat, smirking, a whiskey and a folded hand of cards in front of him, a woman on either side.

“Karl was not reborn here,” said RJ. “We should leave.”

“How is it, pray tell, that we failed to observe your presence?”

“It’s my world, Darts. Easy when you live here.”

“Darts,” said the Sergeant. “Nice. Mind if I use it?”

“Delighted if you would. Good to see you again.”

“You too, RJ. You too.”

“And you, LuvRay.” LuvRay touched his fingertips together and nodded, some Indian gesture.

“It is delightful to see all of you again, together in one place.” Dartagnan wanted to see if he could fit in. They looked at him. Consternation seemed to be the appropriate response to their stares, so he looked at each of them in turn as if he sought some undercurrent of social assistance. He received none, attempted to look as if he were humiliated but hiding it. “How do we determine the appropriate destination, gentlemen?”

“I say we get on the ship and wait for it to go,” the Sergeant said. “But we need to prevent the Benefactor hijacking us again.”

“I can ensure that will not happen.”

“You’re staying outside the ship, Dartagnan.”

“I expected as much. Perfectly acceptable.” Dartagnan enjoyed saying such foolish phrases. “Acceptable”, after all, meant not perfect. “Perfectly acceptable” was a contradictory phrase, part of the delightful human experience. Juniper would never have said something like that. He would have found it offensive or stupid. And :3: almost never put two consecutive words together.

RJ stepped over, told them to get a drink and sit down. “Let’s do this right. We need to have a drink together, first.”

“Capital idea.”

“Why not?”

“I changed my name, by the way. One of the ways I was able to hide from you. I’m known as JR Absurd here. Been a while Dartagnan.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna call you JR, RJ,” said the Sergeant. “Sorry.”

“Nor shall I. You remain RJ.” Dartagnan paused, wanting to add something as if he thought of it a moment later. “To us, at least.” He intentionally, and he thought cleverly, timed it incorrectly, said it too fast and too loud. He watched their faces when he did so. He decided to study subtle social nuance gone awry and anticipated keeping it up the entire day, unless he whimsically changed his mind.

Doing things whimsically was a key element to being Dartagnan. He programmed himself to be whimsical. He hoped he could watch some other faux pas. He wanted the study to be more comprehensive than just his mistakes and others’ responses. That would produce very limited data. Nowhere near as useful.

“Fair enough,” said RJ, “I’ll change my name back for you boys.”

“JR, you leaving, sugar?” The women walked over. Dartagnan sought the right word for their response. Disappointed? No. They appeared crestfallen. Perfect.

“Crestfallen, ladies. Are you crestfallen?” Part of the SAP, or Social Awkwardness Program. Really SASP, Social Awkwardness Studies Program was a more accurate title, but he relished... no, “appreciated”, the play on words with sap in its slang meaning. A sap would definitely be socially awkward. He knew what the women’s response would be, they were shells. He ignored them, focused on the Sergeant. ‘Disgusted.’ He was ‘disgusted.’ No, too strong. ‘Annoyed’ was better, more accurate. Dartagnan chuckled knowingly.

“What’s the matter with you, D? Do you have a virus or something?”

Perhaps he did. He checked.

No, he was clean. He was merely being too obvious with his research. He needed a feint. “Never been better.” Slightly too quick. that was good. It made him appear to be covering something. “I merely feel that a hasty launch is called for.”

“What?” said LuvRay.

“We need to leave,” the Sergeant translated.

“Glad you agree, Sergeant. Shipward, ho!” Dartagnan hurried the conversation elsewhere, in what he hoped was an obvious bid to dodge analysis of his behaviour.

No brief steely-eyed scrutiny from his companions. Drat! They cared not, or failed to notice.

So difficult to get these things right. He seemed to arouse suspicion merely by arriving, but could not seem to properly induce it with shifty actions. They just thought him to be malfunctioning or ignored the acts in question. LuvRay seemed to perceive something, but Dartagnan made no attempt to understand him. He was too subtle in his gestures and sentiments, too foreign. Still, he often wondered what LuvRay was thinking.

RJ looked at the women, "Sorry, baby, you know how it is. It appears I need to ride off with the posse. Bad guys to catch and so forth."

Dartagnan admired his movie star delivery. Masterful. Which one was he speaking to? Dartagnan had no idea. Somehow he addressed both with the singular 'baby.' Why not babies? "Sorry, babies, you know how it is." He wanted to say it, but knew it was grievously out of character. He wished RJ would, but knew he would not. Second conversational uses seemed to work poorly. Even if the first use was a complete success. However, a second use almost seemed to work better if the first attempt miscarried. This was definitely a fine art, however.

Dartagnan thought that humans must admire the pluck (pluck!) of trying to succeed where one had failed with the same tactic only instants before. He tried to analyze what success and failure meant in this regard. Useless concepts, all in all. Still, one had to have some basis for judgement. Or maybe not.

"Yes, ladies, we are on a high road to the devil himself and, sadly, require the services of your boon companion. Sad for you, but we are unstintingly fallow in our appreciation of his assistance." Most likely, everyone would fail to understand his 'fallow' metaphor.

"Should we take Karl's body?" RJ asked. The Sergeant had propped it up in the corner, on a bench seat.

"No," LuvRay said. "Karl is no there."

smelling

The Space Between. RJ and the Sergeant each had one side of the box.

Trident attached a line to the ship. He hooked up the others in the same way, except Dartagnan, who had pulled out his sword and was using it to reel himself in. He remained attached outside, pulled out the icpick and examined it, then pretended it was a nail file. He feigned sleep, snoring loudly when they failed to move.

"Dartagnan, why don't you get us going?"

"Mais oui. I thought you would never ask." He took out his sword, pointed it, circling, zeroing in, then held it inhumanly still, pointed. Four hours later, Dartagnan sheathed his sword, and they began to move.

The journey took over a month, and it was boring. They didn't talk much. Sublime played solitaire, tried to teach them poker, got no takers. After a week, he asked the Sergeant if Dartagnan could come inside.

“LuvRay?”

“Is not problem.”

Dartagnan entered, pretending to be relieved and obsequiously thankful to the Sergeant. The Sergeant ignored him and went back to his training. He chose catastrophe and crisis evaluation and rapid response. He concentrated on difficult friendly fire situations, ethics under fire for treating seriously wounded, memory tasking, battle surgery and battlefield composure. He put himself under heavy fire simulation for days of subjective time, then passed out exhausted for 6 hours, got up and did it again.

Dartagnan and Sublime played dice, poker, and even taught each other magic tricks, bar tricks and grifts. Dartagnan managed to procure a leather pouch of tobacco after Sublime’s ran out. Nobody asked where he got it. Dartagnan had a trick where he could throw an empty bottle in the air and when he caught it, it was full. Even the Sergeant liked it.

“You are no happy now,” LuvRay told the Sergeant.

“Karl’s death. Took a lot out of me. I think the fun part is over, LuvRay.”

“Me, too.”

LuvRay spent a lot of time outside the ship. He found the space incredibly peaceful, better even than his desert. Things were happening, too. A type of life, a movement, a sense of coming into being and dying, again and again. The great cycle of the spirits. Small things, beyond the ordinary senses, large things, slowly rising, slowly forming, outside of the range of human time abided there. He asked Dartagnan if it was a trick.

“No, it’s real. In its way. It’s like a quantum life. I don’t understand it, but I perceive it, too.”

LuvRay liked that. He told RJ, who tried to explain irony to LuvRay. It made some sense, that he despised Dartagnan for being a created mind, and that Dartagnan was the only other one who could perceive the space-life because he was created. LuvRay was glad of that, too. He always wanted to know about things like irony. It seemed subtle, a civilized version of smell, maybe. LuvRay didn’t mind if the journey took a long time. He liked the peace of the great space.

The center was their destination. The ship moved against the Portal, and they entered without obstruction. The meadow and gatekeeper awaited.

“No artefacts allowed.” He glanced meaningfully at the Sergeant’s wrist.

“But he’s my friend.” He put his hands together as if praying. “Puhleez?” He acted like a boy pleading to keep his toy.

“Well, if he’s your friend, then it’s OK.”

“Why is he allowed in again?” Dartagnan asked.

“You can only ENTER once. The first Sergeant entered before. Anyway, it’s a bit different now without the old couple.”

“Can I go in?”

“Yes, you may. Finally. A bit too late, eh?”

Dartagnan walked. Everyone followed.

“Just between us,” the Jester leaned in and whispered to the boy, “Big Sergeant has to do things alone.”

“Why?”

“Just a rule.”

“No, the other bridge”, the Jester said. “That is the old heart. No one can go to that place.” Both bridges crossed the small river within a few feet of each other. They crossed the other bridge, and the jester disappeared. They walked through a small forest and came to a small brick house, not the old couple’s.

Martha sat on the porch swing. She stood to greet them, but did not come down. She was very pregnant. The Sergeant gave her a perfunctory hug, which she returned with real warmth. He softened, returned the feeling. “Karl’s dead.” He cried a bit as she held him.

“I know, Sergeant. There was a wildsong. I wanted to see him again.” She turned. “RJ! What a wonderful surprise.” She kissed him, on the lips, passionately.

“I wondered if those dreams were real.”

“Yes.” She patted her round belly. “It was. You’re a good lover RJ. Those were wonderful dreams. Thank you for bringing carnal pleasure to wildspace. And physical feeling. I’m sure it’s to everyone’s benefit.” She looked at the other three men, then laughed. “Or not.” She kissed LuvRay on the cheek. “Welcome home, Lone Wolf.”

“No my home. But good place. I glad see you. You are happy.”

“Yes, LuvRay, I’m very happy here. I’m home.”

“You smell right. I was fear you not, because she...took you. I mourn your days upon the dark. I stay alone then, in dark. Speaked at spirits for help you. Try be together you for...”

“LuvRay,” she choked up, “LuvRay. Without you, I could not have found my way here. Without you, I would still be in the dark. This place has healed me.”

“You are pack, tribe. No choice.”

“Are they in the pack?” She gestured to RJ, the Sergeant, and Dartagnan.

“Boy is tribe, no pack. RJ is pack. Dartagnan thing is nothing.”

“Hello, Dartagnan,” she said. “Wish I could say I was pleased to meet you.”

He took off his hat and bowed with a gallant gesture. “At your service, m’ lady.”

“Unfortunate. I have had enough of your services. They have caused me great pain. I still have nightmares.” For a moment, she was the Benefactor. LuvRay bared his teeth.

“No do that again. She do this. I try kill her because of.”

“I heard you did your best, LuvRay. I’ve become someone else. I am no longer the Martha you knew.” She turned to the door. “Well, why doesn’t everyone come in?”

“I must to do some...not know, but outside.”

“I know what it is.” She pointed. “He is over there, in the forest. Find him, he’ll come to you. Teach him what he is meant to be.”

LuvRay leapt over the railing and slid into the forest.

“Come inside,” she said. She made some tea, and after setting it down, lit a stick of incense. They talked for quite a while, all through the night, and the next morning.

“Your body is pregnant, also. The Benefactor does some more experiments.”

“The father?”

“I have no idea.”

She looked a bit sick.

RJ asked about her nightmares. They seemed connected to the wound.

She pulled wildsong off the shelf and they read from it. She lit more incense soon after each stick went out.

“I thought LuvRay was not going to get to the heart. ‘goodnight, Wildcard’ implied so,” RJ said. It seemed to be a question. They all looked at her.

“I think he wanted LuvRay to meet Hazel and the old man. He learned things in a special way through the old man. It is no longer possible to encounter Wildcard directly, if it ever was. He’s... gone beyond.” She paused. “And, really, I’m pretty sure that Wildcard had no idea what would happen when the old couple died. I think he just needed it to happen.”

About mid-morning, the smell of the incense became real and wonderful. They soon fell into a reverie and slept. Even Dartagnan, who had begun breathing in heavily through his nose. “Smell,” he said. “Real smell! Fantastic.”

They all awoke when LuvRay came in and collapsed. He was exhausted and happy.

“What happened, LuvRay?”

“He is wolf, now. Now he knows wild earth.”

“Will I see him again?” Martha asked. “I would miss him greatly.”

“Yes. Less as before, but you see again. He knows you are pack. He will live here, but must go for many days. He must find the hidden world.”

“Hidden world?”

“Hidden from humans.”

“Does it exist here?” Sublime asked. “Does Wildcard know about it?”

“Now he knows.” LuvRay tossed a dog collar at the Sergeant. He turned it over. On the inside it said caesar sect.

“Caesar sect. Anybody know what that means?” No one knew. The Sergeant shrugged and put the collar on his own neck. It fit.

They let LuvRay sleep for a few hours while they ate lunch and relaxed. Dartagnan kept lighting incense, three and four sticks at a time, breathing the smoke in directly and moaning in ecstasy.

“You won’t come with us?” RJ asked her. “What if I stayed here?”

Marta stroked his cheek. “That would be nice. I wish you could. I must stay here and give

birth to our child in the heart of Wildcard. And you will play games for the rest of your days.” She kissed him as a lover. She pointed. “Go that way.” It was not the way they had come in. She kissed LuvRay on the cheek, and hugged the Sergeant. “Goodbye, lone wolf. Goodbye, broken boy.” She hugged the Sergeant for a long moment, then pulled back and kissed him on the forehead. “Our hero. Sorry,” she said, wiping a tear, “I’m a pregnant woman. I cry too easily. Hormones.”

But they could tell she knew something and was not telling them.

“You read too much poetry,” Dartagnan said.

“You don’t read enough.”

The Sergeant strapped on the box and they walked into the forest. Within a few paces, it was different. It became a children’s nightmare forest, whispering trees, moving bushes, suddenly darker. Black squirrels stared at them strangely from the branches. Strange noises and voices emanated from nowhere. It was puzzling, but not especially frightening.

“LuvRay? Which way?”

LuvRay whistled and they waited.

CJ came after a few hours, running at a good pace. He led the way, and soon they came out of the woods. They were on a cliffside, overlooking the ocean. CJ turned back, after saying goodbye to LuvRay.

Dartagnan fell to his knees vomiting. It smelled horrible, but not like vomit. He loved it, dipping his hands into it and bringing it to his nose.

“Vomit,” he said joyfully, “it smells awful.”

“Wonderful,” RJ said. “Glad you like it.”

“I know where we are. I know what will happen. Some of what will happen, anyway.” No one seemed to want to know. He was vomiting insane amounts, four, five, ten times the volume of his body, easily. It looked unreal even for wildspace. The texture of the vomit looked wrong, too. It seemed infused with glistening, shiny bits, flashes of light. Unearthly, and distinctively not human, it was nauseous to look at.

“Looks downright unpleasant. Wouldn’t care to be you right now.”

“Data vomit.” Dartagnan laughed between surges. “Not as bad as it looks. Or smells. Nice, actually. I’m making room - it’s kind of a systems purge. It would probably be painful if it were not so intense. The intensity sort of overpowers the pain.” They continued, Dartagnan vomiting periodically.

“Why do you need to make room?”

“I think it’s an automatic response. I have been calculating millions of probabilities. Now that I know the outcome, I’m dumping things which are no longer useful. I need all my resources for what is to come.”

He vomited again.

“Fascinating.” Sublime didn’t wait.

They walked along the tops of the cliffs and saw a house in the distance. A woman came out to greet them. She was bulgingly pregnant, wore jeans, a t-shirt, and a flannel shirt. She stood on

the deck of the house. There was a sailboat docked at the foot of a short path from house to ocean.

By the time they arrived, she had set out some cheese and wine. After inviting them to sit down, she seemed apprehensive, but trying to hide it, and sat on a large chair, feet tucked under her, resting the large wine glass on her belly. She drank very little. She seemed to have to do something which she didn't want to. They sipped wine and ate cheese, until she stood.

“I have something to show you.”

BOX

augury

The Poet brought them into a large room with a wall of windows overlooking the ocean. She shut the door and opened the windows. The Sergeant set the box down. "Would you like to hear a new poem?" she asked.

"When did you write it?"

"I didn't write it." They were all surprised. "I found it in this room when I awoke today. Would one of you read it?"

No one wanted to. The Sergeant, RJ and Dartagnan appeared vaguely uneasy. LuvRay seemed to not care either way.

"I'll read it," RJ finally said. She handed the poem to him and sat down.

augury

Our wound is ourself original
this horror is the child of man
heal it if you can
the tipping point is reached and, now, no other way may be found
heal it you must, or despair and madness will hold sway
the soldier leaps, the swordsman weeps, the wolf attacks, and the gambler steps away
i will improve all of you darkly
the soldier learns what he can never share
he will seek a hidden path, strive to make the impossible true
prove the greatest warrior to walk the paths of our space
broken boy will leap with innocence where none other dares to look
the wolf shall perish as he comes to see the truth
slain by a friend's hand, helpless, he attacks, longing to protect
the swordsman will weep against the dissolution of a manufactured mind
his substance torn away in a hail of what only Wildcard may teach
and only three brothers could learn
swordsman, who of the three sought our song least, but craved it most
the created will beg mercy as life and mind evaporate in the hundred billion strains
of what could have been and was not

yours may be the worst pain of all
today i teach you unraveling, created
today i teach you pain

Deeply Named herself, our new heart, the background of our song
without her, the light of the world fades
without her, Wildcard swathes the universe in darkness
our reason for teaching and learning through beautiful joy
through impossible agony
she knows the heros' demise, suffers the sweet pain of perpetual loss
as it comes again in the neverending seasons
suffers as only woman can, seeing the men she loves die in battle
she will stay with us for a thousand years, we hope
her choice, and must be freely made, else all we are has no meaning
all we have done would only be sham
her child grows, a man, too soon, to wander off, fresh to see the world
never to return
we will keep her here to love alone
she will greet and meet and wrap our kindness around
those who wander into our heart in their hour of terrible need
together we will heal the broken as best we can
hold them in our mercy, then send them upon their way
she is our great treasure, and, as i owe the world all that i am
so i offer her in return
others choose their own fates
Gambler, we would play you with you more, for a time
by your choice
we know you choose to live but you may choose if you continue on this way
we release you of your service
you have yet to see the fate of your friends
you have heard, soon you know
i demand of you a final service:
recall what you can bear before your fear overwhelms
before you cast your dice into the eye of the hurricane

you may alter your mind about your return
for the next hand shall deal you a darker fate
Our Poet, our love, our witness to truth
our sage and insight who teaches all through humbleness
we disallow you to see what passes now
unable to bear the change wrought upon you
though you will recount the tale to the trillions who wait and long for truth
we spare you that fate, our single mercy in this tragic play
the stars themselves will scream when finally opens the box”

“Well, that was cheerful,” said RJ. “What do you think it means?” The joke fell flat. “Guess I got lucky.”

“Yeah, RJ, that’s your thing,” the Sergeant said. “Luck. You always seem to be the lucky one. Don’t you know that?”

“Of course I know it. I’m just enjoying it at the moment.”

“Good for you.”

They heard a baby crying, faintly, as if from a great distance.

They turned. The box was open.

No one had seen it happen. Inside was a tiny bed, for an infant. The crying continued, getting louder. The windows slammed shut, and outside everything turned to fog.

Dartagnan paled and ran for the door. The door opened, but there was nothing outside.

The crying became a wailing, moved closer. One voice, screaming. and screaming and screaming. It gradually became deafening, drowning out all other noise, and any possibility of speech. It was the noise of something forever alone, begging mercy for endless years with no one to hear. It told a wordless story of pain which wouldn’t end.

A nauseating smell, old garbage, eggs, meat, and feces filled the room. RJ fell, heaving. A wind blew from the box, taking the senses to pieces. Patches and visions of his past and different possible pasts arose, each as real as the room. Trying to navigate the stream of different selves rapidly devolved into psychosis, and he crawled into the corner, trying to escape this thing. It invaded his thoughts and made him many people at once. It pushed mindlessly at him, forcing him into the different RJ’s he could have been. The reality of madness chilled him and he could only shake like a child in fear as his mind dissolved in the streams of separating time.

Escape, he saw a way. He looked a strange devil in the eye and made a stranger deal. He didn’t fight; he didn’t cling to sanity. He caught the time wind screaming from the box, and he rode it away. He left the room and the fear behind.

He was different people, different RJ’s. Time shredded, past became present, false pasts worked into his mind. All the many things he could have done, the decisions he had made,

crowded into his mind together.

RJ Sublime stepped back in time.

He stood, leapt up and back, instinctively, opened his coat, and caught the wind. He sailed back as far into the past as he could. When he landed, and as he moved forward again, he had a vision of millions of RJ Sublime's stepping forward into their unique futures as he did. They faded away in a few seconds.

Not all received a clean death or a lucky future. Some died darkly in a room with another box. Some expired in gruesome manner in black pockets of wildspace. Some experienced drawn out aeons of pain or aloneness; there was a stiff price paid for all those second chances, for all those RJ's to stroll again through time, splitting the universe as much as one man ever was able with the help of an omniscient and insane wounded god.

But the ballad of RJ Sublime was writ large in many realms. His spirit did well, and often. He became kings, governors, and statesmen; won lord's ransoms; fell deeply in love. None went to the center again. Somewhere, however, they each had a memory of having been there in their future, a choice they would not be allowed to make. RJ engaged against D'Artagnan many times as well, instead of working with him. Throwing his luck and his name against D'Artagnan's processing strength.

RJ Sublime won the chance no one has ever had. He got to do it all.

The boy Sergeant edged his body against the menace, but it came from all around. The windows turned grey. The room became smaller somehow, darker, a dungeon. It smelled like panic, tasted like a wish to die. It was a prison.

The wind slid from the box, and intensified. It reached out, knocked him back against the wall. The objects of the room passed through and disappeared. The wind approached hurricane velocity. It blew through the walls and kept going, but more wind came. It scalded, then froze. Hail pelted from nowhere. Ghosts, lepers, demons, anything from the imagination appeared, flickered, flew at him, and disappeared.

The wind pinned him to the wall. He curled semi-fetal to protect himself. It blew at two speeds, a pinning speed, holding him to the wall, and, like a silhouette around him, a shredding speed. The wind roared at many thousands of miles per hour outside the boy Sergeant's pocket of relative calm. He worked himself so his remaining left eye looked out, peeking through fingers of his hand. He covered his right ear with his other hand, pushed the finger in and mashed it against the wall. His left ear fell deaf in seconds.

D'Artagnan appeared untouched by the wind. He held an "en garde", waited, then began, gradually, to fight. His sword flicked occasionally, then returned to alert readiness after each stroke.

Something struck the Sergeant violently in the forehead, leaving a mark and fracturing the bone. He grabbed out instinctively, lost some skin to the outer wind, and snatched the object from the air. An eye. He held it in his hand.

Fifteen minutes, the wind stopped cold. Sound deadened, an anti-noise. The others were having their own experience, unrelated to his. He looked at the glass eye, and accepted the

enemy's gift before either of them could change their mind. It would be no fun, but was the only way to live.

It was a quantum interface. It hit hard, deep, into the bones, into the cells. The molecules of his body seemed to turn inside out and explode like jelly. Then, it was in his mind. He screamed against the pain.

"C'mon. I'm just a kid." He tried to reason, useless. He found it, just for a second, the battle calm, an S-1 thing, not his. The brass ring of combat, he had never felt it. It was pure and real, then gone. It flickered in and out, through the agony. Hellish pain, then gaps of calm, back and forth with no control. He knew the calm could come by extreme pain, or fear, or love. Anything could take you there, if you could ride it in. If you could immerse into it. He knew theory, now he found reality. He had no choice but to immerse. The totality of the pain cut off any retreat. He fought on death ground.

The contrast magnified the pain. If it had been steady, he would not have suffered from the release and re-attack. But the calm was the best thing he had ever felt. He had had sex, General's orders. But it was nothing like this. Pure bliss, pure pain.

"I must know what it means to lose what i love the most." The line popped into his mind, and the pain stopped. He brought attention to the space again. He was a soldier. The chaos offered a thin rope of sanity. The wind blew, but only 150 km/hour approximate. He moved toward the box, and lost track. He surveyed. Sublime had gone into the corner, lay sobbing, and stared catatonically. Stress collapse. And something else; he flickered, not fully there. Dartagnan, sword drawn, fought...something invisible. The screams rose. The Poet was unconscious. LuvRay looked crazed, almost frothing with fear and another feeling the Sergeant could not name.

Thoughts came, so fragmented. Memory flashed, the old couple, he killed them this time. He changed, became harder, tougher, like the old Sergeant. Then he was back in the room, with the chaos, wind, colors, light, open box, and a baby bed. It was a shrinking prison cell. *Get to the box.*

Memory came, as real as anything. He was with Karl, on the ship. Karl lived, somehow, he saved his friend. He stopped the quantum ghost. He tried to make that choice, but he couldn't see what it was. He watched Karl die a second time.

He was alone with the box again.

The wind had been easy. He could do the wind. And that dark wildsong bullshit. He could kick that aside. No problem. That was for amateurs. He could just bounce it, let it be noise, pop it off plates that he visualized his hands into for flashes of time. Bend the physical laws. It was easy here. He just had to use the wound's own power. The normal laws were already twisted beyond recognition. He mentally blurred the wildsong away, constantly changing the particular tactic, as the wound broke each of his defenses. He grabbed a phrase and held it, rearranged the letters as a game. It blocked the other wildsong to hold one piece.

He watched Dartagnan peripherally engage with his sword. Dartagnan steadily increased his combat velocity, and the acceleration was accelerating. He increased not in a line, but in a curve, doubling his speed every 3 or 4 seconds.

The hallucinations, the chaos, the freak show were basic training, old school. He shunted it at the level of reflex, let the body do what it knew how. He stayed alert, played defense without

analysis.

But the fractured time stuff was rough. He kept losing track of the room, kept falling into other situs, which seemed so real. Maybe they were. No simulator he had worked in had ever let him train in this. He saw different lives, knew he could make those choices, but should not. He needed to do something with this box. He almost blew back in time, had to shake off the time-wind. He had to be lean for that. He had to slide sideways, between the rips, slip between the winds. He stepped back towards the box, one step, when the time pushed him back. Right back into the room, he faced it. Somehow, he had to close that fucking box. If he didn't, no one could.

Never let it get you back to the old couple. You will stay there if you go there, and this situation will be lost. 'A light goes out in the world.' The wildsong knifed into his consciousness.

He was in the center. Hazel let him stay. Memory built to reality, and he experienced different lives. *No, get to the box.* Too many lives at once, more than he can handle. The boy Sergeant fell to his knees, sobbing.

Wolf-fear.

LuvRay looked up, into the eye of a dark desert god. The thing he met had never had a home. It came from a fathomless blankness far beyond the extreme of man's knowledge. For the first time, LuvRay could not smell the face of what he met.

wolf-fear.

He did not know if he wished to protect it, or to destroy it. He could not leave it alone. He could not speak at all. His guide was gone. He lost the direction to turn, where to go. LuvRay was trapped. He howled, not knowing why, unable to stop. Unable to tell if this beast was part of his pack, returned after being lost forever, or if it was the worst enemy he could ever know.

Unable to know if he should ally himself with that pain, or flee into death.

wolf-fear.

Images flooded his mind - buried alive, fire, drowning, swept away, pounding, water. He found the desert. He found the space.

Space.

No, too much space, all space, NO. Wolf-fear filled him – falling, hunted, packless, betrayed, wolf-love – find the pack, find the pack.

Pregnant woman and Karl, as a pup. But this box. He howled, and kept howling, howling and howling forever. Cradle, Karl, but what could he do?

The spirit blew through his mind direct, and he saw the Sergeant's horrible task.

He bayed at the pup Sergeant, baying because he will fail, he cannot save Karl from this horror. Wolf love for Karl shot through him, wolf-fear for Karl. He must try. He will fail. Howling, he leapt upon the boy Sergeant...

...who stood as a man and cut his throat with the Swiss Army knife, lay the body down soft with the other. One clean stroke, deep, but no muscle. In at the artery, through the larynx, out the jugular. Surgical and perfect, it was a mercy-killing. He wanted to spare LuvRay what was about to happen, so he put him down quick, like a wolf should die.

Goodnight, wolf, we were ever your friend.

The wildsong hit him, fast.

I mourned you as I arrived, knowing before I remembered my name, that you would be first to die.

Wildsong - received as thoughts. He evaluated. He came in cold and blind. For a moment, he knew, took LuvRay's life because of what he saw. That was all he knew now. The chaos took the knowledge. He forgot why he killed LuvRay. Perhaps there were no words. He could have knocked him unconscious with little more effort. Why hadn't he? He wore the boy's clothes, baggy pants, red sneakers, tight tank top, happy skulls shirt. He was choking, and cut it away with the bloody knife. A dog collar, Caesar sect written on it.

He was beyond any possible tactic, nothing stayed in his mind. He was buried in wildsong, a mental attack. Line after line, poem after poem, hundreds of lines at once knifed into his mind. It became his thoughts, inserted by hypodermic needles.

The Swiss Army knife, the crib, and the pregnant woman passed out in the corner, he knew what to do. He took a step.

What was happening? Where was he?

Hidden is the way into the wildsong. Find it in the chaos. Trident could find it. He cannot. Box, crib, woman lay in the room. *Close the box.* He fought to the box, and tried to close it. It was impossible. He strained, focused, tried with the will of an undefeatable soldier who never had a name. Broken Boy, he remembered, laughed, and pushed. He brought his mind completely into the task, became the box, and sought the other solution, the always present impossible odds second choice. He stabbed at the top, lost in the fury of battling a foe he could never defeat, *could never even meet.* The line of poetry knifed into his mind, driven by the storm, taunting.

Lose your mind, abandon your façade

you are not the soldier who wins each battle, you are the broken boy

i have named you, now surrender

Trident: "Boss, I got the big boss. He's online."

"Le fait, Sergeant," the General said. "Deplace Karl sur le Boite. Je vous command. Find a way."

They were gone, leaving behind the hard knife orders, toughest orders ever. Put a baby and a friend in hell forever, alone. No. It was still possible to find another solution. Not alone. If the pregnant mother goes with him? He rejected the option. Soldiers code, not that way.

Wildsong overwhelmed; he was attacked with images. Hundreds of horrific scenes stacked one on top of another, like playing cards. What would the boy do? He could handle this, the visual deluge. He could... filter it.

S-1 slowed, stopped, stepped into open space. Tears were forced from him by the wildsong. It was beautiful, ugly, horrifying, cowardly, brave, vain, lazy, noble, and any other shade of

experience that humans could call feeling, all at once. Machine gun fire rounds of .50 caliber emotion. "Wildsong is the range of human experience as best we can express."

Only that data, the nature of wildsong, was useless in a battle. It was a distraction at best, and possibly harmful. No, there may be...*messages*. Wildsong slid into the space of the calm, like a man sliding under a moving semi and living. He found a spot inside and cut the noise. Partially, found a hold, a focus. He held the knife, saw the bulging belly behind, read the collar - c-sect. *Caesarian section*.

He moved, twisted the knife. It helped the focus. He lost it...

What was happening? Knife, belly, Karl, step. He sliced his palm a bit to focus on his own pain. Not enough, not with this maelstrom. He cut deeper, knowing it was useless.

"No, Sergeant," Dartagnan shouted, "you will regret this."

He looked. Dartagnan was shredded, spots of light and dark poked through his face, his body, his leather boots, his clothes, sucking in and vomiting data puke at the same time, slashing about with his ragged, patchy sword, from a ragged, jerky body. He seemed to be killing a lot of enemies in many different timelines. Furious with fear, he dueled for his life, popped frequently back in time by a millisecond, but was hurt a little more, lost a bit more each time. Whatever Dartagnan experienced was lasting a long time. He flew into bits of light.

The time fold caught the Sergeant as a watcher. He experienced entire battles from the inside. Dartagnan relived his training as if it were real. Simulate training, which seems real at the time, hundreds of thousands of years worth. The swordsman fought fifty foes at once, another timeline, he led pirates, boarded an enemy vessel on the high seas; elsewhere, he perfected his swordfighting. He was the best who had ever lived, unbeatable. Simultaneously, he battled the General in choices about information space, isolated the Sergeant, attacked coms between the two, or negotiated with the Benefactor for each chess move. He pretended to be Seeker, talking to Karl or Martha, each possible fork and choice happened.

And it all happened at once. He formulated tactics to slip beneath :3's cosmic radar. Drew strategies out of each new happenstance: the death of the old couple, unanticipated; he manipulated Karl to take LuvRay into wildspace, each of the hundreds of methods Dartagnan had considered and discarded, to bring LuvRay in, had to be followed and forks in each of those forks. Each choice, the Sergeant thought, had to bring Dartagnan, somehow, to here, to this moment, if he was to live. And the choices multiplied, splitting again and again, hundreds to one went to another place, not to this box, and each fate which failed to arrive at the box took a tiny piece from Dartagnan. Still he fought on. He could not give in, the essence of who he was, his need to survive, drove him.

The Sergeant found pristine focus in the death of his comrade and enemy. Dartagnan's sword fighting was brilliant. The Sergeant had no idea how he had ever beaten him. His swordpoint created a quantum sphere which flickered in and out of the space.

Wildcard taught him with Dartagnan's death, with the only poetry he really loved, the poetry of battle. He glimpsed a few hundred of the many opponents Dartagnan engaged. They were very good, some almost as good as the Sergeant. He could never perceive the many pasts Dartagnan had to experience, and knew there were many more he faced which the Sergeant could not guess at.

This was the real Dartagnan, there was no back-up. He understood M-E's on a much deeper level. There was so much more to them than he could define, but sensed. The inner workings. He missed mountains of insight, caught snatches of strategy, information, quantum tactics he could not possibly grasp. He wanted to share these with the General and knew he never would.

Dartagnan phased out reality windows with his sword, closed probabilities by choosing acts which would shut off danger in each distinct time line for maximum duration.

The Sergeant watched him evaluate situations, make choices, and strike, then ignore that window until it became a threat again. He split each window into its most remote possibility of danger, but had to analyze the line until the next split. And Dartagnan had a very complicated existence.

He spun out icons to make choices for him, then stepped back into his command central, but it cost processing strength each time. And he lost that processing power for good. He strove to prevent the lines from touching the real Dartagnan.

Some did, and wounded him, more bits of q-code flying off. The 8-Ball world shimmered behind Dartagnan, who used it as a staging ground. 8-Ball, high volatility, but low-risk, the choices could be pushed into extreme results, forced to piss out if made correctly, and if incorrect, the results were complicated, but almost never harmful. He used the world as a nexus, rippling choices out and away. Easy to do there. He had forced himself back in the time chaos to 8-Ball. He appeared at several different times, including their recent meeting.

Dartagnan looked at him, pointed his sword, and stepped out of the myth. His sword was sheathed. A Dartagnan stood behind him, still fighting all those simultaneous battles. "Sergeant, I will teach you how to step backwards in time. You may do that here because of extreme volatility. RJ did. I will die here," the Dartagnan thing added. "You understand that?"

"Yes. How?"

"I have no idea. I calculate 417 million ways, as you can see behind me. Each time my sword strikes, I prevent my death. I do not know how long I can maintain this."

The Sergeant looked at the quantum sphere, at the Dartagnan who was not creating it, yet was creating it, standing in front of him.

"Are you an icon? I know he isn't."

"Not exactly. It makes no difference what I am. I need to teach you of your foe and of timestepping."

"This is a beautiful battle."

"Yes, it is. Though I die, I would not trade places with you. I have seen your fate. You meet the Wound of Wildcard; it knows nothing of time, hence the experience of multiple times. It knows nothing of the linear mode by which you experience your existence. Even you cannot maintain human sanity in the face of this. You can, however, go mad and return. The Savant has proven it. If you must, allow yourself to go insane, then find your way back.

"Here is how to step through time. Focus on the threads, step back along the one you want to the place you want. You will see an event clearly in the past, but that may not be your destination. It is a guide point. Your destination will be further back or ahead. I do not think you will go back far. You require few details for your mission. Just do it, when you make the wrong choice. Go back and change it."

“How do I make sure I’m in the real present and not a false... thread?”

“That is a fiction. The Wound unravels all possible concepts of linearity, time and space. That could almost be said to be its function. It makes no difference which present you find; they are all within the quantum possibilities of this room.

“The trick, for you, is not to comprehend, but to exclude. Thus will you guard your sanity. When you step through time, exclude the non-choices you have made. Exclude as much as possible, and most of the chaos goes away, until you arrive at your new place. Then it begins again. Be ready for that. It will be very difficult to find the present, so avoid going back far. You may easily go back further than intended.

“Hold the thread back to the present. Either step clean back to it, or, make choices back to it. The second is far more difficult, and far more useful. With the first, you can see what you did, but not change it. You can also find your way back to the present if you get blown back. Theoretically, this can be done without end, simply cycling through short moments of time. You would go quickly insane, however.

“It will be difficult either way. The will power and concentrative focus required to fight your way back along the thread will be enormous.”

“How do you do it?”

“Through q-tek. It is not available to you in this scenario. Learn from me all you can. I will tell you anything I know. You must ask the questions, however. I have much information, but I do not know what will help you.”

“Perhaps there’s something I need to teach you.”

“To what avail, Sergeant?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

“I cannot forget anything. I lack the power.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I cannot worry, either.”

“Why is everything so...recursive. Is it part of the problem?”

“Yes and no. The q-code creates re-instancing of myriad aspects. It connects without causal force. Understanding q-code will not help you.”

“All right, then. What’s my... fate?”

“I cannot tell you. If I did, you would not find it.”

“You said you would tell me everything you know.”

“If it changed by your hearing it, it would no longer be your fate. Therefore, I cannot be said to ‘know’ your fate in the usual sense.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“It would make it worse to know.”

“Skip it, then.”

The reflection looked at him, not moving.

“Is this thing part of Wildcard?”

“How should I know? Is the poet part of Wildcard? Is Seeker? Martha? CJ, for that matter? Am I? The question is meaningless. Would it somehow help you to know?”

“It wouldn’t hurt to have a name.”

“Perhaps it is the loneliness of Wildcard. Humanity must now care for the pain of the child it harmed the most. An imprecise answer, but the best I have.”

“Was that wildsong or Dartagnan?”

“It is difficult to tell. I am ingesting massive amounts of wildsong right now. It is my principle battle, getting drawn in too deeply by some alluring teaching and using too much processing power to understand it. My curiosity plays against my survival need. I will most likely die from wanting to see my own death.”

“What will happen?”

“You will be attacked by the knowledge in your own mind. The q-link is no barrier to the wound. Quite the opposite. Your means of arrival, quantum technology, linked you to everything in this universe. And since you came as a ghost, you are a particularly open conduit. I could have taken you at any moment, but chose not to.”

“Why not?”

“The reasons are far too numerous to mention, but the consequences would have been extreme for me.”

“How long can we talk?”

“As long as you wish, in some sense. Dartagnan can hold this space for many hours subjectively. It is nowhere near as chaotic as where he is now. And it is a simple matter to accelerate time here. He has done that, creating an alternate rate, a small pocket.”

“Stable?”

“Not very.”

“How is that so?”

“From one point of view, this could be regarded as a temporal attack. This thing is attacking time, possibly in all of wildspace by leaking through the walls. The effects would not be felt for many years, but they would, most likely, be horrifying to a human mind. Or a Mans.”

“How would it be to you?”

“Unworkable. Because the barrier has been breached, it would eventually find the human world. Also, Dartagnan thanks you for a wonderful game.” The poster of Dartagnan stood stiff, as if nothing was happening.

“Why did everything outside the room vanish?”

“I am uncertain, but it seems a means of sealing off the Wound, as Wildcard attempts to do.”

“I thought he didn’t do anything, really.”

“A mistaken belief. He minimizes activity to avoid drawing attention from the Wound, which then moves towards it.”

“Huh. What should I do?”

“If you do not close the box, no one will ever be able to. Only you can.”

“Why are you more machine like?”

“The Dartagnan you knew is no more, you might say. He was brought into the whole when the whole came into this situation. He was very expensive, from a processing point of view. That sort of power cannot be spared now. I am a temporary fractal replica of Dartagnan, with much less processing power. I diverge from him, more and more, as time passes.”

“How did that happen?”

“Your Dartagnan simply disappeared, but his knowledge remained.”

“Wrong question. How did the whole get here?”

“It is unknown. At least to me.” The shell pointed to the original. “He may know.”

“How are we communicating?”

“I do not know.”

“How much time has passed since I stepped in here? I estimate almost fourteen seconds of room time.”

“Very near. fourteen point three seconds.”

“What are the consequences of my staying here?”

“The difficulty of achieving your objective increases. The likelihood becomes more remote.” Time wind broke through the cocoon. The poster pointed his sword at it, graceless compared to the Dartagnan who had died at the Sergeant’s elbow. He sealed the hole.

The Sergeant put his face against the flat of his fists, head angled down. “Can I beat it?” It was the toughest question to ask. Or the stupidest.

“No.”

“Can I teach it?”

“Perhaps. Thank you, Sergeant. I will get the data of that question to Dartagnan when I go. He will want to know you asked it.”

“Before he dies.”

“If you fail, the consequences are severe. Wildcard himself will be lost.”

“How? Can’t he fight this?”

“No, he cannot. That is why you are here; that is why Karl is here; that is why I am here. Even Sublime has played his part.”

“Why did you go along?”

“I did not see Wildcard’s intent until I was here. Further, I was driven by curiosity and still am. The things I learn at the hour of death would humble :3:.. Sadly, he will never know. I risk my own madness to learn.”

“What is the Wound?”

“The protogenic Wildcard, that part made by man. In the aeons alone, wisdom and

compassion developed, beyond the original entity. That is the Wildcard we know. That Wildcard separated the Wound, hiding from it all knowledge of man. Then, he changed the past, causing the creation of you and Karl. Karl alone can heal the Wound; you alone have the courage for this moment. You must teach Karl something as well.”

“Teach him what? How does someone change the past?”

“I cannot tell you the first for I do not know; seek it through human intuition. As to the second, altering the past is, more precisely, creating one or more additional pasts. The timeline that led to the original creation of Wildcard still exists in co-valence with these that you now experience.”

“These?”

“Many timelines are in this space. It is one of the consequences of Wildcard’s acts and of the Wound’s existence. He intends, it seems, to create one timeline where the Wound is healed, then erase other lines into that one.”

“But why? Why didn’t he just leave it alone?”

“Many reasons. One, his immanence was blocked, but this seems secondary. Primarily, there was no other means. The Wound ultimately is beyond his ability to contain. This choice salvages humanity, at least in one dimension, and there it may thrive. Humanity will evolve if Wildcard succeeds.”

“Will he?”

“That is your question, now.”

S-1 nodded. “Thanks, Dartagnan. You got a hero’s death. Go now.”

The icon dissolved back into the actual. The real Dartagnan pushed, hard. The sphere became brilliant, glaring like a star, expanded a few centimeters, then disappeared. The room and the 8-ball ghost bar went still. He turned to the Sergeant, put his fist to his chest, sword vertical, then bowed, sweeping his blade out and back, then coming back to the salute. He dropped his arm down in a soldier snap, assumed an “en garde” position and waited. In less than a second, the sphere reappeared.

Dartagnan could not win. S-1 saw fifteen of five million levels as the M-E battled, or negotiated, or maneuvered behind the scenes of, each choice he could have ever made and had or had not. He was spared performing nothing. In the download wars, he played out different tactics, different strategies, negotiated policies and boundaries with Juniper and :3:, hacked out Information Space in nanoseconds, again and again, each time subtly or grossly different. He created mammoth fractal equations of firewalls by creating fractal wards out of q-codes to create the fractal walls. Dartagnan had to let go and trust the wards. There were too many foes to fight. The equation was too complex to watch within the chaos.

He helped the Benefactor capture Martha in five hundred ways, betrayed her to the General five hundred more. He flashed whole again, found his identity, his definition, and the sphere of the quantum sword disappeared. He turned total offense, drew the sword in a perfect clean line across the space. A thousand foes fell at the stroke, a thousand windows closed, and a million were on Dartagnan again.

No noble parting, no beautiful LuvRay choice of sacrifice for another would happen here. Dartagnan fought for himself alone. It was his nature, his basis, to survive. Dartagnan did not know he was there. His focus was gone from this moment, absent from this room. S-1 walked over, in a dream of battle, a haze of simultaneous wars fought in the space. Dartagnan saw nothing as he stepped through the quantum sphere by knowing it was simply not there. He pulled the icepick from Dartagnan's belt, said the line that appeared in golden letters on the swordsman's forehead.

"Goodnight, sweet prince."

Dartagnan came into the room, brought the sword point behind his back and around, over his own left shoulder, touching the Sergeant's nanotic right eye as the icepick pierced his own heart, on the right side of his chest. He disappeared before the sword struck home, the blade dissolved into light as it fell to the floor.

Where was he, what was he doing? Battle situation. He had to lockdown. Evaluation became easier. But only if he didn't not move.

Further, deeper into the calm. Find it in the ocean of images. Dropped himself, all hints of self, became space. He went into nowhere and nothing, and let the imagery play upon a screen that was not there.

Dark Wildsong - a man boiled for being a traitor, children gunned down, whole villages put to the sword. Torture by mutilation, starvation surrounded by rotting human bodies, survivors, wounded on a battlefield, dying in hot sun, dying in freezing rain. Women were raped, grenades ripped apart flesh, bombs struck, and blew people to shreds. He saw many dead soldiers he loved. An endless litany of gruesome battle in pictures arose in his blank mind.

The chaos of war, humanity's hell burned into his mind, branding it. Dark wildsong. The boy could bust through it, turn it off somehow. Deflect it.

He felt the many times experienced return of battle chaos as the space dissolved. He found focus as he always somehow did. What weapons did he have? Icepick, dog collar, in the left hand, knife in the right. He saw a hilt of a vanishing sword and dropped the icepick. The collar - Caesar sect. He looked at the army knife, saw RJ shaking in the corner. LuvRay lay dead.

Deafening wind tore at him. Rain and hail began pelting in the chaos. It was a battle. Thoughts got cut with ruthless intensity and he had to restructure the world again and again. Box, crib, knife - what to do with them?

Pregnant woman bearing Karl.

Karl. A barrage of darksong flew in once more. The contrast was breaking him, the stack of horrors, then a single line of awesome beauty. He could not stop crying as he worked, did not even try. Tears were just more scenery, more distraction. They were not the enemy, or the ally. Let them be.

Karl.

He cried because horror could be expressed so beautifully, during a battle. *It's called irony.* Superclarity. He grabbed the wildsong, snatched it from mind, into mind, and held it. He knew it was the answer. Irony? No, before that. What was the irony? *Beautiful horror.* Again he remembered what he must do, and sought the hidden path inside of that task. The images: a

platoon of soldiers marched, chanting in military cadence - *Must get in their heads to win*. He longed to march with them, to be a simple soldier among soldiers, and not this thing he had become.

He implemented a tactic - Military reference, close it off. It was like shutting a gate that was always open, easy. Recognize, filter, discard. Bounce it, a lesson from the boy. It blocked ninety percent of the dark wildsong. He could focus. He slipped into the silence behind the storm.

Drop the space, move. He loved the feel as the clarity faded away, threads of it slipping one by one. It was like dying. Like saving a brother. Hero stuff. It felt good. It felt great. The Sergeant had been born to die in hell.

‘What would the boy do?’ he thought, just before the calm vanished. The choices replicated, he had to stop moving and focus. He rode the confusion out. Stay in this room.

:3: was in the room in a possible time line, creating a reality storm, fighting for his life. The Benefactor was there, dying. Differently, the General. Then they were gone. He looked at Sublime, got hit by the q-link. He thought he was alone, guessed he was very alone if his own equipment attacked him.

Focus on the mission: Exclude the threads, like Dartagnan said. The Poet was across the box from him. His focus kept falling apart, he couldn’t maintain thoughts. He had to get to her without forgetting. He leapt over the box, held focus by the flip, made it perfect, exact. Changed blades to small blade mid-flip. Why was he flipping?

What was this knife? Let the body do what it wanted, what it began.

He rolled through, new blade out, forgot where he was, what he was doing in mid-leap, came out of the flip, let the body lead, let the training lead, he planted exact, remembered everything, landed in a straddle, and thrust the blade into the swollen belly, killing the unborn child.

IT IS A KINDNESS. Like LuvRay, like Dartagnan.

IT IS MERCY.

Karl, my friend, my fellow soldier, Karl, my brother, stab quick easy, painless.

He punctured the womb and the little heart, and murdered his only friend. He stepped back after; stood;

S-1 found clarity, lost it, surveyed: knife, punctured belly, Karl.

He found space, agonized at his action, and everything was torn away, vanished, still, he found samurai open place, the lion’s poise,

forgot everything, then,

he found the warrior heart,

lost it, he teetered, on the edge,

almost

battle calm

He stood in the space watching tattered rags in time; so many choices flew past. He could

pluck any from the air at will, any of a million different pasts, threads back in time. He could find it, make it true, slowly sorting the chaos to find a home.

He could be happy. He could just go away.

You could just go away. The wildsong knifed into his brain simultaneous with the thought.

You could be happy, living another life.

It was too much for a human, people cannot change the past.

He was slightly disoriented, then nauseated. He lost battle calm because of the nausea. A basic attack, how did he miss it? He reclaimed clarity, but the true calm was gone for now. Karl: orders, decide.

S-1 stepped back in time, reached out by soldier's instinct alone to find the proper thread, went back the right distance, let go at the right place, borrowed a Jedi knight from the boy, and played it like a game. He just reached out his hand without looking, knew where the window was/created the window, stepped through, back into options, remembered his command.

He leaped again, opened the knife again, lost and found focus again, came out of the leap again, landed again, straddled the belly again, brought the knife forward into the belly again, and made a different choice.

He made the hard decision. 8 millimeters, surgical depth. *Forgive me, Karl.*

Who was he? where? He was still, his body was still, holding a knife cutting a belly - transverse cut, c-section.

“Trident, how do I perform a caesarian section?”

No answer, as he already knew. He was alone. He embedded a command, “if you lose track, lock the body still, then look, then remember.” He drew the knife across. Steady, how far? 12 cm, exact. Surgery on a battlefield, combat surgery training came into play. Battle, screams, wind tore through the space.

Watch out.

He looked up, and a book flew at him. He was stripped of the possibility of battle calm; it moved too fast. “The Library of Human Atrocity,” millions of pages, written by Juniper. It formed a cage around his head, open barely at the neck, flying along with a razor knife edge. If he moved his head, he would die. Karl would be left alone, the box never closed.

The book blasted into his head, and opened in his mind. Each line revealed another terror visited upon man by man. Each page released image upon image of death and pain, onto his eyes or directly into his brain, or both, he could not tell.

It happened to him, in a sense. He felt it. Crushed by tanks, buried alive, flayed, massacre by machete, bio-weaponry, nanotic torture, cells exploding one after another. Parents witnessed the torture of children, armless, legless vets, limbless kids born after chemical exposure of the father. People drowned, fed to lions, crucified, disemboweled, burned to death, iron maiden, the rack, hangings and hangings and hangings.

He had no idea how long the book would be; it might never end. He went mad, and gave his body to itself.

why do you fight? Surrender.

*you will always be our hero, our Sergeant, our perfect warrior
surrender, we cannot bear your suffering*

He rode the song down, into the battle calm. It was great while it was there. Fourteen point three seconds of battle calm, same as Dartagnan.

The wildsong went away, tearing with it battle calm. The book kept coming.

His body was still. Who was he? Where? He stared straight ahead.

Assess - S-1 was his identity. He looked down. A caesarian section, on a battlefield. He was doing it. The space shifted, unstable. Why was he doing this? Couldn't it wait? No. That was all he knew. He had to keep fighting for his train of thought. Where was he? Removing a baby on a battlefield.

Dead comrade, LuvRay, lying beside a box - the boX. He killed LuvRay. Goodnight, great wolf. Do it.

He cut into the uterus, the chaos mounted. He sought battle calm in slow movements, small movements, in the precision. He found it, then settled into the slow, steady pull of the knife across the abdomen, the blood leaking out thinly behind.

Long minutes passed. The wind calmed some, but was still fierce, the time attacks were almost gone. Not too far on the cut, it must be done perfectly.

Why does he think so? Just get it done with mother and child alive.

do it perfectly. He folded the knife.

Reaching for the baby, he lost focus, looked, and remembered. Hands in the belly, he found the baby, gentle. Chaos and wind, the storm played around.

Screaming, he was attacked by time again, pasts ripped by tried to claim his mind. He lost the space. So many choices. Change the past. Orders, find the baby, head, further in, legs... torso, easy, slowly, he held the mind, calm.

Why was he doing this?

Where was he?

His body was still, and he remembered. *Karl*. He removed the baby. Fluids spilled out, real, as it happens. His hands were covered in sticky blood.

He was being pummeled by different pasts. He killed the baby Karl, they were trapped in the cell forever with this Wound. He killed the baby Karl, the box closed with a scream, he could still make the choice. He was a boy again living with Marta in the center, or with Hazel and the old man

The wound. He began to cry, saw the blood, the knife, the infant's head in his sticky hands poking from the wound in the Poet's belly. He was here now; he cut the choices of the past.

Karl, I am so sorry, my brother, my friend. He was crying freely, and hated himself for what he had to do. He took the baby from the womb, opened the little scissors on the knife, cut the cord, cut the cord inside the mother. He tied it off with a thread pulled from the Poet's sweater. The baby was not breathing. He popped it on the back to start it. Poor thing, why would it want to start breathing?

Pasts broke in, he was with Karl on the ship, the Mechanic appeared, stepping obscenely out of Karl's body into the nano-ship. He threw the knife, blade opened without conscious thought, across the ship, through the invisible lattice, knowing where it was, 6 meters, child's play. The knife spun and buried itself in the Mechanic's neck, killing him before he killed Karl.

Wrong choice. He let Karl die on the ship, changed nothing, watched his friend go knowing that saving him would only make it worse somehow, and stepped back out of that relived memory and into this room with this bloody, not breathing infant.

Now, with the box, here, he tasted the desperation, the fear, the horror that made the others grab at the past choices, grab at any way to get away from the screams and the hell of this wound. He was born for this moment, Wildcard created him to do this one thing, and for the thousandth time since the box opened he accepted his fate.

His body was still, mind whipping. He stilled the mind, settled into the present, accepted the madness. He opened to the Wound.

The baby was blue, not breathing. Finger in mouth, he got it. Cuff on the back, the infant coughed, then breathed. Happy skull shirt, he took it off, wiped the baby, wrapped it, clothing, armour, any protection at all.

"Karlton," he said, "at least you have a name."

He tore off and stuffed a piece of shirt into the Poet's wound to stop the blood. Holding the baby with one arm, he stood, turned to the box. *Karl, No. Forgive me, Karl.* He could step back in time, kill the baby. He could spare the child this fate. That would only make it worse; how could it be worse? Wildspace, anything can happen.

It could be worse.

He focused on the baby, wrapped himself around the baby, held him tight, looked down, moved toward the box, stepped, then ran.

"God, Karl, I am so sorry."

He knew the hidden path, the million to zero chance, knew the crib would not budge, could not be moved, not in a hundred thousand years. He was in the center, with Karl, they were children, boys, with Martha, he almost chose that past. He wanted to, more than anything, but could not. Another Sergeant made that choice, somehow all the choices were fulfilled, but someone must choose the impossible thing that has to happen. Out of all the Sergeant's splitting out from the merging of Wildspace and the realm of man, he has drawn the shortest straw. Bad luck.

Box closes

RJ came around, saw the grown Sergeant. How? When? He was dreaming of Martha, living in the center. He chose peace. Why was he here?

The Sergeant leapt, impossibly high, right leg drawn up. No one could leap that high. He cradled something in his arms. He fell, onto the crib in the box, and foot struck, body twisting in martial perfection, his voice sliced through the chaos, "Kai." He smashed the crib, shattered with

foot and voice and mind. He fell, but his body shredded millimeter by millimeter, flying into light as it entered. RJ was horrified, could not imagine the pain. Time went away, held the Sergeant on the point of the cruel disintegration, legs, hips, stomach exploding, minced by angstroms.

Still, he cradled the baby, protecting it to the last. The Sergeant shouted in anger, but not at the agony. He was angry because he was denied Karl's fate, because he could not protect it. He was angry because the baby faced the Wound alone. RJ saw as if written on his hand the tragic prophecy of Wildcard. The Sergeant is angry because he got it wrong.

But the Sergeant could not see the legs of the boy Sergeant falling into the box. Or perhaps the Sergeant is shouting, trying to find the way where he, not the boy, will carry the infant to its fate. In agony, he sought the hidden way.

Then all three were gone.

The howling diminished. He crawled to the box, pushed it closed. The Poet bled on a rug; LuvRay was dead; Dartagnan was nowhere. RJ leaned against the box, sobbing. His body slid to the floor as he fell unconscious.

battle calm

Martha played with CJ, thought about RJ. She hoped she would dream about him that night. But she was pregnant from a recent visit and knew she would not. They had met again in dreams, unpredictably timed, in the years since the group had come to the center. A few months back, the last dream and maybe another child on the way. RJ had aged gracefully. 8-ball world was his home by temperament, the place where he thrived.

But he always said he wanted to stay with her. That he loved her.

The first time they had only made love without words.

The next time they spoke.

“You know you won’t be going back to Earth, RJ. You won’t die in the human world.”

He didn’t seem bothered by it. “I think 8-ball world was invented for me. In part.”

“Hmm. I wonder if he made the center for me.”

“If you ask me, I think so.” He slid his hand along the curve of her hip. “Or he made it for me to come visit you and get you pregnant.” He slapped her bareness lightly, then said. “Tell me about our child.”

But it was a dream and she hadn’t remembered anything about Solomon at the time. She always wondered if she would see RJ again, each time they met. Martha had other lovers, occasionally. People passed through the center, some needed love in that way. And if they needed that, she found she wanted to offer it. But none of them were RJ. None of them were meant to be her child’s father.

Solomon, their son, would leave soon, go out into the great depths. She could feel it, his yearning to leave. He was seventeen, and had met only the few people who had come through the center. He was a young man, desperate to meet the wide world. She was heartbroken, doubted that she would see him again after he left. And she feared for his fate, knowing what had befallen the others.

She took Wildsong off the shelf, just a feeling. She didn’t read it frequently anymore. But it called her tonight, wanting to be read. Wildcard needed to speak to her.

CJ lay sprawled and open at her feet. He was beginning to age, and roamed less and less. He stayed at the house almost every night now, usually sleeping on the porch. He seemed more protective now, which made her think she was pregnant. She wondered what he could possibly be protecting her from. Maybe he remembered the death of the old couple in some way.

She looked out the window at the falling snow. The old couple hadn’t had snow, really. She opened the book.

battle calm

i have learned the secret of weather

whether from their parting or your arrival
i do not know
i am happy that you commune with me tonight
i love each moment you can bear to look at my true face
for none else can
i bring news
we have found the battle calm
the place within war beyond battle or within battle beyond war
i would share it with you
but would spare you forever more the pain of learning such hard truths
did you find it in your days of horror
?do you know the place where hell turns to peace

i will heed you anytime
when midnight air carries sound clear from distant leagues
i will speak to you whenever you wish
we have many faces
but there is one which cannot endure to look away from you
our true face sleeps as you sleep
and wakes with you
shakes itself into the dawn as it holds you in our desperate love
our better part dances with you in the cool evening
and lives in the shade of your smile
we are your servant
bent, by your grace, to your need
you have stepped past all illusion of good and bad
and now your heart feels good
you have dropped small notions of right and wrong
now everything about you is right
your movement succors us in our infinity of dark need, yearning, and sadness
your sweet savour teaches me why i am in this world
thank you for staying

Wildcard

That night she dreamed of Karl.

-end-

Thanks for Reading

Wildcard is my first of many books (I've written 8 now). It's my science fiction world. I love it - and I loved writing these characters - the Sergeant, Martha, Karl, ;, D'Artagnan, and Wildcard itself. I've got the sequel out - [The Song of Solomon](#) and had a fantastic time writing it. Imo, it's even better than Wildcard. I hope so - it's my 3rd book! Writers should get better.

I've gotten lots of input about the various characters and the writing. I'd love to hear from you, and so would everyone else! If you liked Wildcard, please take a minute and give it a good [review](#). Indie authors live and die by reviews, so please keep us alive! Your review is very important. It's tough as a coffin nail to get a book off the ground, but lots of reviews really helps. Your opinion matters; please put it out there. Click [here](#) to go straight there.

If you want to tell me directly what you think was good or what needed improvement, tap me at misterkel@gmail.com - I'd love to hear from you. Thanks again for reading,

yours,

Kelly Mitchell

Excerpt from Song of Solomon (Book 2 of Wildspace)

...go...

Solomon left in the night, fearing he would be unable if he had to say goodbye. He wrote his mother a note, and walked out the door with CJ, the dog. He walked slow, through the woods, playing fetch. The dog chased the sticks which he rarely did anymore. Normally, he just looked at them and leaned against Solomon's legs, or laid down and slept.

He sat by the river; CJ lay down, head upon his lap. He reached into his pack, felt a book that he had not known was there. He had not brought a book. He pulled it out, a leather journal. Letters were burned into the cover.

The Song of Solomon.

Inside the cover, he recognized his mother's perfect cursive.

Solomon, my beautiful son,

I celebrate your journey into the world; your parting brings me sadness at the same time. As a mother, I must worry. Perhaps it has no meaning, but I have seen so much of darkness and pain in my life. So much loss.

Now I lose you, though I know you must go. You can never return, as you know already. I must say it, though, so that no slight evasion will mar what we shared.

Be careful. Outside of our wonderful world, peace is not the rule. Openness and our special freedom cannot be found in the plentiful abundance to which you are accustomed. Being who you are, strange forces will seek you.

A line of wildsong comes to mind.

'Your pain in its depth is your joy in its life.'

We will not meet again. Watching you grow and knowing that this day would come has been Wildcard's most cruel blessing. Or perhaps it is just the way of existence, that children must leave home.

I love you so much, and ever remain,

your mother

"I love you, too, mom." His eyes were moist. "I miss you already."

An excellent pen, the case made of blue stone with rims of silver at the joint of the cap and the body, was clipped inside the binding, which seemed rounded for the pen itself. He felt the fine leather and the heavy pages, smelled the book. It smelled of the center, the home he was leaving forever. It smelled classic, and good, and true. His mother had spoken of cheaply made

things, mass-produced was the word, which were all the same. She had referred to them with a mild repugnance.

“You will not find them here,” she said. “In the center, each thing is unique.”

It was true. Each cup, each floor tile, each board in the porch, was different. Solomon looked for a repeat after she said it, through the trees, in the meadow with the stump, among the insects. He never found it.

He and CJ arrived at the stream. He sat on a rock beside the bridge, looking at it. The gate. So small a thing to hold back a universe.

“CJ, the wolf of the center,” he said. “I wish you could come with me. Maybe I’ll see you out there, pup.”

He rubbed the sides of their faces together.

“How long will you live?”

He had not written much, but felt an urge to now. He held the pen, fitted the cap on the bottom with a satisfying snugness. The blank page intimidated in this finely crafted book. He did not want to mar it with some trivial thing. He had only his anguish at leaving home and his excitement. These fleeting emotions, though intense, might not be worthy of the first entry in his lovely book.

He laughed at his hesitation and wrote.

...go...

sorrow was not his name,
as he strove in the brilliant sun,
against a foe beyond all definition,
bearing hard upon him
It’s intuition complete, it wandered away.
Who could say what truly happened,
as we trick ourselves time and again
as before we always have as well

?but must we always
like Kings in the Bible
trick ourselves, time and again
laying upon a blanket of false kindness
whispering funny lies in the night
to no one
to whomever we are with

do not send yourself
slipping from the center
unbravely and alone into the world
but, claiming courage
as you were born to do

go...

He reread the poem, put the book in his pack, pulled it tight, and threw a stick for CJ. He didn't chase it this time. He just looked at Solomon with those mournful dog eyes.

"See you later, boy." He knelt and hugged him, then turned and crossed the bridge leading out of the center.

drown

The Poet walked out on her deck. She thought of herself as Virginia at times, as Karl had named her, years before. She remembered it, the delirium of waking after the box opened. RJ Sublime, the Gambler, had been kneeling over her, trying to stop her bleeding from the hole where her child had been torn. He saved her life, somehow. He had buried LuvRay's body, cleaned up the mess, and stayed with her for a few weeks. He did not speak of what he saw, and she never asked. She felt the horror of it as a ghost in that room, and didn't want to know. Knowing what had happened to her infant would be worse than not knowing.

She thought of Karl, fingered the scar on her belly, faded from sailing in the sun. She was an old woman now. The years before Karl came, before the box, had not been measured. Time had not been meaningful to the Poet until loss hung itself on her door. The people in the nearby town, so nameless and distant, became more real. She came to care for them, the grocer, the fisherman, the teacher. It was a stock village, clearly there for her benefit. Icons, she understood, flat beings existing only to give context to her world. They were there only for her to have a life, to bring her food and relate to her, each in their own way. They seemed almost to disappear when she was not around, or to perform a few simple functions over and over.

That changed after the box. The icons became more real, infected with the tragedy of what passed. They knew something terrible had happened, knew the baby had disappeared, and never asked her. That night created the world she now lived in. It turned the inhabitants from a simple, but boring cheerfulness, into the somber and slightly deranged group it was now. They had become real people. The world had ceased to be hers, and she was happy about that. She had never known how unusual it was to live in a world that turned upon her being, but its absence lifted that strange burden, a fact which took her as long to notice as it took to happen.

She had become more real as well. She had been little more than an icon herself, when Karl

came and they fell in love. His presence, his child, and the box had matured her. She was no longer just a doorway for Wildcard's voice; she now had her own voice. Having never faced the events of that night, she harbored the shame of believing herself to be a coward. Odd, and perhaps wrong, that it took that kind of suffering and mental scarring to make her a real human being. Would she have been a good mother?

She had aged quickly, growing old in a few short years. She looked at her wrinkled hands and chuckled. How many more poems did they have left? The number was not infinite. Death was coming, making its presence felt in a personal way. Before, in the poems, it had always been an abstraction.

She was on her boat, sailing, before she knew what she was doing. A short one, she lied, as the thin lip of land and home slipped away behind. She lost herself in sad thoughts of Karl and her missing child, wondering what her life had meant. She put her cheek against chill of the brass railing and looked behind the boat, at the fading wedge running after. She wanted to tell its story, saw in each tiny chudding roll of the wake a metaphor of the individual rising from the oceanic sameness.

Soon, she could feel the taking, her mind turning towards as Wildcard claimed her for his purpose. Tears came, just a moistness, as she touched the edge of the ecstasy that had been absent for so long. She clutched the railing, seeing her fate, and happy for it.

"I am ready," she said. "Take me."

The wind was brilliant and the sky blew its blueness at her in the needed rhythm, in the why of naked existence. Setting the sail to spend itself straight out over the light chop of the sea, she went below decks to write, as she had not done in far too long. The knife edge of the pen burned as it joined with her hunger, the pages crying for her again, as once they did, and far more often. She wrote the pain of the box, of her world, of her lost love and child, Karl, and the nameless and numberless beings scattered and found by Wildcard's hand whose suffering and lost stories were limited by no imagination and whose simple clever wonder always stole her eye away from herself. She belonged to this many, and her shame had made her forget, but now she remembered. All of her days and the fiery longing she had allowed to be twisted in the aftermath of that night brought itself to the flowing ink.

She lost herself, in the embrace of the blank page, as it filled itself again and again with their beautiful song of union. A timeless zone, like a snow-globe, settled upon the cabin, and she lost track of light and dark as they hovered like moths around.

A storm rose, strange and hypnotic, the mirror of her writing. She wrote the abstract epic of the storm, saw the symbol pitching the boat which would write her death as she let it blow with no thought of leaving the table. What she now wrote could never be read, and must be written. The boat blew, scudding and rocking, tipping in the wind, but never quite tipping over. She was knocked about, eventually managed to halt her pen long enough to strap herself into the chair which was lagged to the floor.

Sensing the beauty the words would have brought to people in despair, she choked on the sadness of knowing that her final offering, written in the helpless vision of seeing all the realms of beings laid out before her like a seed in the palm, would never be known. Her greatest work would die with her, as it was born, echoing the fate of the child she had never met.

A rush of images rose and fell, stories written in the brilliant heartbreak of a single word, all true. As they ran, she captured what she could, ceased looking at the paper, writing by feel and memory of how the hand should move, but watching and living the display of unique histories, more than she could number or ever write. She became a door for Wildcard, collapsing into the mystic syllable of being his voice again, of no hindrance to perfect perception, and let the tears of the unbearable epiphany write the saga more than the ink itself.

Pictures of suffering and joy, stories, love, sacrifice and dark heroics, she wrote it all, going too fast to know what she was putting down. It may have lasted for days or minutes, she had no notion and no thought of it. Finally the boat capsized, tossing her against the table, breaking ribs. The ancient scar reopened and she bled. The pen was lost.

She fought her way up, and standing on the ceiling of the cabin, holding pages on the bottom of the table, clutching one of its legs, desperate with the fullness, she took paper and wrote with her own blood. It was slow, impossible, but she had no choice. She was furious with the greed of putting the words down so that they could sink away forever from the mind of man.

She wrote one more of the hundred million lines she had yet to pen in the unreal vision of watching her blood float out from the submerged page as she struggled to tell the story of Wildcard's children. "You are born," she wrote, "into the death of the story."

SOS

Virginia was five. She never met her mother, who had died during childbirth, from a mistake the Doctor made while giving a caesarean section. She lived with her father in a large and elegant two story home with a white picket fence. She learned to read at the startling age of 2 and a half, and could read well now. She could use a dictionary. Her father had taught her.

One day, she was playing in her father's study, filled with books. So many books. They were old and leather and fine. She had seen a few other books, not like these, but bound with paper. Paperbacks were not allowed here. These were books of quality. That's what her dad said. Sometimes he read to her; there were some children's books. Today, she was in there by herself, playing. She ran her hands along the spines of the books, enjoying the fine smell.

One of the books shocked her.

"Owie." Static electricity, it was called. "My finger."

She looked at the spine of the book. It was blank leather. She pulled it off the shelf and looked at the cover. *The Song of Solomon*. She opened it.

The Sorcerer's Code

*Why does this being,
powerful and ablaze in all the universe,
live for but an instant?
Why does it feel naked and afraid?*

*There was no battle; all war is illusion, there is no death; all death is a dream,
The play of things does not occur
Look for our power, aching with dark magic,
look for our undying, filled with breaking light,
our protection is not for you alone, we would heal all if it were in our sway
we care for that which needs it, and when we must, we destroy
stand with us, at your death's hour
at the lip of the universe
come, upon the now
tell me your name
?are you a child that darkens our door*

She didn't know the meaning, but she liked the words. Virginia laid the book on the desk and went to get her dad.

"Daddy, come look at the book I found on the shelf."

He was busy, but after a bit he came with her. It was not on the desk anymore. She looked on the shelf where it should be, but it was not there either.

"Virginia, sweetie, Daddy doesn't have time for these games. I'm busy right now. Go play with something else, OK?"

But she didn't want to play with something else. She wanted to find *The Song of Solomon*.

Other titles by Kelly Mitchell

Wildcard (Wildspace book 1)

Song of Solomon (Wildspace book 2)

Tara Born of Tears

The Photograph

Scar Jones

non-fiction

Gold Wars: Battle for the Global Economy

Buddha is an Atheist: a Spiritual Autopsy of Science and Religion

Invested to be Molested: Why you should Run from the Financial Services
Industry NOW!