



This in my pain, This in OURS

this in our Ways,

this Inside my life,

ways for *my pain,*

once moment in life

May name, es Honiker, I need, more power, this was torture, theirs was lost,

I know
FAME

Excerpt from the diary of Prince Clovis, Ace of Spades, two years after his ascension to the station of Ace.

"I grew up on the wealth of Mars, in the Spadelands, out in the remote desert reaches of a particularly hellish corner of the planetoid's badlands. It's not really remote, and I don't really know what planetoid means, but I've read it in some of my ancestor's journals, and it seems to be a mass of land, however you'd put one, of lesser stature than the planets, of which I know nothing, though each is supposed to be part of a body called a solar system, which must share roots with our modern word, Solus...

Solus, Mercury, Venus, Terrus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Every child knows these are the ten designations for the lordships divided up among each of the four imperial houses of cards. Spade, Diamond, Club and Heart all have their own Lords of Solus, Mercury, Venus and so on, ruling over differing territories of the lands. Using this, I can surmise that Mars could be called a planet class, and so the planetoid I grew up on, before I came to my current station and standing as the Ace of Spades, and now, as its lord and savior what forrit... ..

Spade itself, as with the other imperial houses, is a concept much more vast and complex than this idea of a solar system, yet the Solus system of regions of the greater Spadelands and surrounding territories could easily be classed as a simple collection of planetoids and similar bodies, et lo a solar system.

I draw these comparisons now because of what I have learned from these journals not read by anyone else in a thousand thousand years, and that there are other worlds of different lore and culture and names and understandings, and that I could draw what simple comparisons I can to what we are, in our world, have, that maybe this telling of the rise of the 79th emperor can reach you, in other worlds, and that when you read its words, or hear its lyrics, as perhaps the media will be, you might understand some better part of what we are, here and now... ..

"Space" is not a frontier I am familiar with, and yet, my ancestor's writings seem convinced of it, yet space as I know it, is not a place, in itself, but a lack thereof, and so you can see that when you read of our places and happenings, words you may know may be in places you've not seen them before, meaning different connotations and roots from what you've once known, exactly as I've seen written and marveled at in these writings; my ancestor's journals, knowing that some words are, for truer, mostly the same, and whilst others are vastly different to the point of bewilderment and "

end of available excerpt

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 2

Ace of Clubs  Zen Sunn Sukki Eichi

Sukki woke up next to her little brother, with his bedclothes wrapped haphazardly around the two of them, tangling them nicely, and she snuggled up against his naked form, thinking about how long she'd really stay, this time, while she rested her head on his rising and falling chest.

She wasn't really his sister anymore, she supposed. Clovis was a spade, still yet, and always would be... ..

Spades were spades and clubs were clubs, right? If that were true, ever, she'd still be a spade, like her brothers, but instead she'd been married off to a ten of clubs, and an annoying one at that, where she'd taken a new name and abandoned her old life. Sukki wasn't the only one who still remembered her old name, from her days as a princess of Spade, but Clovis had forgotten it, and she'd never told him that she'd never really liked it anyway, and that Sukki suited her fine, now that she was an ace.

Being a seven was hell for a girl with Sukki's upbringing, and rising to a station above her husband's had been her only way out; so she'd become the youngest Ace of Clubs in a thousand years, only to be beaten by her kid brother, a year later, when Clovis became the youngest Ace of Spades in history, at just 12.

Being an ace granted one the autonomy, immunity and power of the four of four royals, without any of the strict bindings the stations of King, Queen and Jack all had to one another. An ace was a law unto herself, as she traveled, and could even freely venture into the Spadelands, the Heart Queendoms and Romulus. When she'd become ace, effectively divorcing her jailer of a husband, Sukki was able to visit her brothers for the first time in four years, and when Clovis took her to his bed the night after. . . she didn't have to wonder anymore what everyone else thought was so great about sex, anyway.

She'd told a three, once, that she was in love with her own brother, and the poor girl had thought Sukki had been talking about her twin, Linas, and was terrified of her after that. Linas was a vicious animal and a lunatic, and Sukki didn't doubt that their father, the King of Spades, was going senile, like half the tens at court tended to be, because he kept doting on Linas and giving him better stations and authorities than were ever warranted, to ask the others nearby.

After her bath, Sukki was thinking about how important it might have been for her to arrive here, in Clovis's estate on the wealth of Mars, in the Spadelands systems, when she had, because she was starting to suspect that without the right people surrounding him and influencing his thinking patterns, Clovis was irritable and manic, but in the right atmosphere, like when his elder sister the Ace of Clubs was around and loving him, Clovis was a mastermind, and it was difficult not to marvel at the brilliance of his schemes and ideas as he eeked them out slowly, to let you know he was interested in something you'd not thought him in before... ..

Sukki had taken leave of her other duties to visit Clovis again, only to find out that their father the Spade King had been making sweeping arrangements across the regions, splitting up the power structures amongst the court's tens in different ways, favoring older, supposedly wiser delegates with greater domains, slicing off parts of Mercury's holdings to give Venus greater standing with certain allies of the house.

Clovis, in contrast, wielding far more power as an ace than he ever could have as a measly prince of the realm, who'd been deemed to be a 4, for his early life, till the present Ace of Spades had taken an interest in the young mastermind, and granted him the authority of his station as Ace, giving up his own throngs of power in the process, just to give the young spade a chance to prove his worth to the entire Imperial order, the worlds over and again... ..

As an ace, Clovis had masterminded the assassination of twelve of their father's minions, that Sukki knew about, and she was sure he'd done more without telling her about it. She was of the same mind as Clovis, in thinking that the courts were too full of old men and women who had long ago decided they were leaving the world, and so had aged, and yet still clung to power and held back the young... ..

"Ace!" cried one of the servants from up on a landing, and she hurried down the stairs toward Sukki,

crying “Lady Ace! Oh, Lady Princess, have you not heard the news? It’s the emperor! The emperor of cards is dead! He’s died just last night, in his sleep, and the palace is empty! The line has been broken once again!”

The world spun about at Sukki’s feet, her mind firing off with the multitudes of implications at the news, and she wondered, desperately, how they could hope to cling to peace, with the King of Hearts dead and gone, and the realms fighting for power during the. . . “The Courts of Chaos,” she blurted, just after the servant had finished her sputtering delivery of ill tidings. “Great heavens of Card, the Courts of Chaos and Order must be consulted! How can this be possible? In our time? Once more, so soon after the last? Oh, hells in rains, this can’t be happening. How could he have died so soon, without an heir to the imperial throne? I’m sorry, girl, but I must speak to the Ace of Spades at once. Too much is about to happen to Card for me to delay!”

Sukki bounded up the stairs and back into her brother’s bedchambers, right as he was in the midst of making sure no one was around but himself, so he just looked at her, as if to say, ‘Did you come to help me work out, this morning, or are you just here to stand there and look vexed all morning?’

“The emperor is dead.”

He didn’t look at all displeased by the news, and instead, looking pensive and reluctant to divulge, he said, “So that’s why he moved so swiftly against the Jack of Hearts, in May. . . I couldn’t imagine him making such a play before his niece was. . .” He looked at his sister oddly, and said, “Wait, do you not know, by now? There is a Queen of Hearts on the throne, at last. The emperor’s niece won the hearts of her people before she was out of swaddling clothes, and so he had her declared Queen of Hearts while her father, the jealous jack, was away from the palace, and he’s been barred entrance from his holdings there, by order of the Heart Queen’s careful uncle’s plannings. Long live the emperor’s youngest friends. . .” he smiled, like it was an old joke they’d shared.

“Surely you’ve gone mad and heard falsely,” she accused. “She’s barely four years old by now; she can’t have been declared queen already.”

“She’s seven years, actually, and think about it, sister I love; if the emperor knew he was dying, then he had to position his niece before he left the open statehood to the current jack, with his death. The Jack of Hearts never would have been satisfied till he’d declared himself King, and if his own daughter was made queen, he’d just marry himself to her and seize her holdings, if he was able.”

“But he. . . he’s not been banished, then? Just disallowed in certain regions and estates?”

“All the queen’s estates, actually.”

“That’s madness. There’s no king, so the queen has. . .”

“Everything. Everything in the Heart Queendoms. He’s not in the Spadelands, but you’d be hard pressed to find anyone welcoming the Heart Jack into their estates, any time soon.”

“Do you know what this means, though? The Queen of Hearts isn’t his direct heir, so the emperor’s bloodline is broken once again, Clovis.”

“And so there will be Chaos, and bloodshed, and he will weep, for his people, and when he looks to the courts, she will hew at his remaining shoulders, and cut aside all that stood before her in false earnesty and lust for powers greater than any station yet borne again. Incite the Courts of Chaos, to invite the Will of Order, when all blood is shed and done, and bow, then, and hail, to the emperor, or to the heretic king who shunned Order’s names. . . .”

Sukki looked at him like he was an alien; not a look he was unfamiliar with, even from her, his sister, who was more alien than she seemed to know, most days. “When you quote the old words like that, people don’t really want to be friends with you, any longer, Clovis.”

“I haven’t been preparing for this for no reason, sister.”

“Preparing? Preparing for what, dear brother, might I ask of ye?”

“It’s the end of the Heart Dynasty, as we’ve known it. All hail the emperor from Spade, slayer of kings, ruler of all Card. . .”

“So you plan to slay more than one king, then, dear brother?”

“I tell you I’m your next emperor, and it’s the king slaying you ask me about?”

“No killing kings, spadelander. You’re not qualified for that sort of work, yet, I’m thinking.”

“No one pre-qualified me to kill a queen.”

That wasn’t the first time he’d alluded to having killed their father’s mother, the late Queen of Spades,

before seizing his own household among her holdings in Mars before his father the king could do anything about it.

As a four, he wouldn't have any autonomy outside his own estates, and so Clovis hadn't ever ventured far from home, and instead carried out his scheming and planning out from Mars, until he was made an ace, anyway. But killing a queen? He wasn't worse off for the rumors, at least, because no one could actually give him the credit it would deserve to have carried out such a masterful assassination, anyway.

“Did you kill the late Queen of Spades, assassin my brother?”

“No,” he answered firmly, then; “I did not kill the late Queen of Spades. She wasn't late until after I was finished killing the living one...”

She wasn't as awestruck that he'd done it so much as come out and admitted to it, like that. While she was busy looking dumbfounded, Clovis unfastened his sister's dress and let it slip down over her shoulders. He hadn't dressed for the day, so he was quick to move where he wanted...

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 3

Queen of Hearts  Zelda

Zelda wasn't even slightly unamused, right now, but it was everything she could do to choke back her tears and not giggle and cackle uncontrollably. Instead, she flashed a demure smile; one she'd hoped was demure, anyhow, and excused herself from the bed chambers, only to lose herself to shaking giggles the moment she disappeared around the corner, and she couldn't stop laughing for what felt like ages and moresome... ..

Okay, so, this was going to be a lot funnier than she'd anticipated; and she couldn't figure out why nobody else seemed to know that she wasn't ever going to stop screwing with these people. She'd been so well known as a lover of fun and games and all childish things, that no one knew what to make of her, these past few weeks, and all she'd done was change how she played, a little bit!

She was more famous for her gatherings than most of the Clubs ever got to be, and she'd always entertained her guests as a bubbly, giggling little girl with way too much freedom and personality. And pink.

Now she wore red dresses, almost exclusively, playing up the more than imaginary curves she'd already formed with simplistic, flourishing cuts that hugged her delicate form quite nicely, and everything about the way she walked and moved was daring you, all the while, to try and talk to her without your tongue tying up or worse, falling limp and useless...

She thought it was the funniest thing in the universe that no one had thought she'd been into sexy things the whole time anyway, even as a little girl, which she still was one, but now, with the way she walked and watched you and spoke to you, you could tell she'd had a thousand thousand lovers and they'd all have her back in a moment, if they could, and she wasn't even seven years old yet but this was the most fun she'd ever had, and she couldn't see it stopping now.

The nine she'd just watched strip naked for her on half a dare hadn't known at all what to do for herself when Zelda hadn't done anything but smile mysteriously, or demurely, or whatever, and walk out of the room, rather than... losing herself to her passions, or something?

She'd been using glamours on the men at court, this nine, and all the young queen had had to do was pretend to turn her affections on the sultry mage for half a fortnight, so that the nine of Hearts would try and turn all her magical, seductive and menacing glamours onto the queen, to win her affection and favor, and Zelda the Queen of Hearts had unraveled half a century's worth of carefully woven spells of deception and intrigue with a smile and a timely departure.

Girls and boys of every age, here in the Heart Queendoms, could weave all sorts of magical glamours and spells of awareness, enticement or alluring sentiments still yet uncovered in the published journals and diaries she and the other girls at court all knew about. None of these glamours, however keen, however, had any sort of expected effect on the young Queen of Hearts, or little Zelda Princess, as she'd been commonly known before she was named, some months ago, by her grandfather and uncle dearest, the emperor of all Card and the imperial houses therein.

That she'd never have to see her so called father, the jack, again, was a comfort she'd taken much solace in, often, but to lose out on getting to know better this old King of Hearts, turned emperor of all Card, since just before she'd been blessed to be born to her mother; a secret lover of the emperor before his departure for the Imperial Halls, or so she would spread, quite soon. Zelda loathed being called the Jack's daughter; so she'd set in her mind that she would spread the rumor that she was the illegitimate heir to the empire, having been born of her mother and granduncle, rather than the jack, great ass that he was.

That she would be without his company, though, e'er again, and that she wouldn't know why he'd thought so well of her at so young an age as to make her Queen of Hearts. . . she marveled at it, hourly, and wondered, often, if she'd chosen right to accept the throne as she had, and challenge her father.

“Great gods. . . I’m the only Queen in history to ever rule without an emperor, a king, or an able bodied jack, at her side. . . How can this be possible?” She was looking in the mirror, trying to fathom what she’d have to accomplish just to stay alive, in the coming years, or months, of the Courts of Chaos and Order to follow. “My ace isn’t even home yet, and I’m growing more alone by the moment, as my bastard father runs about the queendoms seeking refuge and alien allies to come claim some. . .” she paused, for some time, until an older serving girl, about seventeen, or so seeming, came in, bowed to her majesty in the mirror, and went to some of her duties therein the bed chamber.

“Could I be empress, do you think?” the young queen asked her hand maiden, bluntly, watching her figure own in the mirror. . . .

“Empress? D’you have eyes on the Imperial Halls, then, majesty?”

“I didn’t ask you to quiz me, duchess of hearts and minds, I asked if you think I could be empress, or not, do you think? What? What do you think, is what I’m asking. Why are you looking at me like that? Do I have something on my breasts? Wait, do I have breasts?” She checked, urgently, and sighed. “Damns. Guess not. What then? What are you staring at? Speak, elder child, or begone with you! I need opinions, not stammerings and starings!”

The elder girl laughed, and Zelda tried not to smile too bright, which was hard to do, and the girl said to her then; “I do not know what to say to you, Queen of Hearts we love so much. You are our queen and we would hate to lose you to the Imperial Halls, but you would make the finest empre-”

“No! Stop!” She held up her palm. “You’ve said enough. I understand. You all love me faaar, far too much to let me run off and become empress? I suppose I can understand the lack of appeal in losing one out of zero rulers in the queendoms to the toil and sacrifice of empirical beurocracy and hardship.

“Very well!” She clapped her hands together. “It’s decided then. I shall stay here in the heartlands and love and play with you all forever and ever! If, however, I don’t make a good show of at least looking like I’d want to be empress, no one is going to be able to take me seriously yet, and I really need for them to start taking me seriously before I develop real breasts or else it’s really never going to happen, is it?”

The serving girl didn’t laugh this time, either, but Zelda didn’t need her to, and dismissed her, to sit and think in her reflection, for a while, so she opted to draw a bath, and spell the surface, to gaze in that, instead.

It didn’t look much like the quicksilver she’d seen when a five from the spadelands, or somewhere, had brought her father some among other gifts, for favor, or whatever, but whenever Zelda showed someone the mirror spells she’d worked up for bath, lake and river water, “like quicksilver” was all they could ever think to say beyond, “Hells in rain!” or “to the tens, withit!”

“It’s not unlike quicksilver, I suppose, if you could gaze into your own soul in quicksilver, which you can’t, or I’ve yet to see, effectively, anyway.” She turned her attention to the water, as she sat naked, on the ledge of it, waving her fingers gently through the surface.

“Sweet water,” she spelled, “show to me what I want, in me, for to see, in thee, and we shall be all what we never were, there before, here again, and what I want to see, in thee, sweet water, is me, and me alone, here among the ashes. The ashes. The ashes. Here among the ashes, and make our bodies strong.

“Over for the rivers, rivers, rivers. Gone aft are the rivers, and gone aft are they away. . .” She’d picked up the tempo, and she couldn’t pause or hesitate between the lines any longer; she’d picked up a defensive spell and started uttering it right in the midst of her reflection spell, and she was going through her old lessons a thousand pages at a time, reciting every instinctive verse that kicked in for her;

“Over not the river and thereoninnit again before! Not to be so said for and *again* they were what *they* could not fathom and *all* that we were was *all* that you are, so leaven’ me and be done with it, animal!”

“Animal!” she shrieked into the reflecting pool, and to the phantom menace trying to claw his way into her mind and soul. “ANIMAL!” she shrieked, and gave no thought to those listening nearby; they couldn’t save her, if she didn’t stop this thing here and now. “Animal is what you are! Begone from this place! Animal! Animal! Filth! Wretch! Animaaaaaa!”

Stop saying that!

“Then Go!” she cried, and the reflecting pool stilled. Her reflection blinked back at her, clearer than any mirror had ever shown her, and the spell that had broken through into it had stilled the water in a way that was altogether too menacing for her to feel any safer than she had before.

“He’s not here,” she whispered to herself, and her reflection whispered back that he was still in the walls, and the waters.

“He can’t really be in here with me, there’s no room, you see.” The naked girl’s reflection asked why she thought he wasn’t already insi-

“Not appropriate, reflection,” she rudely interrupted, like some queens are want to do, even to their own reflections, therein. “I don’t think you should be saying such nasty things to a girl of my miner calibur. The decent reflection ratio of all that comes out of the woodshavings hadn’t ever thought to leave none of what you ever had here in mine, behind again before again.”

As the reflection wavered, and tried to recite back an intelligible response, the artificial intelligence inside the seeker spell she wasn’t trying not to reason with, broke apart trying to analyze or defragment her counter reversal refractory wave vibration “something something energy pulse raydon deflector paradigm shift counter intuition. Say enough for you to lose focus, assholes?”

The reflecting pool wasn’t showing her, any longer, but a sea of orange and red flames, each different, but not unique, and they were gross, to look at, and she was addressing them thusly. “Reason enough for me to witness the counterintelligent assets of your supposed diorama.” Tell me not to be here, and I won’t, but witness nothing of what I say to you. “Do you have any idea how foolish you’ve become since the rest of all I ever wanted wasn’t here in the first place, anyway?” Are you a fool to think you know what I can say to you, here and now? “Get on with your livelihood and-” She didn’t stop ripping into the reflections, and all the while, nothing had stirred in the room she was in, and she was pretty certain she’d fallen and hit her head, on the ground.

“Fuck...” She wasn’t scared of how bad her head hurt, but of why there was so much water seeping up from the ground. “Fuck, this hurts so bad.” Her vision was blurry. She couldn’t move right.

She wasn’t naked, any longer, but she wasn’t clothed in anything she wanted to be wearing. They weren’t rags, but skins, and they weren’t animal skins, either, and they weren’t. . . treated?

Bloody animal skins encasing her flesh didn’t terrify her the way he’d wanted it to, but she’d muddied up his attack with her counter spell, and she was only receiving a simplified version of the program that couldn’t adapt to her changing circumstance and fearsets...

“Bloody animals,” she’d said. “There’s no such thing as bloodied animals. You just made that up! Come on now, Ace of Spades, you can’t just invent things for me to be afraid of!”

Don’t bring him here!!!

The voice wasn’t supposed to sound like anything but her own, but she hadn’t ever had any trouble discerning what her own inner voices actually sounded like, compared to poor imposters from the house of nines above, below.

“He’s not your friend then?” Saying Ace of Spades had set him off. “What about the Ace of Clubs, then, his dearest sister?”

The, thing, actually hissed at her, from the darkness, and her vision wasn’t getting any blurrier, but water was still leaking out onto the floor from the tub, and she couldn’t bring strength back into her limbs, to push herself up off the floor...

“Ace of Spades isn’t your ally, but he’s not your enemy, either. What are you, Ace of Diamonds? Do you fear me, sultry queen, meek and demure? Or is it him you’re afraid of? You shouldn’t have sent me your ‘ace’ vibe so strongly, I only named the spadeland ace because he’s cuter than you, and being tormented by him on the verge of my own demise might not be so bad, knowit?”

“Turns out you’re scared of him though, Ace of Diamonds.” She wasn’t sputtering as much as she wanted to be. The water from the floor had started filling her lungs, and she was trying to cough it up, but...

“Ace of Sp-” the words failed her. She couldn’t remember who she’d been thinking about. What she’d been mentally clinging too. Who’s name had scared him? Who’s name did he fear, here, in the space between thoughts?

If it isn’t Clovis, I’m not sure what you’re even doing here.

“Sonuvabitch!” She didn’t cough or sputter when she said it, either, because she wasn’t slouched anywhere but the corner of the tub, up to her chest in extra reflective water that had chilled considerably since she’d drawn it out of the faucet for her bath.

“Clovis?” She ran her hands through her hair, and blinked her eyes, flexing the muscles in her face and jaw, trying to air out how damn muddled and confused everything had gotten in her head, just then. “What the hell kind of a name is Clovis?”

She’d never know, apparently, because she’d blocked it out, as well as a million other things that had happened, there, in the tub, after she’d inhaled a caveroot extract she’d had brought from the Club territories, to help with the looking spell she’d developed for gazing into the hearts of her people, the cards.

The Ace of Diamonds had tried raping her consciousness, and he’d nearly had his way about it too, if someone else hadn’t intervened and spoken the emperor’s name aloud to her, then.

“Clovis isn’t a name I can’t forget about but I’d have a much harder time forgetting about the fact that anything I ever wanted to even remember never had anything to do with Clovis does or clovis that and clovis never wasn’t anything but clovis wasn’t ever anything because clovis didn’t thing to be therein. . . before. . . again. . . what the hell have I been rambling about?”

She wasn’t naked any longer, but in her night shift, staring out the window of her chambers, into the torchlit courtyard and gardens below.

She pressed her hand to her forehead. “Gods, this is fucking impossible... Please be over soon. I can’t breathe right anymore.”

Or ever again.

Fucks! He was still here, with her, and she couldn’t figure how to be rid of him. Clovis’s name didn’t come to her, nor did she think to need it for more than a second before the heat from the fireplace caught her dress aflame, and her skin started to bubble and crack beneath the heat.

“I’m not afraid of fire.”

You’re not afraid of fire. It mocked her.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” she repeated.

Not of anything afraid, it said aloud.

“Not afraid of anything, I am.”

Any thing, I am not. So be afraid, little lover girl, and be afraid I don’t kill you before I start r-rr-ipping open this new birthday present!

“What the hell?” She wasn’t in her shift, anymore, but something else. . . a blanket? She was on the floor, and someone was coming into her bed chambers, and his whole body looked like it was engulfed in massive red flames.

“Did you think I wasn’t going to be standing here, when you got this far, asshole?” said the man in her room, just now. Zelda wasn’t sure who he was talking to, but she doubted it was the-

“Creepy voices aren’t much fun when we already know who you are, Spadelander, so just go home, Clovis.”

Shut up!

“You heard me Clovis. Go on! Get out! We don’t want any spadelanders mussing up the Queen of Diamond’s bedchambers, they might catch something. And we certainly don’t want any spadelanders here in *this* house!”

“You are not making *any* less sense than I want you to right now, oh my god!” She could barely contain how relieved she felt, to have him working his nonsense into the hidden spectre that had latched itself onto her, somehow.

“Clovis, now go on! I’m tired of you always creeping around on my sister! You heard me, my little girl! That’s right, my darling wife, Merida!”

She sort of, faded out, then and later, trying not to make too much sense of what was happening to her, but all the pain she’d had, and all the fear she was having now, was burning something fierce beneath her left breast, and it wasn’t until she woke up screaming in pain from it that she knew she was still alive.

“You look well,” said a voice. Not an unfamiliar one, either. It was the Ace of Hearts, Radcliffe, who’d come and pulled her off the floor, last night, though in the bathroom or the bedroom, she couldn’t remember. . . “You’d better not get any higher than that, while I’m not at home, or I don’t think I can pull you back, little cousin.”

“I did *not* mean to get that fucked up, Rad, I swear.”

“No,” he wasn’t cross, or anything, when he said, “you didn’t *not* try to get that fucked up. I saw your little clover station, after I put you to bed, last night. What’ve you got, like, sixteen different clovers in there?”

“*Clover station?* What are you even talking about!”

He didn’t do anything but point over to a corner in the room where a bunch of boxes and jars sat open in a horseshoe shape, where she could sit amongst them and use as she pleased.

“Hells in rain! Gods unholy! Fucks! Are you kidding me! Oh my hearts and loins, I can’t believe what I’m looking at here.” She wasn’t anywhere but down on her knees, examining the different substances acquired from all over the Club territories, all used to alter the mind and body in different ways. “I. . . I did this? Last night? *Before* my bath?”

“You didn’t *take* a bath, that I ever saw you in, or even wet from. You could have been doing it by yourself for hours, though, so maybe you’d dried off and moved to your bedroom, by then. You went deep, cousin. Way deep. What were you looking for? Who did you find in there?”

“I saw. . .” she pulled her shift up to look at her abdomen and her breath hiccuped in her throat. There was a glowing red handprint, just beneath her left breast, and it looked like it had been burned into the flesh, and was eating away at it, slowly.

She scrunched her eyes, tight, and turned to Radcliffe, still holding up her shift for him, eyes shut tight. “What do you see, Radcliffe?”

“What the. . . a mark. A red mark.” He touched the skin and startled her into a sharp breath, that stabbed into her heart and lungs and she nearly lost consciousness before he caught hold of her and carried her back to her bed. “It’s a red mark, like a rombus, but shallower. Why? What did you see, there, in the cloverfields above, below?”

“Is it simple? Like a tattoo? It’s not glowing or anything or eating away at the skin around it?”

“What? Hells in rains, no, yes, I mean, it looks just like a tattoo. A poor choice of tattoo for the Queen of Hearts, maybe, but just a tattoo. Of a. . . stupid looking red diamond.”

“It’s still fucking with my head.” She didn’t dare look at it, or she was afraid she’d see worms crawling beneath the skin, or something worse. . .

“Pretty bad, yeah. Let me get you something to help.” He stood up and made his way over to the clover station, as he’d called it.

“What you need isn’t over there. It’s in a blue jar, just above my jewelry box.”

“*Which* jewelry box?”

“The big one, stupid.”

“Is this the big one?”

“You know it isn’t, jack of asses.”

“It looks pretty big.”

“Medicine!” she reminded him.

“Right, right.” He hurried over to fetch her the jar. “What do you need in here?”

“To see your ass, when you walked over to the jewelry box.”

“Get black, majesty, these are serious matters.”

“What serious has ever actually mattered?”

He handed her the blue jar and sat on her bed, beside her, as she opened it up and withdrew a lozenge and put it in her mouth, closing the jar and sucking hard, to get her saliva working on the lozenge as quickly as possible.

“That’ll help you get somewhere else, then?” he asked, then, taking the jar back from her to replace it where it had been. “Not too far, I hope?”

She shook her head, and spoke through the lozenge. “If I get too high you’ll just have to pull me out of it again. I just need to dull the sharpness for a while and feel this thing out.” She gasped, suddenly, clapping her hand to her mouth.

“Zelda? Princess, what is it?”

“He’s coming for me. . . Oh my hearts! *That’s* what I wanted to see in the cloverfields above, below!”

“What? You mean why you dived like a madwoman into the neverworlds?” Then he added, “Above, below?” Because he was pretty sure you were just supposed to say that whenever you were talking about

dreamlands, or something...?”

She nodded excitedly, looking as girlish and happy as ever.

“Well? Why? What did you see, there, above, below?”

“You don’t have to say that every time, jack of asses.”

“Every other time then. Got it. What did you see, girly girl, Queen of Hearts, child I love?”

“He’s coming for me,” she said, like she was staring right back into the fade again, watching someone coming for her.

“Pardon?”

“He’s coming for me, and I . . .

“Zelda?”

“He’s coming for me, and I . . . I don’t even know his name, anymore. I have no idea why he’s coming here, but the emperor is already on his way. He’s coming *here*, to see *me*, and I haven’t the slightest idea why!”

“Did you say the emperor? The-”

“The *new* one, stupid! He’s already been chosen. He *knows* who he is, and he only needs to prove himself in the Courts of Chaos and Order to follow.”

“You don’t know who he is, though? Where he comes from?”

She shook her head. “I can’t remember. . .”

“Well... that’s not. . . *as* unhelpful as it could have been.” He didn’t seem to know what else to say to her, so he let her think for a minute or so in silence, before he asked her; “What are you gunna do about it?”

She didn’t do anything but look at him as though he’d gone daft. “I’ll do what I always did, after I decided, just now, that this is going to be a thing I’m always doing; I’ll throw an unbirthday party for myself, and see who shows up.”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 4

Jack of Diamonds



Weiss

“If you had *any* idea how long it’s going to take to get where I’m going with this, you could probably just try and call the whole thing off. See, I’m probably a lot better off doing something completely and totally and spontaneously *different* than you, and somehow! Somehow, it all comes down to the very same objective reality: I’m not anywhere near not funny enough to be here, talking to all of you, whilst my pants are down around my ankles and I’m sweating like a LUNATIC!! Sorry; like a lunatic, and I can’t seem to quite figure out just what you’re up against now that you’re on your own, bird brains. Do you have any idea what a complete and total loser you’d turned out to be, even before you were out of swaddling clothes?”

“I personally wouldn’t *ever* hit a child, but you? You... I think I’ll make an exception for. What’dya say. Do you wanna die that badly? Come on, now, it won’t be that rough! Why the long faces? I thought you all would be smiling by now, like me! See?”

“If you wanted to smile like me, all we’d have to do, is get you thinking of the funniest thing you can possible think of, and just always remember, that that funniest thing is always never the funniest thing *I* can think of, and yet somehow, you never even had to know about it, because I wasn’t the only one not laughing, just yet, because nobody can laugh, just yet.

“Nothing’s even *funny* anymore! Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited for that old bastard in the Imperial Halls to drop dead?!”

“No. . . no, I suppose you wouldn’t have any idea what I’ve been talking about now, these past long years, have you, Queen of Diamonds? Oh. . . no, sorry, my mistake. It’s the *other* ruler in red, who loves little boys, that’s the queen, isn’t it? I just get so confused. She doesn’t buy them, either, I think, like you’ve always done, Jack-ie boy!”

“Why. . . why are you calling me that? Are you. . . are you trying to.. . to overthrow the. . . the entire establishment! What the hell’s the matter with you!”

“What’s the matter with me?! Well that’s a long question to answer. Let’s start with the first one you asked instead, Jack, my boy! I’m calling you, *Jack*, because whenever *you* said it to me, you were calling me a Jack of Assholes, like you seem to be, and I *really* didn’t think it was fair for you to be taking that tone with me.

“Do you know why I look so serious right now? This is my serious face. Do you want to know why I look so serious right now? Because this knife. . . this. . . happy, little knife, isn’t going to cut *itself* on its way through your innards. And when I finish gutting you, I’m going to. . . to. . . bwahahahahaha!!!

“Bwaahahahaahaaaaa! Look at your face right now! Oh, hells in pimples, that *would* be a nasty thing to say just now, wouldn’t it? Imagine!” He started laughing again, leaning on the King of Diamond’s shoulder, howling hysterically like he just couldn’t stop himself, while the Diamond King tried to work free the bindings tying him to the throne, but to no avail, and he hadn’t been drugged too long ago, but whatever that traitor, Weiss, had given him was working fast, and he was feeling sicker and more horrific by the minute...

“Do you know what though? I don’t think I’ve been entirely honest with you. I apologize for the inconvenience, but you’re far too important to leave out of the picture I’m about to paint for all my *dearest* companions scrambling for the Imperial Halls, the miscreants!”

“Does. . . does that mean you’re *not* going to kill me then? Why? I. . . I don’t know what to say. . . I. . .”

“Don’t know what to saay? Well I should think so! No, I’m sorry, what I’d meant to say, is that you’re far too important *sounding* to leave *in* the picture, the one I just made, just now, in my head, where I get to have all the fun in the universe and play as many practical jokes on as many idiots as possible, all the while searching for that *special* someone who can make my heart pitter patter in *just* the right fashion, so I can go rest somewhere, and kill that person, brutally, with a hammer, or unsharpened, rusty axeblade. . .

“Or a machete. . . a machete would also be a nice option. Do you think I should use a machete on my favorite playmate, or a sharpened fork, do you think? I can’t decide...”

“I . . . I don’t know what to-”

“Wuh-oh, times up old-timer! Time to abdicate, then...” He held the knife to the dying king’s throat, and said to him, “repeat after me: I, Jack of Assholes, that’s your name, animal, not mine, I, Jack of Assholes, you can skip the parts, like now, where it’s obviously just me talking to you, but I want you to say I, Jack of Assholes, do so solemnly swear.. .”

“I . . . I . . . jack of. . . jack of. . .”

“Jack of Assholes, *do so solemnly swear...*”

“Jack of. . . of Assholes, do so solemnly swear. . . why are you doing this? What medicine did you give me? I . . . I can’t feel my face muscles. . .”

“Shut it! Repeat *only* what I tell you to say! Listen to me: I do so solemnly swear, that if I find *any* boys under the age of thirteen in the afterlife, I will let their spirits mature before I stick a fork into ‘em, and jam their rutting eyeballs out of their wee little hideous sockets! Aaaargh!!!”

“I . . . I can’t, I cabb... I ca’b bek’....”

“Whaaaat? Tongue tired out already? You’ll start laughing in a minute or so, then the pain will come back in, I’m afraid. . .

“Oh, no, don’t worry, it’s a *good* sort of pain. It’s the funniest thing you’ve ever experienced, really!”

“Ahahaheha....” He felt delirious, and didn’t know why he’d found that so funny.

“*There* we have it! I *finally* get a laugh from you, after all these years together!”

“Ahahahahaaahahaaaaa!” He sounded desperate; terrified... ..

“Look at you! Having more fun than a pervert in a schoolyard, I take it?”

“AhahA, haHA! Ahahahahahahahahaaaaahahahahaaaaa!”

“Easy pal, don’t over do it on to laugh track.”

“Ahaahahahaaaaahahaaaaa! I ahaaaaaahaaaaahahahaaaaa! Cahaaaaahaaaaa!!!”

“You’re not going to last to much longer, are you? And I hadn’t even really gotten to the funny part yet. Oh well! No need gutting you like a fish if you want to just be a happy little corpse over here on the dais. Day-is? Die-us? How do you *say* that words anyways? Oh. . . that’s right, you’re still all chuckles and rainbows over there, aren’t you?

“Well the way I see it; If I had to spend one more *hour* as *you’re* bleeding sidekick, I’d have fucking gauged my... I mean *your* earballs out!”

The laughing was gone. There was nothing but silence on the other end....

“What. . . you didn’t think earballs was funny at all?”

..... His face was frozen in a horrific caricature of a grin, and he remained completely still, and stiff.....

“Really? Well, alright, then, I guess I’ll have to clean up my act.” He purposefully approached the throne, like he was climbing the stairs to a transport docking bay, and casually untied the unmoving body of the late King of Diamonds, dumping him unceremoniously onto the floor, sitting in the throne, and faced the rest of the chamber, which consisted of forty to seventy or so individuals, over half of them his own men, holding their royal hostages at spade point, on their knees.

“Alright, alright. Joker’s men, stand down. None of *these* idiots are going to do anything but follow orders from here on out, isn’t that right, idiots?

“Nobody don’t answer that, but before you doesn’t, I want you all to know something. . . what? Is that a question? You, in the stupid looking purple robes; very fancy, by the way, I like the cut of you jib, if you know what I’m not really supposed to be saying. What is it? You have a question?”

“Are you. . . are you declaring yourself King of Diamonds then, oh wise and cunning master we once called Jack of Diamonds?”

“Jack of Diamonds? Is *that* what you thought I was, this whole time I’ve been working here? Oh, my, heavens no. I’m the fucking Courts of Chaos, and they call me, the Joker.”

“You. . . you can’t really be serious. . .”

“Never in my life. . . .”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 5

Ten of Spades  Alexander Mars

“This isn’t going to go over well for you, foolish child. My kung fu is matched only by my love making prowesses...es... Who do you stand before now, but the mighty Lord Pluto!”

“I stand before no such ten, servant. Bow before your emperor, or cower before the heretic king! Muahaha-”

“Whoa card, you’re not supposed to *tell me* if you’re the heretic king. Are you being serious right now? *No one* is gonna *tell you* they’re not the real emperor when they wanna rule!”

“In real?”

“Yes, in real!”

“I just thought I might wanna, you know, piss everyone off.”

“Well yeah, but we’re not really supposed to know you’re the heretic king until somebody kills you.”

“I don’t think that makes any sense. What if they just changed history on us? Made it seem like old emperors were really just heretic kings, knowit?”

“No, stupid, because there’s never been a heretic king before!”

“That sounds like something a heretic king would say.”

“Saiyaaa! Mildew’s abusing scripture again!”

“Stop calling me mildew, Alexander!”

“No one cares what ‘heretic king’ was really supposed to mean, Alexander,” said Saiya, the insatiably gorgeous babysitter sitting over on a stone bench along the wall of the courtyard, reading a story while the children under her care and tutelage played and practiced in the yard.

For now, there were only the seven of them, and Alexander wondered how many of them he would have to defeat in open combat before he won the beautiful Saiya’s maidenhood, or just her virginity, whichever was supposed to be easier to get from a girl.

“Are you out of your mind right now?” asked Namea, who was supposed to be practicing cartwheels with Tabby, just then, but had come to annoy Alexander and his friend he called Mildew, most often. “Of course there’s never been a heretic king before, stupid! They’re supposed to be like snaking ivy and basically *anything* the house of nines says it can do: all made up. Total, irreverent fiction. The Courts of Chaos and Order to follow is just a fancy way to say warlords fight like mad to scramble for power, and whoever survives on top, makes the rules.”

“Wait you never seen creeping ivy before, what?”

“This is so stupid right now-“

“We had it like, *all* over the place like a year-”

“It’s nothing but a stupid fairy tale made to scare kids and explain away-”

“Serious you are, actually, yes and no, hm?”

“Why are you talking like that all the sudden?”

“Not so sure you are, what I have to say, methinken’. Mesa thinken’ you sa are berry, berrrry irritating. Aplease enclosen’ your trappins!”

“The delegate from Diamond Jupiter has the floor!” cried Mildew.

“What happened to the Old King Seauwaa voice, Alexander?” asked Saiya, looking much more intrigued by their conversation than she had been all day; “I liked hearing that from your puny lips better than that irritating little cur, the diamond ten, even.”

“Old King Seauwaa?” asked Alexander, looking curious enough to put his stick sword down, right after he wacked mildew with it again, for good measure. “Who was that? Is that where that voice comes from?”

“Not your strongest initiative, it wasn’t, to have your way about think, I am thinking. Yees. More to the point you should be. At the ending, you put your favorite point. Listen, you must, to all of what I’m saying,

you will...

“Or not,” she shrugged. “The choice is yours and yours alone. Matters not it doesn’t, that started at the end I did not, again, for once the beginning, the end was, and once again the end, the beginning could be.”

“That’s the same way my grandpa used to talk to me! He even used to tell me not to tell Clovis he loved her, like this: Cl-”

“Clovis is a boy, stupid Alexander,” said Namea. “Not a girl, and how could your grandpa-”

“Clovis wasn’t a boy!”

“He was so, stupid. *Is* so, last I heard about him, and people don’t really-”

“Clovis is alive, still? I thought she died when...” He turned to Saiya, looking frustrated, trying to sort his memories out, still. “Who’s Clovis, Saiya?”

“I don’t know, sweethearts, maybe you should ask the emperor if he’s heard of anyone else named Clovis once he gets elected to the Imperial Halls.”

“Clovis isn’t anyone but the Ace of Spades, moron,” said Namea.

“I thought Lucas was the Ace of Spades, though.”

“Lucas didn’t give it to Clovis until after he wasn’t around, any longer, so those trying to give Clovis a hard time are still not recognizing him as the ace, and claim the only ace of spades they know is Lucas. It’s a stupid thing to want to do, considering how many aces have abdicated after their deaths.”

“How do they do that, though?”

“You know I don’t really know, Namea. Get the hell out, though; you’re being a little bitch to everybody and I don’t care for your attitude. Come back when you want to stop being such a jerk all the time.”

“I didn’t mean t-” she’d started to stammer.

“You didn’t mean jack didlydonkusbottoms if you didn’t mean to tell everybody that you heard from somebody else that everybody who didn’t think what you knew how say was right was stupid and ought to be talked to like so, even if they haven’t done anything but question things like they want to know as many different answers as- what- look at me talking to you like you’re people! Don’t make me tell you to get the hell out again and just go! You make me sound like such an asshole sometimes, I swear to the emperor’s hallways and doorprops, if you weren’t my only sister I’d... are you fucking listening to me you little vermin monger? Get the hell out! why don’t you, and don’t make me kick your ass just not to make me fucking swear hellfire on your demon ass, vermin mongering-”

“You’re so *fucking* awful sometimes, I swear to the gods! If you just-”

“Did you just start *swearing* at me, RIGHT after I told you not to make *me* swear anymore? How the *Fuck* am I supposed to do that when my asshole little sister keeps running her fucking mouth like an evil little fuckrocking cockroach, and... ..

“Fuck and sing! Finally! She starts crying again! Hells in *rain* you little *demonic antlicker!*”

“Are you *fucking* kidding me right now, sister prouder, oh Mightiest of vanquishers of-”

She dropped her arms from where they were crossed on her chest, didn’t stand up from the stone bench she was still seated on, and pointed to the door with one finger, leveling a deadly glare at her sister Namea, and said “I will kick your sorry little ass so bad in the next five seconds if you aren’t out of my sight and scrubbing the fucking pooorchEs!” she’d started shouting the last part as Namea took off out the door, scurrying out like fire was at her heels.

“If that wasn’t the most irritating little cur I ever laid eyes on, and not my sister, still yet, I’d rip her apart and, ah, alas, she is *not* my only sister, if I care to have others, I’m thinken’.”

“You got her to run *and* forget to keep crying? Gol-ly, sister,” said the boy called Mildew.

“I’m not even your sister if you start being funny like that, Milhouse. Don’t try so hard to. ... why am I arguing with a chipmunk? Go take a fucking shower, Milhouse, and stop calling him Mildew, Alexander, he’s not your fucking dirt cushion, and he’s not your fucking servant before he’s your friend, so treat him better.”

Alexander looked at her oddly. “Who insults a dirt cushion?”

“Get the fuck out, you foul demon! Not you, Milhouse, the other foul demon, there, beside you, in the ratty bandana he thinks makes a cool headband, still, at 4, no less.”

“Get lady you better watch your short stuff business loco lady. I got no idea what you’re even talking to me about most of the time but I’m pretty sure that was pretty damn unscrupulous of you, just now.”

He put his thumb to his chest, to start defending his honor thusly: “I treat Milhouse like he’s annoying pest who wears spectacles and breathes too fucking loudly through his nasal passages sometimes and won’t stop asking if I think my baby sister will like him when she’s older, like a creeping child molester or something!”

“What are spectacles?” asked Milhouse, skeptically.

“More importantly what the hell do you mean by child molester? Do you know what molester even means, Alexander, or are you just saying-”

“I don’t know what *any* of that crap I just said to you about Milhouse means, right Mildew? Right, Alexander. *I* wasn’t insulted, or anything. Mighty good of you, Mildew.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that in front of your-”

Alexander clouted him over the head with his sword stick and pushed him over so he fell on his butt on the grass. “You won’t be telling ME what to do, Mildew!” he declared, pumping his own thumb at his chest, once again.

Saiya wasn’t doing anything but steadying herself with one hand, fingers outstretched on the stone bench she was sitting on, while the back of her other hand was covering her mouth, as she tried to silence her laughter but failed, quite gladly in actually doing so, at poor Milhouses multiple expenses.

“If I wasn’t laughing so hard at what was obviously a ploy to make Milhouse keep his guard up around his adversaries, I’d sock you one for it, Alexander, son of-”

“*Don’t* you father *my* name, lady!” cried Alexander, justly. His dad had always been a sorry asshole, by anyone decent’s reckoning.

“Sorry, boy child, I forgot how what a sorry asshole your dad has always been, by anyone decent’s reckoning, anyway.. But you shouldn’t hit Milhouse like that unless you’re prepared to let him fuck your sister when she’s a litter older, if he defeats you in open combat one of these days, okay?”

“What’s a sister to you, anyway? You had one already, and you lost it!”

“I don’t know *what* you’re talking about; I haven’t lost her, she’s just around the bloody corner dropping window panes!”

“She’s dropping what-then?” asked Alexander, thusly and truly.

“*I* don’t know. I thought we were just *saying* things we read in old diaries like they didn’t mean anything relevant, right Alexander?”

“I don’t know who you think reads diaries for a living, but I’m no girly boy, sister! And if you think I’m not gonna let Milhouse have sex with my little sister anyway cuz I honestly don’t care to-”

“You can’t really say anything except that you don’t know what sex is, if you’re going to keep quoting old references like they’re sensible, or something. Did you know that child molester literally means someone who touches children? Who the hell wouldn’t touch children, sexually or not? Do you have any idea how fucked up it would be to never touch children, like their possessed or contagious or something? And then to, on top of that already there, lie to them about what sex actually means until they’re older and can’t possibly think it isn’t anything but the worst thing in the universe because nobody ever told them that- Oh, look at me, what am I even saying? You don’t know what sexual intercourse even means; you’re just a miner, after all.”

“Whaaat? Okay. . . if your sexual intercourse isn’t exactly like *my* sexual intercourses, maybe we should compare parts, and see what’s going on, about it.”

“That was very decent of you, to offer to teach a lady something new like that. Did you know that people used to make children do all sorts of things, secretly or openly, that they didn’t want to do at all, and that’s where sexual abuse came from, except that everybody was lying to their children about their bodies, so they had no words, no sentences, no concept whatsoever to explain just what someone had been forcing them to do for him, or her, or whomever. Do you understand what I’m telling you, Alexander?”

“I don’t think I know what you’re meaning, all the way... Did you mean that- Okay... I was gonna say something I thought would be funny, but. . . I guess now’s not great for it.” She did the courtesy of letting him finish, without a word to interrupt him. “But you’re letting me know that we can’t have sex because I don’t know the right words for it, like vagina, or...?”

“I have no idea, honestly, what most of the things in those books Clovis gave to us mean, but I just wanted you to know that if you hurt people, and you like doing it, it’s because it makes you feel powerful to make someone do something they don’t want to be doing, and there are still a lots of others, many of the threes

and sevens you already know, actually, who are believed to be made to be doing things they don't want to be doing, and yet, if they could find the faith in themselves to break free of their own ideas of how to be important, or successful, and simply believe they could rise to whatever..." She paused, and looked at Alexander, and not at Millhouse, who wasn't really not paying attention, but didn't do anything but irritate people when they were trying to communicate, so he knew well enough in these situations to keep quiet, at least, until...

"I didn't know that you-"

"Shut up, Millhouse!" snapped Alexander and Saiya together.

"-that you," he dodged, continuing anyway, "thought that we'd even *want* to know the words for sexy things before we figure them out for ourselves, or had someone show them to us, when we're playing with different partners, or something."

"That wasn't the worst thing you could have mentioned, but your communication dialect leaves me horny at best. And that's hor-ner-y, jack of asses and clubhouses.

"But anyway, you really *shouldn't* have to know any words for anything before you use it, because they wouldn't help, and they'd only make you think wrongly about something until you experienced it. But no one really knows where those books actually came from, Alexander. They're a lot more dangerous than you know about, and I wish you'd stop reading them so often without a more proper placement for things. You're not unclever, though, so I guess I shouldn't be worried. Don't call Millhouse meaningless, stupid words like child molester unless there's a really funny joke attached to it or something-"

"The joke," he pointed, "is Millhouse."

"Anyway don't use words like that, because they make me think you might not be ready for some of the things I need to be teaching you. You don't know it, yet, but just the way you see those words used implants malware into you're thinking patterns. You were actually making yourself whole universes stupider by acting like Millhouse was weird for wanting to have sex with someone he was interested in already, and by calling him some nonsense word that's meant to. . . uuugh! This is so annoying right now! I can tell by the looks on your stupid little adorable faces that you're not getting *anywhere* with me for like, five hours, at this rate!"

This time Saiya did stand up, and not like something wasn't the matter. "Where did my sister go?"

"I don't know. You might want to be nicer to her, if you wanted to keep her around. Sisters don't come in spades, you know. Oh, shit, wait..."

She smirked at him, lightly. "You're only saying that because her vagina is groin height for you two."

He pondered that for a moment. "That doesn't have *nothing* to do with it, probably. Did you think she wanted to-"

"Burn the books!" Saiya realized, and space ripped apart for a second, and there was a crease in the way gravity felt, or didn't feel, and then Alexander was staggering and falling back onto his butt next to Millhouse, and Saiya was gone.

"Did she.. . run, or.. . ?"

"She ran," Millhouse nodded, "like, really, really faster than I thought was okay to do for anything less than you sister burning ancient tomes nobody's seen in like a thousand years."

"Hell in rain, *that's* what she meant by it! Are you stupid, or something?! Come on, doofus, let's get a move on, already!"

Millhouse looked very perturbed by his friend's accent and dialect, but didn't do anything but run as fast as he possibly could to keep up after Alexander, but Millhouse didn't not know where the tomes were kept, mostly, so Alexander left him in a flash, his legs pumping him along down the hallway like he'd never have to stop running if he didn't want to, and indeed he did not, most days even.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 6

Six of Spades  Saiya Mar Su

I can't believe this is happening! Her breath hadn't caught for at least an hour, but she hadn't been able to stop trying not to run as fast as she could try for, because he was *so* much sexier than he was supposed to be, just.

The hallway dimmed and reshaped itself. A flurry of egras escaped the last time they left each other alone, and Saiya was so confused about how she was actually doing in this game, that she was pretty sure this couldn't actually be explained to anyone who wasn't her, later on...

How can this be happening to me? Can he really do that? She'd had NO idea why he hadn't done anything like this the first time he'd seen her running like that, but she couldn't remember how fast she'd had to go, last time.

How fast? She didn't want to scold herself for that one, just yet, because this fucking kid kept trying to block off the escape patterns she was running through the lower labyrinth beneath the castle on the hilltop. In Romulus...

She hadn't done anything but catch Namea right outside the study they'd kept the books in, but when she'd thrown her sister into the... *Fuck!*

"You're too sloooooow~!" she heard echoing down the hallway. "You'll never catch me like THAT!" the voice screamed from the opposite direction, far above her.

She didn't *not* want to take some stairs again to a different level, now, but he was definitely not baiting her or anything, and yet, she hadn't been able to stop running from him, and he'd come *so* much faster up on her than she'd ever have thought before that he could have done, for her, or anyone else, she'd known about.

The last thing she ever wanted to tell herself, ever, was that she should try and measure her speed, ever, at any point in time, because she *never* wanted people to think that she couldn't handle her own...

"No fucking way..." He wasn't moving fast enough to speed her away from him...

Is he not trying to catch me? He wasn't.... yet?

She knew he'd forgotten what speed was, when he'd started, but he'd never had to do anything but- Her never wanted to stop coming for her...

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 7

Seven of Hearts  Maximus

It wasn't like the last time he'd been down with his friends, this was, but the last time it felt wrong, somehow, and now, with...

Max crossed the roads at the intersection, and wondered just how long he'd have to wait before he could come back this way again. He hadn't expected Radcliffe to have to run off to save the queen again, like that, but he was also pretty sure that...

Could it really be happening like this? He hadn't meant to go to Romulus, like this, but he wasn't even really sure that's where he'd ended up. He kept getting lost, it seemed like, and all the different kinds of people in a city like this.. ...

"Are you here for good reason, boy? I don't like those wandering eyes of yours. If you're going to buy something--"

"My *eyes* don't do me justice if... .." He couldn't keep focus, and he didn't know why. The jack of asses at the kiosk wasn't going to keep bothering him, if he moved on, so he did, and when he took another look around him, Maximus knew he was headed for trouble again.. ...

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 8

Nine of Diamonds



Finnbar II, Earl of Bracchius

He wasn't *all the way* had with his drink, but Finn didn't think he'd be able to get much more from this bottle, and he was starting to have his doubts about its supposed origins.

"Finn," said another, "I think you've had enough to drink for this hour..."

He made a show of squinting his eyes at the other. "Just how much more annoying did you set out to be before you crossed the threshold this morning? I'd say I had well enough more than enough for what's I had it all for, any way. . . ."

Jason took a step back, reassessed his leiglord, and said, "You're not as high off it as I thought you were."

"Firs' of all, Jessup"

"Jason."

"Jessuper. Firs' of all Jessuper, you don't get high, in the queendoms, you get. . . whasa word?"

"Horny?"

"Not *that* one, but yeah, kinda~."

"Why are you pretending to be gone with your drink already when we haven't even-"

"How many times do I gotta *tell* you, Jessuper? The last *seven* times I seen the. . ." He didn't trail off unintentionally, but Jessuper there was just mocking a concerned delegate for the nine of diamonds, like he usually did, and Finn's attentions were rapt by another at the Heart Queen's get together.

"How long as it been, nine? I missed talking to you," said the ace, and Finnbar couldn't bring his name to mind, for just a second.

"Lord Zikram," Frankie noticed. Finnbar hadn't paid the small one a second thought, but he wasn't worried about him just for Zikram's presence. He'd seen something other than his old friend, just now, and it worried him more than he allowed to show.

"*Lord* Zikram? Well I hadn't gotten a demotion, last I checked, there."

"My apologies," Frankie ammended, "Ace, Zikram. It's well to see you again."

"That's more like it. Don't look so worried though, Frankie, it's not hard to. . . Oh, hells in rains again. . . Finnbar the Nine. How goes it, fellow?"

Finnbar smiled a little, into the corner of his cheek. There was something amiss here, already, and he knew Zikram could sense it too. "I'm not a nine at parties, *Ace* Zikram. At parties, I'm not even a sebun."

Jessuper: "Seven."

"Seven," Finnbar ammended. "Not eburn a seven. *Really*, I'm more of a queen of hearts and minds, if I do say so myself."

"Not too queeney, I hope? Romulus has got one of those, didn't you hear?"

"Was it *you* who threw this unbirthday party for us then, Queen Finn?" asked Jessuper, the felon that he was with moments not to be missed.

"For all my best friends!" cried Finnbar, waving his drink haphazardly into the air, scolding himself for his lazy use of haphazardly, and taking a sip from his drink in whatever tense he damn well pleased in it with...

"Are you guys working into a kite high already, then? Mind if I join?" Zikram smiled and grabbed a drink off a passing tray, nodding to the serving girl with an odd look in his eyes.

"You're higher than I am, sir..." Finnbar noticed. "How dare you."

"How dare I? Why how dare *you* good sir. It's my best friend's unbirthday party, and I've barely gotten drunk yet." He ammended his constitution, at present, with a drink through the lips.

"Need I remind the good ace and nine that the unbirthday party is still yet to begin?" asked Rodey, who would watch quiet and wily till a good drink passed his own lips, some time soon.

Finnbar's mouthful sprayed out his lips. "*Yet to begin?! I thought I had half the party at my table*

already.”

“Not yet, anyway,” Zikram remarked, still unsure how many at the table were really his kinsmen of clan and kind.

“Rodey’s not a spade any longer, Zikram. Don’t look so perturbed.”

“Not a spade any longer? Ever meet the ace of spades while you ran about, back home?”

“Ace, of spades?” Rodey shook his head that he hadn’t, and changed the subject back to the task at hand.

“If we’re to enjoy the Heart Queen’s *real* hospitality, then we ought to be moving on in the next hour or so.”

Jessuper and Frankie both looked confused. “What?”

“We’re at the reception still,” he elaborated. “See the hedgemaze over there? What’s the ten marked on our invitations?”

“Neptune,” answered Jessuper.

“How do you not know that by now?” Finnbar wondered. They’d spent a week and a half journeying to Neptune in Romulus and. . . “Wait the hell. . .?”

“Exactly,” Rodey pointed out. “The location on the invitation is just to get to the hedgemaze. There’s one somewhere in the spadelands and the club territories. We’re not supposed to know which of the tens’ estates in the heart queendoms her unbirthday party is actually being held at. The only way to find out is to enter the hedgemaze at the location marked on our invitations, and find the warren she laid out to the real party’s location.”

“Well damn. Sounds a little paranoid, don’t you figure?” Zikram hurriedly put something out of his pocket, flipped the knifeblade around in his fingers, then handed it, hilt first, to Finnbar, who cut off a slice of his sweet he’d been trying to dish up.

“I’m not sure what she was hoping to gain, exactly, but. . .” Rodey shrugged, seemingly unsure as to what else he could add.

“How did you find all this out, if you don’t mind my asking?” asked Zikram, the ace of diamonds.

“I didn’t. She just told me so, in a dream. You two didn’t have any of the cupcakes?”

“There are *what*cakes at this party?!?” Finnbar flew to his feet, spilling all the drinks on the table and sending his friends into laughter.

Rodey hadn’t wasted a moment, and was hurrying back with a plate of two red and white cupcakes, which he held out to Finnbar and Zikram. “Cupcakes are Queen Zelda’s favorite, apparently. Turns out her father, the jealous jack, hates the very sight of them.”

In the next few moments after he took his first bite, the situation at hand changed for Finnbar, and he wondered why his father had been such an asshole, as to actually name him Finn, and then Bar, like that was ever a good word combination.

After that, he could feel the message imprinted into the cupcakes, and it described much of what Rodey had said, and more.

Finnbar snatched at a few stray hairs in the dream he was witnessing, and pulling on them, saw traces of a scar, or wound, and in the space between thoughts, he opened it up.

“Someone’s been after her. . .” he said quietly, to the group gathered there.

“You saw that too?” Zikram asked him, setting his own cupcake back on its plate.

“An ace. . .” said Jessuper. He’d taken a few bites, himself.

“Not just an ace. He’s an animal,” said Zikram. “His name is Clovis, and I’ve been tracking him, through the looking glasses, and. . .” he looked at Finnbar, oddly.

“Clovis, is not the name she was afraid of, I’d wager.”

“Oh no? Do tell.”

“Finn•bar. . . Count it. . . Finn•bar. . . Damnations, why does that name sound so familiar?”

Frankie, bless his little soul, actually bent down and whispered into the nine’s hear that it was his own name, that was Finnbar. “Damnations! I think he’s right. Finnbar *is* an atrocious name! Let us do away with it! What was it you were saying, Zikram? About the scar in the looking glass queen’s bathroom mirrors?”

“She’s in a lot more trouble than I know how to handle, honestly,” said Zikram. “Have you met him before? Heard tell of what he’s been doing to people?”

“Can’t be any worse than what the Joker’s got planned for half Romulus,” Rodey remarked.

“Now there’s a card for you,” said Zikram. “I hear he’s the new king of diamonds.”

Finnbar shook his head. “He hates that title, from what I’ve been hearing. And it’s not a lot, mind you, I’m usually a lot drunker than I look. So what do you know about the ace of spades? No! Hold that thought. We need to get a move on.”

Their party rose from their seats, and made their way toward the entrance to the hedgemaze, which Finnbar now noticed was far more enchanted-seeming than he’d first witnessed.

“Quite a kick in these cupcakes,” said Zikram.

“Don’t say anything more about the ace,” said Finnbar to him, in a low, almost inaudible voice. “I think there’s less friends among us than we’d have thought before we ate the, uh. . .”

“Say no more,” Zikram seemed to understand. “Let’s just hurry, then, and hope we get to her before he does.”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 9

Two of Hearts  Senna d'Laire

He wasn't all that bad looking, to be honest. It was hard to imagine oh god spissing grain in this was the worst birthday party reception reception ever until the fucking face of space just go the eere~!!!

She was so totally not freaking out as bad as the queen wasn't showing *wasn't showing any body! somehow! what in HELLS??* The queen wasn't one to mask her affection, generally speaking, it was just that Senna knew her tastes and somehow the Spade Ace had hit all the weirdest, quirkiest isms the queen could muster being attracted to.

He had dark and wavy hair that fluffed just above his eyes, in parts, and didn't really reach past his shoulders, ever. Senna liked styling boys' hair, so she knew a thing or two about how insane it was that Clovis must have gotten out of bed and ruffled his hair to get it like that. Son of a bitch.

He was wearing green, and she was pretty sure his name was still Clovis, but she'd liked the look of the last Ace of Spades too, but she couldn't recall his name, exactly, and if it wasn't always that way with the aces she might have bothered about it. She'd never once before laid eyes on the boy called Clovis, however, and boy he was, but nobody there doubted who he was by the look of him; he had a black spade tattooed over his right eye, so that the lid and surrounding skin were black into a spade that pointed just right of center into his forehead.

His tail, too, was black, unlike his auburn-tinged skin elsewhere. The end, there too, of the tail, at first reminded Senna of lions she'd seen, but she realized that the tip was shaped like a black spade too, like the symbols used all over the universe for it, and the tattoo there on his face.

The tattoo on his chest, she wouldn't see until later, when Clovis tore his shirt killing a seven with a sweep of his sabre, after the seven had apparently tried to rend him open with a nice set of brass gauge-claws.

He tore the shirt the rest of the way off, claimed he liked it that way, and that if he hadn't been considering taking his shirt off anyway, he never would have been so distracted as to let that assassin get the jump on him, and tear his shirt like that.

He didn't say it without a straight face, or without looking back at the queen again, with something else in his eyes, but this was *WAY* before that, back when he first approached the Queen of Hearts, called Zelda, he all green and black, she all red and yellow.

"They say you are the Heart Queen, Princess Zelda."

"Princess?" she held her fan out, as though she were reading off it. "I don't believe it says that in my hall of titles. . . ."

"Were you not the secret child of the dear Heart King and Emperor Almighty? I may have mistaken your bearings."

"Ah, flattery will get you all places but one, they say."

"Do they, say?"

"Which, say?"

"Your color." His language wasn't. . . off, exactly, but it was always this way, when spade met heart, and there were common pastimes and phraseologies used to temper communication to a dull nud. Unless you happened to know how to flourish your tail or fake demure.

"My color? Well I have many?"

"So black, or red?" Oh hells above, below. He was so red for her right then.

"Red as they come," she answered back.

"Cum, Red, cum."

She smiled demurely, or something, and said something to the effect of whatever the *hell* you could have followed that thing with.

She'd laughed, when she read the black letter emblazoned on the ace's freshly bare chest, after he'd dispatched the would-be assassin and successful shirt-ruiner, and the Heart Queen asked the Spade Ace if he forgot his suit and station so often he need mark his face and chest for it often.

"The spade," he touched his cheek, where the black tattoo started, "is so no one forgets how long it takes obsidian to take shape and wreak havoc on all cardstock. The ace," he touched the "A" symbol on his chest, "is so that if I ever meet a red-lettered adulterer, I can make her feel whole again, right where it counts."

"Do you *ever* stop?" Senna demanded of the Heart Queen, in a hushed, giggling whisper.

"Not if I don't *have* to." She was watching some of the boys wrestle on the grass, and Clovis wasn't anywhere in sight, by now. Senna had lost sight of him talking to the Ace of Clubs, who she'd thought had black hair, before, but which now was dark brown, and her skin had turned tan and more supple, somehow.

Not that Senna wasn't more interested in boys, today, for the Queen's benefit, anyhow, it's just that the two of them together looked so naturally beautiful that she wondered if it should be. . . allowed, or something. . .

"I think you wear too much makeup. . ." she said to Zelda.

"I think you need to shut up."

"You're just as beautiful as *they* are, you know. More so, even for, but you hide it under all this glamour."

"Biiitch~!"

"Slut!"

"Harlot!"

"That one's yours, queenie, not mine."

"Ugh! For shame on you, demon! Go flirt with the ace's sister and send him my way, will you? I'm bored, and I need an emperor to vie for."

"*Your* ace's sister, or. . . ?"

"Go!!!"

She laughed running the rest of the way across the grass, to fetch the Ace of Spades from his darling sister, or something.

Wait *what*? "Who's sister is. . ." The Ace of Clubs? Holy shit, was she serious? That would mean that. . . oh hells in rain. . .

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 10

Queen of Hearts  Zelda

The fact that somebody had decided to let her know that Clovis would be more handsome and noteworthy than she'd ever cared to witness, just presently, made about as much sense as her best friend's behavior, just now, and the fact that she still couldn't see Senna and the other girls clearly, after what she'd been through in the cloverfields above, below... ..

The fact that Clovis hadn't done much more than tempt her and flirt with her didn't reassure her, any, and she'd yet to see the Diamond Ace at her little unbirthday party, so as for working out who had marked her by magic, she couldn't figure alone...

Had he left his mark on her skin like that to warn her of what was already inside, or as an insatiably boring calling card for damage he himself had wrought in her?

"You're not the same as in the stories," said Clovis, coming up beside her where she sat on the stone bench, overlooking one of the grassy fields; this one covered in patches of red and white clover mounds scattered across the grassy green. "They're all about kittens and laces and pink, you know."

"Oh, I do know," she admitted, allowing him to sit down on the bench beside her, while she watched a pair of spades across the field spar with each other, bare fisted.

"They shouldn't be doing that without blunts, this late, sorry," he witnessed.

She shrugged, not really sure why he'd be concerned about it. Spades never cut unless they meant to, she'd always witnessed, so blunting seemed an overreaching formality, anyway. "Do you know why I asked for you to come to me, Spade?"

"I do not, I confess."

"I wish to know what you make of the late emperor's demise. It seems most untimely to me."

"I wish that it were not at the loss of a good man and king that we have this chance at change, and culling, but I. . ." he trailed off, sure he didn't need to go further on that point in particular.

"So it is," she noticed. "Still, though. A Spade Emperor? You make your move then, against Chaos, for Order?"

"So above, so below. I'm afraid I won't be fast enough, though. Too many kings need killing, and where there are kings--"

"You speak to me of treason so soon?"

"Treason? No. No nonsense phrases in what I entail for myself and others, yet still again. Have you met the Spade King, yet?"

"Jovial, they say."

"Wicked, I say."

"You seem half prone to wickedness yourself, Spade Ace."

"Not so. Justly that I deserve reservationless discrimination for what I entail for in or without it so, but I must needs know, too, where you rest on what the Emperor of Hearts and Minds once was, if I may ask of you."

"I loved him for what he meant to me, I think, but I did not know him as others have laid claim to."

"If I killed the Jack of Hearts for you... .."

"You would do what just so many have already offered. Not impressive if--"

"If I killed the Jack of Hearts for you, it would be because he was already dead, and I claimed it was for you as a matter of inconvenience in explaining myself. He *is* dead already. Just rightly so."

She looked at him oddly, lowering her fan from her face. "You're mad."

"Not so. His men attempted to occupy the Imperial Halls, just this even."

"You-... You're serious?"

"Yes. A force four hundred cards strong now guards the halls, for safekeeping."

Her tone got dangerous. "You put four *hundred* SPADES in the Imperial Halls of all Card?!"

He laughed, then, to put her at ease, and set, “You really think I *have* gone mad, don’t you? Of course I haven’t. One hundred spades, one hundred hearts, one hundred clubs, and one hundred irritatingly expensive mercenaries.”

“Diamonds, lover. They’re called diamonds.”

“Right, just so. Diamonds, then. A hundred of those, too.”

She laughed, then, glad at his planning for it, and trusted him better. They didn’t talk about much else for a few minutes more, and she wanted to know him *much* better than she was getting a chance to, just presently, and then his tail flicked at her elbow on the far side from him, playfully, and she smirked.

“Didn’t think it was real?” he asked her, while she watched his tail flick about behind the two of them.

“Sort of. I’ve never really seen one like it before. How did you-” She didn’t know how to ask.

“I sought out King Louie, of the Macaque.”

“*The* King Louie? The giant monkey?!”

He laughed again, flashing his teeth as he thought on it. “No, not exactly. He’s not actually a . . . well he doesn’t have. . . ever seen a macaque without a tail before now?”

“Before now or having since? No, I don’t think I have.”

“Well he isn’t one. A macaque. He thinks they’re crazy, actually, and they definitely are that. He’s huge, though, and hairy, like they are, and he swings around like mad, and he’s mighty powerful, so. . . they just sort of, all hang around with him, and bring him food and tribute and stuff, and ask him to do crazy things for them, too.”

She couldn’t stop laughing, imagining it all, like he was some great, big, hairy man or something.

“Does he look more like a person, or something?”

“Well what sort of person? A card, or. . . ?”

“Yes, sure. A card.”

“No, not really. He’s more human looking than the Macaque, that’s for sure, but, he’s definitely. . . well, like a lot of other jungle animals I’ve seen: unique, and profoundly strange to try and classify, knowit?”

“Only just. Where does. . . where does the king of the Macaque reside, anyway?”

“It’s called the Congo.”

“Congo...” she could feel something thrumming. It was a Word of Power, and one she’d not heard before.

“It’s a junglescape that crosses through...” he stopped, then, and pointed to one of the hedgemaze entrances. “It’s like your maze, only wild. It crops up all over the Solus systems in different ways. Finding your way through it is like learning to breathe in a completely different way.”

“That’s. . . madness itself. So you. . . you learned to grow a tail, from a Macaque who doesn’t have one?”

“Well no,” he snickered, then, and in the next moment tried not to look so raw and boyish. “I said I sought him out, I didn’t say he helped any. He uh, he tried to broker a deal, with me, for the monkeys’ benefit.”

“Oh we’re calling the Macaque peoples monkeys now, are we? I hear that’s offensive.”

“Well, we’re calling them monkeys when they’re trying to barter for man’s red flower.”

“Man’s red. . . *fire*? The Macaque wanted *fire* from you? *Why*? Oh, hells above below, you didn’t *give* it to them??”

He laughed again, and looked at her incredulously. “Like they’d ever figure out how to keep it long enough to do any real damage. No, I didn’t *not* give them anything close to fire. It’s not spelled for anyone but Louie though, so...”

“You’re screwing with me.”

“Only sort of.”

“You son of a bitch!” She wanted to keep laughing, so she swatted him with the back of her hand. “Fire NEVER works like that. Gods! You had me thinking you’d sired the Courts of Chaos yourself with magic fire for monkeys!”

He smiled out of one corner of his mouth, and just stared at her for a minute, enjoying whatever he was reading from her, and then, like it was easy to ask without needing to say it, he leaned over and kissed her neck.

She didn’t stop him, and then touched her fingers to one of his hips, so he’d adjust his position, and he moved closer to her, hugging her to him, then, “Wait... stop. . .” she couldn’t breathe right.

“What’s wrong?” He *had* stopped, hadn’t he? She was looking into his eyes, now, so he must have stopped. Her neck still felt like it was burning, though, where he’d kissed it. “Zelda? Queen Zelda? Somebody HELP!”

What the hell was he shouting about. . .? Was he carrying her? He was. . . “Clover! I need you! CLOVER!”

“Oh gods, what’s. . . bring her inside, quickly!”

Zen Sun Sukki Eichi, the Ace of Clubs, was there, and Clovis was giving Zelda something in her mouth, that tasted strange, but her senses snapped back, sharp as ever, and she took in a sharp breath of pain, past the gob of cloverleaf extract he’d given her.

“Don’t breathe that in!” ordered the Club Ace, thusly. “Careful! Here, lay her down on the bed.”

“Clover? He. . . he called for clover?”

“It was my name once, but no longer. Here, sweetheart, look at me. See? My name is Sukki. That’s it, relax. Where does it hurt?”

Zelda blinked. She was in a bed. Three aces were in the room with her; Spade, Club and Heart, all. “Radcliffe?”

“Your mark, can you show them?” he asked her.

“What happened to her, Clovis?” Sukki asked the shirtless Spade Ace, her little brother.

“I was kissing her neck, and she collapsed. I couldn’t. . . I don’t know. . .”

“It’s not *your* doing, it’s hers,” Radcliffe assured the other ace. “She took a nosedive into clovertown, last week.”

“Irritant.” He was vexing her in front of company again.

“Troublemaker,” the Heart Ace returned. His expression changed suddenly. “Zelda, show Sukki the mark. I have to go, there’s something I just realized.” He took off out of the room faster than she would have believed, if Zelda hadn’t seen him take off like that a thousand times.

“What mark?” Clovis’s sister was tending to her, but, Zelda was losing focus again, sort of. Clovis said something, then, and it focused her better.

“What?”

“What ma-”

Clovis pushed past his sister and like a deft handed spade would, slit open Zelda’s dress right beneath her breasts. “I smell fire...” he said in explanation.

“Oh, Fucks!” Sukki cried, when her fingers brushed across the red rhombus mark on Zelda’s flesh.

“It’s just a memento from an old fl-”

“I know what to do!” Sukki cried, and the door banged as she fled, only to return the next moment, fishing something out of her purse on the lamp table. “Use this, Clovis! Pull her out!” She threw him a black cylinder and took off again, out the door, chain whip coming free from her hilt as she ran for it.

“She’s about to go kill someone, just now,” Clovis noted. He was in a chair, at Zelda’s bedside, rather unapologetic for slitting her dress like that. He opened the black canister just slightly and smelled its contents, said, “Whoa!” and held it away from his nose, closing it back up tight.

“What? What is it?”

She looked at her, caressing the canister, smiled, and said, “We’re about to have a LOT more fun than I thought. Hail to the Clubs.”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 11

Ace of Clubs  Zen Sunn Sukki Eichi

Breathe. . . Her chest was pounding.

Breathe. . . She forgot to trip, when she stumbled, and rolled back into a run. She broke free from the doors to a courtyard opposite to the porches she'd been on before, smelling the nasty, charred scent of burning flesh as she ran.

He wouldn't have smelled like that, if Clovis hadn't put a scent to it, like he had. She wasn't sure how he even knew how to work on a nine like that, but then again, Clovis could do a lot of things he didn't necessarily advertise.

If you kill him now, while his back is turned, he'll rip his way deeper into her mind, and destroy her... .. She knew he had to be broken, when he died, and so she screamed his name, "Zikram!" just before she struck, and her chainwhip caught him laughing in the jaw.

He hadn't had more than a second after that to respond, blood seeping over his teeth, now, dying them as he cried out, pulling up his staff to defend himself from her. He tried screaming something, a spell, while he scarcely fended off each strike of her whip with his staff, but her first strike had been aimed to cripple his jaw and fill his mouth with blood for good reason.

"Stop this madness!" Someone cried out.

"Kill the ace!"

"Kill her, Zikram!"

Sukki taunted him, then snatched his staff away from her with a flick of her weapon, yanking it free of his grasp so she could throw a spinning back kick into his jaw, again.

He stumbled to get back up, quick as he could, but Sukki was already to him, coiling her chain around his limbs and body awkwardly, binding him tight as she wrapped the end closest to hilt around his neck, and pulled tight.

He gurgled and sputtered, on his knees on the grass, with Sukki's chain coiled up and around his arms and shoulders and torso, finally coiled tight around his neck, just where she worked to tighten it up, against his throat.

"Now if you're not gunna swallow this," she murmured, pressing a wad of nightshade she'd pulled from a pouch on her belt, into his mouth, past his teeth, and she held his mouth and nose closed, forcing him to sputter, cough and swallow. He choked more. "See? You keep thinking I have to loosen up on your neck to get you to swallow, but that isn't true. See your saliva's pulling out just the toxins I need, so they can slip right through my chanis, down your throat."

No one moved from where they were. Moments went by, and the only sound in the gardens was Zikram's choked gurgles and sufferings as she yet again tightened her chain around his neck, and the metal cut into his flesh, now, and drew blood.

It could have felt like a thousand years, for all the words spoken, during it, but she could finally feel his life extinguishing. "You're about as useless as they come, filthy animal," she cooed. He convulsed, violently, and she knew she'd set him off. "Don't like being helpless, animal? The Queen of Hearts sends her regards, Zikram. And my baby brother, the Spade Ace?"

She hadn't let up in how tightly her coils gripped him, but if she had, he'd have taken her right then. He was all tied up, though, his back pressed against her, where she stood behind him, draining the remaining life he had kicking, holding his position there dying.

He didn't go slack all at once, but he did go slack, and she knew how long she'd have to hold him there, or thought she did, until she realized all the grass within ten feet of her had dried, curled up, yellowed, then browned.

She changed her stance and pulled loose the first coil, untangling it from the Ace of Diamonds' dead

corpse, just presently.

About seventeen rhombus wearing cards made to surround her, and their commander, a pig of a man called Vikren, declared that she was under arrest for the murder of the Ace of Diamonds.

“Not so,” she said simply. “If I have to kill a score more diamonds to prove it, though, then come make my day prouder still.”

“Stand down, eight,” said someone new.

Oh thank the rains, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Jason, the young man who’d spoken just then, cut into the perimeter forming around Sukki and stood between her and Vikren. “This is well outside your realm of legality, senator. I happen to know for a fact that Zikram smelled funny, and nobody liked his jokes, anymore. He lept gargling all the blood and completely ruined the punchline!”

Sukki didn’t try not to laugh, nor did a healthy portion of the other guests. Vikren made to argue, but Jason’s friends had moved to aid the Club Ace, and they stood at the ready, whilst her own retinue from the club territories remained where they were. If it came to her being arrested, they’d be better suited to help her by staying out of an open battle, like this could turn out to be.

“No one questions the autonomy of an ace, when murder is conducted,” Jason was saying, “so who the hell are you, some lowly duke, expecting to get justice from?”

“It wasn’t murder,” Sukki defended, “it was extermination. He was a vile, loathsome pig, and he really did smell awful.”

“You are stepping faaar past *your* thresholds, outlander!” cried Vikren.

“Outlander?” asked Jason, the Heart Six, and generally okay card. “We’re in the Queen’s lands. I live here, moron.”

“Not so, liar! I’ve seen your kind far too many times to ever forget what you *really* are! You and the ace are guilty of crimes against Romulus! You have no idea the hell we will rain down on you, for this insult!”

“How could you know I wanted to insult you, already? I hadn’t even started yet.”

“Die like a pig, cur!” screamed Vikren, drawing a spade forth, for himself, which nobody hadn’t thought was just a decorative rapier, but somehow it actually had a sharp tip to it... ..

“If I fetch the Ace of Spades, for you,” said Jason, to Vikren, stopping him short, “will you swear to leave empty handed?”

“Wh-*what*?”

“I said if I spade the ace last moreover again, the other one has to forget the first one.”

“You’re trying to trick me, cur! I know your heartlander tricks.”

“I thought I was the outlander...”

“If you truly think to stop m-”

“I *don’t* think to stop you. I simply do.”

“There will be no end to the torment you suffer at the hands of Romulus!”

“And so when the Jack of Aces cuts your throat open in your sleep, you can keep trying to gurgle that one out for me.”

He’d gone completely pale, and there were hushed whispers breaking out among those gathered around to watch the spectacle.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 12

The Jade King



Thorvaldt Greystoke, of Mars

The last time he was this pissed, it was like the whole universe wanted to cave in on him, and the hammer he kept at the ready, whenever he left the Congo, his home, for this place, was nowhere to be found then, either.

The fact that he and Hercules hadn't seen eye to eye for countless ages, now, too, was more than he felt he could bear, now, with Jane missing and the rest of his friends taken away from his empty, barren and hollow halls.

"I hate this sodding place," said the ill tempered king, ten and high lord in his own rites. He'd fostered his hatred for the vile cur rampant throughout the realms he occupied now, "and if all Asgard were to fall, and crumble, and this one lonely hall stood tall and barren, I still would not bring myself to crumble it by my hammer's will."

He hated this place, and yet, when he'd had more sisters in will and hope alongside him, like he'd always wanted to maintain, he felt weaker for not having a hearth and home; a base and shelter, for all those he called friend and smiled for it.

"The last time you looked so grim, Lord Greystoke, I do believe it was your dear brother's company we were keeping."

He hated this worm-tongued cretin he'd taken for an 'advisor' some years before, who fancied himself a royal vizier and counterpart to Thor's rule over his seven realms and heartlands. "My brother is of no interest to you, Regibald. Leave your numb observations to yourself, worm tongue."

"Not to be the bearer of ill tidings, your lordship, but I mention your lord brother only for the sake of--"

"My *lord* brother? Just who's tidings are you harboring under that ill kempt façade, worm tongue?"

"A mere slip of the, ah, worm tongue, sire. I only meant to inform your lordship that--"

"That the Courts of Chaos are to ensue, and that Loki will be loose again, to wreak havoc on my friends and loved ones? Rid me of your insolence and foul breath, vermin. More fool you that I had not crushed your head to the steeple, last winter's morn."

"My apologies, sire," said the cretin, bowing and taking his leave of Thor's throne chamber.

"Waaaait! Worm tongue! Come back!" He said halfassedly, too little too late, he knew, to actually reach the ears of the royal vizier, supposed be.

He supposed it was high time he be rid of this accursed hall, once and for all, and all that really meant for him was that by the time he occupied it again, it would be a new place entirely, for all the people in it, and he wondered, then, too, whether Louie had departed the Macaque for good, again... ..

He rose from his throne and strode down the steps, toward the main entryway. There were no guards in the hall, at present; only a modicum of staff he couldn't seem to be rid of even if he told them to sod off every morning.

That worm tongue thought he was being subtle with his hostile takeover was a comfort, to Thorvaldt, because when enemies were that stupid, and one could take them apart without ever really trying for it, he could focus his mind on more interesting matters, like women, or more fruit yielding battles, or other sorts of women... ..

His cape didn't flow right, any longer, and he wondered if he'd ruined the enchantment on it with his foul temper. It was supposed to adapt to his calm and cunning or rage and thundering, depending on circumstance. If he stopped a few hundred miles above the earth, and remained calm, the winds would pacify their own stirrings, and his cape would flow smoothly, allowing him to take in any scene below or above, without distraction.

And on foot, in the heat of battle, when he tapped his inner rages, wind would kick up in even a sealed cell, and the storm that brewed would fuel his rage and passion all he needed it for.

He definitely *hadn't* wrecked the enchantment just by being ill-tempered, lately. He'd been ill-tempered for weeks, now, and instead of stripping the remaining enchantments from the garb to prevent power disruptions and charge reinfluences, he left it alone, and let his temper stir up a quiet storm of its own.

The veranda he'd stepped out on was more than high enough to give him a refreshing few of the tree-covered mountainscape he kept shelter in and around. Loki wouldn't be showing up anywhere near this place, so Thorvaldt reasoned that he find somewhere else to make home, for a while, and considered finding the Hart Queen's latest laire.

"The Queen of Hart will do nicely," he said, and spoke it thusly so that any listening would know he spoke truth in his words; and that that was where he'd intended to go.

His feet caressed the ground beneath him, through his boots, and he let his muscles coil up, as he prepared to take off from the veranda, skyward. He'd never actually been to Hart, the village where the ancient Queen of Diamonds was said to have been born and raised, where she'd sheltered the fugitive Queen of Hearts for some time, long before Zelda's coming into the title, and it was a well kept secret among the Queen of Hearts' friends and allies that the Queen of Hart could refer to the Diamond Queen, and her secret support of the Heart and other just dynasties, therein, fore again... ..

A shockwave rippled out through space and matter, rocketing Thorvaldt the Jade King high into the atmosphere, far past the closet cloud kingdoms, and into a sky of differing color than the magenta one of the sun-setting scene he'd left behind on the veranda, in Romulus.

The sky here was opal, and luminescent in certain flurries of rain and wind, and Thorvaldt felt the enchantment on his cape and cowl snap and dissipate. Breaking an enchantment to arcane exposure like this heralded something else for the coming days, in Thor's experiences, so he knew better than to seek out a tailor for it, and instead wondered what sort of item of power would be created by the cape and mantle he now wore... ..

He was flying faster than he'd have thought possible, back when he was a boy again, swinging through treetops in the Congo, or wherever he'd thought he was, back then, and he longed to bind up his powers again, so he could live in peace, for a while, and knew that such a goal was not so long in coming, because there was something beyond Chaos stirring in the winds, here above the kingdoms he called Asgard.

"They'll never let me live it down, I think, if I don't start saying "*As Carde*," like everyone else used to..." That made him think of the late emperor of *As Carde*, All Card, and he wept for him, again, and wanted to find someone to drink with and make merry again.

"Hell for all my sisters' worth..." He needed to find a very old friend of his, here, far above the other realms, so he could descent right to her, and pass the time as he would, until Chaos called to him again, and his hammer found its way into his grasp, once more.

"Rest uneasily, Loki. . ." And he thought on the card they called the Joker, too, when he said, "I'm coming for you..."

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 13

Three of Hearts  Hollow

“Are you out of your damn mind?” Willow wasn’t one to mince words with the daikini, generally speaking, but that was only because he’d been having more fun in the past seven hours than he’d had in about four hundred years, or so, he misremembered, exactly. “How long do you think I’m just gunna stand here and let you talk to *my* three like that?”

“You think you have a say in this, peck? Just because-”

“You’re darn right that’s what I think! I may not be very small, but I’m warning you-”

“You may not be very *small*? Are you-”

“Did I *say* you could interrupt me? Crying cows, you daikini are all the same!”

“Just what do you think I care about you, peck? You think I give a damn *whose* peck this little lout really is?”

“You’d darn well better!” stormed Willow. “Or else I might just have to turn you to stone!”

“Turn me to st-”

“Willow, don’t!” cried the voice of a frightened daikini warrior. Matmartigan hurried over to the three of them. “Willow, it’s okay, really! Listen, all you’ve got to do is-”

“Matmartigan, are you kidding me right now? Just how many threes do I have to run you through before you daikini learn your places?”

“Willow I’m sure he didn’t mean anything, by it. I mean, of course he knows you can discipline your own threes.”

“Are you expecting me to bel-”

“Are you kidding right now, Matmartigan? This some kind of misplaced sense of daikini loyalty?”

“He’s not the same Willow you heard about,” Matmartigan hastily warned the other daikini soldier, who Willow didn’t really think as a daikini at all, but if you didn’t go around calling all big folk daikini, they might just figure what was going on with you... ..

“Not the one. . .” the daikini soldier had no idea what to say, any longer.

“He’s not as. . . not as vengeful, as the Willow in the stories. He’s not a wicked sorcerer, really, he’s just... ..”

“Matmartigan! Quit making excuses for my behavior! The great nelwyn sorcerer Willow needs to excuses for his behavior! *Or*, for his *three*’s behavior, for that matter!”

“I’ve heard enough of this,” declared the daikini, trying to look fed up, instead of terrified. He’d heard of Matmartigan, without a doubt, and now he was afraid of just what he *hadn’t* heard about Willow... ..

“Oh had enough, have you? Fine! Matmartigan seems to think you’re too good to be my new statue, so go on and get the hell out of here, already!”

Before he departed, the daikini leveled a finger at Willow. “I’m warning you, peck!”

“Warning ME?! That’s it!” He reached into his satchel for an acorn, and the daikini he’d been scolding stumbled into a run for the church’s entryway, taking off like mad without a second glance backward.

“Well *that*’s a relief!” said Willow, smoothing the flap over the top of his satchel, to secure it. “I was afraid I was going to have to waste one of my magic acorns!”

“Willow. . .” Hollow didn’t really know where to begin, but he certainly wasn’t having any doubts about just how ill conceived their might not have actually been.

“Hollow don’t you worry your little nelwyn head about it, alright? We’re doing *fiine*. That daikini was nothing a good trick couldn’t handle!”

“A trick?” cried Matmartigan. “That was only a trick?! You mean. . . you can’t really turn people to stone?”

“Whaaat? No, of course not! I meant that I’d never waste a magic acorn on the likes of *him* when we

can just have *you* kill him for us, Matmartigan! Just what do you think I keep you around for, anyhow?"

"My charm and wit?" he suggested humbly.

"That'll be the day!"

"Willow we should go..." Hollow wasn't not enjoying the antics, he was just scared that someone else might happen along them again while they were still in the churchyard proper.

"This three business really has you spooked, doesn't it?"

Hollow nodded, unconsciously touching his cheek where his tattoo of the number "3" began, the top "c" curving around his left eye. They'd made the mark on him so they could find out just how the hell the cards thought they could get away with keeping slaves like they seemed to be doing, but ever since they marked Hollow they'd encountered one rabid animal after another who wanted to take all his anger out on a half-sized three of hearts.

Willow never had to know how to help people other than to talk just when he thought he should, and to never stop talking or waving his arms like he meant business, so long as someone in the situation was confused about the tiny little nelwyn baring so boldly.

They'd walked far enough to wear the soles of a nice pair of boots out, but Hollow was getting the impressions that some of the public warrens were warping differently for them, now, and he couldn't tell if it was because of the public perception of him as a three that they couldn't travel right any longer, or if Willow was guiding them somewhere other than right where they'd thought to go.

It wasn't that uncommon for a nelwyn to take four or ten years longer on a journey than your average daikini might, but that was because a nelwyn never really knew what you were talking about regarding this "future" business, and they'd get as busy and tied up doing just about anything in the here and now as it might have occurred to them, moment to moment, to do!

Getting out of the village they were in was a healthy priority, apparently, and Hollow wondered if he and Willow shouldn't part company with Matmartigan soon, or not, because once they got closer to the... the uh. . .

"Willow. . . what sort of quest are we trying for again?"

"What sort of *quest* are we trying for again? I haven't the slightest idea what you mean, dear Hollow. Let's walk a little while longer and see what occurs to us to do."

"You know guys," said the daikini, Matmartigan, "I think I've got the whole, 'nelwyns like to take their time' thing by now. You don't really have to play it out for my benefit, anymore."

"Nelwyn?" asked Willow and Hollow together. Then Willow said, "Just what are you implying, daikini cur? How many nelwyns do you think I know, anyway?"

"I don't know how many nelwyns there are, daikini," said Hollow, for him, "but if I wanted to lose count of them, that'd probably be too bad."

Willow's long arms swung loosely at his sides. "That really would be too bad, wouldn't it Hollow?"

"This is the last time I tell you, Willow's friend, I'm not really a daikini."

"Oh you're not, are you?" asked Willow's friend, Willow.

"Hush, Willow's friend's friend Willow, I'm talking to your friend, Willow's friend, now."

"Hush?!"

The rest of the way to the next village went about as accordingly as it could have, and Willow and Hollow didn't meet anyone else who mad them think that keeping Matmartigan around for much longer would be a good idea.

He didn't depart until well into the night, just after he'd woken up Hollow, for his turn keeping watch. Hollow let the sun rise on Matmartigan's silent departure before he roused Willow, who didn't ask where their companion had gone off to, and so they set out again, just the two of them, for now... ..

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 14

Four of Spades  Losha

“I don’t know why you think I’d have called you here without a good reason. Now what do any of you think that reason might be, eehh?”

The other boys the card called the Joker had rescued from the Jack of Assholes, King Baracchus VI, had all decided that their lives would be much better lived as ambassadors for the Joker, rather than some other form of servant to the people who had destroyed their lives already.

“Mr. Joker,” said one of the three boys gathered before the chaos lord, Hitma, “because you want us to prove ourselves to you?”

“*Prove* yourselves to me? What sort of Joker do you take me for, anyhow?”

“You don’t think it would be funny for us to die trying to show off for you?” asked Hitma’s twin brother, Luka. “That sounds nicer than I was expecting.”

“Well of course it doesn’t! I’m not nice at all, you little weirdo! Now who wants to prove themselves to old Joker?”

“I don’t think you’ve funny enough to prove yourself to me,” said Losha.

“Not *funny enough*?! How *dare* you, you little cur! No making me laugh before I’ve decided how hard on you I’m going to be!”

“But Mr. Joker what if we can’t be funny enough to kill somebody in time for the ceremony we had planned for you? I don’t wanna-”

“Are you turning it on me?”

All three boys fell silent, unsure, exactly, if they could keep messing with him like that, but it had proved a lot more fun to make an ass of yourself trying to make Mr. Joker laugh than trying to look tough or stay scarce.

Losha hadn’t really wanted to kill anybody before he saw Mr. Joker kill the Jack of Assholes like he had, and he really wanted to try that laughing clover, just a bit, to see if he could survive the experience. He didn’t know how much it had taken to kill King Baracchus like that, but that old man was a sicko, and only laughed when he thought he was mocking somebody. Besides, he probably knew the Joker was going to kill him anyway. Losha figured that since he actually liked laughing, the drug probably wouldn’t kill him, so. . . .

“You look faaar too contemplative to not be saying something amusing, Losha... Just what are you playing at!”

He sounded furious, but Losha was pretty sure that was only because he seemed to think it was funny that some people got scared of anger no matter how unreasonable it actually was. Losha opened his mouth like he was talking, but no sound came out.

Just before the Joker said anything about it, the other boys started laughing like Losha had said something really funny. “What the hell?!” The Joker just looked at them oddly.

Losha kept moving his mouth, like he was telling a funny joke again, and right away, again, the boys started laughing, and then the Joker smacked Luka so hard in the side of the head that he crumpled to the ground and his ear started bleeding.

“It isn’t *funny* if *I’m* not laughing!” he barked at them, in his defense.

It wasn’t enough, because Losha just kicked him as hard as he could in the balls, grabbed Luka by the wrist, and took off out of the room as fast as he could, expecting Hitma to get the picture quick enough to save himself. . . .

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 15

Ace of Hearts  Radcliffe

The heat of this region's winter months wasn't so unbearable as he remembered, and so when he decided that heat shouldn't play a factor in his traveling capabilities any longer, the amount of time he spent thinking about it seemed to taper off nicely.

The last time he'd been out this way, Radcliffe had decided that the Ace of Spades was less and an ideal role model for the young queen in waiting, as Zelda had been known at the time to the emperor's secret allies in the matter, and so he'd left his station in favor of one more suited to keeping a watchful eye on Clovis from a safe distance and a respectably removed station, whatforrit.

It was little more than ludicrous to assume that he'd never want to return to the spadelands, again, but no one remembered his name, when he'd held the station, and even Clovis refused to recognize him, it seemed, but that was probably for lack of a good reason to name him retired predecessor in his company for any reason.

This wasn't going to be the easiest thing he'd ever done before, but Clovis wasn't the same person he'd been when he was made an ace, two or three years earlier, now, and Radcliffe had no idea how long he'd actually spent in the Congo, but he moved like a monkey, now, and talked like a curious, bipedal creature of some kept circumstance.

Radcliffe didn't ever seem to have cause to go into the Congo for long at all, but he longed to try it some time, and thought of whether or not Maximus or Jason would rather come along. The two of them rarely worked well together while he was around, but that was only because they enjoyed irritating him by pretending to play off each other's supposed incompetencies.

The only time Clovis would ever have to worry about where he was headed next, was when he decided whether or not to keep his secret identity an actual secret, or not, and as it seemed to be playing out, he'd be in the public minds so often, that he'd have to maintain the image of the hardened, freshly cut obsidian spade for a while longer... or, come to think of it, Radcliffe had never really met Clovis when he wasn't an evil little freak, so it was hard to say that he wasn't just going to stay that way forever.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 16

Queen of Hearts  Zelda

The way Clovis made her feel, last night, when he brought her back from the brink of madness, in the cloverfields above, below, was still with her, when she woke up to find her bed empty of him, and she knew she'd overslept on purpose, to give him time to scurry, if he wanted to scurry, and she liked that he had, because she *definitely* hadn't meant to fuck with him that bad.

The idea that she wouldn't throw in for support of him for emperor seemed quite mad, considering the life saving love making he seemed capable of administering, but then again, she was sure that he wasn't in love with her, and that he'd taken what chance he could to lay with the queen of hearts, so he could be on his way with other, older women.

She didn't really believe that he wasn't interested in her intellect, she just felt sick about having to have he and his sister rescue her like that, and she couldn't get over how horrible she felt about him leaving like he did, because she knew he was a boy who'd been prepared to wait as long as he needed, to find the right time with her...

At least she liked to imagine him that way, at the moment, and she wondered what in the hell "Oh my heart," she stammered. He was standing in her doorway with a bouquet of black and red roses, and a tray of chocolates she recognized from the catering table.

"If you wanted to forget about me, I was going to make it very difficult for you."

"You wanted to... to come lay with me again, then?"

"I wanted you to know that I never meant to... Oh, that's a trick, isn't it? *Of course* I came to lay with you again, Heart Queen. What do you take me for?"

She smiled, and she knew he didn't like standing there with the bouquet, so she took it from him, and set it on a dresser. She wasn't sure who'd enchanted the roses to turn black like that, but she liked them next to the red ones...

"I want you to know something," he said to her.

"I didn't ask for you to be here, for me. I didn't ask for you to pull me out of the cloverfields below, like that."

"I know. But I wanted to."

She looked at him, and seemed to regard him coldly. He didn't not falter, at the look, but that might just have been for show, too. The red diamond mark was gone from her skin, and the sickness she'd felt since getting it was gone, but she felt... sick about the way things felt, just now, and it was hard to feel safe just then.

"I'm no more than a child to you," she said to him, to see what he would say.

"I don't know what you think the word 'child,' means to me, but..."

"That you would not know me again, lest I forget the experience was insubstantial the first time..."

". . . . What?"

"My point would be that the last second time you thought I had to get to know you I never had you in the first place, damnit!" She sounded *so* upset.

"Are you out of your bleeding mind? Who do you think I am to you, exactly?"

"It was *never* your place to decide that for me! How *dare* you come back in here with a half deadened bouquet like it will make anything better for either of us! Get out! Get out of here!"

"You have no idea how stupid you sound to me right now! Are you out of your bleeding little mind?! Look at the way you are! You didn't expect this from me? Hah! You really *are* a child, aren't you!"

"Belittle me no more, wretch! Get the hell away from me!! I can't stand the very sight of you!!! Go! Get the hell away from me!"

"Who do you think you're talking to, exactly? Did you think this was easy for me?! DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I HAVE TO DO, NOW THAT-"

When she slapped him, there must have been at least thirteen or forty people who'd managed to come within earshot. Out of sight, though they were, Zelda knew Clovis could hear them, and she could sense their interest and voyeurism.

He stormed out of the room, as though he'd never wanted to do anything but smash apart the bedroom in a fit of rage, and Zelda sat back down on the bed she'd woken up from, and began to sob.

It wasn't hard to actually start crying, once she started pretending. She had no idea what that little boy was about to put himself through, for what he had coming, but she was *so* afraid for him, now, more than ever.

"Lady Princess," came the voice of a friend, Minerva, who'd just appeared in the entryway. "Princess Zelda, my dear, what's happened?" She came to her, and sat beside her, and Zelda just cried in her chest for a while, trying to figure how long she'd have to let herself feel like this, before the people listening could figure she was just a silly little girl who'd let the wrong person into her bedchambers for all the stupidest reasons.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 17

He hadn't thought it would take this long... Jason, that was. He hadn't thought it would take him this long to get to know somebody outside his own circles, but it was proving harder and harder to be able to figure out what anybody but the other clovers were even talking about, and Jason wasn't really helping matters, but somehow, there seemed to be this inexpressive need to become something else entirely at every waking moment.

He couldn't really handle how tired he was of all the crap he kept getting from people, but the rest of what they all ever had to say to him was blah blah blah, and bleebla bleck!! He was so sick and tired of it that he never seemed to have time to get anything he wanted to do done, anyway about it...

Long ago, in a government far away, he'd have lost his home in a different sort of land. And lost that was and all to be, that he was here before again, the last again. My again or your again?

He couldn't *stand* the way other clovers talked like, four hundred percent of the time! but somehow, he couldn't figure out how to say more to a heart than... holy hell.

Prince Clovis was looking at him, again. He wasn't being weird, about it, but Jason liked the way Clovis looked and he wasn't sure if he was allowed to like the same sorts of boys Jason was allowed to like...

The way Prince Clovis looked had always reminded him of a time when he'd lost his French initiative and been locked away by the government he'd thought to come out against, and...

It hadn't happened that way, he knew, but he was tired of trying to lie about what had happened in his life, so far, and it was all he could do to try and get over the fact that people all over the place here, on the second day and official opening, actually, of the Heart Queen's Unbirthday Celebration Party for Fun and Games and Laughter.

The queen herself hadn't actually called it that, that he'd ever heard, but people had a way of mocking the girl queen, and thought he didn't like the way they sounded about it, he couldn't really see himself getting to know a girl of that caliber, but he sure as hell couldn't figure out why the ace of spades was still looking at him like there was something to look at or something... It was freaking him out more than a little bit, and he was sure he'd missed something about... something...

"Are you okay, son?" It was Radcliffe, who asked. The freaking ace of hearts!

"Oh, I uh... Mr. Radcliffe, you're here. I... I thought I had a dream about you in a desert. I thought you must have left the party early, or something."

"Left early? A party of this caliber? Oh, come on, you've got to give me a little more credit than that. How old are you, anyway?"

"You..." he honestly didn't know what to say to that one. "You're asking me that like. . . like no one's ever asked me before. What are you. . . I don't..."

"Like no one's ever asked you before? How do you mean? I tell you what, I'll tell you how old I am, forty two, and you tell me how old you are, seventeen. The last time, sixty one, was the only time, eighty nine, that I ever had to sixty four through seventeen all the way back to seven, again. You hear me, son?"

"I uh... I hear you, Mr. Radcliffe. I um... I guess what I meant, was.."

"What you meant was that when most people ask, 'How old are you?' they seem to really be asking if you want to get away with something, right? Instead of whether or not you're 'qualified' to make the opinion you just made that pissed them off or something, right about it again?"

"Oh. Yeah, that makes. . . a lot more sense than I thought it did. . . thank you, Mr. Radcliffe."

He shrugged. "I think you need something to drink, son. Liquids work wonders at parties. Queen of Hearts!" he called across the party floor to where the queen was standing on a dais, in the garden, talking to some of her guests.

"Jack of Aces!" she cried back to him.

"Jack of What'sits? What the hell does that mean, wierdo?"

"I don't know, it's what I heard someone call you! I think they think you're being nefarious, or something!"

“I don’t even know what to say to that, but do you have a doctor available?”

“A doctor? Oh, no, who’s ill!” She hurried down from the dais, toward Radcliffe.

“This boy right here,” said Radcliffe, “he needs a doctor real bad.”

“Wh-what?”

“Oh my goodness!” The young queen had just approached. “Oh my goodness! He’s just the right color and everything! Oh, a clover, how delicate and mild. Oh, Radcliffe, what in the world would a clover need a doctor like me for?”

“A doctor like you, for? Why, I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“What... what are you even talking about? What’s going on, here? Am I sick, or something? Seriously, are you... is there something wrong with me, now?”

“Wrong with you?” asked the Heart Queen, Zelda. “Why on earth would you think there’s something wrong with you?”

“I...”

“Oh we only said you needed a doctor. All good boys need a good doctor from time to time.”

“Sorry, what... *is* a doctor, exactly?”

“A doctor,” said Radcliffe, “is whoever happens to be just the right person to get you through just the right moment, moment to moment.”

“You see, doctor,” said the Heart Queen to he. “The boy we’re talking about, he’s very sick as well. He very much needs a doctor of your calibur, you see.”

“Wait... what? I thought *I* was the boy we were talking about.”

“Oh! You were, just then. But since you’ll be seeing the doctor any day now, we really have to be concerned about this other boy, the one you mentioned, before, when he glanced your way, and every decent girl at this party wanted you to go cheer him up, because you’re cute as can be and I think you’re already gaga for him anyway.”

“I . . . I don’t even...know...” he was at a total loss for sentences that could serve him, apparently.

The queen kissed him, then, passionately, on the lips, and it shocked him out of a sort of... stupor, he’d been in. “What... what the hell?”

“There, that clear your head? You looked like you were afraid that nobody knew you wanted to kiss me, too, and that they might all think you were just going to go be gay for Clovis just because we all pressured you to. Is that about right?”

“That uh... yeah that just about sums it up. Wait, you want me to be gay for Clovis, now?”

“No. If you *were* gay for Clovis, that would just get awkward. You should just got talk to him, though, because I’ve never seen him look at another boy like he looked at you, just a few minutes ago, and I’m the Queen of Hearts, so you should take my advice, at my party.”

“Hey, that’s um... yeah I’ll go try and talk to Clovis, then.”

“Here,” said Radcliffe. He passed him a flask stitched over with leather. “That’s called java honey. Tell him I said hi, kay?”

He took the flask, then sort of, nodded to them, and hurried away, without trying to look to awkward or freaked out, or anything. Hells in rain above, below. Could this really be happening right now? He had no idea what being gay for someone even meant, the way she’d said it, but people always sounded weird when they said it, so he figured she’d just said it to throw him off, or something. Or, he guessed, to let him know she knew he already felt weird about it...

“Hey,” said Jason. He looked at him oddly.

“What? Uh, hi Jason. What’s up?”

“You look jumpy. Is everything okay?”

“Hey why does Finnbar call you Jessuper, now?”

“He’s eccentric. What’s in the bottle, kid?”

“Nosy, aren’t we? Have you seen Prince Clovis around?”

“Say what, again?”

“Nevermind, you look lost yourself anyhow.” He dodged around Jason and hurried past some other people, then spotted the Ace of Spades up on a grassy hill, beside one of the hedge mazes that wasn’t connected

to the warrens.

He didn't really know what he was going to say to Clovis, but... he'd wanted to talk to him before, anyway, and after talking to the ace of hearts, he thought, well, he could probably at least pass a few words with him without beings super weird about it.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 18

It wasn't like he didn't think Clovis would like talking to him, but he also figured a lot of people tried talking to him just because he was the... Now that he thought about it, Clovis wouldn't bother even coming to parties like this if he thought people tried talking to him too often, and he wondered if Clovis and the other four of four royals got lonely, ever, because people were too busy assuming they already had enough friends around them.

He wanted to take a sip of the java honey before he approached Clovis with it, so he did, and he was glad for it, because he was able to say, when he finally approached the spade prince, "Excuse me, Prince Clovis. . ." well, *start* to say, anyway.

"Yes?" if he was surprised at who had approached him, he didn't show it.

"I um..." he held up the freshly opened flask. "Someone gave me this, to enjoy, and... see I've just had some, and it's *way* too good to share with just myself, and you looked like. . . Do you want to share it with me?"

He smiled, a little. "Who in the world are you?"

"I'm uh... do you always pre-qualify strangers before you get to drinking with them?"

Clovis smiled out of one side of his mouth, then took the flask in his hands, his fingers folding over the other boy's, so he could take a sip without taking the flask out of the other's hands.

"That's good," he said after he'd tried some, and let go. "Come on," he turned toward the hedge maze he'd seemed interested in before he'd been approached, "I want to show you something."

He followed the spade prince into the hedge maze, and wondered at what his conversation with the ace of hearts and queen of hearts had even been about, and he was having trouble bringing it to mind. He was just really excited to be talking to Clovis already, and the java honey was making it really hard to remember anything he'd felt apprehensive about....

"Do you come here often?" he asked him.

"Who told you to say that to me?"

"I did, I think."

"Do you come here often means, do you know who I am, in this place? most often... .."

"What do you mean?" He passed the flask to Clovis, to take it into his own hand and sipped gingerly.

"I mean that it's easy to see why we'd have had to spend so much time together, lately." Then, Clovis actually put his finger to his lips, silently, then took a sip, and passed it back to the other boy.

"Then. . . you don't want to get to know me any better?" he tried following suit, but it was. . . confusing, to say the least of which.

"Not a lot harder for me to get around, anyway."

He didn't know what to say to that one, but it sounded kind of like a closing, or something, so he just stayed silent for a few minutes, and so did Clovis, and they didn't drink any of the flask, for a little while, and he ended up being glad for it, because just the little bit he'd had to drink was changing his head in ways he'd never felt before.

"You must get lonely," he said finally, after what felt like a hundred fairly pleasant years of arbitrary silence of potential intrigue and counter intelligencing, or something... "All these places to go, but trying to see if everyone who wants to be friends with you can..."

"Take social cues to speak in different tongues for a while?"

"Take. . . hm... I guess that's what you were doing. Do you like figuring out what's going on with people before they know what's going on with you?"

"The harder people have to look like they're trying to figure me out, the easier it is to see *why* they want to know about me in the first place."

He could see what Zelda had meant now, about Clovis needing a doctor, and he handed Clovis the flask again and told him to stop drinking like such a girl.

"What, without reservation but with counterintelligent feelings of guilt or being used, after?"

"No like you can't handle the rest of what you're already saying you wanted, in higher quantity than

some dainty portion meant to belittle your standing so you can feign more ignorance and..." he didn't really feel like he had to elaborate any longer.

Clovis was laughing, and he swigged a generous portion of the java honey, this time. "I like you."

"That's good. I was worried you might have to decide not to be friends half way through this thing and leave me lost in a maze, high on java honey."

"Java honey? Is that what he called it?"

"Who called it?"

"Well, you called it, apparently. Did you say who gave it to you?"

"No, but on an unrelated note I just thought of, the ace..." He thought better of what he was going to say, and instead said, "the ace of a different land isn't allowed to. . ."

"To...?"

"I was going to say something different, but... it didn't make any sense, the way I thought it would."

Clovis seemed to understand the sentiment, and didn't bother him on it. The java honey was making him feel *really, really* good, and he was starting to think about what else he might have to say to Clovis, to figure out how to help him stop freaking out.

He wasn't *not* freaking out, that was for sure. He could tell by the way Clovis's tail moved that he thought he was being followed, constantly, and he could tell by the way his eyes looked when he asked questions that he was afraid anyone talking to him wanted to stick a spade between his ribs.

"How long have you been living on the wealth of Mars alone?"

"That's not a very ignorant question for a boy who hasn't even told me his favorite color."

"Oh, it's blue."

"Just blue, then? No special kind of blue?"

"Well... I like blue when it's bright, like, the blue equivalent of that color green you were wearing yesterday." Today, Clovis was wearing black pants and boots, as well as a black vest that left his chest open to the sun.

"I liked that shirt you were wearing, then."

"What shirt was I wearing?"

"The one you've got on now. I just wanted to see if you knew the difference, anyway."

"The difference in what, anyway?"

"The difference in. . ." He looked frustrated; like he'd wanted to say something, but he didn't think it would come across right. "Nevermind."

He didn't know what else to say, but, thankfully, he didn't have to let the silence sit for very long, because a minute or so later, he could hear the trickling sound of running water, and he could smell it a second later, too. "What's that sound coming from?"

"One of the things I wanted to show you. Ever been through one of these mazes before?"

He shook his head. "I haven't, before now."

They came around the corner of a hedge wall and the sight of the hidden garden there almost took his breath away. "Cooool!"

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 19

Clovis says *so* much drunker than he was right now, and he couldn't handle how much fun this was being! "No!" he dodged around one of the stone benches just in time to make Clovis trip up, and he bounded up over one of the fountain trains, laughing when he slipped on the flower bed he tried to jump down through.

Clovis snatched the flask up from where he'd dropped it, as he fell, and the other boy flew back to his feet, to give chase, as Clovis took his turn at the flask and dodged around one of the bird baths, laughing, and trying to keep from stumbling too much.

"DO you have any idea how much trouble I'm going to be in for this?" he was asking, before he'd thought better of taking the conversation in that direction. The question threw Clovis off just a moment long enough for him to snatch the flask from the spade prince's hand, to take a swig for himself, again.

Clovis just tackled him onto the grass, then, and wrestled him for a minute, prying the flask out of the other boy's fingers, laughing, and taking a small sip, to spare the last bits of it.

"It's not as empty as you thought, huh?"

Clovis passed it back to him, and neither boy wanted to move from the spot they'd found on the grass. "No, I was actually wishing for just a bit more, actually. Probably for the better that it's almost gone, though."

"What do you mean?" he took a sweet sip and savored the sweet, warm flavor and the tingling it kept sending through his limbs and chii.

"Because it's about to get us so fucked up we won't see straight for the next eight hundred years."

He crossed his eyebrows at Clovis. "I thought you said you'd never tried it before."

"I haven't. I didn't know who gave it to you, though." He held up the flask, and his finger was pointed to an engraving, on the bottom of it.

"J A?"

"Jack of Aces... You're a crazy bastard, you know that?"

"Who's the... what?"

"Radcliffe's been an ace longer than any of us can figure. I'm pretty sure he was the ace of spades who abdicated to me, actually. Sukki, my sister the Club Ace, says he's always looked out for other aces the way a jack looks out for his kings and queens."

"That's..." He wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Anyway the reason I bring it up, is because it's not a nickname he openly admits, but when an ace finds out he's just had half a container marked by the Jack of Aces?"

"He... he sent you a boon?"

"Well if *you* weren't the boon, I doubt the elixer would have gotten me started."

"You think I'm a boon?"

Clovis didn't kiss him until right then, and he didn't linger for long, but it made both their lips tingle, and he could see what Clovis had meant about it just starting to kick in for them.

"What... what is this stuff?" He was sure it was just a few seconds after Clovis had kissed him that he'd asked, but he'd experienced so much in just those moments, that he was sure they'd just witnessed a new island forming, or something, without knowing what they were looking at.

"I didn't kiss you because I wanted to, by the way," said Clovis, delicately, "but because I thought I might get you fired if you didn't go back to the Jack of Aces with your success story. Run along now, your duties as an agent are performed."

Doctor, doctor, help me please, I got this sharpness, pain in knees, this thing I can't name, this touch I can't describe. Help me, help me, doctor, please. He kissed Clovis, and didn't stop kissing him.

The way they were together, he wasn't really sure what was *supposed* to be happening, because he was pretty sure nobody could come up on them, without Clovis knowing about it well beforehand, but he didn't want Clovis to have to even *think* about that, now, so he just enjoyed the way it felt to kiss him and touch him, and they were both so high, after getting there together, that every sensation multiplied and turned into something different altogether.

“I can’t believe how good this still feels with our clothes on…” Clovis said at once, when he’d broken a kiss with him and couldn’t figure out how to gage reality, at present.

“I am so much higher than I’ve ever been, right now.”

“Don’t tell me not to forget what we were talking about, before all this. I just tasted the Queen of Hearts on your lips, so you’ve got some explaining to do.”

“The… what?”

“I’m fucking with you; queens are good for kissing.”

“She didn’t even warn me.”

Clovis sat up, a little, on the grass, and smiled. He pulled a metal case from his pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

“Can I light that for you?”

Clovis had already put the tip in his mouth, like he was getting ready to light it, but he paused, looked at the other boy oddly, then handed him the cigarette.

He held it up to his lips, then breathed surely, precisely on the tip once, twice, and the herb packed into the tip of the cigarette turned orange and cherried, and smoke trailed off of it.

He put the other end in his mouth and took a few quick puffs, then, to get it going, before he passed it to Clovis.

“I’ve never seen someone do that before. Are you a fireflower?” Clovis puffed on the cigarette, and breathed the smoke into his face.

“Not sure, yet. I just like doing things like that; and I’m not really sure I can do them, until the moment I want to.”

Clovis puffed again and passed the cigarette back to him. “How do you know what to say to me, like that?”

“How do you mean?” The cigarette tasted really good, and he wondered what sort of clover it was that they were smoking.

“You seem to… I don’t know. Not something that can be talked about without making you overthink something you’re already doing naturally.”

He took a big, long drag off the cigarette, then leaned forward and put his lips to Clovis’s, breathing the majority of smoke into the other boy’s mouth, who took it, kissed him briefly, then turned his head to the side and breathed the second hand hit out.

He smiled. “I’ve always wanted to do that, actually.”

“Never have before?” Clovis accepted the cigarette when it was offered back to him, and seemed to be preparing to do the same thing, when someone came around the corner and into the garden they were in.

He was glad Clovis and he weren’t being compromising, or anything; they just looked like two boys enjoying a cigarette together on the grass. Something about the two or… four, people, who’d just appeared, made him more than just a *little* glad though… ..

“I don’t really want you to see me do this,” said Clovis. He put the cigarette out in the grass and stood up.

“See you… do what?” He didn’t know how to ask who these people were.

The ring of steel that filled the garden when Clovis drew his longspade answered his questions…

Clovis didn’t slow his beating heart, or anything. In fact, it felt like it got faster, and he realized that he could sense a lot more about Clovis than he’d been able to do before. He longed to see him move, and cut, and parry, and drop, but…

He stood, stepped back, and wanted to tell Clovis that it was okay for him to see him do something like this, if he had to, but… now that he thought about it, he knew he wasn’t supposed to do anything but watch what was about to happen without flinching.

“You were supposed to be here alone,” said the woman at the head of them. “It’s your own fault the boy will have to die as well, Clovis.”

“You’re too cliché to kill one such as me. Get a real personality, then come and find me.”

“You won’t have enough room to use a blade like that in here. You sure you don’t want your midblade out?”

“I don’t own a midblade, moron.”

“Oh, this is stupid,” he realized, just before he let Clovis take all four of these people on by himself. He was *way* higher than he needed to be to know what to do here. “Moreover thereon again there to, and so fore to at more on to. Set for long again, before, that theirs was mine and ours, before.”

“Your no nine, boy, so cut that prattling before I cut your tongue out for you,” said the uglier of the three men, among the four assassins.

“Like having at before, more to, sat for at there for more, foretu.”

“What the hell are you playing at?!” one of them cried, and he was too high to be able to tell which one it was.

“Liken more again to for the last, at mine was yours therefore tu more. See for theirs to mine at once, so for and there to be more for?”

“Fine. We’ll mark your sodding poetry onto your epitaph, alright?”

“You should put up your blades, before this gets any worse, for you,” he advised them. Clovis flourished his longspade, but didn’t move in to attack, just yet. He seemed to sense the change.

“Worse, for us?” the woman asked. “How did you figure your odds out to start, boy?” They were nervous, and they didn’t know why they should be.

“I figured them after I realized you’d forgotten where we were, moron. This is a hedgemaze.”

“So what if-” The woman who’d spoken went pale.

“Wh-who did you call us to?!” demanded one of the men.

“To Mars, you idiots.”

“M-Mars?!”

The sound of an elephant trumpeting interrupted their little standoff, and Clovis decided now, was a good time to take out the isolated assassins, and dispatched them before the count of ten hit solid.

“Thank you... I couldn’t tell how many more of them were waiting for me to engage the first four.”

He nodded. Clovis had scared the hell out of him, when he’d looked like he didn’t know it was a trap, to attack the Ace of fucking Spades with a mere four armed henchmen. “How did... how did you know I picked Mars?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Because of the smell. Bart is the only one stupid enough to actually go to the jungle after I send the monkey king his way.”

“The monkey king?”

“How the hell did you *do* that? I’ve *never* been able to call a ten to me like that...”

“It was... actually I think it was the java honey.”

“Why?”

“Well, we got high on it together, and it got really easy to tell what you were thinking about. I could tell who you wanted to have backing you up, just when you were getting ready to fight, so I just, said what made sense at the time... ..”

“I don’t not really know what you’re talking about, but I don’t want to stay in the Congo. It will take us a while, but I think I can bring us back to the Queen’s party if we stay here in the hedgemaze.”

“You... what is this place?” He tried to look up, but, everything above the top of the maze was blurry.”

“Don’t try and focus out there too much,” said Clovis. “Not on the sights, not on the sounds. You’ll bring us closer to Mars, and then we’ll *never* find our way back to the party.”

“I didn’t... I didn’t know Mars was a jungle.”

“It wasn’t. This is new. I mean, there’ve always been thousands of jungles accessible in different parts of Spade Mars territories, but not like this one, right on the point of contact with the lord ten.”

“Is he a good fighter, then? Lord Mars, of Spade?” They were walking through the hedgemaze, again, and he was trying to focus on Clovis, instead of the busy animal sounds around them.

“I wouldn’t know. We haven’t been friends for a long time now, but that’s not really a thing you can do. Not be friends, when you already were friends. It’s just, hard to keep track of each other.”

“So you don’t know if he’s a good fighter or not? Why was it him you wanted at your side, in battle?”

“I’m not really sure that it was, just because that’s where you thought to take us. He didn’t show up, or anything, as you can see. He’s fast, though; always has been, but I’ve been dreaming about him and another

friend of mine, lately, and he's become a lot stronger, so..."

"This place we're leaving... I don't understand it... Why do the animals sound like that?"

"They're not afraid of us, you mean? Just because we're different?"

"I... I guess so... They're all just saying, 'don't forget what I am,' over and over again, or, more like, 'don't forget what I never could have been,' or something like that."

Clovis nodded. It wasn't at all what the animals had been sounding like, but the thought of it was bringing them further away from the Congo, which clearly was the point of him saying it.

They didn't find their way back to the party until seven or eight hours later; and there wasn't really any good way to gauge time, because they could hear the sounds of the party dwellers, at one point, and as soon as they had, Clovis had taken them to another secret garden, totally different from the first, and they got to the rest of what they'd been wanting to do there in the furnished gazibo... ..

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 20

Four of Spades  Losha

The friends he hadn't brought with him were telling Losha he never should have come back to this place, and he wondered, then, just how long it was going to take to figure the rest of this joke out, so that he'd have something when he returned.

He hadn't asked permission, when he'd left; the Joker didn't seem to want any of them to be some kind of servants or kept mercenaries, or something, so when Losha had taken off, it was because nothing funny had been going on, and he was pretty sure that just meant they were being lazy, and that you were a moron for hanging around the Joker when he wasn't being entertained quite aptly. . . .

That's what he was figuring on anyway, when he'd taken off like that, and he wondered what he'd do if there was... someone was following him, and hadn't been doing it for long. He hadn't been actually *going* anywhere before a few minutes ago, so he guessed it was possible that whoever was behind him now had been watching him for quite some time. . . .

Then again; if they'd seen him back at the old estates, they'd have tried taking him already, figuring he was looking for a missing friend of his, or something. He hadn't really known why his mother and father had been so keen on sending him to the boarding school, here in Pragu, but they'd insisted he'd be happier there.

It had been a front that the Jack of Assholes had his jack, the one they now called the Joker, set up to capture a bunch of young prep boys all at once. No one had thought it was anything but a new age idea to separate boys from girls like that, and to have them schooled like they were servants or threes, or something... ..

He was really grossed out by how fucked up he'd always felt like he had to act to threes he'd known growing up, before the Joker's men had taken him, to be sold, or kept...

He wasn't really sure what wouldn't be funny about killing the Joker without a punchline. Losha kept thinking about making someone beat and rape him to death, but he kept feeling like there wasn't actually any justice in that, except that there had to be, because of what...

"Why didn't he just kill us all, if he didn't want to be doing it?" He knew how to come up with an acceptable sounding answer to that and other questions about the Joker, but he didn't try for one, and instead thought of a few more gruesome ways to maim and torture him, in some fucked up way that wasn't even slightly unamusing, to him, Losha, because the Joker wouldn't be laughing, no matter what.

Unless he wanted to, anyway. That was why Losha hated him so much. He could laugh any time he wanted to, and the way he did it always made you feel like he *knew* something the others hadn't, about you, or whatever was being talked about.

If Losha got some giant to come beat and rape the Joker, like he wanted, most days, it wasn't hard to imagine that the Joker would just start laughing about it, for some reason, even though you tried to take everything funny out of it; he'd have some private joke he was having the time of his life in... ..

"I'll kill him like I don't have the time for his bullshit, any longer," he decided. "When I'm done with all this Courts of Chaos crap he wants us to pull for him, I'll just, decide he's lived up his usefulness and cut his head off. Slit his throat, or something gruesome like that." It would have to be made senseless to not be funny to anyone but the Joker, if he came up with a reason to laugh about it... ..

"I guess we could just have someone torture him for a while..." he said to himself. He hadn't found a good place to rest, yet, but, "or..." He thought about what wouldn't be funny about locking him in a dungeon where he'd be so bored his mind wanted to rip itself to pieces.

That thought made him sick, then... He remembered the jack who'd come to collect them, or transport them, or sell their friends, or buy new ones; how he never laughed, and never seemed to be anything he ever wanted to be doing.

They'd never hated him, back then, because he'd just looked like a loser, and they didn't have any time for losers, because every moment they had without being mocked or raped or gawked at or flaunted was

something to take for all it was worth.

He wanted to have sex with someone really bad, just then, and he didn't have any idea how to have sex with girls, any longer, but he thought it would be nice to find a girl who wouldn't laugh at how awkward he'd feel around her.

He hadn't been a girl that often with the other boys, but, that was only because they were always being such faggots about it all the time. It was like, half of them hated girls for some reason, but like, they still wanted to "look" like girls or something, so that other boys would want to fuck them, and... ever tried to mimic somebody you don't even like, and make it sound flattering?

Losha didn't really get how they figured themselves into that type of bullshit paradox, because if a boy wanted to have sex with a cruel mockery of a female, because the boy playing the female didn't think he would even *like* females, then he'd be the type of person who wanted to have sex with someone just because he felt like he could control them, or possess them.

He'd killed someone named Jack, just the other day, and he still wasn't sure why he didn't feel more messed up about it. It was just a person, and he wasn't really doing anything Losha could figure on being pissed about, but when Losha had heard that his actual given NAME was jack, he just, he thought this was a chance to kill a jack, so he did it, to see what it felt like.

It didn't feel *great* or anything; not like having sex with someone you wanted to be there with always did. If he wanted to have sex with you for being a girl, it was because you were a girl, though, so if he wanted to have sex with other boys, why would half of them act like they had to pretend to be girls for him to want them like that?

"Probably because they don't like boys, either, and since they don't like girls, they want to be enemies to the boys they don't like, so they act like girls they don't like, and act like they want you in them and around them, but they secretly hate you, and themselves, and everybody around them, because no one will stop telling us what to do, where to go, how to be, who to spread your..."

Four years? Ten? How long had the Jack of Diamonds, then called Weiss, been running boys, as unfunny as possible, for the king, Jack of Assholes? It would have been hell for him, every day... ever moment... And he didn't *not* like kids for all the right reasons, in that kids wanted to be told what to do, right? Kids ALL loved being told what to do. Boys *especially* love being told what to do.

He hadn't really wanted to be a girl for anyone but Bart, before, but Bart didn't get taken like the other boys had, and Losha hadn't really known anything about how to change your sex with people you liked, back when he'd met Bart, and the only other boys he'd tried it on had all wanted to be around him all the time, after that...

"I wonder if I should go fuck with some faggots..." That could be funny. Since he actually *liked* some girls, and he knew what *they* said that was actually sexy to hear, because he knew why they said it, he could be the greatest faggot of them all, right in front of a whole troupe of them, and they'd never know why they couldn't do it.

"They couldn't stop mocking me..." he realized. It was super enticing. A lot of the handlers; the controllers, they'd had, had once been bought boys like they were, and now they were just faggot hating faggots, slaving kids, and trying to belittle and mock them for being the only desirable ones left in the world.

"If Bart never wanted to talk to me again, then it would be because I was the sexiest non-faggot weirdo, and he didn't understand how he could like me, but hate aaaaall the other fags who call themselves gay boys."

He didn't really want to *not* do something about what he'd just been thinking about. It sounded really funny, when he thought about it, that he could just play a girl, any time he wanted to, because he knew why good girls did what they did...

"Oh, shit! What am I even talking about?" He resolved to spend a lot more time around a lot more girls, then, or else he really would turn into a faggot, forrit.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 20

Seven of Diamonds



Pasha

As if he hadn't wanted to be there before, the people Pasha wanted to talk to, most often, were the ones even assholes wanted to talk to, because they were cool, which meant that Pasha had to act cool enough on his own, independent of their affections, to attain the cool person "ok" to talk to them about whatever, whenever.

"I'm pretty sure I'm not cool enough to be having this conversation with you," he tried, out loud. That was always a sexy way to talk to somebody, right? I mean, if you're a genuinely cool person, you want everyone to talk to you like they're not good enough for you, instead of like they want to be your friend, right?

The fact that Pasha wasn't even interested in any of the "cool" people he already knew about didn't bore him, or anything, but he'd already set his mind to leave his homeland and see what life was like among the courts of Card.

He hadn't been a four for long before his ex-boyfriend had made him a seven, but that was only because his ex-boyfriend had always been an idiot, who thought he was cool, and so when Pasha had talked to him like he, himself, was already cool, too, independent of the other, the diamond ten had become so taken with the bright eyed boy that he'd offered him a better life away from all the trammels and monotony of a class that had almost no concept of time or money, usually.

Pasha hadn't ever had to do anything but surround the two of them with people way cooler than the ten could ever handle on his own, without any of his severely uncool minions and comrades, because his darling seven of a son and lover had been "put off" by them, and so they'd been sent away, long before...

The ten hadn't ever known *why* the friends his seven picked were so much more toxic to his bullshit than the friends he himself had chosen, and so he never had any reason to resent Pasha for his "too cool for you" company. At least not in a way he could ever stand or justify to himself.

Pasha wondered if people actually knew who the real diamond ten was, these days, because he could use the name Jupiter any time he wanted, and he had access to all the wealth of Jupiter, and he had standing among all the tens at court and cards at homes, and his "husband" he'd redubbed to himself "ex-boyfriend" was a sad, broken man, now, and couldn't be bothered to try and keep company with his darling son and seven, any longer.

Pasha would show up like he'd never been anything *but* that darling thrall the psychotic lord had been expecting, whenever he thought it was a good idea to put on a show to that effect, but more often, lately, he was sleeping with whoever he wanted to sleep with, fucking those same people, also, and spending all the money and time he wanted to and with and for whoever, wherever and all ever he wanted to for it, there again.

He liked the way he was, in general, and it wasn't like he actually wore the number seven, or anything, but some people still looked down on him, like he was a mere possession, and an uppity one at that. He wouldn't have let it bother him if he were the seven of someone like the Ace of Hearts, but he wasn't; his husband was evil and wicked, and if he thought to think that Pasha had only ever wanted to usurp and destroy him, his life would turn to tell in a moment.

It *was* hell, anyway, and he knew he couldn't ever actually forget that. No matter what he did, he had to be afraid of making the wrong power play, the wrong slur, the wrong fuck, and so he was a prisoner wherever he went.

He was a pretty *cool* prisoner though, at least, who could rip the whole jail apart, given time, which he had none of, some times, and all too much of, most times, except that having none meant there were no mosts to be had, really, ever, anyway.

He envied Maximus, the Heart Spade's seven and best friend. He was a little older looking than Pasha, and didn't ever look girly or faggy or anything, like Pasha had to do, sometimes, or often, sometimes, and Pasha often thought about whether or not he and another seven like Maximus could just be sevens to one another, and trick everybody else into thinking that somehow gave them standing, however.

The other boy sevens he'd met for men of standing were strange to behold, most often, with the exceptions being those like Maximus, but he knew there were dozens or hundreds of others he'd never have met, because he wasn't traveling in the right circles, so here, now, at the Heart Queen's birthday party, or something, he was going to try and make friends with the really cool nelwyn who'd just disappeared a pig, and then turned a mockingbird to stone.

"You don't look like a daikini to me," said the nelwyn, Willow, to him, presently. "Just how'd *you* end up at this little soiree? Don't answer that, I was just making small talk. Little guys like us gotta make small talk on the regular, see, or the big ones might start to wonder just what else we mighta been talking about the whole time anyway... ANYway, what's your best friend look like?"

"He's really small. Like, a lot smaller than a nelwyn. Than a brownie, even. He keeps telling me what to do, and most of the time he lives in my hat."

"Oh, he's a fairy, is he? Well, you know what they say about fairies, don't you? Most people should probably kill them on sight, to be decent about it."

"That's not a very nice thing to say about fairies, nelwyn. You'd think a person like you would have more respect for the little people of the world."

"*Little* people? *I'm* not little, *they* are! I'm huuge, compared to them, even! Why... if they wanted to go around acting respectable, maybe they shouldn't have stayed so small, eh? They should have gotten nice and big, like me!"

"Yeah I was meaning to ask you about that. Are you like related to a chimpanzee or something?"

"What the heck is a chimpanzee?"

"That's not really a question I know how to answer if you don't have a reference for one already. I just meant that your arms are like, freakishly long, so it almost looks like you could walk around on them, or something."

"I'm not really sure what you people think *hands* are actually for, but where *I* come from, we use feet for walking. They're a little better positioned, I think. Even if our arms come down to our knees, or something."

"Do you think I should kill the fairy who lives in my hat?"

"Well you could try kicking it out, first!"

"But then it would just be in sight, again, and you said we should kill them on sight."

"That's a fair point, and I'm pretty sure I wouldn't say something like that without a good reason for it. Hey Heart Queen!"

"I know you couldn't possibly be talking to me like that, Willow!"

"Who's Willow? I'm talking to the Heart Queen! Hey, Heart Queen! Any good reason we shouldn't kill fairies on sight any longer?"

"They like to hide! In hats, most often..."

"Oh, darnit, they *do* like to hide. That *is* a pretty good reason not to have to worry about killing them just on sight. Better smash the hat nice and good before you put it on, every day, just to be safe."

"That doesn't sound very safe. I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to swat a hornet unless you know you can kill it in that one shot, knowit?"

The rest of the conversation wasn't any less amusing for Pasha, and Willow seemed to be acting so outrageously, for some reason, that it made him feel like he didn't have to perform so much, when he was trying to be funny, and he tried not to be weird about it, but he wanted to stick close to the little nelwyn, after that.

"Have you ever met any dwarves, before?" he asked him, at one point, after they went to get some food, to much on, at one of the buffet tables, again.

"Dwarves? Sure, I've met plenty of dwarves! They're the really ugly ones without any facial hair, right?"

"No, the other ones."

"Oh the nelwyns?"

"Yeah, those ones. With the axes and gold and tunnels and total lack of beards, and all that."

"Well suuuure, I've met plenty a *those* guys. Why, haven't you?"

"Not really. I keep getting stuck in the same old circles, and I don't know anyone who knows how to travel to places like the dwarf kingdoms."

Willow studied him, for a minute, and then asked, “Do you really want to see the dwarf kingdoms?”

“Yeah. More than a lot of things, actually.” Was he serious?

“Okay! That sounds like a great reason to go see ‘em, nelwyn! I’ll take you there myself, if I find a good reason to go.”

“What if you just went to meet different kinds of people?”

“Hey! I like that idea! You know you’re pretty good at this nelwyn thing. If you weren’t such a daikini about it, I might actually have something to say about it.”

“What would I want to say to a ruddy little dwarf like you, anyway? Your arms are too stubby, and your beard stinks.”

“My beard stinks?” Willow rubbed the beard he might have had, and thought about it, and Pasha wanted to say something else about it.

“I don’t want you to think I need to be looked after, or anything, just to go there. I mean... don’t feel obligated to hang out with me there, or anything, I just... don’t really know how to-”

“Nelwyns don’t make friends, Pasha.”

“Come again?”

“If a nelwyn ever tried to *make* his friend do anything, he wouldn’t be his friend! So I wouldn’t worry about what you think you might think you’re making me do, because we’re already friends, so if we’re doing something, it’s because we already want to!”

This nelwyn was like, a lot cooler to talk to than anybody else at this stupid party, which just made Pasha want to act as cool as possible for a few minutes longer, and then break away and go find somebody totally lame to talk to, so he could stop freaking out, already.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 22

Six of Spades  Barness de Loc

It wasn't like he hadn't had fun doing this sort of thing before, but Barness seemed to think that this time, Clovis was out of his mind, for sending him away from his side, and that if Clovis was serious about declaring himself to be the next emperor, then he had better stop sending his right hand on foolish errands like this.

Believing he'd never have to be anything but Clovis's right hand, to maintain his stake in life, hereafter, was an annoying prospect, but he didn't see any way around it, and he felt like it was a lot more important to do this the right way, the first time, than to figure on any other approach to it later on, after he was supposed to have had his fill.

Believing he'd never have had the chance to be anything but Clovis's right hand, if he wanted to maintain his current stakes in life and livelihood, now and in the hereonafter, was more than an annoying prospect to Clovis's supposed right hand, and all the time he'd spent stewing on how to better himself and his standings, like Clovis always seemed to be doing, was the last thing he'd ever have to worry about, if he didn't do this right the first time, instead of trying more options later on, when he thought better of how to do it.

Setting himself apart from Clovis and this "right hand" business, and yet still maintaining his current standings, among others, or improving them, of course, was a prospect no less than uninspired, as of late, and he couldn't figure on how to avoid ending up like he kept seeing for himself.

Nothing about the fact that Clovis never wanted to even maintain his status as the Ace of Spades was ever even close to not true, but the prospect of handling himself out here, with the others, without anything to go on but a vague description of an innuendo he was probably better off forgetting about.

"I need you to find a certain type of person, for me," Clovis had told him, at the dawn of this little fool's errand he'd sent him on, in lieu of bringing him to one of the most diplomatically and strategically important gatherings they'd ever witnessed, here on the dawning of the supposed courts of Chaos and Order to follow. "She's not a type of person you're overly familiar with, other than that she's female, but the reason I'm sending you, and no one else, is because I cannot trust anyone but my only assassin, for this sort of thing, and you're not assassin, but that's beside the point. Are you even listening to me?"

He wasn't ever *not* listening to Clovis, it felt like, time and time again, when his instructions or scoldings or warnings or observations would play over and over again in his head, time and time again, and he never had to worry about how old he would become, the next time he looked in the mirror, because Clovis and his other friends kept talking about a new age they would usher in, where the wrinkled old prunes in power would finally wither away and die, and the young would rule forever, into eternity.

The idea that he was something other than Clovis's own seven irritated Barness, too, if he was going to be called the right hand of the ace, ever so often. The left and right hand of the Ace of Hearts were a six and seven, respectively, but Clovis didn't *have* a seven to speak of, so why he would leave Barness as a lowly six when he *could* improve his station, he could scarcely imagine!

It wasn't hard though, to realize then, his error in reasoning, in that Clovis seemed to be an insatiable sex fiend, and he'd never shown any sort of sexual interest in Barness, ever, probably because Barness wasn't a pervert about the sex he had when he wanted to have it, so it stood to reason that Clovis left the station of his seven to someone he may want to engage with sexually, as well.

Why he ever thought so highly of that sister of his, the Ace of Clubs, Barness could scarcely figure beyond some childhood obsession with her, and that Clovis somehow felt he was sticking it to his father, who had sent her away, by fucking her every chance he got.

If *she* wasn't just the secret seven of the Spade Ace, then there wasn't any such thing for anyone ever! It was ridiculous that anybody thought the Ace of Spades should be engaged to the Ace of Clubs for any sort of reason, other than to waste the power of their stations by acting as though they couldn't create equals in

standing any time they wanted to.

He'd never stop fucking his elder sister long enough to witness himself a new boyfriend or girlfriend long enough to have an interest in a sexual tryst extending into marriage, so why he couldn't just fill the station with someone else who deserved it, Barness could scarcely guess, other than to vex him, really...

This mission he was on, though, or supposed to be on, was vexing him more than anything, at present, and he tried to think back on what Clovis had had to say to him about it. The idea that he wasn't ever going to be able to keep his current standings and powers without staying tied to Clovis's service irked Barness, and he wondered how long before Clovis would decide to wake the hell up and teach Barness how to become the immortal ace he knew he was born to be.

The Ace of Spades was a station he could live for, he realized. It was better than being a king, really, if you looked at it right, because you could do so much more on your own. That wasn't the way Barness thought he'd be doing it, but he didn't ever see why an Ace of Spades couldn't be more like a king or emperor anyway.

More often than not, he'd have to tell Clovis what he really thought of his gregarious or outrageously overplayed actions and power plays, but that was only because he was smart enough to keep himself in Clovis's inner circle, no matter what he had to say to the young prince of spades, to keep his wits and will about him, what have you...

A lot more often than a lot more often than not, he was beside himself with worry over whether or not Clovis even wanted to keep an Ace of Spades around after he became the emperor, or whether he would agree to name Barness as his replacement ace, should he be killed in the courts of Chaos and Order to follow, what have you forrit... ..

It wasn't the most irritating thing that had happened to Barness all day, but he was lost, again, in this accursed city, and he wondered just what sort of sick fantasy Clovis was longing to play out for himself if Barness ever turned up with this baby girl he seemed to be after, now.

More than a little after he'd been made a six of spades, by proving himself in an open melee hosted by the then Jack of Spades, before Clovis killed him himself, in another spade tournament, Barness had found that the more often he thought about killing people when he talked to them, the more often they began cow toying to his wants and needs and seeming whims and interests.

It wasn't always the same way, and whenever he thought about killing another lethal Spade, like Clovis or Mar Su, he couldn't ever figure the battle going the way he'd plan, so the effect never came off right.

Clovis seemed to be so obsessed with looking like a spade that he couldn't help but kill every enemy he thought he had a chance to. Barness was realizing, that if he simply knew he *could* kill them, and would if the need arose, he could control his enemies and subordinates as well as or better than removing them, like Clovis always seemed to be doing.

He didn't think there wouldn't ever be cause for Clovis and he to actually become enemies themselves, to one another, but that was only because he found Clovis's behavior more and more unpredictable, as of late, and he wouldn't stand for it if Clovis crossed the line with him.

There weren't many lines Clovis didn't seem to be willing to cross, but somehow, he didn't seem to realize that his closest mentor, Barness, was far more concerned about how the spade prince's ethics than people seemed to think to try for.

He *saw* more of Clovis than a lot of other people had, so he knew what he was talking about when he told himself to watch out for what Clovis tried for next, because he might never know when Clovis finally decided to cross that one final line... ..

He made this place he was standing in look different, by thinking about it in a different way, and he made sure to take note of the ability to deceive oneself, like that, that Clovis's other friends and supposed allies seemed to implement, in this, as though their delusions about reality could paint them into something new, when they were already standing in the world they had, if they would just look around, a bit!

What was an ace, really, if not the only person who had the power, know how, and wherewithal to take out a king, or even an emperor, if he saw that person become the very evil they claimed to stand against. He knew that win or lose this upcoming conflict, Clovis would no longer be the Ace of Spades, so he was sure to find a way to maintain a standing for himself, outside of Clovis's influence, if that waned, but at the same time, he had to chasten himself for thinking so ill of his leigeldord even while carrying out his very will, this evening.

It certainly wasn't going to make this ridiculous mission any easier, to carry it out calling it ridiculous the whole while, and badmouthing, to himself, the very person who'd given him the instructions to find this little baby girl, and bring her to Clovis.

If he had to, he'd end his friendship with Clovis right here, over this very mission. But then, he also knew that there might not be anyone else around to take Clovis down, if it ever came to that, so he wondered what he'd have to do, and he thought, then, that Clovis must have only ever been the Ace of Spades in name, because he, Barness, had always been the acting ace, doing whatever was right, no matter what others around him understood about it.

An ace, like they always said about the emperor of all card, was supposed to know who and what he was, no matter who yet recognized him. He knew there was no way the Ace of Spades title could be passed on to anyone who hadn't actually earned it by being an ace already, right?

It was a ridiculous notion that people kept putting his way, that there was some sort of divine rite to that title and holdings set, but he thought on it now, and he wondered just how long it would be before the title of Ace of Spades fell to its proper holder, Barness.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 23

Four of Hearts  Mordecai

“Are you. . . uh, did you, maybe, wanna do something, with me, still, or. . . ?” He didn’t really know what to say to Jason, now that they’d had sex, because it was always the moment, like this one, when he felt like maybe he shouldn’t have. . . that was stupid. He’d *really* wanted to have sex with Jason, so there was no reason they shouldn’t have gone there right when they did.

“I don’t know what you’re saying to me, are you okay? Something come up for you?”

“Something come up?”

“I don’t know, that’s what people tend to say when they want to do something weird and they want to tell you about it, but they want to be weird about that, too, so they act like they can’t really tell you about it. ‘Something came up,’ knowitnow?”

He laughed and sat up a little higher on his knees, adjusting the blanket around his bare thighs. “It was nothing like that, sorry. I just get kind of weird sometimes. Nothing ‘came up’ or anything like that, sorry.”

“You’re sorry that you had to explain yourself, that nothing was wrong, after you were the only one who was saying something might already be wrong? That about sum up what you’re playing to me, right here?”

“You make it sound like I’m being devious or something.”

“No, *you’re* making it sound like if I don’t start fucking you again, right now, I’m *never* gonna understand what you really meant to tell me.”

He didn’t stop to refuse backing up his statements, or anything. Clovis wasn’t the only person having his fun with the other boys at the Heart Queen’s unbirthday bash, Jason was probably figuring. Mordecai didn’t have to wonder why someone like Clovis would take so much interest in someone like that, but, well, it wasn’t that hard to imagine what he thought he could get from someone like that, anyway.

Jason wasn’t going to be like that with him at all, Mordecai could tell, and he felt like he could love him for it, and he wanted to call out his name more often, but he kept thinking he’d sound stupid, or something, about it, and, oh, gods, this felt so good!

“You don’t have to *not* tell me what’s going on with you just because we’re not actively still fucking, right this moment. You don’t *have* to say anything about the matter, either. I’m just trying to tell you that it’s easier to open up if you relax a little, and figure if there’s any sexual tension, we’ll unstopper it any time we need to.

He laughed again. He liked Jason when he was like this, and he felt like there was still a lot he could learn from an older boy like this. He wondered how much time they could spend together, after the party, and he didn’t see why. . .

“Do you want to, hang out, after this?”

“After what? Hanging out right now?”

“You’re uh. . . a lot easier to talk to than I thought you’d be.”

Jason cocked his head to the side a little bit, then shrugged, stretched, and rolled off the bed. “I’m gonna catch my life up back at the party, for a bit. You wanna hang out, still? Come out side once you’ve feel like you rested up, nice and good. That little heart queen could probably party all week, I think.”

“Hm. . . you’re just trying to make me jealous of her a little, I think. She’s *won* your affections better than I, the cur. . .”

He wasn’t finished getting dressed yet, and he didn’t pause in what he was doing, to say, “I don’t think my affections get to be harnessed by any one super deity, kiddo.”

“No deal for minor deities, then?”

“You know what? No. I hate minor deities. We should probably just kill all minor deities.”

“Off with their heads!”

He looked oddly and the younger boy. “Don’t say that, unless you wanna rule all the queendoms,

weirdo.”

“The heart queendoms would have to be renamed the kingdoms, I think, forrit.”

“Said *no* heart king, *ever*. Come on, kid, there’s good reason for some names, knowit?”

“Such as?”

“Such as. . . well, such as that women like to have nice things, so they can shows them to us, so we have them the heart queendoms, and they keep showing us neat stuffs innit, knowwhatimean?”

He nodded his head, looked down, ran his hand through his shorter than normal hair, and thought about what else he could say to Jason. “Do you, um...”

“Sorry! No time for you to be weird from over there! Wanna be weird in front of me? Come outside! See ya!” He departed, a jaunt in his step.

Mordecai sighed, and collapsed backward, happy that he was getting to know someone like Jason better, and wondering just what it was about these people that the Heart Queen found so fun to fuck with them on...

Jason didn’t really seem all that well respected, being the older of two hands to the ace, and the strange man out, most of the time, so Mordecai wondered why he was still so interested in working so closely with the Ace of Hearts, still.

Last time he’d witnessed any real power from the Heart Ace, it was when a girl tripped over someone’s foot walking by, and he’d caught her and kissed her the next moment. Mordecai wasn’t actually sure if he’d really *seen* the Heart Ace trip her himself, but he kept thinking about it, anyway.

“I wonder if somebody wants to tell me what to do at these sorts of things, so I don’t get left high and dry after beautiful boys have had their way with me? Clovis seemed to want to run out on Zelda pretty quick, but he’s still here, so. . . Oh, duh, so is Jason...”

He was quick about getting himself resuited to hit the party again, but he didn’t like his formalwear, on second glance in the lookingglass, and he wished he had something a bit more boyish and casual, so people would know what he was really like better, when they were talking to him.

He liked the fact that nobody else at the party seemed to know what to say to somebody like Clovis, once all the hype had worn off, and he was rumored to have already fucked the Heart Queen in her chambers, but Mordecai wasn’t really sure if that was true, because everyone said whoever it was had had a big fight with her, and they’d both sounded super upset about some old, rehashed drama, so. . . yeah, probably not the spade and heart everyone was thinking it might have been.

He liked the way people looked at him even after he’d been having his fun with other boys, or girls, even, and he was pretty sure he’d never want to live anywhere but here in the heart queendoms, and he was pretty sure it didn’t matter what they were called, anyway, and he was pretty sure you didn’t have to be the queen herself to enjoy their splendor.

It was like someone had told Zelda Princess that she should stop having all the fun she wanted all the time, and pretend to rule a kingdom that had pretty much governed itself for a few centureis, by now. He didn’t really know what she saw appealing in the title and holdings, beyond the glamour behind it, so Mordecai had resolved to live the life long cherished by those like the Heart Queen; one of endless fun and games with no worries about how long it might take to get to the next one.

He seemed pretty sure of himself, once he got outside, and he was also pretty sure that nobody wanted to let him know that he wasn’t wanted out there because, duh, it was fun to talk to people who liked having fun, but...

“I keep feeling weird about these things for no good reason,” he said near Clovis’s table, to no one in particular.

“No good reason’s not reason enough to stand there without introducing yourself, weirdo. What’s your name, stranger?”

It wasn’t Clovis, thank god, but an older gentleman. Well, not *older* older, but more like the Ace of Heart’s age, or something. “Hello,” he said back, unsure of what else to, “oh, I’m Mordecai.”

“Mordecai. So what is it you’re feeling weird about, Mordecai?”

He raised his shoulders up in a shrug. “The fact that nobody wants to talk to me after... oh! Know what? You don’t really need to be hearing about that, do you? I’m Mordecai, by the way, I think I said that already. What’s your tease?”

“What’s my tease? Who’s asking? Mordecai, or his mother?”

“My. . . mother?”

“Yeah. Did your mother ask you to tease me like that, or did you get that mean all on your own?”

He snickered, not exactly sure what the old man man, but he thought he might like him, forrit. “What, uh. . . what are... nevermind. I’m pretty sure I’m not mean enough to blame my mother for my lack of an upbringing. Oh! I said that out loud...”

“You know what? You’re too cute to be doing this sort of thing on your own. Have a seat, Mordecai. What do you feel like drinking?”

“I didn’t get your name...”

“Zeega, some call me. How old are you, any how?”

“I’ll be seventeen, next. . . Saturday?”

“Seventeen, huh? You don’t look a day over thirty five, you know.”

“Oh don’t I know! I’m uh...” he laughed, “I’m only ten.”

“Ten, huh? So what’s a ten year old like you doing walking around like the world owes him a favor or something? Someone tell you it did? I don’t think that’s really fair; the world was here first, after all, why should it owe you anything?”

“Did you wanna... I don’t really know what to say to you, exactly...”

“You sure? Most folks just try makin’ noises, with their mouths, and see what comes out.”

“More or less, that’s what I’ve been making myself good at, so far as communication goes. Wanna tell me a secret romance story?”

“Now why would I wanna keep a romance a secret, if I wanted to tell you about it?”

He shrugged. “Not sure. I thought a secret romance might make a good story. Do you have a different story you wanna tell?”

“Wanna tell? I haven’t done a thing but try and get to know you, you know. How could I do that if I get stuck telling you a story you were never there for?”

“Well... maybe you could put me *in* the story, just to cover our bases.”

“Well there we go. But you know what? I don’t think I’ve learned enough about you to even put you in the story, unless we wanted to go do something interesting and make a decent story happen. We can tell each other about it after, if we want, but since you’ll have been there, no one will have to tell the story, anyhow.”

“What kind of story did you think you wanted to be in with me?”

“Well I don’t know, young one. What sort of story did you want to be a part of?”

“Well... I like unbirthdays parties...”

“You know what? That’s a great idea. Let’s go find an unbirthday party to be a part of, and see what happens!”

The old man didn’t really bother not trying to flirt with him, or anything, but Mordecai wasn’t sure really what his end game was, exactly, but he liked talking to him well enough, and if he’d wanted to show a little more interest in what he was actually like, then... It wasn’t that big a deal, anyhow. He liked listening to the old man talk, and it was easy enough to want to get in closer to him, when they spent a little more time together.

“You know I don’t think you’ve been entirely honest with me. Just how old are you, anyhow?”

“Me? I’m ten, still. Why? Did you want me to be older, or younger?”

“For what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well now there you go again, thinking you needed to appease me just because I *might* be thinking you should be different than the way you are.”

“I don’t... okay, I guess. I’m just not really used to people not trying to control me all the time.”

“And do you like not being controlled all the time?”

“I don’t not like... what, what did you say again?”

“Do you not like being controlled all the time?”

“I don’t really know what to do about it, most days.”

“That Jason, fellow. He tried to control you, did he?”

“No, not really. That’s why I liked him, anyway.”

“Oh not really, so you liked him? Well it sounds like you might not *want* to act like you have to appease my ever supposed whim, then, doesn’t it?”

He cocked his head at him, then. “You’re a lot. . . wiser than most of the older people I’ve been talking to.”

“Well were you asking for wisdom when you talked to them, or were you just playing hard to get?”

“Hard to get? Is *that* what you wanted me to be like for you?”

“Hard to get? What do you mean? I thought you’d already been had!”

“Hard... what did you just say to me?”

“I thought that’s what you looked so upset about, when you walked by my table, earlier. Thought you’d been had, and nobody wanted to have you again? Why’d you go and try thinking a thing like that, if you didn’t want to be had in the first place?”

“I. . . don’t think I understand your metaphors, oldtimers.”

“No? Well that’s too bad. They’re rather clever, my metaphors. It’s really too bad you never even heard one of them before you decided not to understand them.”

“Okay, so metaphor’s not the right word for it.”

“No, indeed not! You know what though? I have a best friend favor to ask of you. Will you do a best friend favor for me?”

“Uh. . . sure. What is it?”

“Don’t ever let anyone get you to agree to a best friend favor before you’ve heard what the favor is, and whether or not they really want to be your friend for the right reasons.”

He stopped short, and looked harder, at the older man than he had before. There was something about him that seemed pretty different, and he wasn’t really sure how to handle that, just now.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 24

King of Spades  Daedris Maun

The last thing he wanted to be hearing about right now, was the idea that somebody had told Clovis he couldn't just run off and join the Queen of Heart's new retinue, when that was just the very sort of thing Clovis would work hard towards, only just right after someone had told him not to.

"Why would you think to try and tell me son what to do, Adamai?"

"He doesn't listen to anyone, I know, sire, I just... thought he ought to be reminded where his loyalties lie."

"Where his loyalties- He's a spade, for god's sake! How many of your idiot cohorts does he have to cut down in front of you to prove he's already a spade? For hells below, above, you great lout, are you seriously this stupid today?"

"He doesn't... he does not pay homage to his King--"

"If he did, Adamai, I would have him killed and find myself an Ace of Spades who can handle his own affairs. Why would you think that I needed my own son to pay homage to me, somehow?"

"Do you believe then, that he will side with us, come the Courts of Chaos and order to follow?"

"Clovis? No, I seriously doubt that. He's a warrior, at heart, however. If somebody were to best him, without killing him, I do believe he could see a different light."

"Take the French initiative?"

"Something of the sort. Where does that phrase come from, anyhow?"

"I do not know the where, but I do know the how, if you care to hear the story."

"Enlighten me, Adamai."

"Simply that to take the French initiative has always meant that when one is conquered, one adapts to the best of their ability, living life as the 'conquered' sons, and refusing to cow toe to old now worn out ideas of nationalism, as the case often is, or other old cultural norms.

"For as to the where, there have been a number of places who think to call themselves French without knowing the origin of the phrase."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. I thought you said they abandoned feelings of nationalism."

He shrugged. "Well sure, but for how long? The Gahali have been called the French seven or nine times, this century."

"I'm not following you, how in the world is that the case?"

He shrugged again. "Pretoun's forces from Quere conquered Gaal, and the Gahali took the French initiative, and were called the Quereen. Logain conquered Gaal later, with an army from Mardress, and the then called Quereen, who had never much liked the name change, took the French initiative, rather than being enslaved or wiped out, and were now called the Marida people.

"After that it was Yutari, Frenledd, and a handful of other names. Now people just call people from there the French, as though that name itself were the national identity."

"Well... isn't it, by now? 'We are the unconquerable conquered ones! No matter how many times you lay siege to our cities, we still have always been, French!'" He was quite amused with himself, on that one. He didn't laugh, though, he just looked at Adamai, who didn't seem to be laughing either, and shrugged. "What else did you come to ask me about?"

"Whether or not you will be attending the Heart Queen's wedding recital, this May."

"What the hell is May?"

"I shouldn't think to explain it to you, suffice it to say it is a mark on a recycled timeline used by some cultures."

"Why would the Queen of Hearts have a wedding recital?"

"She is not to be married, or anything. *That* wouldn't make sense, or anything."

“Oh no? That *is* the most common cause, I think, to have a recital.”

“She should not be allowed to comfortably seize all the queendoms before a king has taken the heart throne in May.”

“What is ‘in May’ there again?”

“In May, things are kept and tidied away. The idea that one would not be married in May, or June, is almost unheard of, for May and June are the summer months of a bygone era... ..”

The Spade King stared at Adamai in silence for a long few moments. “That sounds like dark ages talk, Adamai. Just what are you planning for the Heart Queen, exactly?”

“Why, her wedding reception, of course. Or recital, rather.”

“To whom?”

“To whom? Your lordship, did you not hear the stories, just now?”

“For... what sort of occasion?”

“Why, your grace, the Heart Queen will take the French initiative, I think, the moment she has to. She shall marry who she must, to keep the peace and tranquility of the heartlands.”

“You. . . you think I ought to strike the heartlands, here, on the eve of Chaos?”

“Precisely what you must do, if you do indeed intend to take the Imperial Halls as their just and verdant ruler.”

“You think that would work? That she would take the French initiative, just like that, and sign her power over to her conquerer and husband?”

“She is a mere child, sire, and a wanton one at that. She will take the French initiative, in time, as they all must do, when the new emperor of all card makes his claim.”

“Very well. I am loathe to draw out this inevitable clash with the heartlands, anyway. I grow weary of the Heart Emperor’s careful plannings. If we strike fast enough, perhaps we can secure peace before Chaos itself is allowed to ensue.”

“By your leave, my king, I will command the armies to strike.”

“Where?”

“Whom. Solus, Mercury and Jupiter are the first strategic targets.”

“You have lords waiting to replace them, then?”

“No, sire. We would need more open allies, for that sort of planning. This sting operation has been well beyond classified, till now.”

“A shame, then, that you did not see fit to tell me about my own invasion forces, so I could do some planning of my own, you insatiable simpleton.”

“I did not think you would be interested, sire, simply because before this time, there was no available cause to use such an invasion force.”

“And what of Clovis, in this? Do you think he would move against me?”

“He has already joined the queen in her bed chambers, to hear some tell of it, though the rumor seems unfounded. In lieu of that, I doubt he could take much issue with the spades taking control of the hearts, for a time.”

“I think he’s more a spade than I am, some days.”

“Do you?”

“Well sure. And you know what? If you drive a stake into the top of a heart symbol, it looks just like an upside down spade! Isn’t that something?”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 25

Ten of Diamonds



Lara en Venusia, of House Cobalt

Saving the fact that nobody cared how long it would be before she found a place to call home again, Lara decided that the best thing for her had to be a home away from home, so she could feel the need to leave a little less appropriately, occasionally? No... that wouldn't do at all.

Super not the same thing as all that, that I wasn't doing anything that this wanted to be... Shoot. Lara didn't know the difference, any longer, over what was bad and what was not, and it was driving her mad, that that damn cat kept popping up right when she thought she wasn't going to be the same way ever again, what forrit again...

She tried not to dwell on the fact that all these places will do, not just for her, but for all the people she tried to be friends with, from time to time. Being a diamond queen's servant wasn't all that bad a life for lots of girls, but she loathed the idea that anyone could classify another person as a *servant*, which was a word that sounds foreign and crass to someone like her.

She had no idea how to tell people not to try and bring so much of this spade violence and diamond grubbing around her peoples, any longer, she knew better than to let people know the difference right away, between what she was, and what someone like the Diamon Queen seemed to be becoming.

She wasn't all that sure why people liked listening to the lies about their ancient monarch. For starters, anyone who ruled for more than a decade should have to step down, if that were the way of things, and so in a world of mortal men and women all, how could you think that a ruler who never died and so never abdicated, would somehow be acceptable to the people she ruled?

It wouldn't be, as a matter of fact, and the idea that she would be the only ancient queen among many and more men and women who died in their throngs of power? What the people she called cards thought to do with their legends could astound her, sometimes, but then, she also did love the way children played with the stories, and the idea that anyone could somehow decide to keep the legends alive on into adulthood didn't seem at all appalling, so why ruin the magic in it?

The trouble was, Lara had never actually seen the Diamond Queen in person, and no one seemed to know how to get to her inner realms at all. Even Lord Rodimus, and she wasn't sure why Uranus everywhere else was Rodimus in Romulus, but not even the powerful Lord Rodimus had no inkling as to how to even *find half* the bleeding tens of the realm, which was utterly ridiculous!

She'd met Thorvaldt Greystoke, of course, and wanted to lay with him, but he didn't seem all the keen on the idea of a committed ceremony, like was the custom anywhere else but Thor's castle keep, whatforrit saveitagain whathaveyou...

The idea that he wouldn't want a woman of her standing to fill his halls with was strange, but she wondered often at the lecherous ways of some cards who called themselves men and boys, and wondered what to do about these rumors she kept hearing about the lands called the heart Queendoms, for goodness sake, who were said to be as lecherous as the men said queen was said to be in charge of.

She'd heard tell of the Queen of Heart, before, of course, but she'd thought it was the name for a queen of lower standing than the Diamon Queen, of course, who ruled all the worlds, and she could figure on how another High Queen could even exist on earth, if that were true, and now that she thought on it, there *was* much more talk, of late, of people from other worlds, coming to visit.

Thorvaldt Greystoke was said to have come from the uncharted wilds, which seemed ridiculous, considering how long they'd been mapping biospheres and natural habitats even where people didn't live. She was well familiar with the vast archives of happenings within and without the studies of these so called uncharted lands, and she knew that most of the animals and plants of these places were well understood enough to consider the majority of usefulness from them charted enough to do away with such nonsense tales of secret origins and aliens from the wilds, whathaveyou.

She knew that at the very least, she was going to have to find a home away from home out here, near the supposed wilds, because King Thorvaldt Greystoke's kingdoms seemed to be shrinking to them, which was madness in itself, and she realized that if he truly was weakening like this, then perhaps it was better that they'd never joined in hand and ceremony after all, though she doubted the same sorts of things would be happening to his once great halls and lands if *she'd* been party to his ruling of them.

She liked the idea that no one quite knew why these festivals were so much more fun for her than for some other people who often said that they favored them above all other days. She often tried hard not to attend just about every festival of legends that showed up forrit, but it was some of the most fun she'd ever had with people, and with children, and she loathed to miss one, on most occasions.

She'd wanted to teach everyone how fun it would be to take some of the old songs and fables they knew and loved, and rearrange the letterings and wordings for them, to bring in different songs and legends they might have known, so they could enjoy it in a new way, but no one seemed to realize just how difficult that sort of thing was going to be, and that they'd have to really work at it, and they may as well listen to the people who'd been doing it for quite some time, like her and some of her closer associates at these festivals.

Losing out to one of these sporting events they wanted to put on at the festivals, which didn't really seem quite out of spirit for the whole festival, since it had something to do with one of the less than unpopular legends, wasn't all to awful for the even she'd had planned that day, but she wanted to make sure this wasn't really going to turn into some ridiculously competitive game, all of the sudden, and ruin the fun of exhibition that these things all seemed to be about, anyway.

Dealing with the fact that no one had ever witnessed this type of thing happening but her, apparently, was more than a little irritating, but she'd seen boys get together and ruin everyone else's fun, even at the expense of their own initiatives, and she thought it was well within her rights to ban some of them from competing, any longer, once they seemed to want to defend their championship, or something else horribly unoriginal and unclever like that.

Moreover thereon intuit again to the next one, it was easy enough to come to believe that this sort of sporting event was never all that bad to begin with, but people at festivals had to keep their culture well away from a lot more of the cultural norms that existed outside these little soirees, so she had to make sure everybody knew what was what at them and who should be doing for whomever or whatever, really.

She was something of a mother to a lot of the men and childish people she worked with. The women too, honestly, and they were all more of girls, really, but that was because a lot of these legends seemed to inspire them to carry on being childish for all time, so they often needed a mother, even one who could be into the legends herself, of course, to set things right on a regular basis, and make sure everyone can keep having fun safely.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 26

Ace of Clubs  Zen Sunn Sukki Eichi

So the rest of what everybody had to say about the matter, wasn't about to let her or Jason know what was about to happen to everyone there, where madness saw fit to ruin the lives of so many innocent people.

Likely as not, Jason didn't hesitate to grab the first plate of cream swirls he spotted, and when he popped one right in his mouth without a second guess, it was because he wanted to look like he'd had them before, so that Sukki might try one, without him having to suggest it.

I can't believe this is happening. The plant she was tasting made her sick, almost instantly, but not because she couldn't fight it; she didn't have to. It was screaming out for her to stop what was about to happen from its graces.

"Heart Queen!" she barked, slapping the food out of Jason's hand. "The cream swirls will kill you!"

Queen Zelda screamed, and the clouds churned in the skies above, and shattered glass in sound ripped apart every partisan's peace, in a moment. The scream was eternal, endless, and short, so she could scream out; "Poiiiiison! Someone's poisoned the food!"

"Hahahhaaaaa!" Jason didn't not find that funny apparently. His voice was muffled, the next moment, when Sukki stuffed a wad of clover from her belt into his mouth, kicked his legs out from under him, and made him stare into her eyes, as he looked up at her, crouching over him.

He was laughing, still, and he couldn't stop himself. That she'd tripped him was just about the funniest thing in the universe! "Jason who are you right now?" She didn't stop for him to answer, but he looked engaged, right away. "Do you know who I am to you? How long are you going to keep this one going? Are you waiting for a punchline?" He giggled, when she said punchline. "How old are you now? I thought you were here, before, but now... I'm not sure what you thought this was about," he laughed a little, at that, and she'd given it to him with the misdirection, but she wasn't going to give him any more, now that she had his attention.

I can laugh from this, said his eyes, to the Club Ace. *I already HAVE laughed from this! I want to hear what else she'll say, because I know it can be funny!*

"I know you're not going to listen to me, when I tell you that it was a long time before we thought to get here again. I know what you're thinking. Respond to the rest of it, if you want to, but get ready to move over the side of what you were thinking, alright? I won't need you to understand how much more important the rest of this is, but you're not feeling anything from that clover I just gave you, unless you were wanting to enjoy yourself."

That did it. He dropped, lights out, the next moment, when every impulse in him from the first drug, the Joker's poison in the cream swirls, told him he had to leech enjoyment from something, so when she was unfunny and punchlineless for that long, his mind leapt into the effects of the other drug she'd administered, and it knocked him out.

The stormcloud that churned up when the Queen of Hearts and Nines screamed her warning let a light patter of rain down on the garden party.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 27

Ten of Diamonds



Jaa jaa Jupiter

more et lo set more fo tho. at for more et let ko at aram. menen dai lo et so ku ta, moreover thereon tu et so let moretu. more tu et canai et su, so met et tor an lo fet eren tai co, senen dar eran. more oh et lai more et so ten en lai, moreover thereon then again set more for lo, that lo ket tho are mu set fai. set en tor. let et mo in mar shi ga. seee ka, lar en more en do. set en for? moreover there again, mesanka

“Mesa thinken’, you, sa, are berrry, berrrry irritatin’!”

“How *dare* you speak to me this way!”

daren munun ket? more etat et kai o mini ma

“You sa thinken’, you sa gunna be gone, gone annoyin’?” set et mor un tait elo

“You. . . how DARE you speak to me this way!”

more on tet e lai de mo, more in set un lu tai ya

“Mesa thinken’ mesa no en speaken’ to you sa, no more!” set en for ut lai e lo!

“You think you can just walk away? This is completely unacceptable!”

“You sa thinken’, mesa no playin’ cards no right an’ okey day?” set en u or tat, me lo

“I don’t give a DAMN how you play cards, if you-”

ooOoo, set for more in tight elo? set more elan etat kimo! baaaasita naaa! “You sa thinken’, mesa meanen’ tarot card? You sa, be forgettin’ you sa places, mesa thinken’.”

“I. . . what do you mean, ‘How you play cards?’”

set lunun tat, mon terio mon etat keloo. set en mo or un lai do? “Mesa thinken’, yousa not be knowin’ whysa people be playin’ dem cards in different ways! Yousa thinken’, this’n whole card game be blat! Moreover thereon again, et set for more in to the lAst one! Mesa amin Noooo amateur! You’sa be havin’ bit more faith, mesa thinken’ if yousa wanten’ bein’ smart, whatforrit. Moreover thereon agAIN!”

“You don’t. . . you don’t mince words, with people.”

mincin’ pet a lo more sun at ker. tenenlai teman elo! “Mesa berrry, berrrry sorry yousa not be knowin’ mincin’ words be for mockingbirds. Ain’t you eba hereabout da birdies flapping their wings knowin’ they gots nothin’ butts to say all different songs strung up together?!”

“Bleck! Mesa thinken’ you’sa not be knowin’ why some little birdies sound BLECK! They’sa bein’ mockin’birds!”

“You. . . I don’t understand what you mean about mincing words, then, I’m afraid.”

“They’sa be hearin’ OTHER birdies, ones what liken to be singin’ for ya, and they’sa be mincin’ bird words! Mince mince mince! Turn em all into cAPTION phrases. Mucha better’n workin’ hard for makin’ bird art music sounden’, no?”

“Pretty bird! says the mockingbird! Mesa pretty bird too! No no no! Aaah! Aaah! See? Mesa thinken’ THAT bird isa MOCKINGBIRD!! No, sa, NO, sa! Checkin’ difference, mosten’ blue birds be doin’ it different!”

“*Blue* birds do it differently? How so?”

more ulen untait emo. mucho lat et to mon tat. “BLUE birds sayin’ much an’ more foremselves. Pretty birds with pretty words know how to mock the mockingbirds! Sound funny while doin’ it, too!”

“They’re the mockingjays are they, then?”

“You’sa be gettin’ it! Mucho, mucho much impressed! Blue jays get to be knowin’ how to be lookin’ like other more DIFFERENT birds then silly mockingbirds copy.”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 28

Nine of Spades  Yukay

More dan often an' not, da pepal I be seein' here be in bad places in a big way, an' nobadee be tellin' us Where to go, What to do, Nobadee but de res of all dem pepals knowin' jus' how long it gonna tayek to be tellin' dem badies dey ain't what we be tellin' dem res' of all dese tales far.

Nobadee be tellin' ME what to do, or so I seiy, but nat a badde wouldn't be tellin' you or aaall dem pepals what we be tellin' us for you here in dem stories we keep for tellin' you what to do, Where to go, How to be and aaaaall dem pepals what say dey gon' take fram us, all dem peoples, eh?? Ahahahaaa!!

Nobody be tellin' dis witty man an' his friends just what sarta pepal be tellin' DEM what to do an what to do it all for, see yes? Nooo... The time is gonna take, for you 'em pepals to be lettin' a warm badde know dat all dem udda baddes be all dem pepal they be wantin' tellin you abowet.

See me forin' for de res' of all dem spades we call on all dem farrit. Set in for again dat NObadde be eva tellin' me what to do outsid a what NOT to do, heya and nowe. Settin' for all dem pretty baddes, dat DEY be de ones you can' be sayin' for, and all dem pepals you never did know 'bout for dem bodies what told you for 'em, and aaall you pepals be tellin' DIS badde which badde to be about! hoW many pepals you thinken' I bein' friends for, shelter? Noobadde knows da trouble I be seein' ev•e•ry day, sum sayitgood, yes an' no, babies?

Yes and know for aaall dem pepals dat be tellin' ayebadde how DEY be doin' dem times and what be tellin' DEM for all dem rest of de starie archives, no and yes'n farrit, yes and no'n to bein' with aaaall dem pepals, un tellin' US what to do, un where to be going, no and no? Nooo. No, no, no! Look at all you pepals bein' here today, an' not knowin' for WHAT to do, wit me, dis littel babbe, so to see an' do I see a bebbe right now. Yes... she be seein' pretty babbe tellin' NO MAN what to do, so be tellin' me who do it it far, no?

He didn't stop to take in all the strange ornaments and doo dads like a stalker or a felon, or anything, and instead, watched the wily old woman move down the steps of her home, toward him, gazing at de babbe's splendor, here an' good far innit...

"You are not the person I seek, if I've been too rude to commit your name to memory and lose you for it," said the man. Witty man, he seem to be...

"How long you gonna take before you be kissen' my feet apologizin' for WHAT you gotta ask dis old woman?"

"I don't make a business of asking friends of friends for things, while groveling..."

"No?"

"No I save my groveling for really important things, like a decent haircut."

She looked at his beard and mane, admiringly. "You have never even had to shave, no?"

"Sometimes, when the occasion suits me."

"Not that it be a bother, forrit, but what be your title, so as I might be seein' you for tarot, some day?"

He was much more intrigued than she'd inspect. "You can use the tarot?"

"ANYbadde can use a tarot, retard. What you be thinkin' bein' impressed by such a lazy passtime?"

He laughed, and said, "I think I can understand the sentiment... Did you know I can fly?"

"Fly, you say?"

"You know I can tell you don't, just by looking at you? Me, though? It's nothing impressive, or anything; you can't do it, is all, so no need to be impressed."

"Ooooh, and so says the witty ten. You are of the diamond persuasion, yes? Among the four, anyway..."

"Not that you'd need to know that, to find me in your cards, I think."

"No, you don't say?"

"May I ask something of you?"

"As as you will, I mislike only boring company."

“I will be as amusing as possible, then, when I can. Forgive me if I sound unfunny. If you need me to try harder, to amuse you, then I can-”

“Stop!” She wanted to laugh so hard, just then. “I think I get the point. Your request?”

“I wish to see the Queen of Diamonds, and I do not know how to reach one such as her, or her kind...”

Her eyes lit up, and she gazed longingly at his soul. I like this one, I am thinken’. “You, want to go and meet the Queen of Diamonds, in her domain?”

“Yes.”

“And you know of what she is, then? Of her... *kind* as you sayit?”

“Only enough to seek one such as you out, to prepare myself for it. Anything you can tell me would-
What?”

She was staring at him more stangely than ever. His request was so uncommon, she could scarcely imagine what had put him up to it. “Do you know madness, witty ten?”

“I’ve heard tell of it.”

“Seeking to undue what you are already; that is madness in itself, you knowit.”

“I need not unbecome what I am to change into something else.”

“No? Why do you think this is a true thing? Do you think you know the stories her people can tell only by being what they are? No... no, you CANNOT know of what you ask of yourself.”

“You don’t think I could handle the change?”

“You would NOT know how to cease being what you are, which is a diamond ten of lords and lands. You will find no lands, in her domains...”

“Because she does not HAVE a domain, you mean? Only people?”

This was not a possible thing to have happen. “Who *are* you? Give me a name, boy, for I must needs to know about it...”

He didn’t hesitate, really, he just, looked at her for a decent moment, before he simply said, “Tarzan.”

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and her head fell back on her neck, laughing for joy. “Yes! Yeeess!! THIS is the name you should use here! THIS is a name that hold power WHEREVER you go, no? Yees, I did not KNOW why you need ask this of me, if you believed yourself ready to become what THEY are already.

“But you... you are not going to stay there forever? You seek to visit, alone? You are quite mad, world walker. I am thinking yes, I can be of much help to one such as Tarzan is, to hear the plants and animals tell your tales, witty boy.”

Knowin’ not what to do, but to help him geyat to da sea pepals, I fixed him up an antidote to his poisonous legs, so he can chyange in de water, an’ see da world true de eyes and hair of the mer.

De mer be a mad pepals, to all dem what neva knew how to change what you are so bad you cyan NEVER go back to what you was before; so lesson dat you cyan change even id the worst of circumstances bein’ about this de place you always be set to be bein’ in.

“You will not be a merman, till you let your body grow itself naturally. You will NOT be like the mer people in the stories. If you do not keep your fear well away from your change, you will die, where you go.”

“I’m going to get bigger, then?”

“MUCH bigger. The sea does not walk around on two feet, you know. It tells us that size is only how many peopal can see you at de moment.”

“Will there be... if I’m so much bigger than the mermaids, then-”

“You will have what you require no matter your size. You will be better for it to let them love you as you most naturally be, so be.”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 29

Two of Clubs  Flounder the Fish

“Flounder, I seriously doubt you’d want to forget about me, even if you started thinking it might started to get you back into troubles again, sweetums... ..”

“I’m not sure what you mean about that, Ariel. Moreover, thereon again, I like the way I am, and I’m pretty sure you don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say that I wasn’t all that bad, just because I was a little different, like this, you knowit!”

“Glub glub!” She almost nodded, at him, through the mirror.

“You’re really in for it, Ariel, when you get back here! Just where is everybody, anyway? How come the whole entire ocean’s so bare and mild, lately?”

“Cuz you’re still acting like a guppy, Flounder, and not a very curious one. Go start some trouble with a shark, or better yet, don’t do that thing, and wait for me to have an excuse to go down there and get your guppy butt back into some troubles again, okaay?”

“An excuse?!” he wriggled wildly in front of the looking glass, as excited as he could possibly imagine. “I got an excuse for you, Ariel! The Queen of Diamonds is holding a celebration festival in the new Heart Queen’s honor! She didn’t wanna come on land to go to the Heart Queen’s unbirthday party, this time, but, but she really does LOVE the Queen of Hearts, Zelda Princess, whatforrit, and she’d *love* to have her over, you know?!” He did a little swimming swirl a round in a circle, in front of the communication mirror, to one of the surface worlds, above, below, nice and quick, and smiled, excitedly awaiting what his best friend Ariel had to say on the matter, glub, glub!

“She’s throwing an entire festival?! Oh my goodness! I couldn’t *believe* she didn’t want to see the new Queen of Hearts. That’s so funny, though! Oh, but they do love the courts of Chaos, don’t they?”

“No one doesn’t love the Courts of Chaos and order to figure, down here, Ariel. Everybody wants Sebastian to shut up about it, but most of the rest of it was-”

“What you mean about et, Ariel?! Eeeeh! You bein’ on yor way, I dare’n sayyyy... et?”

The gigantic crab, or giant to Flounder’s perspective, though he’d seen bigger, and the trident ten’s free agent, Sebastian, had swam, just then, into the chamber, fast as could be, and was grinning at the dark haired Ariel, staring back at him from wherever she was, with blue sky and green trees, behind her.

“What you been saven’ for, Ariel? How long you gunna be keepen’ us all waitin’ down here in da deep blue ocean. . . .blue.”

“Back off, Sebastian. I’m talking to flounder, and you’re too big to use the mirror. Shoo, crab, and tell King Trident he can’t have any more lands, again.”

“He dazen’t need to be told dat again, Ariel.”

“Then figure something else useless to do, Crab King!”

“Ah, A King of Crabs, you say!”

“I will ROAST you on a beach, animal!”

“Yaaah! King Tridaaaaant!” He was swimming away, like he was panicky, but not so fast as he’d swum in, oddly enough. “Yooo daughtaaa is outa dis world wit land lubaa craazyyyyy!”

“He’s not gunna stop screaming about that one, Sorry Ariel, I didn’t know Sebastian would be following me again.”

“I think Trident would have sensed something through the tarot cards, by now. Not from me, I mean, but there are a lot of us from up here changing, I hear, so the cards would look pretty different, lately. Are you understanding me now, Flounder? Do you know what the tarot cards are for?”

“Not even slightly, Ariel!” He swam around excitedly, again, cuz he liked to hear things from her over and over again, just for fun and games, and learning about how many cool magic things Ariel liked to teach him about, glub glub, over and over again, glub glubg, so he could learn the rest later! easier it was, glub, glub!

“Okay, sweetie, settle down for like, 14 seconds then, okay. Or you know what? I’ll just show you some tarot cards when I get there, because seeing Clovis try and turn into a merboy is going to be fucking *priceless!*”

“A merboyfriend, you say? Who’s who? Who’s who!”

“Ooh, Flounder, did you get to talking to owls, after all’s said and done for?”

“I’m not a scaredy guppy *all the time* Ariel! But yeah, I met some new friends, lately. Who’s whoo~! Who’s whoo~!”

“Well Clovis is my little brother, the Ace of Spades. You’ve met him a few times before, I think.”

“Really? How old is he? Is that a thing up there, still?”

“Not so much no mores, no no, Flounder babies. He’s a liiiittle guppy whenever he wants to be, and then he grows RIGHT big and strong, just to fuck someone up for somebody, and then he goes little and cute again, but he was little and cute the whole time through, that’s why he’s gonna be a little merboy and never no such thing as a merman, ever before or again, before, knowwhatimean, little guppy boyfriend?”

“I’m not your boyfriend, Ariel! You can’t have more than one, don’t you know the rules down here? Trident’s trying to woo a lady, and he’s pretty sure she’s gotta *marry* him or somethin’!”

“Oh, hells in rain, Daddy’s at it again with his woo spells, huh? I’d better get my tail down nice and fast, and make sure he knows what right and wrong still mean. Oooh nooo! Flounder, did you think I was born yesterday?”

“Prrrobably not. Why do you ask me so of this thing you say? Glub, glub!”

“Probably because Daddy’s been married four hundred jazillion times and it’s never been for more than an hour or two.”

“But this one’s different, Ariel!” He spun around again, excited to be telling her something new. “He’s been after this one for years and years! He’s gonna try and ask her to marry him, and you gotta stop him, huuuurrrryyy!”

“It’s not the Queen of Diamonds, is it, Flounder, guppy I love so much?”

He was still swimming in rapid circles when he cried, “It’s the queeeen of diamooonnds, Arieel! And she’s not even the REAL one, I think!”

“Oh, god, Flounder, what’s the big deal? So Daddy wants a phony queen to suit for.”

“Or an *evil* one! Or the *real* one, and he’s gonna make a super big giant fool of himself, again! I don’t know how to tell the difference, between ‘em! I’ve never even SEEN the real Queen of Diamonds, maybe! I might not even know what she really LOOKS like, you knowit? It’s a bit ocean, you know, Ariel, glubing glubing!”

“Okay sweetheart, just flash yourself some calming images or go take a nice swim. I don’t know how long it takes to get where I’m going here, so I’ll see you at the festival’s eves, okay?”

“Okay Ariel!” he did a little flip, in the water. “Call again soon, okay?!”

“Okay, Flounder, ta ta!!”

“Ta ta, Ariel!” He waved his fin to her, and the image faded in the mirror, till he was staring at himself again.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 30

Queen of Hearts  Zelda

“More set to you, Zelda Princess, again. How and now could I be to there at that was before?”

“More to set for you, to me? We? O o’er for set and all too mildly, dear boy, look again and tell me never not to know again, said there faireth boy.”

Jason didn’t look perturbed, or anything. “More to you and set to be for mine, I’d say, or more again that theirs was fair before, you know. What fair thou with Clovis, prince in spades, again?”

“Not in mild it no, you’d said. Sipping spies could be for all our times for had again and not, you know.”

“Over wild, and mild again. I’d liken you to telling me what said to thee it was that there was less of you for so much more of your unbirthday party than I thought I’d warranted, heir a fair poor fool that I was, for smitten with Clovis not you hadn’t seemed to unwanted to be, how see?”

“Speak back, and forth, and set, for yet again, and thee are a fairy, and I would do away with thee, or kill the on sight, as set the rule ever so much it was for a true boy three without his name for to bear on without it, again. Name my price again, fair boy, for the pleasure of your company when at my leisure it rests, fair Heart Queen?”

“O for my, and there’s before again. Would that I could grovel further but that she’d not lay with beggars, so I do delay. Hows to fair’d you more again, this summer’s day, or mild, and yet again the temperate buds of may?”

“In that old song again? How could you know it never got too simple for the likes of me, fair Jason?”

“O’er to hold it ever in it was, for one, or more, they’ve said, before or back again and forth, and yet we’d have for love in all we’d wanted there and back, before again, or yours to be in love with them? Hah! For barest hearts and stoutest boasts...”

“For hear’s to say we’d seen their ghosts? Not for love or yours to mine, but mixing pleasure’s pain in thine would do well less and good to serve you for my pleasure alone, you knowit simple.”

He smiled at the sound of the word. “Simple, simple, do it does, what for mine and theirs, because for what I am, in thee? Set aside for there and gone without it be?”

“So set before mine was because it never there before again could know, you know. So set to know in mine before and had it all was there’s to know. Who’s knowing it? Mine’s for what was, because, because, beCause!”

“Ah, fairet thee! How’s to know my name again for less is more, again!”

“Fairest want in back with thee, letting for it know that all could be with what in me, to know it well enough to score.”

“Fairet not I’d want for thee, again, you know, so set me back again and go for less and more, here before, so here I know in what I speak for all I know is what I say to know and score for-”

“More, more, MOre!” she laughed for him, pleasantly.

“Set for more at there’s to be at what we were, for theirs. Longing that I’d know it here, so be and lot in it, because, so set for less and more in this, we know...”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 31

Split in  |  Two

More life to him again, Clovis seriously doubted the rest of these idiots had any ideas about what he wanted to get finished, here, before the end of the festivities, but it was easy enough to witness the lollygaggers, and he thought about killing a few of the heart queen's uninvited guests for her, early on, to let her know he still cared, right?

He was more or less sick of the idea that he hadn't wanted to be anywhere else, this evening, but he hadn't really seen her, and he was more than a little sick of the company he was keeping, after the Willow creature and his watchful three, apparently, had departed, and he didn't miss their company, at present, because he was still brooding, mostly, because he'd seen enough of the Heart Queen to know she was different enough from his present company that his mind started unlocking and unraveling the mysteries and darker forces at work that kept surrounding him, on a daily basis...

She missed him less when he wasn't around, but it was getting harder not to be able to do anything but put on some haughty show in talking to Clovis, before any of his plans were made open, or aware, and she hated the way he seemed to look away whenever she wanted to see if he could touch gazes with her, for a moment, and she wasn't sure she liked the way his tail was moving, lately.

Clovis didn't get headaches like this one often, but it was more or less the same side of the coin as he was used to, slamming again and again in his mind, and he wasn't really sure what was supposed to be considered the end of his mind, or the outskirts, even, so every time he saw red, he felt sick again, for thinking he had to live only here again in black, for some strange reason... still?

Looking back on the rest of how he'd handled their affair, Zelda doubted very much that Clovis wasn't ten times the assassin they'd rumoured him to be, and she didn't doubt for a moment that he'd killed the ancient spade queen in her sleep, himself, or while she was awake, or whatever, or with another assassin, or whatever; it was unlikely she could actually predict him, that far.

But her mind turned to less unfortunate things, anyway. She left the rest of what she talked about, and hurt a lot less, anyway, for it. It was hard to believe he wasn't going to be anywhere but the next four hundred years shelter far and gone away, again. Where had he brought the Congo back with him, from?

Sick less, trying more. Sick less, trying more. More and more, Clovis's tail flicked like he wanted to hit something with it, but nobody was the cause, exactly, so it looked strange, and he sort of, departed, where he was standing from, and found himself facing the heart queen, a few minutes later, a lot less sure he really wanted to talk to her like this again, before he left, anyway...

Clovis had come out from the shadows, as though he'd never left, and no one was sure why he looked so... different, at that moment. He wore black, today, with a strange, loose tunic, that didn't not suit him, but made him look smaller, too, and he was small enough that she hadn't had to reach for him to kiss him, when they were together, so she wondered why he looked... "Clovis?"

"I had to say to you, that I loved you, in front of someone, so no one would think less of what you never had to mean to me, but did, and I can't not say something, about this, now, so, I have."

She swallowed, like it wasn't going to be easy to reply, but he didn't... really, stay, there... forever... It was like, he hadn't.. quite, come back to them fast enough, for everyone there to know what he'd said right away, to her, in a different language than they'd been accustomed to, for a few hours.

It wasn't until after he'd broken company with her, a few short seconds after her first breathe, that anyone gathered even realized what he'd been saying. "Did... did the Ace of Spades just confess his undying

love to you, fair queen?”

“More to the end of it, no, not undying as of yet. He died a little, when he said it, and I did not reply, so... hardly something I care to talk about less and more than before, again.”

“Hardly the thing not to talk about. He’s quite mad, that boy is! You know it well enough, so, I’d dare say!”

“Open more’s that there was less before again,” she cast, “and wickedness for living lies and sickness health for feeding ties to bonds unbroken, sick anon, that long and weird were less for gone. Mine was less then yours before, so set in lasting hours before, at more to yours at sickness was, for less and mine that was for on that this was less and more is mine, that here for less yours wasn’t...” she’d trailed off, because the party goer had dropped dead, before her. “Burn the witch,” she ordered, about his body. “Or off with his head, for all I care.” She dismissed herself, from the outside terrace, and retreated to her bed chambers, at the guest sweet.

More in liking that he hadn’t needed to kill the witch himself, Clovis was less inclined to kill something else, for want of less discomfort, and he had less and more reason not to belittle himself to the image of a mad spade with two many blades for fingers to help himself but to cut, and scissor for all he was worth that less and this was theres, again...

Liking less what she saw of him sitting alone on a bench, outside, across a grassy hill and in a corner, in the shade, in the night, all alone, and she couldn’t, quite, breathe, right, because everything she wanted to tell him was mute, for it, because he couldn’t touch her, or talk to her like he wanted, and wanted, and wanted, and she kept getting sick with herself for touching Jason, but...

It wasn’t stupid that she was freaking out about how ridiculous this all had felt. He wasn’t going to stop throwing up, if he’d had the reflex, he figured, but he hadn’t eaten much, and there was less and more reasons to keep from getting that sick, anyway.

“How old am I?” she chided herself, for trying to act like she could freak out over fucking Jason, because duh, so would anyone, probably not Clovis included except, duh, yes they totally wouldn’t have to, unless they wanted, which wasn’t a bad idea, honestly, except that Jason wasn’t anyone but a boy for her, just lately, and Clovis was a sick boy with far too much alone time on his hands, and she couldn’t... quite get the thought out of her head that the Ace of Diamonds might not be as dead as all that; somehow stuck in the verge of the cloverfields, and the more she thought about Clovis, and less about Jason, how she used to be, before he rescued her, the night before the one before last, or whenever, and she’d changed for him, to help him rescue someone else, and she wasn’t sure, who, but...

He liked himself a lot less than average, tonight. Someone was talking to him, because he’d rejoined the party, and it wasn’t really that hard to imagine slitting his throat, just for fun, because he kept wanting to do something he wasn’t sure he could handle, without everything in his life being ruined, for real, so he could stop behaving like such a coward, already, and deal with something actually the matter.

He was less than likely to annoy her, now, but Jason had returned, and consoled her, some, and wasn’t sure how much harder it would be, to come back from something like the dive she’d nearly taken, just sitting alone in her room, watching the window again, and he asked her how long she’d wanted to get herself killed for no reason, for.

“It’s less like he wants to kill me and more like he wants to own me, more yet. The dead Ace of Diamonds, I mean.” She wasn’t really sure what she was talking about, exactly, and she wasn’t used to talking this way with Jason, ever, at all.

“More to yours and set for mine it were because and there in fore again? I should know you less that this was ever more because you were less than ideal for him or anyone like him, fool girl. Speak little less of what you know of love past your elder heart, I am, and let me tell you well enough and now that I can’t ever not be a well set parent to your idol affections as idolatrous as you care to ever pretend to be, so set more less that

you'd ever want to love Clovis as you've already had to for any other reason than that he was made for to love you as well, so and there without them both, you could not be called '*in love*' by any heart who knows the score, again, for there in love you both are, together, and so the in is what's in for. Not did he say to you, presently just maybe, that he was in love with you, and he and both you knew it true, in exactly as he said it there?"

"At fore?" she asked him. "More to yours and set, you've said he was not at all at once what I'd thought, or less before again?"

"Moreover thereon intuit again, good sir. How fairest thee to become an idolatrous cur form fairy fae? Madness has it at thee, or Queen Map hath been with thee."

He was less liking the idea that somebody didn't want to kill him, at the party, again, for about, the seventh time he'd counted, something... He wasn't sure why he kept thinking he'd kept track of anything like that, other than to stamp it out, or not think about it and do something about it anyway, but he was less and more inclined to have it out with anyone, as of late, and more wanted clover forrit or something in a drink, for mix.

More and less that he was there before it again, he found himself sick of the hedgemaze's outskirts, and wandered his way into it, sure he wasn't about to get anywhere far before he started crying, and didn't really want to stop, either, and his ribs hurt, and he was pretty sure he was far enough away from anyone to not be heard, forrit.

"Less and more it was that there was before, Jeffrey! I cannot for to go to him, again! So what say you to anything I think to know or pretend to know means Nothing to me! For say it said it was for Nothing was there and Nothing was there before and we had Nothing for us to know about one another and None of that matter, Jason! None of that mattered because it was *so* much fun to be around him, before *everything* started going to hell, again, and he brought me out and I can't even *touch* him or tell him what I know of him, and he thinks every move he makes has to be to help somebody, to kill a witch, or out a scheme, and every time he does it, he gets sick when no one thinks he's anyone but a killer, again, and again, and again.... .."

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 32

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 1 • Alaias, son of Brenadin

Last of all in this place, of all places, did Alaias think he wasn't ready, yet, for this sort of journey, because he hadn't even had to kill anyone, but had done so, anyway, when the fool bandits who'd pegged him as wealthy, for the fine black northern cape he wore over his shoulders and breast, and couldn't be helped but to dispatch them without drawing his broadsword, or thinking to, mostly, until after, when he wondered what sort of shows of force he would be capable, in a place such as this.

Honeybadger, his mountain horse, wasn't enjoying the less than freezing temperatures, any, but that was only because they'd spent so long in the highest fordes, that it was a lot easier for him to adapt if he had something fun to do, which he didn't apparently, until Alaias checked him in at a stable with a boy quite fond of large horses, apparently, who'd never even seen a creature so large in all his life, and Honeybadger took to him right away, whatforrit.

Likely as not, his fresh beard wasn't going anywhere, right away, but he didn't really know what to do about that, because he thought it might bring trouble for him, when the sellsword searchers came round, and he figured well enough that it wouldn't make too much a mark, since it was black as obsidian cut you for, and well grown, anyway, so he looked to have come from somewhere that simply bred a more powerful creature than these, here, in the lower fordes of Albion.

Liars hated the phrases he used, from his mountain home in Brenadin, where it never snowed but once a year, when Optriks would appear, and visit with his people, and Alaias had lived and worked at the temple of Optriks his whole life, and didn't understand what he'd heard, from so many travellers, all his life, of how other temples seemed to feel, and what they thought Gods should be treated like, in the real world.

"He doesn't actually visit you, you know," said one such traveller, and no one was less inclined to tell him of the first day of winter, when such a thing could be proven easily enough, and always was, than Alaias, when he'd met him, and hadn't killed him, per se, just roughed him up in the mind a bit more than was average, was all.

Less than he'd had to have left, before, he'd died outside the looking glass a thousand more times than he'd wanted to, and someone was telling him never to try it again, in this place, and find out what would happen if he didn't know how to return. Not being an immortal wasn't a *completely* foreign concept to Alaias, but he couldn't understand why more people didn't know who his real father might have been.

It was easy enough to imagine a demigod among the men of Brenadin, considering what Alaias had always been capable of, in temple speak and searching for liars and hounds foreon and throughout all his years as a boy, there.

He wasn't much more than a young man, now, barely past his rites of passage, in some, for others, but he'd had as much freedom as he needed from the man who'd raised him, Aelus, who Alaias had always called father, what forrit.

He was not his father, though; that was apparent enough when he told Alaias never to doubt what he already knew, and never had to prove to anyone else, anyway, other than to be exactly just the way he'd wanted to be.

Liars could tote that they might be the child of Marifirth, or a less present god than Optoly had always been, to the people of Brenadin, who loved him yet still, and it was hard enough to imagine how old he was going to have to become, just to begin to believe that he really could have been half god, or close to it, and he'd felt the call to the blue, and hoped he could learn it here, in Albion, far south of the Gouldian mountains he'd grown up on.

"More lies, tell us here again, and here we are again, so set more lies, and there's to more so set my life again, what forrit?" He asked the barkeep, who looked like he might be supposing this one was mad, whatforrit, anyhow.

"How to say less than you'd like me for," he asked again, then produced a gold colored coin, and two more, "or set less that yes, it is not gold, and no, I do not care who you tell."

He looked at the pieces in Alaias's hand, took them, bit one, briefly, laughed, then stuck them in his apron pocket. "No more, forrit? Well enough and good, mountain man. How long for you to stay in our fair city?"

"Fair enough and good for a while. Do you like the other speaks too, then, sir?"

He brightened. "Definitely more than some others I've not wanted to get thinking in, again. Too many morons to serve without knowing how to cut them apart with scissors."

He gestured that he might have felt like that before, with a sideways bob of his head, whatforrit. "Low enough I've had to get, you know, down far high from the mountains. But until I've sold my cloak and cut my hair, I doubt I'll get less than a wayward want for lack of understanding further."

"Not so frightening, you might be lookin', without that damn magic beard, sorcerer."

"Sorcerer? Not so, just yet. Hoping for it, well enough, and though. I'd heard tell of a sorcerer here in this part of Albion?"

"You mean Optoly, the mayor, out here?"

"What is a mayor?"

"A city lord, apparently by popular election from people no one seems to know how they got to get to be the electing people, what for."

"Not well liked, then, this Optoly?"

"Not sure I can say much more about him, really. If you like clever coin, you might as well take it up with Maz, the information broker in uptown, whatforrit again, no sir, at least... somewhat forrit."

Alaias decided not to press the barkeep any further, and he didn't really want this grog he'd had poured for him, so he left without worrying about it, and then decided he didn't want to go into uptown looking this conspicuous, so he made for a market, down here in the poorer quadrants, and he doubted there was such a thing as an evil city that didn't look something like this one.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 33

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 2 • Eliwood, Lord of Aejges

“Proper or not, you’re an idiot. I’d lay with my maiden mother before I’d let the likes of your indecent prick inside her, cur.” The young lord despised the word minced, on most occasions.

“You insolent dog!” And yet the stupid lord didn’t have the dare withall to strike him, like he’d raised his hand for.

Eliwood wore gold and white today, for no occasion other than to rip apart the idea that he couldn’t handle these insatiable suitors and hounds after his mother’s holdings, just because he was young enough for them to stay the hell away and laugh for all they were worth, for less and there’s more to all of it, anyhow. Liars, all, and he wasn’t really sure why they were so stupid all the times.

“You have a mouth on you, boy.”

“General Taes, arrest this lord on irritation of the court and noble birth.”

“Did you just make that charge up, my lady?”

“Sovereign lady, cur,” corrected Eliwood, and he wasn’t serious, “I can make a better one up for you, if you like me to...”

“Irritation of the court and noble birth will do fine, I suppose,” he declared, and moved up the carpeted stairway toward the throne, where the lady mother to young lord and future ruler Eliwood, Mar Se Au, lounged and watched her general take the lord, who loudly objected, but had no forces to speak of, inside the halls, and Eliwood wondered whether or not he needed a cape every day, for this, or just today, and sometimes, really...

“You’re quite less the noble boy when you have less enough for all our friends to know about you, young one.”

He smiled out of the corner of his mouth and half turned to her, whatforrit; “And what to say to do, mother, at a minute or two, to two?”

“A thing distinctly hard to say and harder still to do...”

“Once for once I knew the rest,” and he headed down the stairs, as was warranted, his cape flowing nicely behind him, squared at his shoulders, “that this was theirs before, the rest. More and last, for this our tuuuuune!” he called from running down the palace halls, away to the front yard, again.

“More to yours and yours to mine, young one!” she called after him, and he’d heard her well enough, forrit.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 34

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 3 • Alice

Lies do not become us, you know.

“Sort it out for set, Cat. I’m tired of not killing cards, today. Who else needs to pay?” Alice was lately a different sort of card killer, and lately more and less, she’d spare few words for the cat’s antics, again, lately, sometimes, evertimes, or maybe therefore once forever again...

He smiled, then. *“Who do you think we’ve become, young Alice? How’s to tell how old you aren’t, anyway? Wonderland is changing well enough and fast, they say...”*

“You know what else, they say?” She looked wild, for a minute. “They say, Aslan, is on the move.”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 35

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 4 • Patsu

“*Never again,*” Patsu breathed, staying his heart, he thought, maybe. “*I’ll never forget you again, Wendy...*” He’d never had to remember anything so bad in his life, he figured. Could this be real... or not?

“*Never again, Wendy*” he breathed again. He *had* to know the crystal wouldn’t really work; that it wasn’t going to be like before, that that all had to be dream, after dream after dream he hadn’t been able to stop having lately.

“*Go,*” he hissed to himself, and his bare feet took off across the bare stone tiles, racing him out across the narrow terrace, toward the skies out below, far high and above, below the floating slab of land he’d crashed his plane on, to find what he’d needed here... to fly without the craft he’d never been able to stop building, all his life...

He jumped, flew, dove, cried out what he thought he knew about what was happening, that everything was real, and this had to work, and he knew that it could, too. The crystal necklace he wore ignited in a blue shatter of colorburst light, and he took off across the skies, riding the torrents of wind that flew through the air with him. “Sheeetaaaa!!” he screamed out, for her. “I’m coming for youuuu!!”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 36

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 5 • Alaias

Death could not become him again, he wasn't so readily sure as all that, forrit, but long enough between his lives, perhaps he could have warranted a deeper look into his own mind, but he couldn't figure on what was bothering him so much, still yet and more again...

He could have stayed at the information broker's estate, but he was less and little inclined to spend too much more time near and around Angelica, who was going to go to dinner with him, tonight, anyway, and he was fair enough and sure he didn't want to not get something decent to wear for it, but decided he wasn't a girl, so he just went to look at swords at a traveling market he'd noticed in the city, out here.

"How long is it to take to witness something such as this?" declared a show stopper, apparently, though less and more like he was being a dork, and more like he had a really good idea to get rid of right away right now for you, sir...ma'am... clever boy... pretty girl... Whoever happened to be near, so Alaias thought of screwing with him, but decided it sounded boring, and continued on, past some other stalls, till a boy with orange hair and freckles sat up atop a storefront, near this traveling market, looking curious about what was going on, but naked, altogether.

Alaias looked around as subtly as he seemed to be able to, but... "Oh, no one is going to notice me, I don't think. They're quite oblivious, you know," said the boy.

"You're quite young to be so bold."

"Young enough to be bold for sure," said he.

His eyes were too green from this distance. "You're a god, then?"

"Who's to say I'd even *want* to be a god anymore? That'd be madness in itself, you know. The courts of chaos have taken amber, well enough and good, and all the hells and wills won't save the rest of all the used to people, you know? People too used to the olden days, and long ago and what was what?"

"People not like you, you mean. A child. Merkados, is it?"

The boy didn't stand, but swung his naked legs, still, over the entryway to the store front, but more of the crowd was busy and hummed loudly enough that none cared to notice Alaias talking to no one, apparently.

"People don't like not to see me, you know." He looked out at the crowds, gathered at the trading market there. "Looking's hard enough to get won in, these days, and they're clothing naked children a much more too often than I'd warrant was healthy at all I'd say."

"So they can see you, then...? They don't know how to keep what's in them, though."

"More or less that none can see what I do not want them to. I am basically completely invisible to all, and yet somehow still naked for it. What should be the point of being naked, I wonder, if no one can see you in the nude?"

"I'm not familiar with the turn of phrase, boy."

"Merkados was not my name for less than an hour, or more. How well do you wish to know the blue, before you use it unwisely?"

"I don't take favors from stray gods." He wasn't going to surely depart, but he was wiser than to try not to think about it really hard. "Why?"

"Happy enough you'd have to stop acting like you can't look at my body, temple boy, it's what I put it there for. So for and well enough and later, I think you should seek out the local mayor sooner, rather than later, and do with him what a smart son of Brenadin would be willing, for."

"Is he of the blue, then?" He spoke of the mystic arts.

"Not so. He is of white, you know. He likes to wear lots of blue, though, maybe to cover it up."

"I'd never seen white magic before I saw your pale skin getting ignored by hoards of busy market goers. Am I really mad for seeing and talking to you here like this?"

Merkados laughed accordingly, and looked around, his too-green from afar eyes took in the sights of the people, eagerly. "I should like to think they'll learn to forget some of this pain, you know..."

Alaias looked out at them, too. "Not one or more, less again. I can't say I've ever seen the likes of this

before, and yet it's a familiar old sting. Do you know well enough and good where I come from, fair boy child?"

Merkados smiled out of the corner of his mouth, looked Alaias up and down, a moment, and said, "You could know me well enough again, you know, if we wasn't has so busy, as before and now. Let's again tomorrow, though, and see how old one playground is."

Alaias wasn't standing alone; he was at the market, outside a particular storefront, and there was no child, there, on the rooftop, any longer, so Alaias broke away from where he was and hurried off, not forgetting to stop by the swords long enough to see if he was being followed, which wasn't occurring, presently, and he made his way to another part of the market, not sure why he'd wanted to run so badly for, until he realized how sick some of these people seemed to be, looking around like they wanted to make someone bleed or suffer for just being there, alive.

He was sure enough well and good that this sort of place was going to be crazier and crazier to not be witnessing, the further he digressed into Albion's shorelands with the Gouldian mountainrange proper, here at the base of them, and so for the rest of what he'd witnessed, he stayed well away from the southern edge of town, and watched the mountains he'd come from, often, in the distance, and wondered when the last time he'd seen a temple of Merkados, the god of children and mischief, out there in its reaches.

Not one, he realized. Merkados didn't have any temples out there. He shouldn't have; there were too many happy children to even bother with one. They were everywhere, getting into much trouble with one another as they had to keep I called playing, and it was hard enough to imagine where in the hell the children here, would go to play safely at all.

"Excuse me," he said to a particularly wealthy looking merchant, slipping him some coin, for whatever his attitude might afford in expedience. "Just a word?"

"Surely well enough and good, what can I do for you, sir?"

"How many temples do you know of near and about the city? Gods' domains, as it were?"

"Only temple I know about is Optoly's, honestly."

"*Optoly's*? The mayor lives at a temple?"

"One word, or two?" he asked him.

"One is well enough and fine. What god does..." he didn't bare to ask. "The *only* temple to the gods you know of, is Optoly's estate, whatforrit?"

"Not just so, now that you mention it. There's uh, three or four deities I can't place the names of."

"You're lying to me, for coin, and I'll just as soon as wring you for wasting my time and patience."

"Fair enough a gesture. Merkados is looking for trouble, if you want to tell the truth of it."

"What does that even mean?"

"Means he's been screaming his bloody head off from inside his temple walls, and no one knows why, or how to stop him. Optoly thought he might get close and try to see what was what about it but the screams dropped him before he got past the threshold."

That wasn't... terrifying, or anything. Alaias wanted to wring this man, anyway, for not knowing what a gaping fool that made him. "What the *hell* do you think Merkados is screaming out for?"

"Not sure I could guess at the ways of gods, above, below, sir."

He grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him closer. "Children, you idiot! Where the hell are all this village's bloody children?!"

"What, hey, I!" he was thrown back a bit, so he could look around like an idiot, for a second, and stammer that he didn't know what to say to him about it.

Alaias stormed through the market, and it didn't take long for people to start to notice him, and move quickly out of his way. He wore his sword on his back, now, since he'd sold his black fur cloak, and was in some blue trousers, black boots, from the temple up north of here, and a short haircut, and a shave, forrit. He didn't look anything like the mountain man who'd appeared in old town, earlier that day, and he was hoping that he still had well enough about him to practice the green without thinking, or feeling.

He didn't... he realized. The thought disturbed him. He hadn't been sure, exactly, where he'd been going with that train of thought, but he didn't actually have any real magic, he thought, and he wasn't sure if he knew what that even meant, at all.

He hadn't been able to stop from going to Optoly's estate, whatforrit, and it was the information broker,

Maz, who'd set up a brunchon, of sorts for him, but Alaias wasn't worried, anymore, about how long this was going to take, because there was something far more intriguing on the entryway he could witness from the foyer they had him relaxing in, while he waited for the mayor Optoly to become available, again.

"Optriaks would have my head if I didn't tear this place down, brick by brick," he witness, staring in abject irritance at the ancient symbols being used on the etching above the hall down into the proper wing of Optoly's estate.

The signs they used for 'optriaks', at the temple, and elsewhere, were for courage and ancient wisdom, which could also mean blue or white snow, together, and were used for another of several connotations Alaias was familiar with herein; godhood.

"You've got the symbol for godhood, in your name?" he asked the man he knew had to be Optoly, who approached from the hall.

"I beg your pardon? You're Alaias, then, aren't you?"

"I'd have less than this word with you, forrit. Who are you?"

"Optoly, some call me; it's only a nickname though. Did you mean to tell me you know what those symbols up there actually say, whatforrit?"

"Breaker of Minds," he witnessed, "Keeper of Hearts, Wielder of Blue and White."

"*Breaker* of minds, surely?"

He shrugged. "I'm a temple boy. I think my mind goes to quickly to the bold and dramatic, sorry. It's just an odd thing to see used like that, even outside of home."

"Most unbecoming of you then."

"Do not mistake my apology for lack of fury, for it. I am foreign, so I'll stay my tongue further, about it."

He looked back up at the symbols, and Alaias knew he was too curious about having Alaias look at some books for him, to interpret, or opinionate on, to send him away, just then, or maybe it was something else, whatforrit. "They're not the same as the ones you use in the temple, are they?"

"They are not the subject we'd become friends over, mayor."

"Please, then, call me Francis, and we won't have to worry about such a thing, any longer."

"Well enough and good, Francis. My name is Alaias, it's a pleasure to see you so good tempered, after what could have been an unpleasant rough start. How is your town fairing, sir? I hear you have trouble at one of the temples, innit."

"Oh, quite so, yes, though I doubt if you know anything about how to deal with that. Not a practitioner of the red, are you?"

"I know nothing about it, by that name. Is that another brand of magic?"

"Yes, as forbidden in these parts as most tekno magic, I think. Not that I'd have harranged you for it; it's nothing to know of things, only to practice them, whatforrit."

"That sounds idle, at best."

"Come again?"

"Nothing for it, nevermind. What seems to be the trouble with Merkados? Or did you have another matter you'd like to discuss, firstly's? I've been rude, and hogged the conversation's most dramatic points, so far."

He smiled and laughed a little. "Well enough for good reason, I'm sure. Come along, young Alaias, then, and witness my study, will you? It's well enough stocked with refreshments and there's something about an occurrence like this one, at Merkados's temple, that I've yet to work out or understand, just well enough to do anything about it. Perhaps you can have a look at it."

"Surely, well enough and good. Do you mind if I, uh, who is that?"

"Her? Oh, that's Emily. Emily! Emily! A word of you?" He hailed to a serving girl, apparently, who was well along with child, down the other hall, and she hurried down toward them, at a measured enough pace, he supposed.

"Yes, sir?" she asked him, smiling and bowing her head briefly, in way of greeting to the stranger, and looking instead at Optoly, or, Francis, rather, the mayor.

"Nothing for it less and good," said Alaias, before Francis made him look like a creep about it. "Perhaps

you could help us with something? It's rather urgent."

She looked quite surprised at Alaias's cadence, for sure. "Of course for well enough and good, my lord. Have you come to us about the temple, then?"

"What could-"

"I have, in fact," said Alaias. "Would you allow Emily to accompany us to the study, Francis? I do believe we have need of her expertise, in this."

"What ever do you... oh, surely, I'm wasting all our time, aren't I? Surely, yes, come along, Emily, and we'll see about what dear young Alaias is referring."

"You're from the north then? The Gouldian mountain man?"

"Well enough and good, I am."

"You're not so big as I imagined you. How tall are you?"

"Taller than you, shorter than Francis. What was not apparent?"

She smiled. "No, well enough and not. You call the mayor-"

"Here we are!" said Francis, and opened the double doors into his study. She dropped off, and they entered.

"What have you noticed in the temple so far?" Alaias addressed to Francis, first, presently, while he moved to pour some drinks, for them.

"Nothing I can care to witness without embarrassment. His screams keep anyone from getting even close to the temple, I'm afraid."

Emily didn't think that was true at all, apparently, and she looked very uncomfortable, just then, but she smiled and fetched the book Francis asked of her, quite readily.

"Do you enjoy your time here, Emily?" Alaias asked, taking the book, when she offered it to him, and peering at the lettering on the inscription.

"Well enough, I'm quite far along, by now."

Francis said, "Yes, I had intended to let Emily hurry off home, soon enough. Did you have need to detain her, Alaias?"

"Surely, or I would not have asked her urgently, or so. Where did you find reference to the screams in the temple?" he handed the book to Francis, for him to find the placement.

"Ah, see, let's see."

"It's near the back," said Emily, "far, a little, from where you dog eared the pages."

"What in hell's own names," Francis started.

"She's not going to stop doing that," said Alaias, "don't worry, for a few minutes. Did you find it?"

"Yes, it's here, right where she said it."

"Moreover therein again," he read aloud, taking the open book he was handed. He skimmed through what he could, retracing the lines, again and again, a few at a time, absorbing the different connotations and meanings, therein. "This isn't very simplistic. It says no one had to tell them what to know about how this could be happening, and why none but the rest of us could stop to scream back out at them."

"I can't know what that means at all," said Optoly. "Did you... what are you doing, Alaias?"

He was standing, close to Emily, now, and he touched her brow, and asked her if she felt alright, then ushered her into a seat, rather urgently. "She's going into labor," he said.

"What the hell? Now, you mean?"

"No, she'll die if we move her," he answered.

"I didn't say to- WHAT?!"

"Merkados, the god of children, has been screaming, nonstop, from his temple walls, for days, and you want to argue with a temple priest about childbirth?"

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 37

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 6 • Alice

“So set more in for again, for again, for again, so set more in for, again and fleece was white as snooow~..” sang Alice, and the little girl beside her looked at her funny, as if she’d said something awful. “Please don’t do that again,” she said forrit, “that sounded awful... what *is* that sound, anyway?” “Not enough!” she cried. “Not enough for what?” she bemoaned, bemoanedly. “This one, happy one, your one, sad one... yes and no? Yes and no?”

“Just what are you talking about, Alice! You’re not being very nice to me, and I don’t know why!”

“Look about, little card, for who’s to come to play? Where’s thine little lamb, again, or where from whence did she commeth, before?”

“I don’t know where she is, and I don’t *want* her here! My *mother* sang that song for her before she died and I can’t stand the sound of it, and I don’t know what to do!”

“Your mother’s not so dead as all that, you know, says the Cheshire cat, I know,” said Alice, to the young card girl, Mary, upon the hill beneath the tree upon the wall and sitting back to talk and play and sing and laugh but not the way the warg would have...

“Why do you hate that song, so much, Mary?” Alice was an older girl, than Mary was, at the time, and they had less and more to talk about, concerning all different manner of things.

“I don’t like the way it makes me feel. It’s like someone’s singing a bad chord over and over again.”

“Do you know why your mother sang that song, to the little lamb, you know now?”

“No, why would she sing such an awful song to a little girl, either?” “She doesn’t want you to have any fun she doesn’t approve of, I think, so she created a warg hound for you, didn’t you know?”

“What the devil is a warg hound, Allison? That sounds awful!” “Now it’s Alice, and I’ve told you that before.”

“Sorry, Alice. What’s a warg hound, though? It sounds awful” “Well I’ll tell you, so listen good, a warg... ah, there’s that little lamb, coming round the hill again. Do you want me to kill it for you?”

“What? No, oh, no, that would be an awful thing to do, Alice...”

“Not so, I think. A warg hound is... ah, hello lamb.” She flashed the knife, broadly, “want a smile, forrit?”

“Alice, stopit! Mother will know in the afterlife and she’ll tell father about it! I won’t be able to see you again, if you keep threatening my lamb like that! Put that knife down, Alice, you’re scaring me and her both, withit!”

“Still not sure what you are, then?”

“No, I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’ll put my knife down and never use it again, if you’ll-” “Well I don’t want you to never use it again, that would be awful too. There’s lots of awful cards that need killing, still, and you’re awful, awful good at it, Alice.”

“Well, *thank you*, Mary. Want to know why your...” she looked at the lamb, again. Mary’s father was coming down the hill, from the house, shouting something, from far away.

“Watch it,” she said, briskly, and strode down the hill toward Mary’s father, humming, “Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb... Mary’s father bred it for to keep his girl in check...” She had cards and more to kill, today...

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 38

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 7 • Alaias

The fact that no one had acted, thus far, on the Merkados temple shrieking, disgusted Alaias, but he had a theory as to what, particularly, was going on, in there.

This time, he didn't wake her suddenly, but gently, and Francis had retired, some time before. "Emily. Bring Miles, alright? We have somewhere to be; I think you know where."

She didn't nod, or anything, she just stared at him, a minute, coming awake and processing what he'd said. "The t-" he'd held his finger up to her lip, to silence her, and nodded, then rose silently, in the darkness of the study, still yet again he was with her... ..

It was long past dark, when they got out there, to the temple, and the shrieking didn't die down, or not wake the baby, but they stepped closer, Miles in Emily's arms, and he was sure this was right, and she didn't seem afraid of collapsing, either.

"You have to *want* to know what's wrong, I think, and be able to handle it. Merkados isn't some wild chaos lord, or something."

"He isn't..." he stopped talking, when they got so near the shrieks might have buckled their knees, but didn't, and Alaias felt a pal of calm wrap over the three of them.

"See?" she asked him, then, still approaching. "Do you feel that, now?"

"Have you been up this far, before?"

"No, never," she replied curtly, and he realized she'd been in before, perhaps several times, and he was eager to know why she'd let him get this far without telling him so, so, "Well if we get in here and..." he stopped short, as he stared at all the children, resting or playing around in different parts of the temple. The shrieking was not present, here, and in fact he could hear some of the children playfully singing to one another, instead.

There were no toys, nor items of any kind. Alaias didn't know how long this place could have been barren for, but he was getting the picture of it, now. "Who's been taking the others?"

None of the children replied, right away, then; "Can you help us, then? We can't leave, or he'll get to us, too."

"Where are the others?" he asked more directly.

"Optoly has them," said Emily. "I couldn't tell you before we got inside, here. None of the other mothers have come in here, since the children showed up, a few days ago, and no one has bothered to check, since.

"A merchant tried to come in," said one girl, blonde, and quite forlorn, to behold, at first glance. "He wanted to see what was happening, but he didn't like children, I think."

"You're as safe in here as I could hope for, while Merkados stands, and he does. He spoke to me earlier, if you'd believe, and I know that's not impossible, do you?"

"What did he say?" "Tell us, please!" "What did he say, sir?!" "What did he say, forrit?"

"We're here to help stop what's happening, alright?" said Emily. "I'm sorry I couldn't come to you more often, before, but I had to see what I could find out at the estate, whatforrit."

"This is a lot easier than I'd have expected," said Alaias. "Not the rescue, part, but getting in here. I don't know anything about what Merkados intends for this place, but we'll need to leave, and find somewhere in oldtown we can hold you up, for the night, and a few more days, if we need."

"How will you get us all to old town, then?"

"If the shrieking is persisting, then we're better to do it altogether. Do you know why I said it like that? Because the shrieking hasn't stopped for days, now, and I don't think it will really let up, until you're all safe."

"What did Merkados say, sir Alaias?"

He looked at her oddly, a blonde girl, with braided hair. "How did you know my name?"

"They all know it," said Emily. "They've been waiting for Merkados's champion for weeks, now, in here. Time's not the same when you're being kept prisoner, not at all, Alaias."

He didn't really not like Emily, at the moment, but she was certainly different to behold in any way shape or form, so he reassessed her, for a moment, and talked to the kids, again. "I need to get to the estate as quickly as possible, and find the other children there, and rescue them. Do any of you know how many there are? Or where they're being kept?"

"They won't know anything like-"

"Let THEM say, please," he cut her off harshly, this time.

"Sorry, I... of course."

"We don't know, I think, none of us do."

"I haven't seen Albie or Allison or Raxon or Allister, maybe," said one of them.

"Alistair's dead, numbskull!"

"He is not!"

"I'll find as many as are there and alive; you have my word. My solemn oath, alright?"

"Are you really a son of a god, then?" asked one of the girls.

He'd paused, just before hurrying out of the temple. "Son of a god? No, I don't know that, for sure. I've always been able to do things other people can't, though. I'll do whatever I can, and I know I can't fail, so I won't delay any further."

"You're just going to-" He'd gone, already, without delay, like he'd said, so she trailed off, and he assumed she would stay in the safety of the temple, with the children, this time.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 39

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 8 • Eliwood

No idea stayed with him, for too long, out here, but he was tired of waiting for his friend, Tama, and he was a lot *more* tired of not having anyone to talk to besides the spirits in the trees and river, whatforrit.

He moved his arms, forward, up to his ankles in the river water. Ripples pressed forward, moving out across the rippled surface. Small waves formed, and he brought his arms smoothing back, sideways, around his body, and he swirled the water around and near him, taking turns with himself, to push and pull and feel out what he moved.

“They breathe less, when you get so near to them, you know,” said Tama’s voice, and Eliwood looked over his shoulder, at him. Tama was very old, and had been the advisor to his father, Lord Delwood, before he’d died, and before that, *his* mother, the Sovereign Lady Neuma. He looked older than a teenager, though, and much younger than a grandfather might have been... ..

“Tell me not to be here, and I will not,” said Eliwood, smoothing out the surface of the river, and hoping he could breathe easier, without wanting to torrent the water through the trees, again. “No good,” he declared, unable to breathe right, when he stopped moving.

He kicked up, sending a flurry of water out from him, and thrust forward, then, stepping forward, sending a flash flood out across the other riverbank. “Don’t take it easy or anything, you’re get sick again,” said Tama.

He wasn’t about to keep from getting sick, he figured, and he didn’t know why, but he didn’t want to not hold back, either, so maybe that was why, so he started pulling away all the things he’d been afraid of, with it, and he kept swinging, kicking, sending wave after wave of energy through the water, rippling for power and sending it screaming forward and throughout, again... ..

Each, thrust, swung, here, about, and smoothed out, he brought it in, through him, and around him, and moved, faster, kicked, higher, thrust, deeper, wanted, easier, and the water swirled around him, again, kicking up faster, and he wanted to scream about it, and moved again, kicking and thrusting, smoothing and flying about, trying his best to keep his body from seizing up on him in exhaustion, and carrying out the movements as best he could do, forrit.

It hurt a lot, when he quit early, forrit, and he wasn’t about to not, because he was tired of doing this, too, and he wanted to talk to Tama, some, in case the old man had to leave early, again. “You missed my birthday, again,” he said as he was getting his dry shirt on, from a branch he’d left it at.

“My dear boy, I’ve never not missed your birthday, it’s tradition! They had me rushed in all hurry hurry just after you were born, so here I am on the heels of it again, set to make sure everyone knows Eliwood can, in fact, breathe easily.”

“Sort of,” said Eliwood, and stopped breathing, for a second, which wasn’t as easy as it had used to be, and so he started again.

“How’s your heart rate?”

“The same as ever.”

“How do you know you’re still alive, then, boy?”

“So it is,” he said, simply.

“I have something for you, you know. A birthday present, although, I’d have given it to you anyway, whether you’d been born forrit, or not.”

“Oh much and more well, forrit. Is it that spirit token you promised me?”

“*Token?* Please, Eliwood, it’s called a medallion. Show some decorum.”

“Well enough and good, then; I don’t want one, anymore.” Eliwood left his boots still by the river, and didn’t close his shirt all the way, either, and walked away from Tama, down the riverside.

Tama didn’t not let him get away somewhere before he came back down to find him again. It was hard enough to tell anyone who listened that he didn’t need to be here, just to rule the riverlands, but they didn’t want to listen, and they called him young and brash, often. “You’re too young and brash,” said Tama, “What if the

entire river had swallowed you up, for cutting the dance short, early?”

“No one thought it unwise to leave a girl who can’t help but follow your lead, and follow your lead, and follow your lead.”

Tama looked a bit more serious, now. “The river is sick, then?”

“No, I am.” He put his hand to his chest, again. “Me, Tama. The river keeps telling me to run, to go! Get out of here! it says, we don’t want you to feel this way! it cries.”

“Take this, Eliwood.” Tama handed him a fold medallion on a silver chain, and he wondered what, exactly, he wanted this thing for.

He took it, though, and could feel the cold metal he touched as him his name, forrit. He threw the medallion out into the river, and cursed it, then answered, “Nemris, apparently.”

“Nemris?” asked Tama.

“It wanted to know my name,” he said, watching the spot in the river the medallion had disappeared into, when he’d hurled it out into the water. “And that’s all I can think to say. Nemris, Nemris, Nemris, Nemris...”

“He’s not your ally, Nemris.”

“He’s not your friend, Nemris,” Eliwood mocked.

“Why do you think he uses that name? The gray man, above your bedside?”

“He sickens more most than one, and there again, but he’d laugh and tell the rest of the world I was dead, when it happened to be true, or not, and everyone wants to know why I don’t like creepy old men, or something.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen him, Eliwood?”

“Yesterday. He was he’d be coming for me, if I would not come to him, lately.”

“The token, you know, is to keep those dreams far from you, boy.”

He looked out at the river, where he’d lost it. “It didn’t tell me that.”

“You never let it finish.”

“If it wants to be my friend, it can drown in the river for a few more hours, at least.”

“Magic has a way of disappearing, if you do not watch it closely enough, you know.”

“And a way of betraying you, if you forget to punish it.”

“Much and more again, young Nemris, you *are* angry with me, I think.”

“Anger is just what I feel, lately. It comes with the river water, I think, now.”

“Why haven’t you left, then?”

“Killers.”

“Whose killers?”

“None, I just don’t know what to say to you. I’ve never been able to get anywhere away from here, for long. I’m tired of how sick this place makes me feel. I’m tired of going home just to scream out from my room like everyone’s gone fucking mad, or something. Girls don’t interest me, lately. All the ones I know think they’ve got me sorted and figured, by now.”

“How long do you think the medallion should stay in there, for?”

Eliwood reached down, when he saw something moving towards him under the water, and reached beneath the surface, freeing the medallion chain from a tiny baby turtle, who’d swam to the bottom of the river and fetched it for him.

“That’s much healthier to look at,” he said, gazing at the chain again. “Thank you kindly, turtle baby.” The turtle popped up out of the water to do a jump, above surface, and disappeared back underneath, below.

What is your name? it asked him again.

“Eliwood,” he answered. *Nemris* the medallion said back, and he hurled it back into the river again, and sat back down on the rock he’d found, where his feet kicked in the surf, still. “I can do this all year, medallion! My life is over, as I know it, already!” The river thrummed from beneath, and he could see magic swell and rise beneath its surface, for a while. “Not impressed!” he called back.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 40

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 9 • Alaias

Killing Optoly didn't seem like not his only option, so Alaias scouted about the palace grounds, sword drawn, and wondered at the supposed grandeur, of this estate, and realized, pretty early on, that the walls themselves had used to be a temple, and not to Optoly, of course, or even Optriks, but the hall he'd seen the symbol on was an old remnant of a warren, of sorts, to a chamber of Optriks' liking, what more, forrit.

"Xemnas," he decided. That was the resident deity, here in Optoly's palace. The ground beneath him thrummed with power, and he knew he was more than enough, for this place. Two fools with guard weapons came at him, which was the idea, what with the drawn sword and the night prowling, and he dispatched them, without waiting to fiddle.

"You're more a fool than I thought!" he cried out, from a window high above. "Did you think I wouldn't have you followed? It's only a matter of time before we access the temple, Alaias of Brenadin, and then we'll see what you and the other magic-using traitors are hiding."

"From the law you mean?" Archers didn't frighten him, when they appeared at the windows. "Xemnas is waiting for your respects, I think, Optoly."

They'd paused. The name held power, here, and they were afraid, too, when a student of Optriks used Optoly's bastard name, too. "Did you actually think that leaving the first letter of his name, then scribing yours over new tiles, wasn't going to rip you apart? You've invited me here, after all, Optoly. You begged for my godly father to have me send you to hell, for what you've done to Merkados's children."

"Where are the other children now, dog!" cried one of the window archers. "Don't think we don't know you've taken them!"

"They're in the temple, fool! Where none but their friends, may enter! Did you think that screaming meant anything but that children were being kept and tortured, nearby?"

"What are you accusing me of, exactly?!" Optoly cried from above, in the window, still. One of the archers loosed an arrow right into the flesh beneath his left ribcage, and he doubled over, and fell out of the windowframe he'd been leaning against to shout down at me.

"Lord Optoly!" cried one archer. "Traitors!" cried a guardsman. "Hold your fire, all!" cried an authority... interesting...

"You were Xemnas's archers, once, am I wrong?" asked Alaias, thusly.

"Who is Xemnas?" asked one. "Why does- hells above, STAY where you are, man!"

He'd closed the distance between he and Optoly, who was scrambling to try and right himself, bleeding out on the stone of the courtyard. "I'll dispatch him after I find out where he's keeping the children!" he informed the archers and wary guardsmen, on the sidelines, still yet again, whatforrit.

"Are you really the son of Optriks, sir Alaias?"

"Not your sir, but my own" said Alaias. "Not your life, but any I choose to take, what forrit. Take nothing from me, or stay your hand, still yet. Where are the children, cur?" He kicked Optoly's legs out from under him and then kicked him across the side of the face, hard, to knock him askew.

"They're not here!" cried one of the serving women, or an archer, he couldn't tell where from. "He's taken them to-" "Seize her!" cried another of the archer guardsmen, and there was movement, there, on the upper floor. Interesting...

"You'll... you'll never have me feed into your *lies*, cur!" sputtered Optoly.

"Seize yourself, cur, that's the name I used for you." He grabbed him by the hair and pressed the blade diagonally, to his neck and throat, forrit. "Where, are, they?"

"Listen! Listen! You have to understand! I've had them all adopted! They were in danger, here in the city! That's why Merkados's temple is crying out, still yet!"

I pressed the blade, drew more blood, and covered his throat, closer. "Finish him!" someone else cried. "Torture is wrong!"

"Who are you, really?" I asked of Optoly.

“No one! I am no one, to you!”

“Then where will I find *all* the children you stole away?”

“There’s nothing to it! I can’t say what I don’t know, and I don’t know what you’r”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 41

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 10 • Eliwood

“It’s not enough to be here, any longer, mother. The river doesn’t do as I’m doing, and rot in a castle.”

“So well enough you should go, young son. But where to, did you seek to venture? The river’s edge is lined with thine father’s adversaries, and yours, hoping the riverlord will take to it, again.”

“There are other rivers, and I need not travel by them, for now,” he said to her. “I’d like to go with Tama, if that doesn’t seem mad, or anything. I don’t think I need some sort of retinue, or something ridiculous like that.”

“More or less the same as before, young one, I seriously doubt anybody won’t want to grab at you alone, unsaid, but together you two would make a fine pair of travellers to happen to ignore, if the need arises.”

“Ignore well enough that I won’t not want to look rich, I think.”

“Rich, or well spent?”

“True enough and clever, mother. I’ll just have some blue made up for myself, with red inseam on the cape, and gold trim, for my tunic.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Dangerous enough forrit, I’m sure. Where is your sword, I wonder?”

“On my hip, like a sod at practice with himself.”

“Or a boy with too many capes, perhaps.”

“Sure enough and well, mother. Perhaps a longcoat will suffice for me, some day, on a battlefield.”

“You have your father’s hair, you know...”

Eliwood looked at her odd. He’s seen his father’s portraits, before. “You said it was my grandfather’s red hair, once.”

“Not so, I think. I never met your grandfather, I reason.”

“No...? Perhaps in his youth then. Lord Delwood had brown hair, and so do you.”

“Oh, he did, didn’t he?” She laughed. “I’m so silly, sometimes. Of course he had. Nothing to say, forrit, anyway.”

“How many years ago did you meat my father, anyway?”

“He was much smarter than the other lordling boys I’d met, thus far.”

“Didn’t you meet him as babies?”

“Hm? Oh, well yes, of course, so you can see how many other lordling boys I had to compare him to, at the time.”

“Right,” Eliwood said, not sure how to laugh, exactly, so he didn’t and played with his tongue, reasoning what to do.

“Why don’t you tell me what your spirit token has been whispering, beneath that shirt of yours? Come, show me.”

Eliwood reclined beside his mother, and pulled the medallion out of his shirt, around his neck by its chain, and showed her the etchings on it, still.

“It’s been in the river already, then? Not with you?”

“How can you tell?” he asked her.

“Not so white, around the edges, and more or less, what do *you* think, fool boy?” she teased him, and shoved his shoulder lightly. “What did you do, forrit?”

“I don’t know. It was irritating me, so I cast it in the river. Twice or thrice, reasonably speaking. Both times a baby turtle brought it back up to me, after a spell unspoken, and the third time I dove for it myself, when it turned the river gold, to call back to me.”

“Sure enough a story you’d never have to tell any less fantastically, wanton son.”

“What, you don’t believe me?” he was smiling at her.

“Sure enough, I’ve seen more enchanting things enough to reason why you’d spire to run off with a cambion, now.”

“Well I’m a cambion too, they say.”

“So they say, yet none have the gal to suggest I actually laid with an incubus, besides my own son, apparently speaking.”

“I didn’t accuse you of anything!” he laughed at her accusation. “Looking swimmingly well, mother, you’re far less off than you were before you had me, set and for again?”

“Your company is well and pleasing enough, dear boy. Though I do wish you’d leave me with a suitor or two to bargain with, now and again.”

“Set to for and innit again, the bargaining you take may need not be with lords who sake their thirst in you, you know.”

“For to be that sons would never have it any other way, I’d wager. Not enough for the river I’d have to know, for. Well enough and good it is, though, that you should let your tailor know your plans, post haste, young one.”

“Sure enough that I would, but had she not already been to my bed when she suggested them, I’d have far less more inclination to lounge with you, a bit further.”

“More forrit in yours again, you are too cheeky, I think, for a wanton lord’s son.”

“Set in for that I’d have you forrit, what in hell for what again? Who’s lord father is wanton? I thought mine was dead.”

“Stupid me, forrit. Wanton means as it always has and I’ve gone and slipped forrit. Dead is dead, well enough, and yes and good, your namesake and father Lord Delwood have died and gone away.”

“Have... you speak well enough and good in riddles, woman. How long for sure departure that you’d have of me?”

“For in some time enough it wasn’t well and good before, young one. How long of you ago did you cast your die upon the route of leaving, henceforth?”

“For sure to have that I would gain leave of my mother, so long as she’d leave of me, I wouldst there depart.”

“Have you, now? Longing for in to that it again, we have long enough to spend for life well spent enough, and said to when I grant my leave you go.”

“So said and I will go.”

“Then come and spend, with me, dead boy, and lounge for some leisure, and have for my company of what you will. But speak no more of lord fathers and realmly tidings, well enough and good for it all, yes?”

“Sure enough that I would be, yes.”

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 42

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 11 • Alaias

Long ago, in a far away place there lived a boy, named Alaias, who knew all the world would lay itself out before him, the day he set out from his mountain homelands, and day was age, and age was now, and yet, he found himself underground, once more, but not as before, searching the corridors below for some sign of the children, being kept there. Boys, mostly, and that didn't frighten him, particularly, but what had happened to the missing girls, he didn't want to think about, because he wasn't sure how not to hunt down the caravans, and find the rest of them, but he was here now, hunting them, and saving what little reserve he had not to rip apart the rest of the staff...

"In due time, if I were not so readily busy, I think..." He wanted to understand what else he could say or do, to speed the process, but he felt compelled not to shout, and trusted his instincts, as always, and wondered at Merkados's intentions, further. Would he have someone else after the girls, already? How long was it going to take Alaias to secure the other children so he could feel safe leaving them here?

"This is madness itself." Where to go? How in hell...? They weren't down here. That much he was sure of, but that wasn't right. There was no way that was right...

"Who's down here...?" he asked into the hallway. Something shivered, in his step. "Show me where you are, so I can help you..." How was this possible? His head was aching, fiercely by now.

Alaias moved more swiftly, down the halls, sure there was something to it, anyway, and his vision blurred a little, when the pain in his head seared, and he balked, stopped, for a moment, and felt out what was happening to him. "You're here..." he witnessed.

Leave us...

Who in the hell could be doing this? One of... "Who are you?" he asked. There was no reply, but that's not why he'd asked. "Sending help, unless we know the score, forrit."

What are you?

He was shivering, and he'd dropped his sword. It was hard to stay kneeling, really. "More or less, the same as I've always been."

A child, you mean. A child with a beard?

"Say the mountain frosts, I think. Do you not..." his head was pounding, piercing, "more or less, are you all alright? I want to free you from this place, now."

You know nothing of what we are...

He deliberated, albeit in short breath. "Xemnas's temple is cursed, right now. It must be rested free of this suffering. Come to the temple of Merkados."

You would send us to another god's domain? Why?

That was... unhelpful, so far as conversational directions were going. "How many are there? How many children does... Alistair? Is that you?"

Sick for more and less, that is not our name.

"You're not the one the little girl at the temple was looking for, then? The one she *knew* when she was challenged, wasn't dead?"

There was nothing, then;

Break enough and done, for you to go about your existence, away from this place. I could crush you, if I chose to...

"Forsee it, then. If you are so powerful, then why do Optoly's prisoners still lay kept here? Is that your doing, I wonder, fiend?"

None could know how many he kept in this place, sir...

Sir did *not* feel pleasant, coming through like it did. "Is it just you then, Alistair? Are you the only one to be freed from here? He took no others?"

No others.

"How is that possible?"

Once a child, broken forgotten, seen without, hence unbroken, so set for more in less, that his was gone in for, that last is time and gone awry is for to know and see what are that this was lost for sure in time that lo and sink this once our rhyme, alive and well, for ease, and sorrow, he lasts, with hell, and breaks, in morrow. Sure, by sign, he tells, what lives, for long, in that, he brings, sure pain, lost in hours and broken pauses set for rifles filled to blasting down the nonbelieving scum who set for hours in lasting end for sure in lasting hope for down, in lost that once was poorly founded back before in last array the chosen gods of lost array.

I was on the floor, of a cell, or something... Not sure where I'd come into it from. Where was this place? I couldn't breathe, forrit. My breath was still, and my whole, narrow point of view put me on sight with the exit to the cell, a narrow, icy chamber, that leaked cold white air from the cracks in the corners, what for.

Who in hell forsaken here? Lost and though it was, I am in here for it. Who are we, in this place? I took my barings inside the narrow icy hall, and breathed none of what was there, but sure enough I could start to see my white breath in front of me, and the feeling returned, that I was taking turns with air, through my chest, which thrummed, now, at the feeling of cold air.

So set in for more, this place was a broken parallax inside itself, and I willed my way to find another venue. No end in sight for this hall, but here for the corner I'm rounding, there will be tile of purple, not brown, I think...

The gray tiles did not change color, but when I rounded the hall, the next floor was violet, and as I stepped across it, pink light seeped into the hall from the cracks running along the corner slots to either wall, on the ground level.

Set more for over innit again, I do believe the plaster was green, on that wall back there, and not yellow. It was blue, when I checked back where I had come from, but not so unlike the blue-green of the plaster in the halls in front of me.

Set for yourself, stranger. Not alone for set in sure, you've most become.

I could liken it to an ugly disturbance in the force, but there was less and more inside of it for less and more or less to be for sure, for sure, and here for less and there was there for more, or less. The halls should open, well enough, to the manor I used to live in, and not at all unlike it, well enough and good.

More so and less, this was not the way I'd come, and the trees that opened up as the hallway widened pulled light from unknown spots high above in the celing, where shatters of rays would pull from otherwise murky shadows above, spontaneously, as though the tree itself, in each one, were the focal point for the sun itself.

These trees were white before, I think, but not so much, any longer. I much enjoy this shade of pink, what for. However long this world should take, I should think to not worry on the color of the grass, set for over that rise, ahead. It was less and more red, for sure, and sure enough not brown in the least, what for.

Break yourself on the rocks in the sideways tunnels, Alistair. It's less like you to want to know the future, you know.

"Please stop it! Leave me alone! I can't take it anymore, I can't be here any longer!"

It's all for less and more, Alistair, broken down and wanting, forever more.

It sucked the life from my heart and lungs, to try not to heart what that was, and I did not cease to let it guide me, through the worlds' hallways that I walked in.

I couldn't describe to you, the hurt in my chest, for seemingly unending hours, traveling through the mist, that kicked up, and breathing in what was here, in this place of dreams...

More so less and there, Alistair. Broken down for sure, you've never been. Has it longing for your hoping, Alistair? Hoping for it all in broken and naked to what you are, to me.

"You're madness itself, Optoly! Hell with all your teachings and hell to all your perverted lies and twisted pleasures, cur!"

I dropped to the ground, unable to catch myself, and my

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 43

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 12 • Alistair

Broken and naked, though he felt, Alistair wanted not for crowning, that he had the circlet on his brow, and nothing more did he need, for the time being, as he watched the stranger cross his way through the pattern Optoly's madness had etched into the chambers beneath the temple, a path untraversable, to most, but to those who knew the pattern of order, within it, and Alistair was not sure where this stranger could have learned such a thing.

More to it that he could have lasted this long, Alistair wanted nothing more than to shed his skin and become something else entirely, but he had little need for a scope of himself outside his normal routine of life and livelihood, forever that he was less and more the same that he'd never wanted to be, and hated the lot in life he sent himself for, apparently, because he didn't know what else to do, when Optoly tried to seize the others, but to be taken himself, and to torment and belittle the captor, and to change and master his mind, so that he could be made to believe he was capturing child after child, all boys, for some reason, because all in what he was, it was all this one boy, who'd mastered the blue well enough to show forrit.

He broke his surroundings down, around him, in this cell, where the stranger from the north had started his route through the pattern, and Alistair wondered what to do about his life and living patterns, here on and innit for. This was sickness, and madness, and hate in all we'd had, before, so longing that he was not at least of which again before gone and out of what he'd set out to become, moreover, less and so that this was not what he'd wanted to achieve, and yet it hurt, endlessly, and he wanted away, and on, and off...

"Not so, anymore, I think..." he whispered to nothingness.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 44

Outside the Looking Glass Chapter 13 • Alaias

simply less than before, it was not enough to bring me back again
I could not find the end of where I was, before so here I stand again
do I not know here what was said before, again this last time and there was more
before that all this ever was, here again and lost, but not before the sounds
echoed back again off the warrens dividing hope and changing epic sagas thereafter
beyond credence, or malice and rage
there and gone within, without, forever more on into what he could hope to suffer
for well enough and set, I am for what I am, broken less and not
here and set for in in this, the blue, for what I am in now
now again, lost not for, changing courses so on surely less than less than sure as all
for less in this what was said for that lost in broken changes coursed
so less and for in all our hopes
that change is wanting, for in sureness hoped and kept by want in sorrow for
change is needing want for hope in black to burrow for less in sureness
broken hallows by the eves, and set in for for less I've known
that all in what my lantern's shown
so here in set before I was, that lost in this, I'm not because
there was blue light, set, there before me, and unbroken here in this place. I'd never before witnessed such a
force, in energy, and could not compel myself to want to look away, and yet, here before I was I could not stay
sheltered, for more pressing fates at hand had their way at my throat, and I could see the dawn of something
new beginning

You are not the same as we thought you were, stanger

less and so I did not think I could speak but to be what I was that was different, for spoken well enough had the
other he'd witnessed in the halls. I broke myself upon the doorway, slammed for what felt like a shattered curse
in time, and here it hit me what lay in the door itself

*Sure enough and well, Alistair, you've nothing left to hope in here for. Break away the rest of your
sickness, for me, and show me how good a son you could be for me to keep at my side.*

sickness for in all hells it was, this was illness I could taste and spat for
how could life for have lived instead of this one once before?

longing that a cold sorrow should creep away from my shins and knees, I kicked at the barrier, and forth it came
to me again

*You're LESS than nothing, fool boy! See how you crawl and beg for life unending? Nothing you've
never wanted for to here deserve, in less than all it was before, cur! Now clean you're sodding blood from the-*
"Sigma!" Green light flashed from my palm and shattered the door barren black, where it had stood, and the
eerie swept shadows retreated, peeled back, screamed, and etched themselves beneath the pallets in the dank
cellway.

"Hell in fire above," Alaias swept forward and took the naked, huddled boy up into his arms, and didn't
delay but to check the room as broadly as he dared, before darting from the hall again, paying witness to the
retreated shadows new hovel, as they warped and fled through the rest of this labyrinth he still had to work out
from.

"They've seen you in green, now... show them blue..."

"I don't know what I saw, before the door collapsed like it did."

"Sure enough, you did. Your will cut the door, and now you've found hope. Show them hope, for safe return;
what you knew we could have all along."

Alistair was never his name, Alaias realized, it was something of a curse he'd put on himself. *That is*

not our name he'd said before, and it was beginning to make sense. Since he'd taken him into his arms, Alaias was sure he'd sounded like at least seven different children he'd known and loved in his life.

"We were never here, but to depart," he said, surely enough, hurrying down the hall with all haste, un beholden to what the chambers might show him, now, with the etching shadows changing and warping the corridor throughout it. "Here and now, gone without a flash, and yet we've become less or more so sure that we never had to leave this place. Kill and savor what you've had in shadow's wanting, demons, and yet and know that I never needed fear you, for all in hope I needed for what was to come, here, for a boy well wanting nothing more than those with the will to bring about what he alone hath wielded surely and smartly enough to slay an ogre among sheep."

different bends take the halls, my blood feels tighter, in my chest
longing that there was less and for
pain, unending.

more in last again that it was not here, before, so I set before at last that I was

"Can you breathe, okay?" he whispers to the boy, walking his way through the hall now lost in shadow. "Well enough and good, I'm fine," he said into his shoulder.

"Do you know my favorite color, son?" he asked him thusly.

He took his head from Alaias's shoulder and looked some at his face, as he carried him. "Is it red?"

He laughed, then. "No, it isn't red. It was orange, I thought. Orange light, and I couldn't figure on why."

"It doesn't do well to tell, when you're clearly so bathed in blue, anyway. Where do you come from?"

"Stranger things have been asked of me. The north, of this place, so sure I'm not what that means, any longer. We've come and gone further yet still. Harken here looks like a chamber beneath the temple I grew up in, here."

The boy looked and though he could see only shadow, at first, blue light etched itself into some of the lines they'd not yet seen, out there. "But it isn't, though...?"

"Sure enough I could hardly see it being anywhere else. Must be well enough close to where I know."

He walked on with the boy, never worrying about how much further they'd have to walk for it."

"Is there less that there was before, in there? These halls look whiter," he said from back over Alaias's shoulder, where he rest his chin.

"Sure enough, that's right. Look here," the boy turned, again, "these aren't them, but some of these stairs lead up to the higher floors."

He could see less of it, at first, but the light being shed down from the stairwell changed colors, somewhat, and the stairs beneath them looked different, changed, well enough and good. "These aren't them?"

"Well enough I wasn't sure, as you could might tell, but I'm better for it now, because these look like the very same sort of steps I was so used to riding home on." He bound up them, with well practice ease, and there, at the top of the stairs, was a door he'd seen a hundred times before, but it looked sealed, and at first, he didn't know why.

"There's a lantern here..." said the boy. "This isn't like where you grew up, I don't think, if you don't know how to get in..."

Alaias looked at the lantern, there in shadow, and it eeked, and wept, and he took a scant step back from it, there on the top landing. "Gross... I think it's locked the door on us. Nevermind, that, there's always plenty more blue light to be had in the temple of Optriks."

Something sizzled, and popped.

"That's what you're looking for isn't it? What I'm still holding out for?" Then he realized it was the boy, still her with him, who was tormented by the shadows in the first place; tormented by Optoly's wretched companions in madness.

It would have been the boy, too, who could have built the labyrinth to hide himself in, among them. It would have been him who'd chained himself away, and Alaias was realizing he'd shed all but the inner cell door, himself, and waited for someone to give him something left to live for. Some sort of hope, because what was rescue, for nothing set in life again?

"You could be my son, you know," he said to the child held in his arms, resting on his shoulder.

"What did you say?"

“I’d want to be traveling, but it’s far better I leave it to you, where we spend the summer, coming soon. I’m well enough sure that it’s easier, to leave oneself wanton and sorrowful, to be sure, but I’ve long forgotten how easy it was to be sorry for myself, when I traveled the long road from Brenadin on my own.”

He was silent, still, so Alaias started talking again. “If you wanted to be my son, you could do much of whatever you wanted, while we traveled, you know. I’m very much of the mind that a father is nothing if not your friend, first, as would a son always be to me, and I have never owned a friend before, nor should I ever need to...”

“I don’t want to be alone anymore,” he was crying.

Alaias cradled him, rocking his body back and forth. “I know it well enough, my son, I know it sure and well enough. So here we are together, as surely as we’d ever want to be.”

“I don’t... I don’t have a name...”

Alaias’s eyebrows rose. “A name? Well sure enough, a father’s just the sort of friend to provide you with one, free of charge!” the boy choked out a laugh, then. “A name,” Alaias continued, “I shall have a name for you in moments set for soon enough and good. Do you get to object to the name, or are you a baby still?”

“I have voice well enough for reason, sir... father...” he tried out.

“Now there you’ve gone and set me straight again. William, I think I will call you. Your name is William.”

“William...” sparks sort of jetted out from the lantern, but it remained dark, still.

“More often than not,” Alaias corrected himself, “I will call you Will.” The lantern blazed in blue light, and shadows retreated in a shriek. The door opened, willfully, and Alaias stepped outside, into the cold morning air, on winter’s day in Brenadin.

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 45

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 14 • Eliwood

Getting separated from Tama this early on wasn't *not* part of the plan, exactly. He'd just planned on being in blue again soon after he'd done it, but the damn old man wouldn't quit hunting for him in all the places he'd thought to go.

You're not to be trusted, Emris, mocked the turtle in the token.

"Hardly enough for *his* call. How could he not know I was only using him to get away and out without a retinue?"

Might've ditched the retinue.

"That's well enough from you, turtle." He tucked the token back into his shirt, and decided he was done with maps and asking for directions to places he already knew about, here forrit.

He didn't think it wasn't a good idea to go back to the nearest river, and so he hurried off, in that direction, and Tama didn't catch up to him till he'd crossed it faster than the other cambion could manage, safely.

"Well enough for tomorrow, boy! I'll see you soon, then!"

"Not so, animal!" Eliwood called back over to him. "I only waited around to tell you not to follow, so you could be sure doing so was difficult for good reason."

"Oh? Got a plan now, do we?"

"Sure enough I didn't need one."

"Set in more for there, in all. There for more in ours, before. More to more, and here's before, this one ours, for this, before. More so, in all we've set, before, and torrent raging come, before, so lo, and set, my life, before, that here we've called the fordes, before.

Break, in sorrow, for lost, in trials, so set, more in, for longing trials. Set this, ere one, moreover trials, set more, for lost, in all these trammels.

"That won't work you know!" the river was quickening, and the rocks crouched above the surface were falling further below. "I'm no real threat to you!"

"Better make for higher ground then, old man!"

"Set for lies in all we've kept. More for lies in all we've wept. Here for gone and all we've spent! Lie for lies in all we've kept! Here for lies in all you've swept! Hear my cries in all we've spent! Hear my cries long for this end! Send four horses for all I've said!"

The trembling, rumble of the river's current neighed, and cried out, charging down from above, head the forde, there came a torrent of gushing river, ten times over again the river's edge, charging in the shape of four spirit animals, crying out in defiance for Eliwood's plunge, and as they swept past him, he dove, and disappeared into the fordes' white river.

whatever less of what he wasn't had, hadn't had, here before, that once before, this, once, hadn't had, to know, this once, this, once, this, once, this, once. "I don't know your name, even," he said back to him, and it wasn't strange, or anything, but he didn't know not what else to say withit, too.

"Moreover that it was never your concern till now, sure enough yes? Alaias, should you feel the need to use it, boy."

"More boy yours, stranger. Set in more for innit again, I'd have never had to know your name to hear you out, or drop you floorbound."

"I did that to myself I'd wager...?"

"So it was, I think. Well enough the brick wall was already there, when you clunked into it. Well done."

"For sure and well for here to be, again. Last time it hadn't needed for, you know. That this wasn't here before, and lost enough here I was, so... I hadn't had to know you well enough before, you know?"

"Sure enough and good, my child. I'd have to have you understand little more enough about how much more fun you'd have if you wanted to pretend you weren't smarter than," he coughed, forrit, "*everybody else*," and coughed again, "for long enough to pretend how easy it is to learn something new, already smart boychild." So set for, that here it was, that he laughed at good and well enough, not sure what else to say forrit. How long had he had to prove how much smarter he was than everybody else? He warranted that he didn't need to remember that one all the time, but it didn't not serve him here as he needed it, or didn't have to want needing not in for all of it before there before, having enough here before so set more that this wasn't there before so he couldn't never not want to have this one before that this wasn't one before so set more that this wasn't there before, to moreover this once wasn't there before so that this wasn't more than that which what he couldn't never haven't had to want before, again, you know?

"I'd have to have figured..." he trailed off, and was more well enough for it, looking to Alaias, for what he had to think about next. He smiled again, and sort of, sauntered off, not sure what else to say.

This wasn't hard enough here to immitate again. What was the green again? "Will," he said aloud to himself. Who had enough will to keep his mouth shut when they were talking to different sorts of people, but one who knew their secret identity, basically every time he looked at them.

"Do you want to know your other name, son of Optoly?" he asked Alaias, calling across from the stone footpath he'd found, out in the autumn leaf garden, what for.

"My other name? Who said I needed one?"

"One of the elder gods, I think! Optoly's kin!"

"Set in all the rest, I did not knowit. What is it, then, young one?"

"Father's good and well enough for them, I thinkit!" he called back, and didn't really, not want to look at his face, but smiled a little lot, into one cheek and a half, or so, and sort of, looked at the little rock wall he was stepping across, one foot outside the other, what for, what for, what for.

His father had snuck up on him, in his focus, and grabbed him, suddenly, lifting him up to some laughter, and getting him laughing more with less or more a tickling and such for little more than an ages and ages for more!

"You for sure in it all!" he laughed and cried out.

"Not so! Who dare?"

"I dare! You've *belittled* me! I must now become *little* again! Do you have *any idea* how exhausting this is going to be?"

He laughed again, Alaias did, and said, "More or less I think you are up to the challenge. There is little hope for you yet..."

He wanted to laugh so much harder at him, and didn't want to tell him what an animal he wasn't supposed to be. Oh, gawds, this was stupider than sand and witnessing.

He hadn't lied, well enough, for the rest of his life, and he wasn't sure what color his hair was, to other people. He wanted to see his reflection, so when he got away, finally, he set laughing and running down to the riverside they'd shown him before, and found a pond still enough to look into.

"What in for, Mordred?" he asked himself in the glass of the pond. He liked the way he looked, better, he realized, and he didn't not want his eyes to be green, instead of blue, but they looked gray, by now, and set his own life aside, he knew he was just scared of getting too blue again, as though that would have less and for in

sand, again.

He'd had not in enough for his life, this life, and he could sense his father catching up to him, and stopping at the hillside, well above the pond. "You can come down here with me," he said, when he thought he'd paused a moment too long.

Alaias somewhat slid and walked down the hill, getting to his son by the flatter than sloped bed of the pond water. "Do my eyes look green, do you think, or gray?" he looked at him, from the pond water, and opened his eyes a lot wider, forrit.

Alaias looked at him like he was more curious, than not. "They're not all gray, but I can see what you've put in there. Who else is your friend, these days? Do you have something older that time in there, I think?"

"Flattery will simply not do, father. You are far too impressionable at your age."

He nodded, as though he might not have considered it that way. He'd shaved his beard, too, and looked younger, to Will, and he didn't know what else to say to his father, just then, so he looked back into the pond, what for. "I think they used to be blue, I remember."

"Used to? Who happens to used to, anymore? I'm never used to before in my *life!*"

"Set before and innit again, father?"

"Say what's *your* other name?"

"Moreover that you could hardly knowit yet. William, of course. Will and William, there together, forrit."

"Well okay, so if I call you Will *or* William..."

"We're going to have words, you and me..." he wanted to laugh, but smiled, instead.

"You're gunna have to not mind so much when I'm messing with people, or mind so much as you want to, maybe people will think you're a helpless little child who can't handle both his names, apparently."

"Ugly forrit once before, father."

"Set in for that less is more; I don't know what you're talking about."

"I like that you have stupid looking hair now that your beard is gone."

"Stupid hair, huh? How'd that get to figure, mean kid?"

"It's too long and *wavy*, it's all gay and whatnot."

"Gay huh?"

"For sure, and surely so it. I don't know, you might be less or more able to handle anyone who ties to gay you forrit."

He laughed, "you think so? That's good. Maybe I don't have to cut it off."

"Not in laughlessness, but I don't know why your hair gets to be so long so fast, Father, it looks like you've been cutting mine off my whole life for no good reason."

He smiled then, Alaias did, and said, "I think I can wager it'd make a lot more sense for us to have cut our hair at the same time, in the same places, huh?"

"Well enough that's *less* a smart thing to do. I get curls and you barely have any color."

"Barely get... it's *black* you demon! Quite black." He stroked his hair accordingly.

"Hardly speaking black is not a color, you know."

"Sure enough, I think you're trying to change me."

"Hardly well afford, black just isn't a color, really."

"So set in once before, I think it can hope for change, one day. Where'd you get all that auburn on your head, anyhow?"

"It's not red and yellow."

"I said auburn that's... oh, yeah, that is red and yellow, huh.. not orange though?"

"Speckled more, it changes the color."

"No foolin'... What's yours called then?"

"Brown, most likely. I like it darker though. Maybe not *black*, but, some real color, you know?"

Alaias smiled, and tussed Will's hair, looking at the shade and texture, what for. "We could die it, if you want, get you started."

"What's dye for?"

“Darken your hair, or change it to blue.”

“Green hair would make me look like I’m trying too hard.”

“Blue might distract people from how smart you are.”

“But then no one could see my circlet, when I wanted.” He was wearing it then, and it was blue.

“I didn’t...” Alaias looked stunned, but sure he’d seen Will wearing a blue circlet when he’d found him, in the cell, as he remembered it, otherwise naked, but he hadn’t been wearing one, the whole time Alaias had cradled his head, on his shoulder. “Where did you...”

He took it off, and handed it to Alaias. “Don’t put it on or anything, it won’t suit you.”

Alaias took it in his hands, and admired the craftsmanship, apparently. “This is... what *is* this, Will?”

“More or less, the same thing I was using to destroy Optoly. I don’t want one anymore, for a while, and you should have it. I like you in blue, too, father, it suits you.”

“This is... what *is* this?” he couldn’t stop admiring it, running his fingers along the curves and shaping in the metalwork.

“It’s... a crown, of sorts. It protects your mind from those like Optoly, who practice breaking of minds, in such away as many have done before and since, I think...” Was this easy enough? He hadn’t not created the power, he was pretty sure, but he couldn’t summon it all will, if he hadn’t hidden it, and yet made it physical, so that he could always have it there at the ready. “I like to wear it all the time, and I can make another one, if I need, but I like that you’d have the only one like this, it’s sort of what you looked like you might be wearing when I saw you before you arrived, from the hall...”

“This... this wasn’t invisible, was it? Before and... you’ve had this on the whole time?”

He nodded. “It only appears to others when you want it to. To scare the shit out of them, mostly, and fuck with their heads.”

“You’re as strange as they come, I think. Do you know how long I’ve waited to have a magic crown? Now I can just call myself king of everything, just like *you*’ve always done, I’m realizing, now, apparently. This makes so much more sense than before.”

“Well king of smart people, really,” Will corrected. “The crown protects you from mindslugs.”

“Mindslugs? Oh... gross...”

“Yeah, Optoly liked to use a *lot* of them, and he couldn’t stop freaking out over how they *never* came *close* to working on me. I never let him see the crown, though.”

“I can see that being a good plan. You’ve had your work cut out for you for a long time, I think. How long do you think you’d want to have something like this, for, before you figured out how scare it is all by yourself, like that?”

“No one was stepping up.”

“Well there you go. Way to be independently cool. Now, coincidentally, or perhaps maybe in spite of, other cool people, Merkados and Optoly, apparently, and seen fit to send more cool people your way.”

“Do you know what I heard once, about cool?”

“What?”

“That old people don’t know how to say it, because it’s a new world, and only kids can be cool.”

“I’m pretty sure only kids *are* cool, mostly. Depending on what you’re looking for.”

“Well sure. You can be a kid and get really big and strong so you can *fuck* people up for hurting other cool kids, right?”

“Sure enough, I had that plan from the start, you know. Came up with it myself, and everything.”

“Sure enough it’s about time someone gave you a crown for it. That’s what kings were always supposed to be like, you know...?”

Alaias wasn’t not sure that wasn’t true, for like, a second, and then he looked at the crown differently, then. “Keep it with you, for a while,” said Will, to him then, “it will shape to you, and you’ll feel right about putting it on, eventually.”

He smiled at him, like, he hadn’t wanted to offend, but, he was a little of trying this thing out right away, when he wasn’t sure what it would do, for him. “It isn’t not working on you right away, But its sort of... there, anyway, so don’t worry about it.”

“You’re as mildly cunning as they come, you know.”

“*Mildly* cunning? That’s a horrible thing to say, Father.”

“Set in for, you’re less or more an evil child who has far too much time on his hands. I think we ought to send you to school, one day, maybe soon.”

He’d never *been* to school before. “What’s it like?”

“Like nowhere else on earth. Nothing like any schools they would have had outside of Brenadin, though. Like I said, no place on earth.”

He smiled. They’d left the temple in Brenadin, but were far off from there, and still in this place without winter snow, except for yesterday, when the grandson of Optriks was born...

The Imperial Cards | Chapter 47

Outside the Looking Glass

Chapter 16 • Eliwood

“More or less, I’ve found this is *not* the future my mother warned me about,” said Eliwood to the druid master, thusly.

“How so couldst she know of it, young Emris?”

“For be it mine to know by, she said that I wouldst not depart by the river thusly, and I already have, and so far exceeded the bindings of our maps, and found the secret front of my late supposed lord father’s war.”

“Your father Lord Delwoord, suppose he be, was a good man to know by, young Eliwood, riverlord. When we saw you come by torrent, sure enough we’d never have doubted you could do just exactly as you have set out.”

“Teach me, then, what you would know of me to have, for I’m much less the person I’ve set out to learn to be.”

“For it not that it would be an unfair trade, we have strict bindings in our stations, over who we wouldst train, and know about. For to know that I personally would much love to learn of you and your mysterious ways with life, so magic, they have set me apart as a druid knight, and I cannot be your teacher, in this...”

“For to it that it may not have been, what do you mean? What is required of me to be a knight of the sylvan order?”

“Set in more for then innit again; you have come seeking power, and refuge, have you now?”

“Not so, old one. Listen well or I’ll box thine druid ears, forrit. I came here as an explorer, fast approaching an escape from my retinue, for be that as it was I could not have summoned that magic if I did not have a gift for the sylvan arts, yet still again, for no?”

“No and yes, it seems; if you were summoning that torrent only to flee a lordling’s retinue, then-”

“Then you have misjudged my intentions knowing not that such a display of power has *freed* me from my retinue’s parenting, so what forrit. I do not seek a parent in thee, but a friend. Parents I already have, and if not to help me learn of you, then at least grant me a sylvan sword, for once I learn to call it, who could question my loyalty to its order?”

He was intrigued, by the request, to say for sure enough. “You wish to have a molded crystal hilt, then, traveller?”

“For sure it is as you say, I believe. That one such as was good and well known for it, hath molded the blade innit as he saw fit, and so no such wicked heart can call it forth again, so such is the science, yes?”

“Yes and no, for yes in surely more than the other. You are well quick a study in magical sciences, and so as more to me you have proven you are either a card well ‘quipped to fool the allies that be, or a boy well disastered to rule the forces of magic as though he need never fear be without them, for current or for purposes unknown to any other but himself and the magic he witnesses henceforth and so forthe before again...”

“Yes and no in that this is not a plausible way of things, however?”

“It *is* not plausible only in that I know of only one such a blade, and you would do well to retrieve it in poste haste, so for I know where it is kept, and evil moves to claim its power, or destroy it, more than likely, in the attempt.”

“What name for it?” he asked, not sure how to belay any delay hereforth.

“Not so lost to its history, but it would mean less than nothing for you not coming from the crystal hilt itself.”

“Are they black crystals, all of them?” Eliwood asked him, having seen several sylvan blades lit and drawn, on his arrival.

“So far as I have seen and witness, no. There are other colors, blue, once, I’ve seen, but the color of the blade itself varies on the users’ hue, therein. A cursed blade would be sick to look upon, and strike fear into the hearts of many and most or more, forrit.”

“A blade wielded by an evil doer, that he corrupted himself, while it was a virgin, still?”

“Something of the sort and narrow, yes, young lord. Do you know the rivers’ ways?”

“Such as they speak to me, so yes. What can I travel by?”

“Sure enough if thou wouldst not take my word, you might’n delay too long. Follow this river,” he pointed at the fork, off in one direction, “out into the open sea, and search for an island within sight of the coast, to elf eyes, yet still.”

“They eyes of a cambion will have to do me for, I think,” said Eliwood, what for.

“Do you know of what you speak to me? The truth of what you are?”

“Misunderstood?” he oversimplified.

“Just so,” he allowed the summary.

“I’ll make haste,” said Eliwood, “thank you, sir druid!”

“Well enough and good, young one! Take care for the sylvan order!”

Olympus

Ace of Spades  Clovis, Hades

He couldn't be here, all alone, forever, but, here set in this life, a return, to Olympus, and this was fallen back in timing not, for, his friends had not come to this place in too long, save that Saiya was waiting for him, by this, in a faded memory, where she'd visited one of the shadows of this mountain villa, this sure village, college campus, amazing mountainland, and this was gone on more, forever; that ghosts of Olympus, and shadows, existed in a thousand dimensions, and so sure here, he wept not alone, but in torment not untaken by this; a god, but this in his life, he is, torn, and broken back not, but, there set, "Ares..."

Alexander regarded him, through the looking glass, keeping his eyes away sure still, as though he were really watching someone else, but, he could see him, Clovis knew, and wanted for him to *run, Alexander! Run like we wind never showed you!*

This life, sure gone away and kept back in bay, with this age, lost in timing taken on and without torment nor pain, in this, sure so spent, this once, sure so spending this blanket, back in torment, this in torment; sleeping forever alone atop mount olympuses was not this in sureness, but here on Olympus, this world was gone forever, below, and he couldst see this in more clearly; his own rites, and this princess's unbirthday party plagued him not, but he was enticed with her, in ways he'd never before believed in, yet, he knew her fate, and what she would have to become, to serve him, in this, and his life was forever under.,, "What am I to do with.... Persephone...?"

Not the queen, of course, but his wife from some ancient line, but not sure on in this, she was Cassandra Pallas Athena, here, and not Persephone, but this was forever misunderstood or betrayed, and here was her knowing so much of the underworld as he had taught her not to want to know, but to yearn to learn more ever more from him, its master, and this in regards, hers, too, but this was going back in torment taken surely this in ages kept or lost not in this of, nor in back once in timing taken overture, this once, sure fire, this fire kept back, back back, this fire, kept back back back, this once, sure fire, kept back back back, this once, alright, Alright, I know this ancient score, by now... I know it's courses, begone of me, ancient fool....

Behold the looking glass table, and a scry in mapping not of marks, but of visions, here on out into the Olympians' domains, and he watched for nothing in particular, but this in ages, this gone back in time forever, this sure so brought back into this; his own rhythm, and this was his fortress of solitude only in reason, but this was going back in surest torment gone back in worlds, never more,,,
"The bridge between this world, ... and the next... How many of them do they think I know then, I wonder? If it's always next, I think I'd have to know something about all of them, any time, wouldn't I?"

He couldn't find that boy who'd made love to him in the hedgemaze, and this was troubling not only because he believed too much in no regard for open aide not, but because it meant Clovis would have to leave him be, and this was darkness sure in on kept back, at bay, and here was heard, this ancient score, this knowing, back in timing taken on forever on, without, this in motion, that in pain, torment not, unspoken,

"Olympus, Olympus," he paced, this pillar, swung himself around back to that one, peering ever into this, hourglass table, sure, in this glass spying this eye, over eyes, over eyes,...

This in life, *sure so needed back upon it, this in self, this surely taken for, on it, this world surely kept back here intuit this in timing, taken, surely gone in backwards now, this world, this world sure so spent, this world spent, this Hades, this world sure, kept within this world sure so spending this life back in Hades' Isles for, this world, this world, this world, that world, back home to, this home to, here in Spade, there over There, !measure, what's for this one, this;*

Bart was.... striping across continents, connexting up land in giant zigzags and war lousps and,.. holy shit,,...

this many in wolf, this, regarding, Ares bring us a way, coming, bring chaos, this world here at war still, this, aging, this listed age kept back intuit more for, this more for, this forever under me; this in sureness spades this was granted back in timing taken back in shelter this was granted this was back in all our ages here, this world, sure in spending back against this tide, this tithe,

This was the Logrus; the sign of chaos, the patterns, of chaos, that Bart was running into the earth, all over Spade, mostly, not really though, this was a war cry, this, Change, in his friends, kept something else alive in the young spade; this wanton need to know this once, surely kept back, back in motion more in all younglings, this once sure, so kept backwards, this world, surely kept in homing time, thyming taken back, backwards, this world, sure so, kept inwards, this world, I know....

You could... intuit something.... some things... wanderer... "Father.... father,,,, where are you?"

here, at this table now, set so forthe this once in black, this once in orange, this once, sure in life, sure so in keeping all our spades in black regarding this world is never back in timing taken in all of our worlds, this, this intuit this world again, this world sure enough, this world was gone against, this timing taken back in spades, this world is never more, this world is nevermore, this world, they are gone, this world, they are gone, this world in this war I bring to bare, bring me chaos for this emperor I seek and hear to be, Believe in me, Father,, Believe, in what I can become. This is my enemy: all the ones. All those who stand against we; this legion.

this legion spend in mild regarding this world surely spent and kept in backwards motion this before this once sure in aperture, this one in my only world, this in my yet world anew and forgotten in timing taken this was never, this was never, never over, this was never, never over, this world at large, this world, I know in large as mine, this world, I know it, I know it, this was gone, this life lived back in merry beatings back in forthe, sure so spending this once surely taken back, this world surely taken back,....

This world surely kept back in black regarde: we are not the same. We, are, not the same. But we are, in love, and this, in love, is our infinite design; and so forthe tu set, infinity cannot exist with but one subjugated, but all must be subject to this, his dark glove, this spade wrist, this torment taken back, this in terror, not unyielding, "Alexander, Alexander, cross cut tu my name, this once sure in this; a name, this naming back in rhythms set this once back in my only regarding,.....

This waving back, this tithing taken surely intuit my name against this other score, this world surely kept in abject misery not, but this was gone on forever under, this timing taken, surely, this; an apple.... where fore, is this poison apple, to be borne?

Clovis drew, drew drew, this sure card; kept this, painted back, in his mind, intuit, him a name not, but this death sentence. Make this voodoo as you do so much better than all them others boys and girls, Clovis one, and this was never not one, alone, Clovis, but we are in love, and as they say, we in love forget not to bare this pain, but this pain is so we can know of others' fear not? No so it, this back in sureness kept, this liars' chair, this throne, regard the card, this, painted card, this, was left for him, by someone; he'd seen it, in the viewing globes, this, the crystal table not, but, the viewing globe seen from his chair, here, in highest regarding, this death god, this changeling boychild, this war wizard, this changeling death child god war wizard power maximum epic sentences without closings, this world, in sure regarding, that nothing was gone forever, and so sure forthe, leave not it undone, this in shortness but not of in this breathe,...

This life in living backwards this in torment taken not of in this highly regarded sentence this once surely taken back in my only life before, this once in my own overture, this world in my own world I know, this world surely taken back, in this my ancient black regard, this was evil surest kin, this was world domination not, but these his enemies all would cower in fear, and die in abject misery, and this was going back in timing not untaken, nor couldst this be changed back in our own messages, this world and world renown, this world so surely going back in this regarding, this timing taken on, this world surely kept inside this world surely kept on in more so surely this was granted back in surely ages gone in sure intu this once, this was life before in torment taken not in pain,,,, do you feel it, feel my, feel my Force?

This world, sure in surrounding, this wasn't gone for, back in our age, this wasn't gone for, back in our ages, this in torment taken back in spades cut deep in knife obsidian bring my spade tu life, this burn it into glass, this crystal glass, this shade of truth, this change of even tides, this was never gone, here and against, this world surely kept at bay, this world, surely kept at bay, this world surely kept at bay, this taking sure so in mine, this

world in sewn in mine, this world, surely kept, this world surely surround it all, this world,,,..

He moved, this placement, not all wrong,, but, sure it was, so,;Bring! back once to bare this World I know in my own chair! this regarding mine! This once! Kill the animals! Make them scream! This regarding in mine! this regarding, in mine! We are, one, and the same not, but this was never not one love, and heard forthe, this is god, so sure forth set, I am god, too, so watch my world crumble yours intu oblivion, and when I wrest you from your cottoned blankets, to watch you burn your own house to the ground, you'll never have to know why, until you die,..

this in abject torment, taken backwards, this this this this this backwards, here so setting backwards, this life set back in backwards sure in backwards, sure, in this world, sure, this one world, sure, this one love, sure, so bring back, one love, this one love, bring back, this back back back in time, in time to save them all, back in time, turn back time, this back, back back back in time, this back, back back back in time, this back, this back back back in time....