

WILD CARD ESPERES OF EDEN

Written By **George E. Hunter**

Preface —

Hello there! Thank you for taking the time to explore the first volume of *Wild Card*, my new writing endeavor that continues to change and evolve over time. This wouldn't have been possible without the help of *M.K. Alexander* who aided in editing, so a huge thank you to her.

As for the story itself, expect this PDF file to be changed out at various times. The cover page will display the current version which will indicate where this volume is in its editing and revision, a process that is continuing long after the initial release.

The writing will continue to improve and I hope that you come to appreciate the story as I fumble through presenting it to you — now then, have a great read!

1st CARD | Wild Card

Black smoke billowed upwards, spreading throughout the skies above the once luxurious city block. What was once a pristine piece of paradise filled with shops and homes was now a pile of wreckage stained crimson with the blood of its patrons. Bodies of those who had fallen victim to the apparent attack were gathered up along what remained of the street, each laid to rest in the most respectable way possible at the time.

They were all citizens of this amazing city of paradise – New Eden – but after such an event a lone white sheet was all the city could give back to them. A simple sheet to shield them from the carnage around them on their way to the afterlife.

Perhaps if a House and its Espers had arrived sooner to protect them, as their job was meant to entail, more innocents could have been spared.

Unfortunately, no House arrived in time and no Esper carried out their duty.

As such, the beast bred for chaos – A Chaotic – could run rampant. The monster that craved only chaos carried out its purpose and had his fill. Though, such a being was hardly one to ever have its appetite sated. Chaotics can run wild for potentially eons. The more destruction it caused, the more it consumed, the stronger and thus hungrier it would become.

No House had arrived while the beast attacked and decimated the small piece of District Five, so what had become of the Chaotic? It should have still been out continuing to consume, but instead the arriving House of Diamonds found the monster no more.

A darkened carcass lay hunched over in the middle of the street, at what was surely ground zero for the attack. The body was large but had been larger. Its shape was much like a giant ape creature, but one could not be certain – before anyone could have examined it the corpse was crumbling to dust and fading into the air.

Someone else had taken the glory of victory a mere minute, maybe two, before the arrival of the local House. Victory was stolen from the clutches of the Diamond King; Victor M. Ferris.

“*What* is taking you so long, *Duo*? Must I hold your hand?” A hoarse, grainy voice, passed through the ears of the men and women rushing to survey the area. It seemed to put everyone on further edge.

The voice belonged to a much older gentleman, with a lean build and long slicked back ashen colored hair tied neatly in a ponytail passing the entirety of his back. Perhaps his hairstyle served as a symbol of his status.

His gear was clearly formal, much like military officer garb ill-fit for field work, drowned out in nearly all black. The minor details of the uniform were dark blue trimmings lining the shoulders, the sides of his top and bottom, and just over the front where his jacket buttoned.

It was the typical uniform of a King dressed to the nines and the blue colors signified it was none other than Diamonds.

Behind the King stood the target of his drilling tone, dressed in far less impressive clothing albeit with the same blue hues.

“N-No, Sire!” The young man was clearly over excited, barely old enough to tie his own boots. He stepped forward. “My King, the Chaotic was designated as exterminated approximately three minutes prior to our arrival, Sir. It was reported as growing from a middle B-Rank to a low A-Rank within only ten minutes, but even with its growth it appears to have been eliminated by an unregistered elemental, specifically a fire—”

“Enough!” The Diamond King was fuming.

He clearly no longer needed nor wanted his Duo's report in order to grasp what happened here.

The Chaotic consumed the life force, or rather energy, of those it killed. This ability, in conjunction with its rapid growth rate the more it fought and destroyed, allowed Chaotics to evolve. B-Rank was powerful, at the level an average Esper could not beat, and this particular one had evolved to an A-Rank.

Powers of an A-Rank were so monumental that it meant only an Esper with strength akin to a King would be able to handle such a beast. Such a high ranking Chaotic was a rare sight, but should it ever appear, it was almost assured to cause mass death and destruction. A scale far beyond what lie before the groups on the scene now.

The last such A-Rank Chaotic on record killed hundreds of citizens before being subdued over one year prior, but this newest threat had only claimed the lives of a few in comparison.

No other House – not Hearts, Clubs, or Spades – had been anywhere near the scene. Houses were absolute in their power but they could rarely be everywhere at once in a city as vast as New Eden.

Victor was certain there was only one possibility. A report that an elemental ability had been used wasn't even necessary to prove his hypothesis.

“Enough of these hide and seek games, *Jaeger*. I know you're there. Why don't you and your little *assistant* come and face your fate like a good *criminal*?” The old man's voice was cold, sharp like a knife.

“I told you!” The soprano of a young girl, full of spice and plenty of vinegar, failed to keep her annoyance – and voice – in check. “You're such an incompetent moron, Gio!”

“H-Hey! It's not *my* fault. You're the one who *freaked* and hid when you heard them coming.” A man's voice, sounding a bit older and weathered but not too deep, responded. Much like his female companion he failed to keep especially quiet.

Whomever the duo in hiding were, they seemed a bit lacking in proper social cues. If they were in fact ‘criminals,’ they were certainly not the best.

“.. If you're incapable of making up your minds, I'll be happy to make them up for you.” Victor stepped forward, his platoon of Espers rushing back behind him where they reformed their ranks.

There was no doubting just how serious the situation was becoming.

But as the tension in the air thickened, a sudden screech – or rather prolonged squeal – took everyone off guard.

A figure was sent flying from out of sight, propelled by unseen forces, screaming all the way as it finally hit the middle of the street with a thud and yelp of pain.

Stunned onlookers were momentarily treated to the sight of a sunglasses clad man lying sprawled out in the street on his back, unknowingly being flung there by a much smaller and younger girl.

Luckily just a couple moments later he was sitting up, pushing himself up to glare back in retaliation.

“Just what the hell do you think you're doing, Sera?! That's dangerous, you know?!” The man shouted to his attacker, but it was then he realized that Victor was already walking towards him with a rather menacing look on his older, wrinkled face.

He couldn't help but swallow hard as he saw that the Diamond King was coming for him. He tried to scoot himself backwards along the ground, his black fingerless gloves becoming covered in a thick layer of dirt and dust. He then pushed off the ground in a hurry, leaping up to his feet.

From there the onlookers finally got a decent look at him.

His darkened, chestnut hair fluttered a bit as he moved back. Shaggy hair, unkempt and coming all the way down to his shoulders, gave off a rather immature impression. At the same time his attire hardly seemed one of a fighter, as he wore a casual black jacket over a plain white tee. Together with some khaki pants and dark red tennis shoes, not to mention the aforementioned black sunglasses, he hardly seemed a threat.

He looked more like he crawled out of bed from his parent's basement and rushed to get himself presentable for a last minute interview.

The only bit of him that seemed even remotely mature was his facial hair, unshaven for at least a few days. He didn't seem to care much for keeping up appearances.

Back at the rubble the man was launched from, the young girl had inadvertently made herself visible as well during their spat. The desire to quarrel amongst themselves seemed the prevailing sentiment.

Interestingly enough she at least seemed more like the fighter type, sporting a roughed up red t-shirt and jean shorts that were equally battle tested. Underneath her tee shirt appeared to be a type of muscle shirt, perhaps used for training or added protection. A few scrapes and bruises showed she wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty and keep going.

Though what would throw off those laying sights on her for the first time was her unexpectedly fair skin and pretty face, complemented by her practically glowing, ultramarine eyes. She was clearly younger.

The most visually stunning part of her ensemble, however, would have been her hair; her practically bubblegum infused pink hair that fell casually down her back, just past her shoulders.

She was obviously athletic and built like a warrior, but her looks could be quite the red herring. Such was the so-called assistant; Sera.

Fortunately, the wishes of these two 'criminals' to continue their in-fighting seemed to be pushed aside. Sera's attention rested solely back on Victor, the approaching King. She was realizing their situation had become quite problematic.

"F-Forget about that now, Gio! How about you use some of that mumbo jumbo and just get us the hell out of here?" She hid her nervousness with a dash of her domineering tendencies.

Gio could only shrug towards Sera, his sunglasses sliding just enough to reveal the chocolate coated hues hidden behind them. Despite the sudden heaviness that permeated in the air, he seemed to be taking this all in rather carelessly. His eyes seemed to echo the fact he wasn't quite taking things seriously.

It took another glance to Victor for his demeanor to slowly begin ticking over. Reassessing the situation in that moment had his carefree persona fading into a far more serious one.

He knew full well just how bad things were getting.

After all, they were facing off against the longest reigning and most powerful of all the Kings in New Eden.

Victor Maximus Ferris; Diamond King for the last sixty years.

“Giotto Jaeger and Sera Noel... Oh, how I've longed for this day. It's been a long time coming.” Victor continued stepping forward, slowly removing the bleached white glove from his left hand. “It was decided to leave you be for a time, to learn what you had become, to perhaps uncover the truth... but even if no evident crime had been committed your existence is a sin.”

Victor's already chilling tone seem to reach a new low in terms of temperature. To him this seemed clearly personal and he made no effort to hide that fact. For the Espers behind him, those serving under him in Diamonds, they knew that what they witnessed here would never leave this battlefield.

Gio's existence, specifically that he was alive, was a secret that very few highly-ranked Espers knew. Those who were present wouldn't dare repeat what was happening before them. To betray the trust of one's King was akin to signing your death warrant.

“.. But, here you are at the scene of a horrific Chaotic attack. No longer do I let cheapened deals bind my hands from taking action. Now, it's of no consequence to take you into custody. For interrogation, of course, but let's say if you were to resist such pleasantries... I would do my duty as King.”

Gio managed a slight smirk. Such words from the old man were amusing, since that bit of sarcasm of his was the closest thing to a joke Gio had ever heard from Victor. The Diamond King lived up the 'diamond' bit of his title rather well – meaning that he was stubborn and extremely hard headed in just about everything he did. It meant talking or negotiating his way out of his wasn't in the cards for Gio.

“Come on, gramps. You know that's not right. We did just help clean up your mess.” Gio's voice held a casual, cocky tone, but he stood ready for what was inevitably coming. “That Chaotic was rampaging, you know. If we didn't step in to stop it... things would have gotten a lot worse. You know I'm right. You want the blood of those civilians on those silky smooth hands of yours? The same hands pledged to defend this city?”

“.. Yes, you're probably not wrong, Giotto Jaeger.” Victor stopped pacing towards him, standing just about twenty or so yards from Gio. It seemed a setup for an old fashioned duel.

Gio was sure it wouldn't work, but he gave talking one last try.

“If that's the case then how about we call it a day? You guys can handle cleanup and we'll just—”

“I don't think so, Giotto. You may have saved lives today, I commend you for that, but it doesn't change the fact you've surely cost many more in your past. You'll cost even more in your future. This situation simply serves as an

opportunity for me to apprehend you as a King of Eden before further destruction follows you.”

Victor wasn't in the mood to talk any further. Gio could notice a faint azure glow beginning to appear around the King's left hand. That meant that his spirit energy, what some would call an aura or simply energy, was gathering. That meant his supernatural ability as an Esper was about to be unleashed.

Like most Espers in New Eden, Victor bore a mark atop his left hand. This *Mark of the House* activated either when one's ability was triggered or the wearer channeled their own aura to manifest. The mark took a different shape depending on the House and one's rank within said House. Each of the four Houses held a unique mark and each rank a specific title.

In Victor's case the mark was of a Diamond shape – covering most of the top of his hand – with various crisscrossing ornate patterns around it. In the center of the diamond was the letter 'K' which represented his rank. This was the brand that he and he alone, the *Diamond King*, possessed.

It spelled certain trouble when a King stepped into battle, as their power was said to be capable of wiping out the entirety of the city. It was so great in fact that the mere act of unleashing even a portion of their power typically called for widespread evacuations.

Such was the problem when fighting in a massive super-city with twenty million citizens living in it.

For this time there wasn't going to be a chance for evacuations. Besides, most in the area were long gone – either through having already fled or falling victim to the beast.

Victor's mind was made up. His unnatural emotional response to Gio, fueled by their complicated past, had this confrontation set in stone long ago.

“I would suggest, Giotto Jaeger, that you come quietly. We can avoid causing wanton destruction that way.” That condescending tone was one that only he could pull off. It would also be the one and only offer from Victor to apprehend Gio quietly.

“So you're tellin' me that's that? Geez, gramps. You can be a real prick sometimes... not to mention always using my full name like that gets me all embarrassed. Long are gone the days we were pals, huh...” Gio's right hand, rather than his left, soon began to glow with a swirling mix of white and black lights. His expression seemed to finally show the gravity of the situation. “Sera, you're going to need to get back for this one. I can't really guarantee this will go over too smoothly.”

“I can take care of myself just fine, Gio!” Sera was defiant as ever, but even her resolve began to waiver when watching Victor. She wanted to protest further, but instead she took a step back and to the side, away from what was soon to become a battleground once again. Her partner’s tone was one she didn’t take lightly. “.. Don't go doing anything stupid! If you end up dead, it's going to hurt business.”

He couldn't help but slouch with a heavy, exasperated sigh.

“You care about money at a time like this? You really know how to make a guy feel needed.”

Their somewhat turbulent relationship at least appeared to have a grain of genuine concern; an understanding for the other.

He waited until he could clearly see Sera leaving his field of view before finally stepping on the gas a bit. Gio’s own aura began to expand outwards, his energy levels beginning to climb. At that precise moment the swirling yin and yang glow around his right hand gave shape to a mark like Victor's – only it was different in both design and color.

The difference was instead of a diamond, his mark displayed as a combination of various shapes swirling as they came into view. They then combined and formed a somewhat more elaborate design – a tilted *jester's hat*. There were no elaborate patterns in the space around it, either. There was also no letter or even word that appeared, implying that there was no rank to whatever his symbol of a jester hat represented.

Victor was visibly disgusted at the sight of the mark forming atop Gio's hand. His face contorted like he ate something he'd be regretting for the next few days.

“Not taking the gentleman's way out and surrendering? I have to admit I'm not the least bit surprised. To think that you, Giotto Jaeger, the once so-called hero of the people would come quietly... it does sound rather ridiculous. As such I shall *happily* give no quarter.”

Victor's words were like the hammer snapping forward on an old fashioned revolver.

Blue, electric-like bolts of energy soon streaked outwards from his body, ripping through the air and causing loud cracks like thunder that shook the foundation. The rubble beneath his feet and the nearby concrete all around him burst apart at an atomic level as the energy made impact. His aura he emitted was so brilliant, so bright, that onlookers from behind him had to momentarily shield their eyes.

The energy, which took the obvious form of lightning, continued to crackle all around him and multiply. Such a sight looked amazing and fantastical, but it was a fraction of a fraction of Victor's power.

He was just starting up.

Despite that fact, both normal citizens miles away and Espers city-wide could feel the force of his power being unleashed. That was the devastating force of a King.

“I’m sure you remember this sight, Giotto Jaeger! The power of the Diamond King – *my* power – *Adamant Charge!* Now then, *En garde!*”

Victor was right – Gio remembered the ability well.

Adamant Charge was hailed as one of the greatest Esper powers in New Eden. Thanks to its incredible offensive capabilities to create lightning attacks and its defensive prowess to supercharge objects and form barriers, many believed Victor to be the most powerful of the four Kings. He held his position longer than any other King in history and he did so by seemingly getting even stronger with age.

Now, this historic powerhouse was charging right at Gio.

One wrong move would surely spell certain doom for most anyone. In fact, few in the world would be able to survive a single attack from Victor – let alone actually beat it.

Gio was hopefully one of those few.

The swirling energy around the mark of the jester hat soon erupted, the mixing light and dark energies engulfing Gio for a brief moment. The winds whipped and swirled around him, affected by the sudden surge in power, and Gio dug his left foot deep into the ground.

His body then lunged forward in a superhuman level dash to meet Victor head-on.

“Remember you brought this on yourself, gramps!” Gio called out as his right hand was raised.

A flickering ember, faint and small, appeared within that same palm.

“*Fiery, Release!*”

His voice had become intensified, shedding his sarcasm and calling forth the very power that the Diamond King had expected.

The flame in his palm grew, engulfing his hand and then his entire arm. The flames of mixing reds and yellows were wild. Like an inferno they raged but not once did they burn their master. The magical flames were under Gio's complete control. Instead, their target was the old man.

“*Giotto!*” Victor's left hand gathered the energy immediately around him, forming a spear of erratic lightning that Victor slammed downwards in an attempt to skewer Gio from head to toe.

But the flames focused at the point of impact, focusing in Gio's hand alone. They became compact, matching the point of the spear with a crimson flicker. It

was then that concentrated flames and lightning clashed, the might of the meeting sending shockwaves through what had just a few hours ago been a busy shopping district.

The fragile ground beneath them was ruptured and the pulsing energy blew back debris in all directions.

Neither man backed down.

Victor was visibly upset, a rarity for the King, but he used that frustration to focus and gather a second spear in his right hand. He then slammed the mass of electricity towards Gio, aiming for his side this time, but Gio was aware and back stepped at the last possible instant in a move that looked more like a teleport.

The two spears of lightning met at the point where Gio had once stood, causing the King to spit in annoyance. A second later and Gio would have been skewered – a second sooner and Victor would have had time to alter his attack and strike him down.

What looked like a simple move in an average battle between two foes was one expertly calculated by both parties. It just so happened that Gio had the slight edge for that first clash.

“Running won't save you anymore!” Victor stepped forward, dashing to match Gio's sudden retreat, but things suddenly took a turn.

Flames had appeared on both sides of Victor, manifesting along the ground where Gio dashed back. They grew tall in an instant and surrounded their mark.

“You're too eager, gramps!” Gio's voice triggered the flames to collapse in on Victor, but much like Gio before him, Victor dodged.

The Diamond King propelled himself upwards, climbing into the air, while still propelling himself forward and towards Gio. He refused to be caught in a trap, but the hard headed Victor was indeed far too eager. He was uncharacteristically flustered, and thus mentally at a disadvantage.

He was also out of his element.

A tiny flame, barely the size of a small candle's, appeared just in front of Victor's face as he went through the air. He had been careless, despite knowing this fire elemental power.

“.. *Explosion.*”

What once was a miniscule flame turned into an orb of crimson light. The change was instantaneous. The orb then flashed and engulfed the Diamond King in a focused explosive force equivalent to that of C4.

Luckily for those nearby, the attack was controlled. It spoke volumes that such a blast could be contained in such a way.

Members of the Diamond House witnessed the explosion from afar and on instinct rushed towards the battlefield, fearing for their King, but electric sparks soon silenced their fears.

“.. *Excellent* try, but that was rather weak for *a former King!*” Victor's voice peaked, filled with a sudden rage the likes of which few had seen.

He cleared the smoke of the explosion, diving back to the ground and launching a series of electrical blasts at Gio with honed speed and precision. However, even with the sudden assault, Victor could only look on in surprise as his beams of electricity were dodged like a child's dart gun.

“You think you can match a King with those fickle flames?! You're a disgrace to all Espers, a heathen, a rogue, *a villain!*” Victor raised both hands together, forming a series of lightning bolts which hung in the air. “After four years of waiting for a chance, your villainy ends *today!*”

Both arms slammed forward, launching the thirty plus spears of electrical force. The energy being expelled was a massive quantity, exceeding all previous maneuvers, and the area felt it.

As the bolts flew to their target environmental changes ran wild. The air, the earth, the very city could feel the effects. Gravity intensified, the ground quaked, the atmosphere grew heavy and thick.

But it wasn't quite enough.

Gio stopped dashing back, flames swirling from around his feet and spreading. The fires then shot out, streaking as a series of mystical flamethrowers, each rushing through the air to clash with the bolts one by one. However, the flames seemed to be lacking in strength. Piercing bolts of lightning broke through and flew true.

“.. *Fickle flames, huh?*”

The mark atop his right hand began to spark wildly with white and black energy, similar to before. He then extended his hand in the direction of the incoming blasts – but the bolts soon crashed into him, and a cyclone of electricity and flames consumed his entire being.

The ground where Gio once stood was torn asunder. Lightning struck upwards into the sky as it made impact and then ricocheted in different directions. Flames spun and washed over the ground, melting away what remained. Any remnants of a store or even a trash heap nearby were blown away.

Then the flames, the lightning, all began to fade. All that remained was a wall of swirling smoke.

Admittedly, Victor seemed surprised, but more than that he was oddly excited. He hardly expected it to be that easy... and truthfully, he realized it couldn't have been.

The Diamond King began stepping forward to where Gio once stood, the cloud of dust and smoke still standing strong. However, as Victor drew closer, he began to notice a subtle crackling sound. A sound that was much like the lightning he so expertly crafted...

A sound that was *exactly* the same as said lightning.

“.. What's that you're doing in there, *Jaeger?*”

The only response was further crackling.

Victor's surprise faded to frustration and he took another step.

“*Careful, gramps. There's a livewire over here.*”

Gio's voice cued the expulsion of the dust and showed the source of the crackling sound – an electrical mass of energy, forming a type of barrier between himself and Victor. He then ignored the surge of emotion washing over Victor's face and instead focused on moving.

“..W-What did you just do?” Victor's high and mighty persona had, for the moment, completely fallen. He couldn't believe what he was witnessing in that brief reveal.

His ability, his own Adamant Charge, cancelled out by what appeared to be the same power. A fact that was unmistakable.

“You already know exactly what I did, gramps... that's my power. Oh, and no hard feelings, but this is over. *Our party's about to be crashed.*” Gio's tone grew cold as he spoke those words.

Those small crimson orbs from before began to appear once again, this time in a massive number, surrounding the Diamond King where he stood. The surprise – or perhaps audacity – of what Gio had just done still immobilized him, constricted him, and that was more than enough time for Gio to finish things.

Perhaps old age was catching up with the old man.

“*Explosion!!*”

The orbs of flame expanded on cue as fast as before, only this time it was accompanied by many more such events. Each orb, filled with compressed explosive power, unleashed themselves in a chain reaction that consumed the Diamond King and everything around him. The concrete, or what was left of it, was mercilessly turned to dust. The abandoned city block already fallen to Chaotic attack was now wiped off the map in this clash of Espers.

Members of Diamond were sent flying back further, crashing into the piles of rubble around them, while Victor could only let out a single gasp – too proud to allow himself to scream in agony.

In a single moment, Giotto Jaeger had delivered a finishing blow to the Diamond King, Victor Ferris, as if it were nothing.

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Nearby, Sera had been blinded by the sudden flashes. She was quick in turning to shield herself from debris, but a gloved hand soon grabbed her own and pulled her from her defensive position. She knew who it was but she couldn't help the surprised look on her face, especially given the fact explosions were *still* going off.

“G-Gio! Back there, you, you actually—” Her voice was cut off by Gio's own.

“Yeah, yeah, I know! We need to get out of here! *Damnit*, why couldn't he have just let us go? Everything is all kinds of messed up now!”

Sera's hand continued to be pulled along by Gio and she did her best to keep up. She could tell that what happened just then was the last thing Gio had ever wanted. He had worked to avoid direct confrontations with the Houses in New Eden for four years now, but now not only did he end up fighting a House – he ended up fighting a King.

Heck, he even *won* the fight. It wasn't exactly a close fight either.

Or at least that was how it appeared to her and anyone else looking on. The media was going to have a field day.

No matter the aftermath, no matter the state of things as the dust settled, it was clear that a King had lost to a rogue. To a villain. And not just any King – this was Victor Maximus Ferris, hailed as the mightiest in all of New Eden. It was even worse than say the undefeated World Boxing Champion losing to a bum off the street. Something like this had never happened before. Things were going to become far more strained in the days, weeks, and months to come.

An upheaval had begun that would shake the foundations of New Eden, of all Espers, to the very core.

With everything that just happened Sera thought she would be more surprised, taken aback by everything, especially given who it was they just encountered. Perhaps she had grown used to this type of nonsensical chaos. She was used to trouble involving Gio and herself.

This was just another in a long list of unfortunate events to befall Sera since she returned to her hometown after ten years away.

In the past year since her return to New Eden, ever since she became Gio's partner in his ill-fated business, she had come to expect sticky situations day in and day out. This wasn't new to her. Not anymore.

That seemed to be the fate of *Sera Noel* since she met *Giotto 'Gio' Jaeger* – the man whom they once called a hero of the people, a man whom they once called the fool of fools, and the man who was once called a *King of New Eden*.

The same man who, with his previous identity lost, was known far and wide as *The Wild Card*.

2nd CARD | The Fool & The Firecracker

Three days had passed since Gio Jaeger, the Wild Card, went head-to-head against the Diamond King, Victor Ferris. In three days the news of the battle had spread all throughout New Eden, causing a stir unlike any the city had seen for quite some time. After all, for a King to engage in battle was a rare sight – for the King to lose said battle was practically unheard of.

It didn't reflect well on the Houses. It created a sense that they were weak. It also didn't help Gio and his business, as he hardly wanted the news he fought and defeated a King to spread, which would create panic and fanfare.

The situation had grown so dire that Gio and his partner, Sera Noel, were forced to stay away from their home for the time being. Their only course of action was to try and hide until the heat died down. As such, they found themselves hanging out at a familiar place for them both. A place far away from most of the city and secluded for just a select few.

That home away from home was none other than a run-down tavern known as *Ridge's Bar*.

The smell of stale beer and old peanuts permeated the dingy hangout, but it was a safe haven for the most part. The entire structure was pretty worn down with much of the wooden building needing to be replaced. Chairs and tables were rickety and falling apart. A few ceiling fans would sputter before a swift smack got them spinning again.

Even so, the drinks were cold and the food was warm. It was a place of comfort and familiarity.

Gio's sunglasses were folded up, resting on the collar of his white undershirt. His eyes were closed and he was noticeably out of it, but he took the time to reach forward and take hold of his tall glass of golden liquid. A nice, cold beer, seemed to be just the thing he needed to put his mind at ease.

“Oi, why not try drinking a cola instead?” Sera's snarky tone chimed in from a few bar stools down.

“.. Why don't you try drinking some milk instead of that root beer, eh? Might do your body some good.” Gio sipped his beer while developing the slightest of smirks.

“The hell do you mean by that, jackass?! This body o' mine is perfectly fine as is! If you don't watch it, I'm going to shove that glass down your thro—”

“You two sure never change.” A third, strong yet gentle voice, came into play.

It belonged to the barkeep. A rather husky, heavysset man, with enough body hair to make an ape feel a bit underdressed. Unfortunately for the barkeep that hair wasn't atop his head, where he was forced to wield a comb over with what little bit of cocoa colored fur he had left.

The barkeep was none other than Ridge, or rather Richard 'Ridge' Roberts, the owner and namesake of the tavern.

“Why don'tcha butt out, Ridge? Gio's askin' for it and I'm ready to make 'em regret it!” Sera was fired up, as usual.

“You should listen to Old Man Ridge. I don't think you and those *mosquito bites* are quite ready for—” But Gio wasn't going to get to finish that, as a wild flying stool soon flashed into focus.

In a true display of skill, Gio narrowly got his beer glass back atop the bar and to safety – but unfortunately the stool impacted him hard, sending him spiraling off to the floor.

At least the beer survived.

“.. I don't know why I try with these two.” Ridge's voice trailed off into a heavy sigh. He had become far too use to the antics of Gio and Sera.

Sera took the opportunity to take Gio's now vacant seat, and his beer, which she casually poured into the bar sink with an accompanying chuckle. Gio could do nothing but attempt to count the number of birds circling his head.

“I swear he never learns!” Sera was seemingly talking to herself, but Ridge gave a reaffirming nod. “I half expected him to have some brains by now. I think those shades of his are cutting off the blood flow to his brain or something.”

Sera then reached down the bar where she had been sitting previously and brought her own drink, an ice cold root beer resting in a brown bottle, to rest upon her lips. She slowly enjoyed every second that she was able to have with her ultimate beverage of choice.

“Nothing beats an ice cold, heaven-upon-your-lips root beer. No sir!” She smiled happily as she continued to drink, ignoring the incapacitated Gio as best she could.

Though, as she ignored him, she couldn't help the nostalgia that seemed to awaken within her. Specifically, she remembered the time that she and Gio first met. It was right here at Ridge's bar and the situation wasn't entirely different from the present one.

The bar was in the same shape back then, with the same sounds and smells. The drinks tasted the same and the food was still subpar.

Not to mention, the two so-called 'partners' seemed to be at odds just as much as now.

It was perhaps why the two continued to have such a rocky relationship to this day, just one year after their initial encounter...

« — »

“Where the hell's my root beer?!” The familiar voice of Sera hadn't changed much in a year. Even then she was a firecracker, ready to go off at a moment's notice. “It's been well over five minutes. Barkeep!”

Slamming her fists on the table caused her pink pigtails to sway. She was obviously upset, but she felt more than justified. To take so long for a simple beverage order when she was the lone patron was ludicrous.

The barkeep, Ridge, looked about the same back then as he did today.

Well, maybe he was a bit pudgier around the waste back then.

“Apologies, Miss. We've got to get some from the warehouse out back. My part-timer is back there as we speak, bringing in the new shipment. Root beer isn't a common order. Though, perhaps...” His voice trailed off. He wouldn't admit it to a customer but his employee was taking his sweet time.

“Screw it, I'll go get it myself.” Sera was up on her feet and heading towards the employee's entrance before Ridge could even muster a single word.

Being at Ridge's wasn't really a choice for Sera at the time. She had just made it into New Eden for the first time in years and had simply wanted to grab a refreshment before she dove deeper into the city. Though, instead of being on her way, she found herself being disrespected in a rundown bar that hadn't seen better days in at least ten years.

With head held high and pigtails bouncing back and forth, she blew past the doorway and straight into the alleyway out back. From there it was simply a hop, skip, and jump, away from the storehouse. With or without the assistance of the barkeep she would soon have her treasured root beer.

“So much for the service here. It really does blo—” She froze.

She didn't move nor breath.

Shock was holding her tightly in place.

What she saw sent her spiraling deep into despair.

Hunched over a splintered crate of premium NEB root beer was the oozing mess that must have been the hired help Ridge referred to before. The part-timer was clinging to the now empty box like a life raft, with the shattered bottles and puddles of root beer before him serving as the swaying seas.

He did seem to have a single bottle of something with him, though it was filled with something quite a bit stronger than a soft drink.

Sera's despair quickly turned to rage. She had become the embodiment of the kraken, ready to strike down the man before her and drag him to Davy Jones' Locker.

“The *hell* are you doing, you idiot?! T-T-That was perfectly good root beer! What the hell did you do to it?! Are you so much of a klutz you can't walk five freaking steps and do your job?!” Her voice nearly cracked.

There was no response to the outburst.

She stepped forward and grabbed the part-timer's shirt collar, clenched fists pulling him to her. The smell of spilt root beer mixing with what appeared to be whiskey made her gag repeatedly.

The man with messed about brown hair was none other than Gio Jaeger in all his drunken glory. He looked about the same as he did in the present day, albeit his clothes were an old and filthy black jacket with matching slacks and he clearly hadn't seen a shower in days. The only part of him even somewhat clean appeared to be his sunglasses. The sight of those shades, being worn on what was a cloudy day, simply drove Sera's rage further.

“You're out here getting drunk off your ass?! Not to mention you're wearing these stupid shades when the sun's nowhere in sight?! You really are a moron, aren't you?!” She reached for his sunglasses as she finished her shouting rant, but the man suddenly sprang to his feet on his own before she could get too close.

He nearly head butt her in the process.

“.. *What?* Ohhh, you wanted... Hic... beer. I ain't got no beer, but I has some whishkey.” His words were a tumbling, slurred mess of the English language.

He couldn't seem to even grasp what the situation was. He was obviously drunk, but that didn't seem to matter much to Sera. She was fuming that her root beer lay scattered to the winds and that this lazy drunkard before her was the cause of the distress.

“.. Listen up, *dumbass*. I'm going to give you a chance to fix this situation. I'm sure there's some more—” She was cut off by the sudden feeling of the drunkard's hands atop her feminine peaks.

This part-timer was groping her breasts.

“.. Oh? I thought it was a *woman* talking to me... How disappointing...” Those words were potentially the last for the part-timer. In a move fueled by emotion he was sent flying through the wall of the storehouse by a swift roundhouse kick.

The girl clearly had some physical prowess.

Angry wasn't the right word to describe Sera. Not now. Enraged, furious, those didn't quite cut it either. It was highly possible that a word had yet to exist which could properly describe her feelings in that moment. She didn't care what the collateral damage was, either. Sera was intent on inflicting an unheard of amount of suffering on Gio.

After the loud crash Ridge was quick to make his way out into the alleyway to join them.

He wasn't pleased but he didn't seem too angry at the damage to his property. Instead, he held a look of disappointment, much like a father would after hearing of his child's bad test grade. This situation must not have been too new to Ridge.

His hands rested on his hips as he peered down at Gio, his demeanor showing his obvious displeasure.

“*Sigh*. What am I going to do with you, Gio? You've cost me more money in a day than I'd pay you in a month.” Ridge's voice caught Sera's attention.

“Oi, barkeep. I want the best filet knife you have. I'm going to cut off this guy's balls.” Sera then reached into the shattered storehouse wall and pull the dazed Gio from the wreckage. “You're going to *beg* for death before it's over. Gio's your name, huh? I'll be sure to forget it before your funeral.”

One might think she was playing games or having a laugh. One might think she was simply trying to be intimidating. One might also be wrong. It seemed Sera was fully intent on striking down this drunkard.

Clearly the owner of the tavern couldn't go and let his part-timer get murdered on the property, though.

“Well, Miss, as much as I wouldn't mind being rid of a guy like that, he's not all that bad. I did tell him no drinking until after work, though...” Ridge could only sigh further. The tone of his voice implied this wasn't the first time this kind of thing had happened.

The young woman, clearly in her late teens, couldn't help but let out a wild laugh.

“Oh? Who is this jackass, anyway? Pretty shit part-timer, but you certainly seem to know him a bit more personally.” Sera was calming down, if only momentarily.

Perhaps she thought by easing up a bit in front of Ridge she could still grab hold of a sharp object to introduce to Gio's nether regions.

“He's a part-timer. Has some business related to odd jobs, but in all honesty he just likes it to sound flashy. He's just a part-timer. Sure does pack in the alcohol, though.” Ridge then held out a dark brown bottle for Sera, enticing her attention away from Gio. “Here you go, Miss. Found it stashed in the back of the icebox. Have yourself a cold one, on the house, and let me deal with him.”

Sera's remaining anger fluttered away instantaneously, replaced by jubilation and victory fanfare. She dropped Gio like a sack of bricks and happily swiped for the root beer, stepping away back towards the bar's interior with a smile across her face. She was in her own little heaven, barely even remembering the last few minutes.

“What am I going to do with you, Gio? You're nothing but a mess these days.” Ridge reached down to help up his part-timer. “.. You're just getting worse, too.” He grabbed Gio's free hand and pulled him up in one swift motion.

“Thanksh Ridgey. Fell over or somethin'...” Gio struggled to stand on his own, but Ridge was able to keep him steady.

The situation seemed mostly handled and the barkeep began to help his part-timer back inside, but there was a sudden shift in the air. A heaviness that fell upon the bar and the lone three who occupied it.

A sobering sense of dread had crept up on them.

Both of the men became tense and halted their movement as the feeling around them grew more intense with each passing second.

Gio's drinking hand twitched ever so slightly, causing that whiskey bottle he had clung to for so long to fall. It shattered violently on the uneven pavement beneath them.

“.. *Old man Ridge*, get inside and— Hic!— bolt those doors. Keep that girl safe for a... few.” The once slurred words had become mostly clear, though they seemed a bit forced when partnered with a stray hiccup.

Gio sounded as close to sober as one could expect, and for the first time, he was quite serious.

Ridge didn't even bother to ask questions, leaving Gio on his own as he rushed to the doorway, but the emerging Sera caused him to slam on the brakes.

“Hey barkeep, what do you have to eat arou—”

“—Miss, inside, now!” He frantically picked the pace back up, racing towards Sera without giving her a chance to continue her request.

“What are you on about?” She demanded answers but she didn't have to ask again at that point.

All she had to do was look above her as the sense of danger began to draw her eye.

Drops of a warm crimson liquid fell at her feet, the source of which were a series of fangs belonging to a charcoal colored beast staring back down at the trio. The hovering creature was already lowering itself towards three potential victims, trailing along thick strands of a white webbing covering the gap of the two buildings.

The monster appeared to be nearly six feet tall and at least three times as long. It was covered in what could only be described as scales coated with long bards of a hair-like material, which much like its fangs were stained with splashes of blood. The sectioned body and eight creeping legs showed that it was some kind of massive arachnid.

Quite simply, some sort of monstrous being from hell.

Or rather it was what the world had come to know as a *Chaotic*, a monster born from and focused only on chaos.

Sera never even had time to realize what was happening before she felt her body being lifted up off the ground by some unseen force. More specifically it was actually the wind, gathering her up and pulling her straight towards the spider-shaped Chaotic.

She didn't even have the chance to scream, no change to struggle, before her figure spun wildly and flung upwards onto the roof of the rundown bar. A barely audible yelp was all that escaped her lips as her body hit the roof with a loud thud.

The Chaotic itself went springing from its webbing, flying up into the air and coming to rest just a few mere inches above the rooftop, hovering with its apparent air magic.

“Gio! The girl!” Ridge called out to his part-timer but there was no response. Gio had already vanished from the alleyway.

Sera's body rolled harshly across the rooftop, the Chaotic using the wind power it controlled to whip her back and forth without any mercy. It was quite literally attempting to turn her into pound beef. The force of the attacks were so quick that not even Sera, whom was rather skilled in the martial arts, could react.

The magical force of the Chaotic's power was too much for someone with no supernatural powers to speak of. Not to mention the fact she had never faced off against such a beast.

Is this really how I'm going to die?! I haven't even found him, damnit! Her mind tried to find a way out of the situation, but there was nothing. This isn't it for me! I just need a grip and I can fight—

Her body hit the roof with such a force that the supports below splintered, caving in beneath her, but the body remained hovering and was tossed around some more on the bits of the roof still intact. The Chaotic was now closing in on its pray and preparing for the all-important kill shot.

“I'm really not a fan of eight legged *freaks!*” Gio's voice, filled with annoyance, called out.

It was the cue for a sudden explosion of flames that slammed into the creature and sent it flying from its perch.

Sera's body fell limp, freed from the grasp of the Chaotic.

Gio turned his attention to her, running and stumbling over to give her a once over and make sure she wasn't seriously wounded.

“Hey, flatty, you still alive over there or should I forget about ya?” Gio's semi-serious tone was finding a whole new way to mock while the situation worsened around them.

Sera wasn't very amused.

“The hell?! Who do you think you're calling flatty?! I'll have you know I'm perfectly proportioned to be the perfect woman, you fucking creep!” Any fear or pain she had suddenly flew out the window.

Once again, she was pissed – despite the agony she had felt radiating throughout her entire body seconds before.

She found the pain lessened when her attention was once again drawn to Gio. She didn't realize it then, but perhaps it was part of his plan given their situation. To get her mind off of what was transpiring.

It also seemed that the same man who had been slobbering over himself just a few minutes ago had somehow cured himself of his drunken state. At least for the most part. Not only that, but that explosion of fire... Sera was certain that it had to be Gio who caused it.

She realized Gio was an *Esper*. Those gifted with supernatural abilities and magics.

“Yeah, you're right. Perfectly proportioned for a preteen boy.” Gio gave a smirk while adjusting his shades, seemingly caring more to engage in a battle of words with Sera than facing the Chaotic.

The young girl was ready to respond with more insults, but she quickly discovered her inability to speak. She couldn't breathe. The oxygen around her had suddenly vanished and the air was now suffocating her.

The Chaotic was once again making a move, going back towards his prey rather than facing Gio. Unfortunately for Sera that meant her air supply was nil and she wouldn't have long to survive.

“Like *hell* you'll be doing that on my watch!” Gio shouted out once more, flinging himself through the air in an otherworldly showing of strength and speed. “Hey, *flatty*, don't worry! Ol' Gio is going to get you out of this! Don't sweat it!” Even as he moved to save her he had to take another jab.

The Chaotic was moving now to avoid Gio, but it wasn't prepared for the wildfire that flared up and surrounded it. Flames had burst forth from nothing, blocking all escape routes but one. The beast had nowhere to go but up, which was easy enough for a wind manipulator, but that was what Gio wanted. The Chaotic was a mindless beast, going exactly where the part-timer wanted it to go.

Gio floated just above the spider's escape route, right hand surrounded in a swirling white and black energy.

“Chew on this instead, spidey!” Snapping his fingers downwards soon unleashed a streaking red energy which moved through the air like a sonic jet. It slammed into the spider and with a thunderous roar exploded into a pillar of flame.

Sera was released from her airtight prison just in the nick of time. Gasping for breath, coughing wildly, she couldn't help but claw towards the battle. Even as her body fought against her she had to witness the fight. She was mesmerized by the

power on display. The flames which burned acted as if they were alive, dancing and swirling to the beat of Gio's drum. She had seen the abilities of Espers plenty of times in the past, but never had she seen such a destructive force wielded so effortlessly.

She watched as Gio floated in the air above where the flames raged and still she couldn't fully believe it. That same guy was a drunken mess not long ago. Now, however, he was fighting that monster with a power that seemed completely and utterly overwhelming.

If it had been *anyone* but the man whom insulted her so, she might have fallen head over heels in admiration for his strength.

Gio, meanwhile, continued hovering and kept the flames raging even harder. The propulsion of the fire seemed to allow his floating position with ease.

“Still not quite well done and crispy, huh? You've got some real thick skin!” He could tell the fight had yet to be finished. The spider had survived the explosion and flames, which was rare.

“You're telling me that thing is still alive after all that?!” Sera's surprise overwhelmed her. She almost sounded excited or even eager in some way.

The answer to the question was clear, but the Chaotic was indeed still alive and kicking. Gio watched as his flames began to bend outwards, a trend which continued upwards. Something was moving towards him and pushing away the blaze.

“Of course!” He was expecting it.

The Chaotic then sprang forth from the inferno, shielded by a visible force of blackened wind energy. The spider shaped beast then darted towards Gio with enough speed and force to easily flatten a regular human like a bug on a windshield.

Though the sunglasses-clad part-timer was hardly a regular human.

As the beast's fangs attempted to chomp down on Gio he grabbed hold of the Chaotics' head, keeping the fangs at bay with what looked like raw strength. The truth was, however, that he had broken through its wind barrier with what appeared to be a similar wind-based ability, which covered his own body.

It was so similar that it had to be the same skill, manipulated and controlled by someone else.

“Damn you're feisty!”

Gio then used his strength to turn in mid-air, flinging the spider upwards and releasing him, but the spider darted right back at him in an attempt to latch his fangs into him once more.

Sera then watched as the spider collided with Gio, appearing to succeed in wrapping its fangs around his frame, and the two figures crashed harshly into the street below with another loud crash that this time rocked the area.

“D-Did he just get *eaten*?! Just like that?!” Sera rushed to the edge of the roof to look at the aftermath, but she was greeted with a different sight than Gio's defeat.

“*Sorry*, friend... There won't be any Grilled Giotto on the menu today. Hope that doesn't deter you from coming again, though.” Gio couldn't help but let out a bit of laughter as he mocked the Chaotic attempting to slice him up. His body, which lay inside the Chaotic's mouth, had yet to be bitten into. “Now, tell me, what's the best way to *ride the wind*?”

Gio's body was protected by that same wind energy, this time preventing the spider from biting down.

As if feeling frantic, perhaps for the first time feeling fear, the Chaotic summoned a series of swirling twisters. Each was colored the same faded black as the wind which surrounded its own body. The twisters then rushed towards the pair of them, surely planning to take out Gio even if it meant sacrificing itself. The ground along their path was shredded and blown away with ease.

The part-timer smirked ever so slightly at the move while his right hand twitched ever so slightly. In that moment new twisters formed, but they remained simple masses of wind for only an instant – and instead they soon became swirling cyclones of flame.

“Maybe in the next life you'll be a bit nicer to local watering holes! Nothing wrong with having a drink in the middle of the day, spidey!”

The shouting from Gio matched the ferocity of the flaming twisters as they collided with the Chaotic's own wind, and the combined forces converged on both the spider and Gio in a pillar of swirling fire that stretched high into the sky.

A brilliant flash forced Sera to look away, but she fought the urge to run and instead looked back. She was enthralled and she had to know what happened.

“Hey! Part-timer!” Sera couldn't help but let out a shout, shielding herself somewhat from the heat of the flames, but luckily the pillar began to die down just as quickly as it appeared.

Dust kicked up by the forces of wind and flame had yet to settle, but the scattered torched limbs of the beast made it clear what happened – the Chaotic had been shredded and incinerated. The only question left to answer was if Gio had survived the combined attacks of the spider and his own.

A light cough from within the smoke was confirmation enough.

Gio's figure, seemingly untouched by the flames or razer-like wind, stepped into the view of the onlooker Sera. He couldn't help but have a slight grin across his face as he looked up to Sera leaning over the roof's edge. He could tell from the way she acted that it was exciting for her.

Sera was startled at what she just witnessed, but yes, she was also quite excited. Her first experience back in New Eden since she was a young child had been nothing short of exhilarating.

“That's... that's it?” Her voice was shaky. Her adrenaline that had been pumping so hard was coming back down.

“That's it, Miss.” Ridge appeared from a hatch opening on what remained of the roof, motioning for Sera to follow him to get down.

“You're telling me that drunk was able to do *that* to that... *thing*?” She spun around, demanding a better response from the barkeep.

“Well, Miss, it's true that he can be quite a slacker and tends to drink too much... but that Gio Jaeger is something when it comes to that power of his. He's not like anything else in New Eden, I can guarantee you that.” Ridge's approval was obvious.

Sera couldn't quite grasp that the man from before was the same man that had just fought that Chaotic and won in such fashion. It didn't quite click in her mind. However, Ridge's words seemed to spark something within her. Perhaps it was his name, or perhaps the idea that this Gio would open the door to a whole new world of excitement.

So, turning back towards where the dust had finally settled, she stood and vaulted off the edge of the roof!

There was no hesitation, no concern for her own injuries, and she even completed the feat with a mid-air flip.

She landed comfortably with soft scrap across the pavement where Gio was casually stretching.

“You! Gio Jaeger!” Sera shouted with authority, catching Gio off guard and causing him to nearly stumble backwards.

“W-What do you want now, flatty?” His response was enough to cause Sera to once again grab him by the collar.

She stared right into those black sunglasses of his as if looking through them and right into his very soul.

“Tell me what it is you do! How the heck do you fight like that after being so wasted?” She demanded answers.

Gio could only give a glance off to the side, his shades barely hiding his wandering eyes. He wasn't sure how to best respond to the very direct woman standing before him.

“I-I'm just a part-timer, ya know?” His stutter didn't help his situation.

Sera then pulled him in close, staring further. She was inches from his face and nearly gagged once again at the sudden stench of alcohol. She fought the urge to do so.

“You have a business, yeah? Well guess what, *Mr. Part-Timer*? You just found yourself a new manager.” Sera's sudden declaration had Gio turning limp with fear. Not even the observing Ridge quite understood what the young Miss was up to.

Gio's lack of a response caused Sera's grip to tighten.

“Something *wrong* with that?!” She shouted again and Gio's returning intoxication didn't seem to enjoy that much.

“I hate to be a bringer of bad news, but uh... I don't really work with anyone, so—” He was cut off as his body went soaring further down the street, skipping along the path towards what would be the heart of New Eden.

The dominance of this young woman was firmly established as she sent his body soaring with little effort.

“Hey, Barkeep! Where the hell does this guy live, anyway?”

Sera's glare caused Ridge to physically freeze up, but he was quick to respond.

“T-Thirteenth District! You can't miss the place, trust me...” He wasn't sure why he answered, but fear was quite the motivator.

Sera simply gave a smirk and made her way over to Gio. Looking down with a nod of approval she kicked him along, much like a soccer ball, and watched him bounce along the road. Her physical strength seemed even more freakish than Gio's fire.

“Thanks!” She gave a wicked smile as she continued on, pulling out the root beer she sneakily managed to get her hands on once again. How did she still have it? Did she hide it somewhere? Was it a cosmic moment? No one could be sure.

This time she finally popped it open and took a long chug. She had been ready for this all day, only something wasn't quite right. The taste was off.

“.. *It's fucking flat! Damnit!*”

“Like your chest. ~” Gio's words were like a whimper, weakened by his hangover and the physical abuse he had sustained.

She set down the bottle, giving no response to the comments, instead clasping her hands to seemingly offer a prayer to the flat root beer.

It was the moment after the prayer, where her eyes glared at him with a calm terror, which had the part-timer somewhat worried.

After all, for some reason, it appeared he was going to be stuck with this strange girl. His mind was already racing to the abuse that lie in his immediate future. Was he really going to let this girl force herself into his business, his life? He didn't work with anyone and hadn't done such a thing in years... but now it seemed that was changing against his will.

It was the beginning of what would surely be the most dysfunctional and downright crazy partnership in history. One had to wonder just what Sera was thinking and why Gio hadn't yet decided to escape. Somehow, someway, these two

forces were colliding – and who knew what the future could hold for this *partnership setting sail on the rocky seas.*

3rd CARD | King

One week had passed since Gio 'defeated' Victor Ferris, The Diamond King, and today would be the first time Gio and Sera returned to their home. For a number of days they stayed with Ridge, avoiding any potential retaliations, but now they felt confident enough to return.

Returning back home to the slums of Thirteen.

The *Thirteenth District* was notorious for being mostly slums and *shady* business practices. Four years ago was a different story, but ever since the disaster of a *Fall From Grace* befell the district it was essentially abandoned. New Eden personnel, the Houses, rarely ventured to it.

That was great for someone like Giotto Jaeger, who made the district his home. Moving into an abandoned building was easy enough and fixing it up required little effort. It was here that he setup his business, *Wild Card*, and was thus where he took most potential jobs.

If someone was desperate enough to come there for help it was obviously a dire situation – and those were the jobs that Gio felt he was responsible for. It was his duty to help. At least when he wasn't drowning his worries in a sea of premium whiskey.

Even though official records all claimed Gio as being dead, even though it was no longer a responsibility of his, he still wanted to help this city he called his home. He would continue to help despite being listed as KIA - killed in action - during the exact same event that left District Thirteen in the sorry shape it was.

Luckily, for the most part, he rarely had run-ins with the Houses.

Unfortunately, his run of good luck had recently come to an end.

“Step lively, pond scum! We're not going to slack around no more, you got it?!” Sera was fired up already and it wasn't even ten in the morning.

Still far too early for Gio.

She was already washing up the dishes that she just made use of for breakfast. The haunting aroma of burnt toast, overcooked eggs, and practically raw bacon, was overpowering. It filtered through the small kitchen and through the entirety on their home sweet home.

Despite the rundown areas of the district it appeared the renovations here in Wild Card were actually pretty top notch. Thanks to the interior of the original building remaining mostly intact.

It housed a state of the art kitchen, comfy little breakfast bar, and a small living room just beside it with some lightly worn furniture. The main draw was the older

brown sofa, worn but in great condition given its age. Mismatched recliners lay off to the sides with a rectangular glass coffee table in the center. The glass was slightly cracked on one of the corners, as if someone had head butt it some time ago.

It was a vast improvement over the other homes and buildings nearby. It seemed Gio at least cared enough to make his home presentable and hospitable – but he in fact had little to do with it.

Sera was the one who did most of the renovating.

Gio's slumped corpse on the living room couch was about as good a response as Sera would be getting to her early morning eagerness, but he decided to indulge her at least a little.

“.. What's up *your* butt? We just got back last night, you know... I'm going to sleep for a couple days.” Gio's dulled pitch served as his case to remain asleep. He was visibly exhausted.

The sudden swig of whiskey from his trusty silver flask had Sera back on the offensive.

“Sleep, huh? I don't think you'll be needing *THIS* then, right?” She dove across the breakfast bar as if carried by the wings of angels, hand standing and twirling over the couch, grabbing said flask in a flash, and finished by landing in a roll to bounce back on her feet.

Sera was far too much of a freak when it came to physical ability.

“H-Hey! That's mine, mosquito!”

Gio was on his feet, grabbing for the flask, but Sera swiftly spun away and ran back into the kitchen. Gio could barely even follow her from behind those shades of his. His head was pounding and his body was heavy – not from exhaustion as he might have claimed, but from a hangover.

“The reason you're so against getting any work done is because you were drinking this crud like water all night. I won't be letting that continue into the day, too.” Sera spoke as she poured the remnants of the flask down the sink.

He looked on in sorrow as his prized drink drained away.

“.. Yeah, well, don't expect me to get all chipper just because you threw out my supply.” Gio flopped back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling.

Sera's feisty expression faded away as she set the flask down on the counter. She seemed slightly defeated, nearly depressed. It was obvious that Gio's drinking was a problem but not even she could get him to realize that. They had been a team for nearly a year and it was sometimes as if little had changed.

Her thoughts were soon knocked away by a subtle tap on the front doors of their little establishment.

“Oi, look lively, Gio! Already got a customer.” Sera brightened up at the thought of a job, prancing over to the door with much haste.

A job would be just the thing to get them focused again.

She grabbed the handles and pulled open the double doors with a smile on her face for their new customer – but the sudden sight before her made her cringe in disgust.

“.. *Oh*, it's *you*.” She spoke with a malicious spark.

“Nice to see you too, Sera. How's Gio doing?” The soft spoken voice of a young man caught the ear of Gio across the room.

The man at the door entered, revealing bright orange shaggy hair that was recently combed and a kind gaze resting upon Sera with hazel colored eyes. His smile was subtle and pleasant. The overall look, though, was one of notoriety – a mostly white uniform, clean cut, with various black and golden stripes along it. On the front, just above his chest on his left, was the golden mark of *Spades*.

This customer was a member of the House of Spades, one of the four Houses. In fact, he was none other than the *King* of Spades – Leon Kruger.

“Leon! The heck are you doing in these parts at this time of day, huh?” Gio jumped to his feet, wobbled a moment, then caught himself. The hangover was strong in this one.

Leon gave a wave and slight laugh, stepping into the living room as Sera slammed shut the doors behind him.

“You look about as I'd expect, Gio. Still a fan of the hard stuff, hm?” Leon raised his fist to the air as he neared Gio, and the two shared a fist bump as a sign of both respect and their obvious friendship.

“Well, you know me all too well. Just got back home last night, too. Been a rough week.” Gio sat back down on the couch as Leon took the chance to sit in the recliner to the side of him. “.. Though even so, I doubt you came all this way to catch up.”

The orange haired King couldn't help but give a nervous laugh. It wasn't hard for Gio to figure out there was more to his visit than simply catching up.

“That's so quick! I expected we could have chatted a bit first, but, I suppose you're right.” Leon smiled again, despite the sudden death glare from Sera reaching him from the kitchen.

Leon took a deep breath and allowed his expression to become more focused.

“.. It's about a job, of course. Something I can't act on myself.”

A loud thump could be heard from the kitchen as Sera kned the cabinet doors under the sink. Wood chips clattered against the kitchen floor.

“What job could a *King* of New Eden possibly need us to do?! I would think you and your precious Espers are more than capable!” Sera shouted. Her obvious discontent with Leon radiated through the room.

Another nervous laugh from Leon was his immediate response. Gio, however, was intrigued.

“.. So what's the job? I have to admit, it's pretty rare you need me to do something these days.”

Gio nonchalantly took a small book from the living room table and chucked it behind him at Sera, but she skillfully dodged and stuck her tongue out in response.

“It's a job that I can't get involved with directly... in fact, it's not far from here. In the underground slums, there's been some recent disappearances.” Leon trailed off slightly, as if unsure how to continue, but Gio gave him a reassuring nod. He continued, “.. You see, underground fight clubs have always been an issue in New Eden. They're somewhat tame, though, and have never had a dire need to be stopped... but lately, we've received reports of a new kind of underground fighting.”

Gio lowered his sunglasses ever so slightly, staring clearly back at Leon.

“Don't treat me like some patient you're consoling. Out with it, man. Rip off the band-aid.”

Leon hesitated, but nodded in agreement.

“This new type of fight club involves both *Normals* and *Espers* alike, though they aren't fighting amongst themselves – they're being pitted against *Chaotics*. To the death. For the sport of some wealthy patrons of the inner districts.”

Gio's expression barely changed, as if he wasn't fazed much by that news. However, it was without a doubt a big deal.

Chaotics were wild, monstrous beings, not meant to be controlled or rounded up for sport. They were beasts meant to be put down. Putting a Chaotic up against Espers, or even worse, *Normals* – those with no powers – was ludicrous.

Then there was the inevitable outcome that the monsters themselves would hardly remain someone's prisoner for long.

Leon continued, but it was clear the conversation was a strained one.

“What makes it worse, Gio... is they're using mostly kids. Teenagers you could say, but still, they're using those who don't have any other option. They're taking advantage of the people living in the slums for gambling.” Leon's typically soft spoken voice began to grow rough, grainy.

He was becoming visibly angry and so was Gio.

Sera, however, seemed to be further annoyed that Leon came to them with this job. A job she felt strongly that the Houses themselves could easily handle.

“If it's so bad Mr. King, why won't the Houses intervene? You're supposed to be the protectors of this city, aren't you?! So how about get out there and do your jo—”

Gio held up his hand to try and quell Sera's annoyance. He knew what the reasons were and why Leon came to him about this.

So, with a heavy heart, he explained.

“If it's in the slums, that means no House holds jurisdiction. The Houses mostly leave the slums to the dogs... and stepping into the slums is akin to attempting to expand your territory forcefully. It's a stupid reason, but, the Houses have a weird way of going about things sometimes. Then, of course, the Houses don't want to go pissing off the one percent...”

Gio trailed off. His own concern, or rather anger, was obvious.

After all, four years ago Gio attempted to reform the slums. He and Leon worked to rebuild the Thirteenth District, of which they did a hell of a job. It then ended up being the House of Hearts – Gio's House – that gained jurisdiction over it. At the time, anyway.

That didn't sit well with some members of other Houses. It caused friction among the Espers throughout New Eden and made some of the more powerful and influential members speak out against it. Eventually, even most Jacks and Queens were looking to their King to speak up.

Despite the backlash, they let it be.

It wasn't until Gio's fall, which greatly damaged much of the work done in the District, that they were able to once again abandon the slums and the District as a whole. District Thirteen was nothing more than a forgotten page passed over in the book of New Eden.

That explanation didn't really mean much in the mind of Sera.

“But Gio! That's all the more reason for the Houses to actually step up now and do some—”

“—We'll take the job, Leon.” Gio cut off her attempt to reason with him.

Sera's fist slamming into the counter showed her obvious distress.

Leon was, meanwhile, quick to show his appreciation.

“Thank you, Gio. I know it goes without saying, but we'll keep this one off the books. As usual I'll have your fee upon completion... and again, Gio, thank you.” Leon smiled as both men stood.

The hangover which plagued the shade wearer seemed to have subsided for at least a moment.

“Alrighty then. Sera, let's get a move—”

“—*Just* hold on right there! You're really just going along with this?! The Houses could easily—” Sera was cut off once again, this time by a mere gaze from Gio. His eyes peered out from behind those shades and made her freeze, if only for a second.

“.. We're doing this, *mosquito*.” His voice was calm and commanding. Not the typical Gio.

Sera could only grumble. She was typically the alpha dog in these situations, forcing Gio to do jobs, but this time was different. Gio accepted the job without an ounce of hesitation. What would normally call for Gio to drag his feet, kicking and screaming, was now like second nature to him.

It could only be attributed to his friendship with Leon. After all, the two were best friends since childhood. They were together through thick and thin.

“Fine, idiot. Let's get it over with.” Sera walked out from behind the counter, grabbing a red bandana from atop the breakfast bar. She tied her hair back with it as she glared towards Leon once more. “I'm expecting one *hell* of a payday for this one, Mr. King. Three times the going rate! Plus expenses!”

The double doors of Wild Card were pried open as Sera stormed out, Gio following closely behind as Leon gave a reassuring nod and wave. The doors then closed and Leon was left to wait for them to return – of which he seemed certain they would successfully.

“You've changed a lot, Gio... and yet you haven't changed. You're still the King I remember at heart. Still the King that joined me in trying to bring change to this city...” Leon smiled, reaching into his back pocket to reveal a worn and torn black wallet.

Among the series of cards and pictures stuffed inside, there was one far more crinkled than the rest. It had obviously been one Leon had kept close for many years. It was one he looked at frequently and as such it had become somewhat fragile.

In it stood three figures; himself, albeit younger and donning similar clothes to now, Gio, also younger and donning a similar uniform but in black, and a third. The third was a fair-skinned woman with long flowing black hair and sparkling big blue eyes, in between Gio and Leon. The three of them were smiling with arms intertwined.

“.. Seven years, Giotto. Seven years since we stepped into the realm of Kings together. I wonder what she would say about our present situation, hm? After all that's happened...”

« — »

Seven years ago was a completely different story from today. No battles amongst current or former Kings. No hiding from a city's worth of seekers.

The Espers Giotto 'Gio' Jaeger and Leon Kruger had just burst onto the scene as elites. At an unprecedented time when the Kings of two Houses were stepping down, few thought that a pair of rookies would be the ones to take up the crowns.

Alas, both Gio and Leon, only seventeen at the time, achieved what none other had before them – they became the youngest Kings in history before ever having even joined a House. Such an event had never occurred.

“Boy, would you look at you two! Genuine pair of celebrities on our hands!” A young girl squealed with delight, with pure joy, eyeing up the two before her. “Don't you two clean up well, hmm?”

She smiled and leaned in closer to get a good look at them both, a light breeze blowing her long, silky black hair about.

Those sparkling blue eyes were firmly planted on both young men before her. Much like her they were both wearing important looking uniforms. Her own and Gio's were of similar colors, a mostly black palate with red detailing and a symbol for Hearts just above their top breast pocket. Leon's, meanwhile, was identical to his present day attire of white with gold detailing.

“Come on, Faye. Don't go talking like that... there's others around, you know?” The somewhat flustered Gio seemed far too innocent for the present day version, but his reaction garnered a cheerful laugh from Faye.

Leon seemed rather embarrassed as well, but he couldn't help but laugh at the two beside him.

“You two sure never change. Though even with Gio as a King, I hardly expected him to be able to stand against you, Faye. Make sure you keep him in line over in Hearts, alright?” Leon smirked as Gio gave him a death stare, which only made the smirk grow.

“Oh, you know it Lil' Leo! I'll have him running laps soon enough. Such is the art of being a *Queen*, the true ruler of any great nation.” She laughed and placed her left hand on the Gio's cheek, smiling the whole time.

A silver ring around her left ring finger glistened in the shining sun overhead. Gio's own left hand, reaching up to hold hers, showed a matching silver band around his own ring finger.

Engagement rings for the happy couple of Faye Star and Gio Jaeger – the newest Queen and King of Hearts.

Even with the craziness of the entire event it felt like they could find their own world to pull away to. It was something that the two of them never bothered to explain. When they were together, when the world around them grew intense and overwhelming, they would lose themselves in each other. Instantly the buzz around them would cease. To them, the entirety of the world was the space between them and nothing else.

“Now then, my King, shouldn't we commemorate this occasion?” Her voice softened as she gave a comforting smile, washing away the uneasiness from Gio like an autumn breeze clearing the fallen leaves.

He smiled in turn, the likes of which the Gio of today seemed impossible of giving. It was a smile that remained in the distant past. A genuine smile, a smile free of worry and doubt. It was a smile that only Faye seemed capable of bringing out in the newly crowned King.

To be fair, the same could be said for all three. Friends since early childhood, having gone through the loss of their parents and the awakening of their powers, together as a new family. The connections between them were an unbreakable bond. In fact, it was perhaps thanks to their ties to each other that they were able to grow so quickly while climbing so high – they were leaders of New Eden because of their lives together.

His mind was finally at peace, so Gio nodded and glanced to the various people whom he had never seen before. The same people that now flocked to be around them.

It was the event of the century, or so some covering the spectacle would call it. This was the crowning of not just a single King of New Eden, but two. On top of that once in a lifetime opportunity a new Queen was also rising to the throne.

This was something that hadn't been done in nearly a generation.

Thousands flocked to the *Grand Theatre*, a place reserved for only the greatest of events. The Great Theatre, located right across from Central Tower, was almost never in use – but for this it was filled to capacity.

What would have normally only held about twenty thousand or so, was pushing it to practically thirty.

Citizens from New Eden whom were lucky enough to get standing-room-only tickets lined the aisles and boundaries. Espers from all four Houses were present, separated in the crowd by the House in which they belonged. Reporters and photographers of all kinds, from professional papers to small student magazines, were scattered amongst the swarm. Each and every one of them were hoping to catch the best shot once the ceremony began.

Not to mention, perhaps the *most* important attendees – the Kings of both Club and Diamond, all set to welcome their new comrades into the fold. They, however, had yet to make their official appearance. Though like tradition, they would be on stage to personally welcome their fellow Kings as their *Marks of The House* were given.

For the moment, Gio wanted to make sure they had something beyond the flashing lights to have as a keepsake for the event. Faye was right that they needed to commemorate the spectacle with their own personal touch.

Gio seemed a bit disheartened as he peered around from their place backstage, still out of view from the crowds. He wanted to try and motion for a photographer of some kind to come over, but they were all preparing their equipment. Somewhat

ironically the three that all of the people were here to see couldn't get the attention of a single cameraman.

Of course, him trying to get the attention of a single photographer without alerting the horde was most likely impossible anyway.

“No one's... *hmm*.” He was pondering what to do, but a familiar presence soon appeared behind the trio.

The haunting aroma of stale beer poorly hidden by cologne couldn't help but catch their noses and they instantly recognized one of their personal guests had arrived.

“You three are looking great! I hardly recognized you boys, but Faye is as lovely as ever.” The hearty voice belonged to none other than Ridge, the same man who had been like an uncle to Faye, Gio, and Leon their entire lives.

Even on this day he looked about the same as he always did. Still looking like he snuck more than his fair share of cookies from the top shelf and still with more hair on his arms than on his head.

He was, however, wearing a rather stylish black suit with platinum cufflinks that screamed mid-life crisis. Gio and Leon must have picked it out for him in jest.

“Ridge!” Faye quickly spun the two young men around to face him, giving little to no time for Gio or Leon to react.

She then quickly looped her arms with theirs, pulling them in close.

“Picture! Picture!” Faye's charismatic laughter and smile got both of her best friends to give widening grins of their own.

She kicked their nerves to the curb in a hurry.

“Bwahahahaha! Energetic as always, Faye. You got it—” Ridge had a small digital camera tucked safely away in his suit vest's front pocket. He quickly pulled it out, fumbling with it for only a few moments before raising it up to face the three friends. “Now then, on three, let me hear you say King!”

The two boys couldn't keep a straight face with that one.

“Really Ridge? King? That's a bit cheesy, don't you think?”

Leon let his snicker subside as he nodded with Gio in agreement.

“Yeah, Ridge. Maybe we could pick something a bit more—”

Faye swiftly grabbed the two boys by the ears, conforming her interlocked arms with quite the showing of flexibility. Both of them were instantaneously subdued.

“Cheese is great you two, now let's get this photo – we're on in just a couple minutes, ya know?” Faye's command had them shaping up in a jiffy.

This was a perfect moment. This was a perfect memory. If ever a time came when things were dark, this would be a shining light.

“One...!”

Amidst the chaos of the world this was a single cherished memento. Three best friends, arm in arm.

“Two...!”

All of whom had grown up together through good times and bad. All of whom reached unthinkable heights – together.

“Three...!”

And who cared if such an unforgettable moment was sprinkled with a bit of cheddar?

In unison, they breathed in with all of their heart. They had their entire lives ahead of them and nothing but happiness to come... and so they belted out with a smile the word that would pave the way to the future, being silly on their day of celebration—

“*KING!!*”

It never even began to sneak into their minds that it would all come crashing down around them in practically no time at all.

A seemingly unavoidable fate that had drawn them in since before they were even born. A destiny that not even their cheerful laughter or cheesy lines could hope to stand against.

Faye Star, Gio Jaeger, and Leon Kruger – a trio only preserved in the present day by a worn *photograph*.

4th CARD | Into The Arena!

Heading deeper into the slums of District Thirteen meant traveling underground. Above ground the slums weren't as horrible as the name would suggest. The only part of the district that was obviously uninhabitable was ground zero of Giotto's fall, where buildings were reduced to rubble and in some cases dust in the wind. Elsewhere, buildings were run down and abandoned for the most part. Streets were littered with obstructions here and there, but overall it felt more like a ghost town than an actual slum.

It was once you ventured into the underground that everything began to change.

Homeless littered the vast number of tunnels that swept through the area underneath Thirteen. Makeshift homes made of cardboard, dry wall, and sheet metal littered the walls. Dried crud and filth were scattered throughout the so-called 'streets' without a care. The smell, the stench, was all intoxicating – a single whiff made your head spin. A second made you lose your lunch.

What was once a vast sewer system was now home to a few thousand citizens abandoned and forgotten by their city of New Eden.

It wasn't as if they wanted to live there, though. They did so out of necessity.

Most of them were '*Normals*,' or rather non-Espers. Due to this fact, most of them were behind the eight ball to begin with. As a Normal it was hard to find suitable work in such a competitive market and that difficulty only seemed to increase in recent years. A city of twenty million can do that.

Living in old sewers was the only way some could survive. Above ground the threat of Chaotic attacks was high and no House dared to venture to the Thirteenth District to protect the citizens. Not in four years, at least.

The city that seemed so perfect on the outside, this paradise, was divided and it was getting worse.

On one side stood those with abilities, Espers. On the other side sat those without, Normals. It was an unfair system that for some reason continued to become more skewed as time went on.

Gio had fought tooth and nail, together with Leon, to change that.

When the two became Kings they used their newfound influence to attempt and bridge the gap. They wanted to make a world where both Espers and Normals alike had the same opportunities. To find a way where New Eden could truly become the greatest city in the world in more than just name alone.

They made progress up until Gio's fall from grace.

After that, well... it was as if all involved gave up hope of a truly unified city. The Houses abandoned the District and an agreement was reached that no House would attempt to claim the detached area as their own. Leon objected, along with the King of Clubs, both wanting to carry on the project, but the Houses had reached their verdict. Even with the request from two of the three Kings still active, the plea failed. Such was the influence of The Aces – those who stood above even Kings and remained faceless at Central.

For some reason they wanted to forget the district ever existed.

In the four years since, all the previous progress had been totally lost. If anything the District was even worse off now than it was before.

The underground fight club that now drew the attention of Leon, the arena where teens were pitted against Chaotics for sport, was evident of just how bad things had become.

Leon could only hope now was the time for Gio and Sera to get back some of that lost progress.

“Let me get this right, cheese head. You're going to... no, no, *no*. This is completely moronic even by your standards!” Sera shouted, her fist flying at a ducking Gio.

“Trust me it will be fine. All you have to do is act like you know what you're doing.” Gio paused for a moment, smirking. “.. Oh, right, you'd have to act like you knew what you were doing. Right. Impossi—” This time Sera's fist connected and sent Gio back into the stone wall beside him.

“Idiot. If you screw this up I'm going to give you more than a bloody nose, you got that?” Sera glared at the recovering Gio, whom could only shrug in response.

The two had made their way deep into the underground tunnels that ran underneath the Thirteenth District in just a few hours' time. They were both wearing black cloaks, hoping to mask their identity and escape the ooze that seemed to drip from every surface of the slums.

Gio had even come up with a plan, mostly thanks to Sera's somewhat small frame that could pass as a young teen. She was only nineteen, but even so, she needed to pull off looking a bit younger. Perfect for playing right into the greedy hands of those controlling the operation they were here to stop.

The plan itself was a simple one; enter Sera into the arena while Gio used his power to make her appear as an Esper. This would give them the opening they needed to get close, allowing them to hopefully snuff out whomever was the ringleader. Once they were found out, all Gio had to do was take out the boss and the job would be complete. Seemingly quick and painless.

They had originally wanted to simply enter the arena as patrons, betting on the event to get close, but their funds were shockingly nonexistent. Gio didn't have

enough kidneys he could sell to try and make the kind of money they would have needed.

“Yes, yes, whatever you say, mosquito.” Gio glanced further down the darkened tunnel at the subtle orange glow near the end. That was the light of their destination. “Don'tcha worry. I've got your back.”

He gave a little smirk as he passed her, which seemed to quell that anger of hers ever so slightly. It seemed even a fool like Gio could attempt to comfort someone else in a time of uncertainty. At least a little.

She nodded and followed swiftly behind him, paying careful attention to avoid the various vomit and feces piles along the way.

As they continued down the tunnel the light grew brighter. Eventually the thunderous roars of the crowds and growls of the Chaotics began to echo around them, practically drowning out their own thoughts. It was like walking into a stadium of a country's favorite sports team right before the championship game.

Lights skewed their vision as the tunnel opened up, blinding them like a burst of sunlight. Sera raised her hand to block the sudden surge of light, while the shades-cladded Gio simply looked on at the sight before them.

Their destination, as if suddenly popping in to place out of thin air, had been reached.

Hundreds of well-dressed men and women surrounded a thirty-foot-high steel fence, each cheering and screaming their heads off at the current fight on the other side of that barrier. Each and every member of the audience seemed to be wealthy, made obvious by their expensive clothes and overpriced bottles of wine or brandy. They were all ages from surely all corners of New Eden, but they stood here of all places for an illegal night of gambling over battles, blood, and bodies.

Interestingly enough the arena and surrounding structure was incredibly well kept. So much so it didn't seem real. It felt like you were entering into a totally different section of New Eden or traveling through a star gate to some far off world.

The look of the material switched from a leaky poo brown to a faded white marble from the ceiling down to the walls and across the floor to the edge of the battle arena. Numerous bars made from fancy looking lumber and metal, filled with expensive liquor, lined the coliseum style viewing area. Each row was then filled with expensive looking fiberglass tables and chairs.

It just didn't seem possible that this was the same slum.

In the middle of the otherworldly coliseum, where the white marble ended, the steel fence began. The structure was clearly well put together with bars being as large in diameter as an average person, crisscrossing over each other. In addition, massive steel barbs covered the interior of the fence, and each one had a nasty

yellow spark to it. These electrified spikes made sure that none could hope to escape.

The ring itself was at least a couple hundred feet wide, filled with a layer of sand much like coliseums of the past.

A last defining feature were the competitors themselves.

One was a young boy, bandaged in various places from head to toe in nothing but street rat clothing stained with blood. The other was a far more terrifying sight that would make most feel uneasy – a Jurassic looking creature, a high level Chaotic, nearly four times the height of the boy and twice as long.

This beast was covered in a copper-colored scaly skin, much like armor, lined with red tribal-like markings and splatters of blood. Clearly this towering monstrosity had been fighting in this arena for some time. The blood that stained his body was no doubt days, even weeks old.

The boy appeared barely fifteen or sixteen and had obviously seen better days physically – but regardless, he leapt around the ring with superhuman ability. He was an Esper, after all, and his movement was a literal blur.

This Chaotic, shaped much like a long extinct tyrannosaurus, didn't even bother trying to follow his speed. It had other ideas.

The boy was stopping occasionally from his dashes and showed his fatigue. Who knew how tired, hungry, or hurt he may have been. He wasn't well enough to go up against the rex or to use his ability consistently.

So the beast waited, watching, and finally took a single solitary lunge forward.

Its jaw flew open and snapped shut before most onlookers even realized what had happened.

At the same time there was no longer a young boy whizzing around at dazzling speeds.

All that remained was the crimson ooze which spewed across the sandy arena floor.

Gio was seemingly unfazed by what he witnessed. He was prepared for this, he expected it. Unfortunately, he was use to such sights.

Sera was a different story.

As the patrons cheered the death of the Esper, Sera began to dash ahead of Gio to give them all a piece of her mind – but Gio was quick to grab her by her cloak and spin her around to face him. She gave him a look of pure aggression, livid at the sight of these *suits* celebrating the death of another. Sera was so angry that she didn't even bother to hide the tears slowly beginning to stream down her face.

“Get your damn hands off me! I'm goin—” She was shouting and Gio used his other hand to cover her mouth.

“You want to blow the operation? Charge in? Give the mastermind time to run and get away? Be smart about this, Sera. We stick to the plan.” Gio's voice was calm, commanding. Different from the typical Gio experience.

Sera shouted through the hand which covered her mouth, expletives being thrown out in the form of hushed mumbles. She was enraged and rightfully so, but Gio had to calm her down. Everything was riding on them infiltrating the arena.

Hidden by his shades, Gio's eyes wandered to a pair of what appeared to be officials for the arena. An older gentleman and a young woman whom were dressed in matching formal garb. A white suit with red trim for the man, a white pantsuit for the woman with similar design choices and splashes of red here and there.

Both were eyeing up Gio and Sera. They had caught the eye of the staff already. Gio had to act.

“No time now, mosquito.”

Sera was suddenly spun back around to face the arena.

“—cking bastard!” She continued shouting despite the situation, catching a wicked smirk from the female staffer not far ahead of them.

The woman made her way towards Gio and Sera somewhat seductively, as if enjoying the sight of them just a bit too much. The wicked smile of hers and her tied back black hair was enough to compare her to the wicked witch.

“My, my, I see you have a rather unruly *pet* with you today. I'm *assuming* you're here to make a deposit?” She spoke like a snake, slithering her words into their ears and constricting their very souls.

“Who the hell do yo—” Sera was cut off by Gio once again covering her mouth. He gripped tight around the collar of her cloak, too, practically causing her to choke.

“You can say that again, *miss*.” Gio gave a comforting smile to the female staffer now standing just a few feet in front of them. “It's my first time here, but when I heard the going rate for some young Espers... well, just too good to pass up. Figured I'd give the slums a once over and see what I could find.”

Sera could barely believe what she was hearing. Without even flinching, Gio was able to converse with the devil in Prada like it was a normal thing. Heck, it almost sounded like Gio enjoyed the thought of selling off an orphaned Esper.

How could he so easily hide his emotion and act like that?

“Oh? Well, I'm happy to have a *first timer* with us. She certainly seems pretty scrappy as well, yes, yes.” The woman's wicked smile grew three sizes too big. “So, what might her ability be?”

Gio violently pushed Sera forward, practically causing her to trip over her own two feet.

“Go on, show her.”

Sera wanted to turn around and slam her fist so far down Gio's throat that she'd come out the other end, but now wasn't the time for that. It was the time for restraint. She calmly held out her hand, which Gio took advantage of – and a flame suddenly burst forth, nearly burning the hairs off Sera's eyebrows.

“Oh! She's an elemental user and a fire one at that! My, my, we haven't had a fire user before. This could get quite interesting...” As the flame vanished the woman looked back to Gio. “Well then, the going rate is...” The woman held up her hand with two fingers extended.

Gio nearly burst into laughter.

“.. That little, huh?” Gio then held up his own hand, showing four fingers. “After all, you yourself said it; you've never had a fire user before.”

The woman couldn't help but let a laugh escape her lips. Both she and Gio were locked in a game to decide just who would be getting the best deal.

“First time and already driving the price up, hm? My, I think I like you, *Mr. Shades.*” The woman then held up three fingers. “.. Though I don't like you *that* much.”

Gio sighed and began to reach out to Sera to pull her back, which the woman noticed, and she instead reached out to grab Sera by the front of her cloak.

“Fine, fine. You win, *Mr. Shades.*” She then pulled Sera along with Gio trailing behind. “See my associate over there for your money and grab a drink at the bar courtesy of us. After all, I think you'll like to see what this little *firecracker* is capable of... she's up next, after all.”

Gio smiled and nodded, watching Sera get pulled towards the large arena like a dog. He knew it was all Sera could do not to let loose and rampage without a single care in the world... but he also knew that this was their one shot. Sera may have been hot-headed but Gio trusted her enough to remain calm in a situation like this.

He wasted little time in collecting his payment. It was his role to play the happy slave trader – meaning money and booze were two things he'd be able to enjoy here.

“Woo! Let's see what you're capable of, *mosquito.*” He was cheering from in front of the bar before turning around to face the bartender. “Your lady boss will be picking up my tab, good sir. I'll take a whiskey and coke, hold the coke.” He smirked and turned back to the arena, finally removing his sunglasses and slipping them under his cloak.

Sera was fuming. With the amount of rage coursing through her veins it was likely she'd start producing flames on her own. She was red hot.

Don't punch the bitch in the face, don't punch the bitch in the face, don't punch the bitch in the face... Her inner voice was working hard to keep her from snapping.

“Now then, my dear little firecracker... Do put on a good show.” The woman's wicked grin grew wider still as she pushed open a steel door, leading to a small cage about the size of a portable toilet.

Sera was viciously thrown in without hesitation and this time she couldn't stop herself from falling face first into sand. Before she could turn around and retaliate, however, the door had swiftly shut behind her.

She pushed up off the ground and dusted herself off. Luckily her clothes had escaped the sand for the most part, thanks to the cloak. Facing forward she realized that this small cage was meant to hold the combatants until the fight was to begin. The second steel door in front of her was controlled from the outside, meaning that any moment the cage would spring open and she would be face to face with the same beast that just killed an Esper minutes prior.

“.. I'm counting on you, Gio...” She had calmed down a bit, knowing full well that at this point she needed to rid herself of blind rage.

It was also evident of, despite their quarrels, just how much she had come to trust Giotto.

“Laaaadies and Gentlemen!” The woman's voice from before suddenly screeched throughout the arena's loudspeakers. “After that rather lackluster performance before, I'm happy to announce that we have a brand new Champion ready to take on the seemingly unstoppable *Draco Rex!*”

The crowds erupted with bloodthirsty cheers once again. Despite the fancy suits and designer dresses the audience members were more like barbarians than members of high class society.

“We're about to get going here, so now's the time to place your bets! Before you do, though, you should know that this new Champion is a master of an equally unbeaten and forever blazing elemental magic! These flames of hers are unmatched in their explosive power, ready to send our dreaded Draco Rex back into extinction!”

More cheers consumed the audience. This woman was doing her job well – sell the audience on the Esper, make them bet, and more times than not the Chaotic will make quick work of even the toughest Champions.

It was working more than she could have hoped for.

Each member of the audience was given an electronic tablet in which they could place their bets instantaneously. A large screen near the back of the area showed the betting odds and was updated in real time as bets were made.

Unlike a typical arena fight, where money placed might favor the Chaotic, this time saw increased betting on the Champion; Sera. As the woman went on about Sera and her ability the odds shifted in her favor, making the Chaotic and thus the arena itself the underdog.

The woman stopped herself from breaking out into a wicked laugh.

“Now then – all bets are officially *closed!*”

The large screen at the back then showed the live feed of the arena itself, where Rex the Chaotic lie in wait. A smaller, secondary screen, showed the inside of Sera's small cage.

“Let's get this party started! Countdown starting – .. *Ten!* .. *Nine!* .. *Eight!*”

The crowds then took over the count, from seven to six and beyond.

Sera took the chance to stare through the fencing of her cage, catching sight of Gio, and their eyes became drawn to each other. Gio gave a reassuring nod and that was all Sera needed.

“.. *One! ZERO!*”

Sera's cage swiftly opened and the young girl dashed out of it. The thunderous roars of the crowd were nauseating, but there was no time to focus on that. The massive dinosaur wannabe, affectionately labeled Draco Rex, was already rushing towards Sera.

You could say he was still hungry.

“D-Damn, you're fast for a—” Sera's potential insult was lost as she was forced to sprint with everything she had. Dodging Draco Rex would be anything but easy, even in the rather spacious arena.

The crowd once again cheered as Draco Rex's massive jaw came slamming into the ground where Sera had just stood. His razor sharp teeth snapped at the air as Sera ran, hoping to catch his prey much like his previous. As Sera ducked around him, though, she suddenly remembered that the beast had a massive tail – once which was heading right for her.

“Shit, shit!—” She instinctively held up her arms in defense and that was the perfect chance for Gio to act.

A small ember appeared in the path of the tail and with a loud crack erupted into a pillar of red flames that consumed the entirety of the tail. In that instant the tail was completely vaporized without a trace. Not even ashes remained.

Members of the audience practically fell out of their chairs when the flames appeared. None of them were ready for such a daunting display of power so quickly. They could even feel the heat of the flames all the way in the back row.

Once they recovered, they showed their enjoyment by chanting '*Champ! Champ!*' in support of the pink haired champion.

“Oh? Not bad, Gio!” Sera's surprise kicked in and she continued to sprint away from the beast.

Rex himself was in bad shape after such an attack. That massive tail of his was for more than just show, as it seemed to be used to balance his massive frame. Rex

tried to pursue Sera but instead he fell over sideways, crashing into the floor with a quake inducing thud.

The audience couldn't help but be overrun by laughter.

“.. He's immobile now, huh? This won't be as bad as I thought.” Sera gave a sigh of relief. She had confidence in Gio to get her out of this, but she felt better knowing that it was easier than expected... or so it had appeared.

One by one the crowd's laughter began to subside into silence, and even Gio had to take a second look at what he was seeing – Rex was rising up from the ground with his tail rapidly growing back. Within less than four seconds it had grown nearly thirty feet.

The Chaotic was back on his feet and thirsty for blood. Its regeneration ability was insanely fast, even moreso than high level Chaotics. Rex himself had to be just about the power of a Jack if not even higher.

“.. Damnit!” Sera held out her hand, hoping Gio would agree that finishing this now was best – but as Rex began to charge, no flames appeared. “.. Uh, fire? Go-Go flames?!” Sera began to grow worried as Rex's charge intensified!

Gio's own face had suddenly grown contorted. He was summoning his ability, trying to use his flames to cause an explosion, but nothing was happening.

Instead his body was beginning to tremble. Sweat began to drip down his face. Without warning, something was going horribly wrong.

“*The hell is this?!*” For the first time he sounded genuinely worried and he wasn't sticking around to find out what was going on. There was no time for that now.

He began pushing himself through the crowd, dropping his whiskey drink, rushing towards the arena's fence – but he suddenly found himself falling to his knees. Time began to slow for him.

An intense pain began to shoot up his left arm from his hand, spreading throughout his entire body as if needles were coursing through his veins. He was in such total disarray that he couldn't even scream out in pain. His voice was silenced. His entire body was overcome with lethal doses of torment.

He looked on with eyes that refused to shed tears, even with the practically unfathomable torture bringing him to his knees. He knew that this was bad. He couldn't bear to witness such a sight again, someone close to him losing their life because of him. Sera was on her own and it was his fault.

History was about to repeat itself.

.. Or so it appeared.

As Draco Rex closed in on Sera, massive green vines covered in thorns exploded from beneath the arena. They were each nearly the size of the Chaotic and their sudden coming caused the stone structure holding the fence in place to begin to crumble.

The Chaotic froze, unsure of what was happening, and before it could react the thorn covered vines latched onto its legs and tail, shredding the limbs like paper.

The crowds that had been so barbaric moments ago were now fleeing in terror. The cage was beginning to give way, the Chaotic would soon be free, and this attack was obviously not part of the show. They flooded towards the exit tunnels like rats attempting to flee a hurricane.

Unfortunately for them, more green vines soon caused the tunnels around the arena to collapse in furious explosions of dirt, stone, and sewage. Someone wasn't letting the guilty patrons escape their fate.

This type of power on this scale was rare. It was a massive attack, using large amounts of energy that even Normals in the audience could feel. There was a pressure in the air being forced upon them by a single individual – someone with the power of a King.

“By the decree of the Houses, these illegal activities will no longer be tolerated!” A female voice, young and energetic, cried out among the chaos, causing patrons and staff alike to look upwards at the source.

Houses?! But Leon said— Gio's thoughts continued to race, but his pain was becoming too much. He looked up to see whom the woman was and he couldn't quite believe it.

Long scarlet hair flowed freely, matching the red eyes of the dark skinned woman. She was a beauty with some well-rounded curves, though they were somewhat hidden under her white uniform. A formal uniform reserved for the Houses. This one in particular, with the red markings of a *heart* on the front of it, was reserved for high ranking Espers from the *House of Hearts*.

Even as the pain left Gio in a submissive state he could tell who this woman was. A fact made obvious by the decorative mark on her left hand radiating with a familiar red glow. A mark with a large 'K' in the middle of it intertwined with a heart.

“In the name of the House of Hearts, I, *Rose Jalice*, shall dispense the called upon punishment –”

Her voice carried through the arena with ease, but there was only one part that Gio cared to pay attention to.

Words long since forgotten.

“Such is the duty of the *King of Hearts!*”

5th CARD | A House That Burns

It was unheard of for a House to be without a King. It was something that hadn't happened since the Houses and Kings were established nearly three generations ago. Once Gio Jaeger fell from grace, Hearts was left without a King – as well as their Queen and Jack – all three of whom were considered dead.

The roles of Queen and Jack were filled shortly after the event, through promotions from within Hearts at the command of the Aces. The King slot was left open due to the request of another King.

Victor Ferris, King of Diamonds, used his influence to keep the House of Hearts without a King... for nearly two years.

His reasoning in doing so was he wished for his adoptive daughter, Rose Jalice, to grow and become the King of Hearts. At the time she wasn't quite ready and Victor knew that, so he made a deal with the Aces of New Eden. In this deal the slot remained open under the guise of a pseudo-punishment for the House of Hearts. A probation of sorts. In addition, the excuse that none were ready to be King was spread through the ranks.

In truth the lack of a qualified candidate wasn't a complete lie.

This deal and anything like it had never quite happened before. If only because of Victor's title as the longest reigning King in history and his impeccable record did the Aces allow such an agreement to be had.

After the two years passed and Rose grew to a suitable level, Victor approached the Aces in order to form a tournament. It was a right of passage that had been done in the past to establish the top ranks of each House and to replace leaving Espers.

Within this tournament they would find the next King of Hearts – though it was clearly decided beforehand that it would be Rose who came out victorious.

Rose was overjoyed to find herself entered into such a tournament, increasingly ignorant of the truth of it all, and she fought with all she had. Her goal was to prove that the faith of Victor was not ill-placed. She vowed to become King no matter what... and as a surprise to onlookers, she did just that.

Despite being seen as a dark horse when the tournament began, Rose had somehow battled her way to victory, claiming the title *King of Hearts*. She achieved her ultimate dream and in doing so gave Victor what he had planned for since Gio's fall. His daughter, adoptive or not, was now his fellow King.

To this day, after two years as King, Rose Jalice knows not of the backroom deals that made her King. The truth was she had done a fine job in the position... but one still had to wonder if it was all ready to come crashing down around her.

There was something stirring within New Eden. It had been there for years, festering and spreading like a sickness. Victor's own plans were surely a part of the problem, but there was more at work than simply selfish pride. A dark force had set its sights on New Eden. Rose's ascension to the throne seemed but one more piece on the board.

« — »

Those who had moments ago been cheering for blood were now screaming in their own terror, attempting to escape their new prison. Rose had used her ability, aptly named *Red Rose*, to seal off all exits from the arena.

Her ability gave her control over powerful plant-based creations and allowed her to create them from nothing. There were many who overlooked the abilities that could manifest things in addition to manipulating them, finding the former to be trivial, but it didn't change the fact it was a very powerful ability.

Much like how Gio could both manifest and manipulate flames, Rose's ability to do so with plants was truly a King-level ability. It didn't matter how she had become King when she had such a power within her.

“There is no escape now – though should you surrender quietly, I can make your arrest quick and mostly painless.” Rose spoke in a rather high and mighty tone, which was different from how she use to be.

Not long ago she was a shy and timid girl.

Now, as King, she was taking command.

Some of the patrons listened to her words, dropping to their knees with little hesitation and placing their arms upwards. Others, however, continued to try desperately to dig through the piles of rubble to escape. They knew that if caught here their future, their family's futures, they were all forfeit.

Goodbye status, goodbye wealth.

“.. The lot of you struggling should have realized. The will of the Houses is *absolute*.” Rose sighed as the red glow around her left hand intensified.

It was the sign that her ability was gathering strength. Seconds later, around each of the struggling men and women, small green vines ripped up the ground beneath them and grabbed hold of their limbs. It was like a scene out of a horror movie as each vine seemed to have a mind of its own. Vines were moving like wild beasts to ensnare one prisoner after the other.

She had quickly and cleanly subdued most of her targets only a few moments after her ultimatum had been given. Such was the absolute will of the Houses and the power of a King.

Gio looked on, continuing to writhe back and forth in pain.

She's gotten a lot better... but damnit, what's with this feeling?! His mind raced at the cause.

Even as he suffered he continued to assess the situation to the best of his ability. Most of the audience had surrendered or been subdued and Gio even noticed a number of the staff turning themselves in. In fact, the only face he spotted still standing defiantly was the woman whom he dealt with before.

If she's not standing down... she's obviously an Esper... must be a Rogue. Damn. I never even noticed?

He was questioning how he hadn't caught on, but now he had a much more pressing matter to deal with – the Chaotic, Draco Rex, had once again regenerated within moments of being shredded by Rose. His attention was drawn to it immediately.

“Quite the Chaotic specimen. To not only survive my Red Rose but to appear back in prime condition...” Rose prepared to strike down the beast once again.

“Not so fast *my dearest King!*” The woman from before, the female staffer, began walking towards Rose who still remained atop the arena suspended by vines. “You see, I expected one of you would butt in sooner or later. Lucky for me, it was the *rookie.*”

The woman's body began to glow a faint purple. Both Gio and Rose could sense a rising energy from her and it was obvious her class of power was above average. Not a run of the mill Rogue at all.

“.. Rookie? I'll have you know I've been a King for—” Rose was abruptly cut off.

“*Two years?* Yes, yes, I know. But let's be honest *my dearest King...* two years for a false King isn't much to get excited about. After all—” The woman's energy began to cause visual distortions in the air. Around her it appeared as if objects were beginning to move... and it was no illusion. “– you were never meant to be King. Someone such as *The Matter Morpher* was far more deserving!”

The name went over Rose's head, but Gio instantly recognized it.

The Matter Morpher was the name given to a high ranking member of Clubs with the ability to temporarily bring inanimate objects to life under their control. This member, a woman named *Patricia Barnes*, had been a *Decimus* rank for nearly five years. Frustrated with her lack of advancement she entered the tournament to crown a new King of Hearts. It was here that she was mysteriously pulled out of the semifinal match, which Gio remembered would have been against Rose.

After the event Patricia took a leave of absence from the House of Clubs. She never returned to her post, instead becoming a Rogue.

Patricia could only chuckle as Rose's face showed confusion.

“Don't worry, my dearest King... I wouldn't expect a *puppet* like you to understand.” The tone of her voice changed as her body sprinted towards the crumbled arena fence and above it, Rose.

“Not so fast!” Rose summoned forth vines to spring up and grab Patricia, but the vines were harshly ripped apart by a pack of spinning disks soaring through the air like fighter jets. “*H-How?!?*”

Rose showed her surprise without thinking. She then leapt from her own perch, diving to meet Patricia head on.

This left a fully revived Rex and an outmatched Sera on their own.

“.. You've got to be kidding me! Gio, now is not the time to be taking a drink break!” She was beginning to show obvious worry, even fear, as she took the best stance she could.

She would use that growing fear to sharpen her skills.

Draco Rex wasn't moving in for the kill just yet. It was as if the beast was observing his prey without being rushed. The Chaotic seemed to know that the arena that held him captive was no longer there. His cage was now wide open.

“Come on, ugly! Don't try and screw with me now! You want a piece of this?! Like hell you'll get it for free!” Sera shouted away her fears, digging her feet in and sprinting ahead.

The Chaotic remained stationary, seemingly unsure what Sera was doing, but that was just what she needed. Sera could get close, move quick, and give the beast the slip before she ended up on the wrong end of a happy meal. Despite this monster's proven track record against agile opponents, Sera was confident she could still win.

“S-Sera!!” Gio struggled to speak properly, attempting to crawl towards the arena, but the pain continued to hold him down.

“Let's see what you've got!!” Sera was moving with purpose, flying through the arena like a bat out of hell.

Her body zipped back and forth, working to confuse the Chaotic, and the plan was working to a point. Draco Rex was scanning the field, following her, but there were instances where she got ahead of him. The beast tried to correct this and then got ahead of her, losing sight of her entirely, and Sera noticed that single moment where she had him beat.

She burst forth, using all her strength to pivot off her right foot and launch between the legs of the monster – but Rex had pure instinct on his side.

The same instinct that allowed him to kill the previous competitor; the young boy with the superhuman speed.

His massive jaw snapped downwards in a flash, slamming into the ground and causing a massive upheaval of sand and dirt.

“*SERA!!*” The pain was pushed aside as Gio finally leapt to his feet, falling over the crumbled arena fence and tumbling into the arena.

He refused to believe it was over just like that. There was just no way – but he watched the Chaotic emerge from the clouds of sand, chewing deep into the cloak Sera had just been wearing.

It was mixed together with a crimson liquid which dripped to the sand below.

The pain that shot through Gio's body continued, but at the same time his entire frame went numb. It was as if knives carved out every inch of his flesh and scraped against the bones, but it no longer seemed to matter. Shock at what just happened washed over him.

There was just no way that the plan had fallen apart so easily. No way that his promise to have Sera's back had become vapor and drifted away.

Draco Rex continued to chew on the remnants of the cloak still stuck in its teeth, staring down Gio as he did so. The beast seemed rather pleased with himself. After all, he appeared to have gotten a nice meal and was now free to rampage outside of the arena.

Words didn't seem to flow in Gio's mind at that point. It was more so just a mesh of images and sounds that were too incoherent to make sense of. If you were to ever look into the mind of the mentally insane it might look a lot like that. Complete and unrelenting chaos, swirling around in the mind of a wannabe hero who couldn't keep one girl safe.

Just like before.

“.. *Explosion.*”

A sudden spark and flash of light were followed by a surging heat that blew through the entirety of the arena. Just like the blast wave from a nuclear explosion.

Instead of a mushroom cloud the onlookers were treated to a pillar of flames that engulfed the Chaotic's left side.

In an instant its left arm, leg, his entire tail, and part of his head, were completely vaporized.

Rex flopped over with a thud and didn't move.

It was certainly an impressive attack, but those not in awe of the power would see that the attack was clearly off the mark.

“.. *Damn, I missed...*”

The sudden flash of light caused both Patricia and Rose to lose sight of each other and to focus on the arena itself. They watched as the flames tore through the Chaotic without mercy. They also noticed the apparent source of the attack and Patricia then knew it wasn't Sera whom had been using that fire ability. It was the man.

Rose, on the other hand, found herself frozen with a bit of anxious nostalgia.

She knew others with fire abilities but knew of only one that had delivered such a ferocious attack in the past. Rose was thinking of none other than the Wild Card, Giotto Jaeger, whom her step father Victor Ferris sought to eliminate above all else.

“T-That's...! *The Wild Card!* He's here!!” Rose was shouting, turning her full attention to Gio and ignoring Patricia entirely. The commanding King suddenly sounded like a schoolgirl spotting her old crush.

Forgetting your opponent, though, wasn't the smartest of moves when in the middle of a fight.

Patricia's ability had already been in the process of sending twenty, forty, eighty, or perhaps a hundred or so chunks of rock and metal debris soaring through the air, each one locked on to Rose. They moved through the air like swarming hornets.

Now that they were both standing still the flying objects could build up their momentum and skewer the King with ease.

“Pay attention better in the afterlife, *rookie!*”

Patricia stepped away as Rose snapped her attention back to the fight, but the objects flying at her were way too close to dodge.

“*Shi—!!*”

Rose's vines began to shoot upwards from the ground, but massive chunks of rock and metal were slamming into her position at the same moment. Dust from shattering stones burst forth, consuming her, and the objects continued to pile it on even further.

“Hahaha! This is why, *my King*, you are simply the rookie. You were never meant to be a true Kin—”

Patricia ducked left as a pointed thorn whip shot out from the smoke. The *Matter Morpher* then dodged further and flipped backwards, anticipating another crack of the whip.

Obviously the offensive onslaught wasn't quite as effective as Patricia had thought.

“.. This is the might... *of a King!*” Rose's voice spoke out as massive vines began to flail in the dust, flinging away all the debris that covered her.

Blood trailed down her face from an open wound on her head, but as the dust settled she was clearly far from dead. Large vines, each as thick as a small car, shielded her. Rose stepped forward as the vines parted, forming a path. A single thorn vine remained in her hand forming a whip.

“You are the mission, but now that *he* has shown himself, he takes priority. I will now finish you in the name of Hearts and then eliminate the Wild Card!” Rose's voice peaked as she dashed ahead and her breathing intensified.

Patricia knew not of the man's true identity, but the nickname of the *Wild Card* had spread throughout all of New Eden over the last couple years. More recently he had even been said to have defeated the King of Diamonds, Victor Ferris.

She realized why Rose was suddenly so adamant to face him. Seeing as Rose was the adoptive daughter of Victor, it made sense.

“Ha! Like daddy, like daughter, eh? Very well then, King!” Patricia raised her hands as a purple smoke-like energy surrounded her and spread to the ground. “Unfortunately you lose!”

Rose ignored Patricia's taunts. She pulled back her right arm, that thorn covered whip of hers slicing through the air with enough speed to catch a missile midflight.

It seemed that the visual energy wasn't just for show, though. Rose should have paid better attention to her surroundings.

As she began to launch her attack and stepped closer, the purple glow along the ground vanished and in its place the sand and stone shifted from a solid to a type of liquid. Much like quicksand but far more potent. The moment Rose's feet touched the morphed ground they were instantaneously restrained.

Despite Rose's speed she came to a complete and sudden halt.

“W-What trickery is this—” Rose was exasperated and rightfully so.

Patricia chuckled, pointing down to the ground.

“You were maybe thinking that my ability to animate was simply for loose objects?” Patricia's sly voice began to change tones as metallic bars slithered around Rose's body, constricting her arms. “Or maybe that surely I wasn't powerful enough to control this entire environment? Maybe you should realize... that someone like me was a *true* candidate for King.” Patricia's voice grew quiet, sinister.

Rose tried to forcefully break free, but her strength seemed no good against the altered objects. They didn't seem like normal material simply controlled or manipulated – it's as if their entire composition had changed entirely.

“You won't be able to get away with this, Rogue—”

“Don't misunderstand, rookie. I won't be killing you. I don't need the might of New Eden chasing me down for killing a King. That being said...”

The ground that restrained Rose began to lift out of the ground. Within a matter of seconds, a large chunk of earth with Rose on top like a Christmas star, was floating just above Patricia.

“Yes, with that being said, I don't intend to let you stick around. Give my regards to your *daddy King*, Mmkay?”

Rose was trying with all her might to summon forth vines from all around the arena. Even if she couldn't move she should have been able to manifest them... but nothing sprang forth. She could even feel her ability working but none came.

It was thanks to Patricia manipulating the entire area of the underground. Her ability had stretched itself into the walls, the ceiling, the floor. Nothing was getting through her world. This was the *Matter Morpher*, even more powerful than her days as a Decimus rank in Clubs.

But Rose didn't need a place for the vines to spring forth.

From Rose's body vines began to appear, to twist and twirl around her frame and grow – they then shot out, aiming to pierce Patricia from head to toe.

“Too slow, King!”

Before further words were spoken, Rose's personal slice of New Eden was sent flying upwards.

The vines so suddenly shot out to pierce Patricia were met with equal forces in the forms of sharpened steel.

Above, seconds before smashing Rose flat as a pancake, the ceiling opened up. It wasn't a natural opening of course and was in fact made by Patricia's ability.

The hole closed as Rose rocketed through, launching like a rocket from a silo. She was heading for somewhere far enough away to allow Patricia time to escape.

Just like that the battle between a King and Rogue was over. Another King defeated in a most unflattering of circumstances.

“.. Now, now, now, before I exit stage right...” Patricia's wave of the hand began clearing rubble, allowing her customers and the audience to escape as their restraints fell limp.

After all, it would be bad for business if they were all captured by the Houses of New Eden.

“I didn't forget *him*, either. *Wild Card*, huh?” Patricia looked back to the corpse of the Chaotic and to Gio, whom still stood frozen in the middle of what was once the fighting ring.

“.. *It wasn't... suppose to be like this... I...*” Gio's voice was cracking. He was on the verge of tears and not from the intense pain that had plagued him.

As he fell to his knees he began to feel the pain lessen. His left hand no longer burned. The sensation of being carved up by a butcher vanished almost immediately much like Rose.

That being said, a new pain began to grow within him; the pain of loss.

His right hand was consumed by a mixing black and white light. The mark of the Wild Card was in full bloom.

That didn't matter to him.

He had failed to protect Sera. His manager, partner, and on some level, friend. She had trusted him to protect her and he failed. It didn't matter if the situation grew out of his control when Rose appeared and that mysterious pain with her. It was his responsibility and he failed.

Or perhaps he came to the wrong conclusion.

“*Oi, oi, oi!* You want to not try and roast me alive next time? Thanks.”

Gio looked upwards towards the Chaotic, surely imagining hearing those words, but his eyes would tell a different story.

Sera was standing and dusting herself off on the other side of the beast.

“Sand just goes everywhere! Why is this arena made of sand?! Ugh, I need a shower. Two showers.” She was annoyed and from her actions it seemed she didn't realize Gio had feared her eaten alive.

“Hey, idiot! Grab me some cloth or something. That guy did a number on my arm.” Sera casually strolled over to Gio, looking down at him and awaiting him to do the polite thing by tearing part of his clothing.

Gio was still in a bit of shock but things started to play back in his mind.

He could see Sera diving between the Chaotic's legs, the beast then chomping at her, and the moment she barely dodged off to the side with a slice to her arm. Abandoning her cloak in the scuffle gave her a brief second of distraction to hide in the sand.

That was how it played out, right? His mind couldn't help but assume so.

“Gio! Paging Gio! Are you even listening right now?! This is why you need to lay off the damn booze.” She ignored his moment of shock and took his cloak, tearing off a piece and quickly wrapping up her right forearm.

Gio couldn't help but chuckle as he regained himself. His face which had been so distraught and in shock now seemed plain and casual. Pushing up off the ground, he pulled off his cloak and tossed it to the side.

For now, he would keep quiet about his fear there. If he told Sera he thought she was dead and was actually worried, he may have never lived it down.

“You two had quite the overelaborate game there. Tell me, why on earth did you deceive me to get into the arena? Make a quick buck?” Patricia's voice caught both Gio and Sera off guard.

They had almost forgotten she was even around. The mission wasn't over just yet.

“.. and that *rookie*. She called you the *Wild Card*. Any truth to that?” Patricia strolled up towards them both, grinning from ear to ear. “.. You know, they say that guy could be worth a pretty penny if captured and brought to the Houses.”

Gio couldn't help but sneak a grin. He realized that while they were here to topple the underground arena's management, that same management was suddenly seeing their own payday with Gio's head as the signature on the check.

“Oh, yeah, I guess you could say the Wild Card would go for quite a bit. Personally, though...” As Gio spoke he turned towards Patricia, taking a step back. “.. I'd be a bit more concerned why such a high profile kind of guy decided to

sneak into your illegal fighting arena. Almost as if it was a job or something to *cut the head off the snake*, yeah?”

The *Matter Morpher* managed to retain her composure. Her confidence in this place was off the charts.

“Is that so? I really must admit you're quite the likable fellow, *Wild Card*. In another life we may have really hit it off—” Patricia shrugged, but as she spoke her ability had been at work. Spinning downwards at both Gio and Sera were the same spinning disks that attacked Rose!

“Gio!” Sera ducked low and pushed off the ground, sliding backwards to dodge the sneak attack.

Gio was already working on his counter.

The blade heading for Sera turned after missing its mark, attempting to u-turn and make contact, but flames had flared to life around both blades – and both objects were obliterated without Gio making a move.

“*Wild Card*, huh? Not your typical Esper, then! What kind of flames can turn steel to ash in an instant?” Patricia dashed backwards and raised both arms, causing the destroyed underground to begin shaking wildly. “If an attack like that won't do you in then I guess I'll be using one with a bit more *flavor*, hmm?”

The damaged area was already under heavy pressure. In fact, if the battles before had gone on much longer it was very possible the entire place would have caved in on itself. Such was the result of Rose and Patricia destroying the foundations with their abilities.

That made Patricia's show of power here that much more unstable. Even if she was able to control so much at once, the possibility remained for a single piece to slip through the cracks and to cause a catastrophe.

“Sera, move!” Gio was practicing what he preached, dashing forward at Patricia. He seemed in a hurry to act as those swirling energies around his right hand intensified.

“You don't have to tell me that, geez. I can feel the whole apocalyptic-ish earthquake too, you know!” Sera was moving as well, but Patricia seemed unfazed by the pair's moves.

“You two won't be able to move much longer—” Patricia's voice trailed. She had been manipulating the ground before them, preparing to trap them just like Rose, but a snap of Gio's fingers sent a flash of flames across the ground.

The heat was so intense that the sand, no matter its shift to a quicksand trap, quickly turned to glass. The heat was so intense that Sera and Patricia both couldn't help but grimace and squint.

“That doesn't mean you'll be able to walk across it!” She pointed towards the two, her power intensifying to manipulate and morph the glass, but her powers

didn't work. Not how she wanted, anyway. The glass was even cooling as the pair leapt onto it.

“What the hell are you playing at?!” Debris flew into the air, soaring towards Gio and Sera, but the duo showed no fear or hesitation. The two had stepped onto the cool glass and were now rushing to meet Patricia. “Coming to meet your end, *Wild Card, Firecracker?!?*”

That wasn't the case.

The debris which flew their way was slowing. Patricia noticed it and her attention split between her controlled objects and her opponents. Doing such a thing when up against the Wild Card wasn't the best of moves.

“*Flare...blitz!*” Gio's body rushed forward, through the air, and flames erupted from behind him and propelled him like a jet. His target was, of course, the woman just in front of him.

With hand outstretched, his sudden speed overwhelmed the *Matter Morpher*, and he grabbed her face in the palm of his hand. Flames soon sparked around that same hand as the two continued to fly forward, with Patricia unable to react in the slightest.

“*You should know, Patricia Barnes, that you are less than the sewage beneath my boots.*” Gio spoke quietly, somewhat sinisterly. It was one of the rare times that Gio showed a darker side.

As his words trailed, the flames behind him ceased and the flames around his palm intensified. He then slammed Patricia into the sandy, rubble-ridden ground head first, as flames erupted and consumed them both. It was a brilliant sight as fire stretched all the way to the ceiling, splashing against it like waves on a beach.

The blaze was an outlet for Gio's raging emotions. The same emotions that thought Sera had been killed only a few minutes prior. The same emotions that Gio failed to display when they arrived in this arena, ones that Sera had expressed in earnest.

This was the truth of Gio's feelings.

The flames of his soul raged on.

« — »

Hard to believe it was over just like that.

Anger that was strong enough to summon Gio's power in such a way was rare. He didn't seem to ever get overly emotional in conflicts, or at the very least he didn't let on that he was feeling such a way. For the fight against Patricia to be over so quickly was solely due to what he had felt.

The potential loss of Sera was a typhoon against an unsuspecting sea and any ship caught in the path of that storm was sure to perish.

Patricia Barnes, also known as The Matter Morpher, was once a prime candidate to be a King someday while she was still in the Houses. Not to mention that in these two years as a Rogue her influence in the shadows of New Eden had grown exponentially. Her power was well documented. Heck, she even went toe to toe with Rose Jalice, King of Hearts.

Despite those qualifications she was still taken out in mere seconds.

The Wild Card ability of Gio's no doubt caught the Rogue off guard. The moment she tried to use her power to take care of him just like she did Rose there was a mere second of delay. This was how Gio gained the upper hand and charged through her guard without mercy. His power mimicked hers and gave him the one opening he needed.

The mission was finally over.

It didn't take too long to get out of the sewers. Since Rose had been catapulted through solid earth by Patricia Barnes' *Matter Morpher* ability, the same pathway was easily accessible. It simply required a bit of extra effort to open it up for Gio, Sera, and the incapacitated Patricia herself. Building a staircase out of rubble to reach a hole in the ceiling wasn't easy, after all.

With the ringleader of the illegal fighting ring subdued and restrained, the head of the beast was cut. Sure, the arena could possibly return in the future and the patrons escaped, but for now it was silenced. A time of relative ease would let the homeless and orphaned youth of the slums sleep relatively peacefully for a change.

Gio carried Patricia all the way to another district, with the cover of night as his ally, and he left the woman at the doorstep to a House of Spades outpost. At the very least he wanted to be sure Leon's House was getting the credit for this one.

The one unfortunate thing would be Patricia's physical health. She was alive and not suffering from any life threatening injuries. That being said, she was burned pretty badly from her face to her toes. Those would heal. A few broken bones up and down her body would take a little longer, though. Let's not even get started on the mental side of things.

Both Gio and Sera also wondered what became of Rose, knowing full well that the news of a King's defeat would spread like mad. The same as Victor's defeat. Like father, like daughter.

They hadn't heard anything about Rose's condition. Her apparent defeat, rather through raw power or the distraction of Gio's presence, went unnoticed for the time being. It was something that you'd think both Gio and Sera would hear whispers of, even if it had only been a few hours, but there was nothing. All those present knew a King was bested. Surely after escaping they would tell *someone*.

The pair didn't bother to theory craft on the way home about whether or not they should be worried about more heat coming down on The Wild Card for having another altercation with a King.

Strangely enough, Sera and Gio didn't converse at all during the trip.

No words other than a few minor phrases were uttered. The truth was that Gio himself was keeping quiet about his display of power and Sera was hesitant on bringing it up. It seemed like an awkward conversation to say the least. Even worse if you considered the entire display was due to Gio fearing for Sera's life.

It wasn't until the two were walking up to their front door, back in the Thirteenth District, that Sera finally asked a question.

“.. Hey, blockhead... Gio. What was it you said to that woman back there just before you... defeated her?” For perhaps the first time in forever, even with the casual insult, Sera spoke softly.

Instead of responding immediately Gio opened the front door, taking a step inside. He then glanced back to Sera with a somewhat forced smile.

“Oh, that? Nothing much. Just a cool one-liner I saw in a movie.” He laughed it off and stepped in, spotting Leon half awake, attempting to sip a cup of tea while on the couch.

Sera didn't have the chance to respond before Gio was rushing away from the entrance and further into their home.

Footsteps across the hardwood floor got Leon's attention, his body instinctively jerking and twitching as he awoke in full.

“A-Ahh! Welcome back you two!” Leon stood quickly, nearly spilling the tea on himself, but he regained his composure and quickly made his way over to the two. His slight stutter step showed just how groggy he still was from his apparent nap. “I bet things got pretty crazy down there. I'm glad to see you're both... alright? Oh!” He noticed the sloppy bandaging of Sera's arm, where Draco Rex made contact. “Are you okay, Miss Sera?”

She grinned and flexed, showing she was fine, but before she could speak up Gio took the lead.

“Hey, hey, Leon. Don't forget that payment, eh?” Gio seemed in a bit of a hurry, which was rare.

“Sure thing! I took the liberty of already leaving it on your table over there.” Leon couldn't help but see that something was a bit off, but he hesitated to say anything.

“Alrighty. That'll be it for me, then. Time for a snoozin'.” Gio motioned for Sera to take care of the money and made his way further into their home, heading down a hallway before either of the others could stop him.

He was heading back to his room, entering as the door clicked shut behind him.

Leon showed a look of worry as he looked back to Sera.

“Is he... alright? What happened?”

Sera shrugged. She honestly had no idea.

“I don't know. Haven't seen him like that before.” She then remembered what happened when the King of Hearts, Rose Jalice, appeared. “But, there was something strange. When that King showed up, Rose, Gio started acting all weird. Didn't use his powers like we planned and nearly got me chopped to pieces. Or well, maybe he couldn't, I guess. Not in front of a Kin—”

Leon grabbed Sera by the shoulders, shaking her in exasperation. His worried expression became one halfway between a passing worry and a sudden fright.

“Rose?! Rose Jalice?! The King of Hearts was... there?” Leon stumbled back, surprising Sera quite a bit, and he shook his head. “His powers... That doesn't, no, I'm sure it's nothing.”

Leon went back to a worry free expression, smiling to Sera as he made his way to the door.

“Well then, I'll leave him in your capable hands, Miss Sera. Please do take care of him.”

“Don't go acting all buddy-buddy with me just because I'm not taking a swing at you!” Sera's fiery attitude was back.

Leon could only laugh, stepping outside the open door and closing it behind him.

Once he was out of sight from Sera, Leon's face contorted. His mind was racing at what it meant for Rose to have been there and also what Sera had said about Gio not using his powers as he should have.

Things were going to get out of hand if the course of certain events continued. Leon knew that fighting and defeating a single King was enough to cause an uproar throughout the Houses and all of New Eden. For a second King to be at conflict with the same person and to get a similar outcome would cause riots.

If citizens started to doubt in the power of the Kings, it was entirely possible that Rogues would take full advantage and try to incite a revolution of some kind. The chances for that were incredibly low, but the Aces standing above the Kings would no doubt be acting soon.

If they wanted to it was a very real possibility they'd hunt down Gio and finish him once and for all.

“.. and his ability was affected as well, hm? If that's true...”

He couldn't help but fret further. For something like the new King of Hearts to affect Gio in a physical way meant something else was also at work. Leon was certain that trouble was heading right for his best friend at full speed.

Meanwhile, however, Gio had fallen to the floor of his bedroom. His body was weak, his mind strained, and it all could be traced back to what happened when Rose appeared.

His thoughts raced, but the lone thing he focused on was the intense pain he felt when she arrived. His pain could only be related to her showing up. That was, after all, the first time he had run into her since she became the new King.

That lone answer was the most obvious but it was certainly not the most plausible.

Somehow, someway, his connection to the House of Hearts... *it was still active.*

6th CARD | Reap A King

Despite the battles involving Giotto and Rose being in the slums there was little stopping the news from spreading throughout New Eden. The news that both the Wild Card and the King of Hearts were present at an illegal underground arena where all hell broke loose, where the King of Hearts was, true or not, completely and utterly defeated.

The rumor mill also wasn't quite so kind as to say who defeated the King.

To everyone in New Eden that heard the rumors, it was thought that the Wild Card was in fact the one to defeat the King of Hearts.

So within just a short time many had come to see that the Wild Card had not only matched the Kings – the Wild Card surpassed them.

Obviously this way of thinking was dangerous.

Not only did it completely undermine the Houses and their power, but it called into question the foundation of New Eden's society. For someone, the Wild Card, to be so powerful as to surpass even the Kings... perhaps it was possible there were more out there. More Wild Cards or beings of equal strength.

If that were true, then perhaps New Eden itself was bound to crumble. These beings of power could potentially destroy all that this paradise had become. The Houses could fall.

It seemed farfetched to go that extreme route but at the same time it was possible. At least in the minds of those who let their thoughts momentarily wander.

The Wild Card was quickly becoming both the biggest celebrity and biggest target in the city.

What remained now was to see the response of the Houses. How would the Kings themselves handle the situation? Or, better yet, how would the Aces act?

Things were just getting worse by the day.

Hopefully they would calm down for a while, right?

« — »

“Move those feet, soldier! You're slacking more than a slug in salt!” Sera was pushing Gio from behind down the busy New Eden street. He wasn't budging too well, though.

Hangovers were a real pain.

“This... might go better if you stopped shaking me about... everything is already shaking you know...” Gio stumbled, catching himself on a traffic light pole just before he face-planted off a street corner and towards an oncoming vehicle.

The overpriced sports car flying down the street stopped inches from running him down.

Close, very close.

“Oi, you're impossible, you know that? You're fine helping to make the coin but can't get it in gear when we actually have to buy things! You expect ME to do all the shopping?” Sera smacked the back of his head and Gio nearly went head first into a trashcan this time. “.. Actually, wait. You're pretty bad at helping to make it, too. Useless.”

He wasn't really amused but didn't have much strength to fight back. His head was pounding and not even his sunglasses could keep out what seemed like a supernova shining overhead. His vision was blurry and his breath wreaked of day old booze.

“.. You know, mosquito... If I could stop seeing three of you I'd probably roast you...” His defiance was lost as the crossing light signaled and Sera pushed him into the crosswalk.

This time without the fear of being mowed down by traffic.

The pair had been laying mostly low for a couple weeks, but now they were running low on supplies. It wasn't something they could really get in the Thirteenth District, either. Food, medical supplies, new clothes, toiletries, they were all something needed from a number of different stores.

So on this day their target was the one and only Eleventh District Super-Mall known as '*Clover Mall*,' or simply '*Clover*.' The district itself came under the reign of the House of Clubs and their somewhat eccentric King; *Kenny 'Ken' Blume*.

“Listen up, Mr. Hero. When we get in here you're going to be carrying most of the bags since you're obviously too broken to pick out anything. You get to be a pack mule, so don't mess it up, alright?” Sera seemed pretty snarky when shopping.

Well, she was dealing with Gio.

His response was mustering a weak wave while sipping on a water bottle. Sera did a double take, wondering where he suddenly had that from, but she passed it off as nothing.

The confused man crossing the street behind them was wondering what happened to his freshly bought bottle of water, though.

It wasn't long before the dynamic duo was staring up at the massive pearl colored complex that was the Clover Mall. Named as such for a *four leaf clover*, a sign of luck, and a similar symbol to the typical Clubs insignia relating to clovers.

The name had been somewhat bland for many years, simply being the '*D-Eleven Mall*,' but it was changed after Kenny Blume became King.

Though even with the name change the building continued to be simple and sleek. It was predominately made of a pearl-colored stone with the mark of Clubs

scattered about here and there. The mall was then divided into multiple sections, each hosting different shops.

In one section were the clothing stores, in another the grocery stores, in another a movie theater, and so on. As you might expect from your typical mall.

The lone difference in this mall and others, however, was the increased fortification and security.

Being in a district closer to the edge of New Eden meant that the possibility for a Chaotic to attack was higher than in most other districts. Espers from Clubs frequently patrolled Clover Mall, given the fact so many citizens frequented it. Not only that but the building itself was reinforced with a powerful security system able to create powerful electric fences around the perimeter, shielding the building from Chaotics if need be.

Clover had the ability to serve as an emergency shelter as well, housing both above ground protection and secure bunkers underground.

Luckily the last Chaotic attack at Clover was practically forgotten, as it had only occurred once in the last ten years.

“First things first! Toiletries, Gio, toiletries! They are, after all, the lightest of the bunch and thus easiest to carry. I'm not unreasonable to my pack mules.” Sera's accompanying laugh was so pompous that Gio nearly chucked his water at her head.

Especially when her head seemed to grow nearly three sizes with that laugh. He was enjoying the hydration a bit too much to go through with it.

“Right, sure, hurry it up... I can barely get what you're saying but whatever makes this all go away...” Gio was completely and utterly defeated.

“Onwards!” She grabbed Gio by the back of his collar, dragging him along like a sack of bricks while he casually sipped his water.

The doors parted before them and they both passed into what appeared to practically be another world. Sera's eyes lit up as she witnessed the thousands of patrons walking casually throughout Clover without a true care in the world. Fountains and various sculptures littered the center of walkways. The glistening water and sunlight sneaking in from the windows above created a spectacle that so many simply passed by without a single glance.

Sera, however, was mesmerized.

She had been raised here in the city when she was younger, but after her parents divorced she spent a majority of her life in *Estrella Village*, a small mountain town far from New Eden. Due to that fact she was always astounded by much of the beauty in New Eden.

For most citizens, these things were nothing more than some fancy scenery, but to Sera it was so much more than that. She found it hard to put the beauty into words at times.

A loud belch from Gio brought her crashing back down to the reality of it being a mall.

“.. Oi, you slob! Trash! Have some respect for the moment why don't ya?!” Sera swung at Gio's head, though he just happened to stumble to the side at the same time, luckily avoiding. “Geez! Fine! Let's just go, then.”

Sera continued dragging Gio across the marble floor, taking a hard right seconds later to begin a long trek down what seemed an endless corridor. Shops littered the walkway on both sides. Some shops were flooded with lines stretching into the distance to get in. Others were small, simple, but with a sense of comfort.

Even though Sera had been shopping here multiple times in the past year, she was always amazed by the sight. Perhaps it was childish, but there's no reason not to find the joy and beauty even in things as simple as a mall. The wonder that a child sees in the world is quite a wonderful thing.

Conversely, the cries of a child were a terrible, terrible thing.

As Sera continued to drag Gio along like a disobedient puppy, the shade wearer just happen to catch sight of a small figure tucked away beside some vending machines as the walkway took another angle. It was brief and others probably wouldn't have noticed, but even with those shades he had seen it.

Or rather, her.

Short, blonde hair tied into tiny twin tails. A salmon colored dress accessorized with an emerald crystal pendent, attached to the small frame of a little girl by a silver chain.

She was crying, sniffing, standing in a corner that no passerby paid any mind to.

Sera then felt the force of Gio halting her without warning, nearly jerking her arm clear off.

“What do you think you're doing, idi—” Sera's voice trailed as she turned and watched Gio, previously rather incapacitated, walking over to the vending machines.

She was about to continue her rant as well, but she noticed a small figure just ahead of him.

Gio, rather calmly, made his way over the poor girl and kneeled down. He reached out, left hand now holding a small piece of candy.

Much like the water, one had to wonder where he got that candy. A confused young boy was probably wondering where his bad of treats went just down the walkway.

“G-G-Gio?! What do you think you're doin—” Sera was shouting once more, sprinting to the situation that seemed straight out of a *to catch a predator* special.

She froze just behind the two when she saw the young girl attempting to stop her tears.

“Now, now... What are you doing lost in here of all places, *Clare*?” Gio spoke softly and Sera could see that somehow he knew the young girl.

The small frame of Clare, having been shaking just seconds before, suddenly sprang forward and latched onto Gio as more tears began to flow.

“*U-Uncle Giooo!*” Her voice squeaked in the excitement, but Gio simply gave a comforting smile, gently rubbing her head.

“Well, happy to see you too, Clare... though you have to tell me, where's that doting father of yours? I can't believe he's not here with you.” He spoke as if the hangover and exhaustion that plagued him were simply memories of the past, despite his still throbbing headache. “.. and if not your dad, that stone faced woman would surely be watching out for you, yeah?”

Clare's face was buried in Gio's shirt, but she looked up to him as more tears began to fall. Her face contorted a bit as she smelled traces of alcohol.

“Eww, Uncle Gio you're all smelly!”

Gio couldn't help but cringe as he slipped a piece of candy into his mouth to help hide the aroma.

“Sorry about that... But more importantly, why are you here alone?”

“I-I saw... I saw something pretty! It was, it was—” She was struggling to get the words out with her sniffles, but Gio continued to comfort her.

“It's okay, just tell me.”

“It-It was... glittering! All over!” She waved her hands in the air, trying to emphasize the amount of glittering she could see.

“Glittering...?” Sera was a bit confused. Not only at the young girl's statement, but the relationship that Gio seemed to already have with her.

“So you wanted to investigate, eh? Well, aren't you just a detective in-training. Don't you try to go taking my job, okay?” Gio laughed, smiling down as Clare quickly threw up a salute.

“Sir!” She was calming down bit by bit.

“Alrighty, then. By chance, though... where was it you saw the glittering?” Gio's comforting voice added just a spice of worry, as if he knew something he wasn't talking about.

Clare dropped her salute and looked up, seemingly trying to remember with pinpoint accuracy, but such a thing wasn't needed. While she looked up she pointed up to the ceiling and window panes high above the walkway. Gio couldn't help but notice how her eyes were glowing ever so slightly as she looked.

“It's there! It's there!”

She gleefully pointed out the glittering light that rested just above the crowds, seemingly floating in the air like a cloud. Clare even managed a giggle.

Gio turned his head and looked upwards as well – and as he did so that comforting look of his faded to a far more serious one. Sera was further confused, looking up, but she didn't see a thing.

In truth neither did Gio.

“.. Clare, you sure it's there?” Gio spoke slowly, quietly.

“Yep! Yep! It's allll over the place!” She giggled further, feeling as if she just won a game of *'I spy.'*

Those weren't the words he wanted to hear.

A slight glow began around Gio's right hand. That mark of the jester hat appeared, catching Sera's attention, but before she could say anything Gio was already motioning for her to come close.

Sera was curious, stepping towards him, and she noticed how his eyes suddenly had a white glow which covered his normally brown irises.

He could see the glittering now as well.

“Gio? Those eyes, what is it—”

“–Sera, you need to stand back here with Clare... and make your way back towards the entrance with her ever so quickly... just not too quickly. *It* hasn't quite noticed that we noticed *it.*”

The strawberry blonde, pink haired firecracker, was further confused.

“It? Are you telling me that there's a Chao—”

“–A Chaotic resting just above us and this entire crowd, that's right.”

Sera was shocked, a rare sight. She was right to be. For a Chaotic to not only get close to an area like this but actually sneak in? That was unheard of. This mall was designed as a shelter with advanced security features and even posted guards from Clubs.

No Chaotic she ever heard of had the ability to get so close, let alone inside, without being detected by anyone. Even if she had limited experience with the beasts her thought process was spot on. This was unheard of. Not a single Esper in this place noticed anything was off.

Though, it seemed Clare noticed it, despite not realizing what it was.

“U-Uncle Gio? What's wrong?” Clare was a bit startled by the sudden change in atmosphere, nearly reverting back to her tears.

Gio turned back, forcing a friendly look to comfort Clare, and pointed to Sera now beside him.

“Nothing's wrong, Clare! But listen, Uncle Gio's friend here – well kind-of-friend-aka-torturer – is going to walk with you to the exit, okay? That way you can meet back with your Dad, alright?”

Clare gave a slow nod, of course trusting her 'uncle,' but it didn't change the fact she was getting confused.

Her confusion gave way to a look of amazement as she pointed back to the glittering cloud above them.

“Oh! Oh! Look Uncle Gio, the glittering stars are coming down here!”

Clare's amazement was trumped by the sudden rush of emotion that ran from Gio's face and welled up inside his chest.

Looking back, the glittering cloud began to drop towards them and Gio's fingers snapped – calling forth a burst of flames, mere inches above the tallest patrons in the area, forming a thin layer of protection from what was the Chaotic's sudden sneak attack.

Apparently the beast had indeed noticed *them* noticing *it*.

Crowds began to scream in horror as flames burst forth from nothing just above them, sending them fleeing in various directions. The screams and panic that erupted were caused solely by the flames, not in fact by the Chaotic, which no others were then aware of.

“Sera!! Take Clare and get the hell out of here, now!!” Gio dashed forward as the crowds around them let loose a stampede like a scared herd of gazelle.

Sera acted on instinct, grabbing Clare's hand, and the two were merging into the fleeing civilians in a flash. Clare didn't quite realize what was happening as tears began to fall once more, but she kept moving, pushed forward by Gio's sudden change in attitude that showed this was serious. She was young and not sure what was wrong, but she was smart for her age. She caught on and continued to flee.

“That blockhead! Just what is he thinking doing that in a place like this?! No time!” She was infuriated by Gio acting so rashly, but she wouldn't let Clare go.

Sera was going to make sure that this young child made it to safety.

The flames began to disperse, forced away and dispelled by what looked like an invisible force. To Gio, however, it appeared as a glittering mass of light.

“The hell is your power, buddy... Those flames aren't child's play, you know!” Gio rushed forward, dodging civilians left and right, and raised his hand to meet the sudden burst of light slashing down towards the crowd.

Air exploded outwards from the force of the attack, knocking over a number of people, but Gio kept the attack at bay.

The citizens around him didn't know what to think. It looked like he was causing this, after all, as they saw nothing but him and his flames.

“Will you all stop staring?! Get the hell out of here—”

His attention to the citizens was the opening the invisible Chaotic needed to smack him with another mass of light, launching him backwards and slamming

him into the vending machines. Sodas and chips went flying as his body crushed the machines like tinfoil.

Citizens, frightened and confused, began to flee in multiple directions – but a swift swipe of this invisible Chaotic's apparent limb cut down ten, twenty people where they stood.

In an instant their bodies had been ripped in two. It was a quick, rough cut, with obvious jagged edges. The pain of being split in two with such a blade was nearly unfathomable. The only good thing came from the fact they wouldn't be alive long enough to feel it anymore.

A gruesome and unforgiving death.

Spewing blood painted the corridor in a terrifying shade of red, but that wasn't enough for the Chaotic. It rampaged, crashing through the wall of one store and into another. Supports for the structure began to give way. The ceiling itself was beginning to crumble just above.

“.. *Bastard!*”

Gio rose, his own blood dripping down his forehead. He wasn't prepared for an attack of that level. It was surprising even to him. He still questioned what the ability of this Chaotic was, though he seemed to be piecing it together slowly but surely.

The beast was invisible to the naked eye, even now as it fought wildly. The only one who could even catch a glimpse of him was Clare, a young girl who was only nine years old... but she was the daughter of a great and powerful Esper.

The daughter of the King of Clubs, Kenny Blume.

Clare didn't seem to realize it but her own Esper ability had awakened. She could see things. Things that others couldn't. Her power was that of sight, one which could see through illusion, one which could see the aura of others, and one which would surely evolve to dispel much of the mystery in the world.

Taking into account this Chaotic's inability to be seen by normal means, its high defensive capabilities, and increased offensive power... Gio seemed to grasp the idea of the ability.

It was using a type of shield, generated by powerful light energy, which gave it the ability to refract light in such a way as it was invisible. In addition, this powerful shield of light energy would make quick work of something like Gio's flames.

“.. Alrighty then, beasty. We're going to try something a little different.”

Gio removed his shades, now covered in his own blood, and placed them inside his jacket pocket. He then held out his right hand as the glow of white and black, around both him and his body, radiated further out.

“.. *Explosion!*”

Flames erupted from above the Chaotic, forcing it downwards with its force, but little to no damage was sustained.

“*Again!*”

This time the powerful explosion came from beneath the beast which was now fully on the ground. The marble floor was melted away entirely, and this time the force of blast launched the Chaotic upwards – and with enough velocity to slam into the glass ceiling above, shattering it, and forcing it into the outside world.

Fire blazed from beneath Gio as he leapt to the sky, following after the beast with his flames propelling him like a rocket.

He had at least wanted to get the Chaotic away from the fleeing civilians, but there was the risk of letting this invisible beast escape. It was a risk he had to take to save those below.

Gio landed safely on the roof of the building, away from the glass panes, and watched as the glittering mass before him grew taller. It seemed this beast was finally standing tall, showing it wasn't as small as other beasts that have been faced in the past.

“.. You're one big s.o.b...”

That big s.o.b. was on the move with speeds a being that large rarely demonstrated. Gio leapt back, dodging a swipe, but his arms had to be raised over his head to block another simultaneous attack.

The Wild Card felt like his arms were nearly broken by the force of the attack.

“*Shit, shit, shit!!*” His voice was strained.

Even with his power and those flames of his, it seemed impossible to break through the Chaotic's shield. It was a good trump. Gio needed piercing power, slicing power. His flames were best at smashing and blowing through. He needed the pinpoint power of a blade or something similar.

The Fiery ability – his main fighting skill – could potentially be used like that. He had to figure out the best way to do it, though, and fast.

The Chaotic pulled back, giving Gio a moment of ease, before slamming down another forceful attack. The Wild Card was then beaten again and again with alternating attacks as if being a nail getting hammered into submission.

His mind was racing, trying to think of the best solution. He could concentrate his flames, trying to creating that piercing power he needed with a pinpoint explosion, but it didn't seem good enough. He could pour his everything into an attack and attempt to obliterate the Chaotic in one go, but not even Gio could contain that power.

It would likely wipe out half the mall in the process.

Whatever was to be done needed to be done now. Gio's arms and body were giving way. Without a way to break through the shields of the Chaotic, though, it

was looking grim. Gio's arms were getting closer and closer to cracking and then breaking.

The war of attrition was about to end.

“Rise and Reap!”

A thundering roar erupted from behind Gio, but it wasn't just some attack. The voice that came was like a freight train smashing its way past his very soul.

A flash of green light shined overhead and before being drowned out just as quickly by a mass of black energy. This black energy, wildly bouncing all over the place, condensed itself and formed a massive weapon stretching high into the sky. A weapon shaped like a *reaper's* weapon of choice; a *scythe*.

The Chaotic's attack slowed then stopped completely. The arrival of such a strange sight overhead was enough to catch its attention in full – but it was a bit too late.

The massive black scythe was already slicing through the air before the creature even realized it was there. The speed of the attack and the size of the attack were both so unbelievably overwhelming that not even this highly talented Chaotic could hope to avoid it.

This would be the slicing and piercing power Gio had wanted.

The scythe cut through the glittering light in an instant and in turn the Chaotic itself as a monstrous roar cried out in pain.

As the barrier of light was cut it shattered completely, falling away to nothingness, and Gio could finally see what the beast looked like. It was jet black, much like the scythe which just cut through it so nonchalantly. Its shape was clearly that of a praying mantis, with an almost metallic-like skin.

Now, however, it was simply a headless beast cut down entirely in one single blow.

Landing just a few feet from Gio, clad in a skin tight black and green shirt nearly giving way to the muscles beneath it, was the man whom was responsible for such an attack.

Kenny D. Blume, standing at six foot six inches, with bulging muscles equating to a body builder's or perhaps professional wrestler's physique. This bear of a man, with his short and messy brown hair, was none other than one of the four Kings of New Eden – The King of Clubs.

Kenny stared calmly at Gio, but his bluish eyes were piercing. He was a King, which meant that relations between him and the Wild Card were sure to be stressful. Perhaps another confrontation was brewing.

Though, before either man could utter a word, their attention returned to the massive mantis-shaped Chaotic before them. It was moving once again – its head and upper body regenerating – and it was pissed.

That black scythe of Ken's manifested, formed by strange shadow-like energy, and Gio's own flames began to flare up.

Neither got a chance to move.

Silver flashes of light, formed by something moving at high speeds, crossed between the two Espers and their Chaotic enemy. These silver flashes of light appeared to be attacks, each slicing at the Chaotic and each finding their mark without fail.

A few seconds later the beast which had been regenerating was now crumbling into dust. It was completely and utterly torn asunder by the silver flashes of light.

Now, standing before both Gio and Ken, was a third. A female clad in silver armor wielding two long silver blades. Long blonde hair, tied back into a ponytail, trailing down the back of the mystical-looking armor. It was like armor ripped from the middle ages but given a modern sleekness, made for both strength and agility. Oval shaped glasses rested upon her face, while dark green oculars stared coldly towards the two men.

“.. Sir, you must remember to finish your foe before letting down your guard. I won't always be here to help.” The woman spoke almost like a robot, stoic and straight to the point.

Her silver armor and twin swords, a sight to behold, slowly began to fade away. In its place was a black skirt suit atop a long white undershirt, sporting a green pin on her collar with the Mark of Clubs – a symbol seen on her glowing left hand as well, combined with a 'Q.'

This woman was the Queen of Clubs, *the stone faced woman* as Gio called her; *Lenna Vermillion*.

Both Ken's scythe and Gio's flame faded. The fight was over as quickly as it began.

The three were then faced with a somewhat awkward situation. Staring back and forth at each other, it seemed obvious something was bound to happen. Giotto Jaeger was standing before both a King and Queen. Their duty to their House and city called for them to capture the rogue known as the Wild Card.

But that wouldn't be the case today.

“.. G-Gio!!” Kenny suddenly blurted out, and the serious expression that once accompanied his intimidating frame had disappeared.

The giant was now rushing Gio and with no warning, was squeezing him into a hug.

“It's horrible, Gio! Clare, my Clare-bear, s-she's—!!” Ken was completely out of it, tears streaming down his face, and the now suffocating Gio didn't exactly have the ability to respond.

Kenny was way too strong for his own good.

“—*Ke-Ken, le-let go, breat—*”

Lenna then walked up behind her King, grabbing him by the ear, which caused him to release Gio in turn. She seemed to have her King trained quite well.

“Sir, I believe this wanted fugitive was attempting to tell you something about your missing daughter.” Lenna's voice was about as monotone as you could get. Practically rehearsed.

“What?!” Ken grabbed Gio, shaking him wildly. “Giotto! Buddy! Pal! Criminal-at-large! You know where my Clare-bear is?!”

The hangover which plagued Gio before the fight was creeping its way back in. The more he shook, the more his world began to spin without a moment of mercy. Though even with the obviously ill Gio right before his eyes, Ken was blind to all but news of his—

A door across the rooftop suddenly sprang open, with two figures walking out into the light of day.

“*CLARE-BEAR!*” Ken screeched, tossing Gio behind him like a deflated chew toy as he rushed along the roof. He was darting straight to the lone door of the roof access that had opened to reveal his pride and joy; *Clarissa 'Clare' Blume*.

Oh, and Sera was there too, but Ken surely never noticed.

“*Papa!*” Clare sprinted along the rooftop without a care, never seeming to even notice the destruction or signs of battle.

Like father, like daughter, the two both appeared to be in their own little world.

Both leapt, as if long jumping into a cool lake on a hot summer day, and right into each other's loving arms. Cheek to cheek they nuzzled, hugging as if they would never let go, all the while laughing their worries away.

Clearly this was a King a bit different from the rest.

“.. I still don't know... what's going on...” Sera was a bit out of her element, stepping onto the roof and casually walking past both Clare and Kenny.

She was on her way to Gio, whom had yet to recover from the shaking, but she was suddenly stopped by the approaching Lenna.

The two women each gave a look to the other, as if sizing each other up, but truthfully Sera still had no idea what was going on exactly. So, the firecracker tried to walk past the Queen of Clubs – only to be stopped with two hands resting comfortably on her face.

Lenna had taken hold of Sera's cheeks and was staring deeply into her blue eyes.

“He-Hey! What are you—”

“*C-Cute...*” Lenna's once robotic voice went about as bubbly as you could get.

“W-What?!”

“.. *Cute.*”

Sera's face had turned bright as a cherry. Whatever was going on, at least it wasn't happening in front of more people... but, what exactly was going on again?

Standing up, albeit struggling to do so, Gio dusted himself off and began a slow walk towards the mass hysteria atop Clover Mall.

“Don't mind her, mosquito... That stone-face just has a bit of a girly side when it comes to certain things... she should ease up soo—” Gio was cut off by the sudden death-glare emanating from Lenna.

Despite this, Lenna released Sera and managed a smile. The Queen of Clubs then made her way past her and off to reunite with her King and Clare.

Sera continued to feel incredibly lost and out of place. This seemed more like some long running joke or a play than real life. Surely she was just missing the punch line.

“.. Like I was saying, don't mind her. Or any of them, really. They are pretty eccentric.” Gio finally made his way back to his own partner. “.. The King and Queen of Clubs, considered the most powerful duo in all of the Houses.”

Gio couldn't help but look back on their attacks from before.

Kenny Blume, affectionately called Ken by most, was known as the most powerful in terms of attack power in New Eden. His ability, *Reaper*, allowed him to control powerful shadow energy. Unmatched in offensive capabilities.

His trademark attack tended to involve a scythe of shadow energy, but Ken was capable of even more masterful manipulation and creation of powerful weapons. He could even tap into the natural shadows of the world and create gateways over long distances. The only downsides to Ken would have been his physical combat and perhaps his defensive power, but even then he was highly talented.

That skill was why many believed if Ken went all out, not even the other Kings could best him in attack power.

Right there with Ken was his Queen, Lenna Vermillion, whom sported the ability *Vorpal Knight*.

Her ability, when active, produced an immensely powerful suit of armor and dual swords. Not only were the items themselves powerful, but the boost they gave to Lenna's already freakish ability made her a King-level Esper. In fact, Lenna was the popular candidate for replacing Gio years ago as King of Hearts... but Lenna wanted to remain with Clubs.

It was thanks to her typically monotonous personality that few knew what to think of her, calling her cold, but she found her own warmth in remaining with her House.

Watching the two of them show off their abilities, even if only for an instant, was still thrilling even for a former King like Gio.

“Let's get going, mosquito... I don't think hanging around here is the best idea.” Gio was already moving as he spoke, Sera instinctively following behind.

“D-Don't think you can go saying things like that just because you got a few bruises, you ingrate!” She wasn't going to lose that edge, no matter the situation.

The two were as casual as could be, considering the battle that just happened. Now was the time to make haste, given that soon other Espers would be arriving. The two making their way back to the roof access and leaving the premises was all but a foregone conclusion.

If not for Clare.

“Uncle Gio, Auntie Sera! Thank you!” With no warning, Clare had smashed into them with force that rivaled even her father.

“A-Auntie?!” Sera was losing it, but she didn't have the heart to turn away the kid.

“.. She's not wrong. Thanks you two.” Ken spoke, that squeal of his from before being back to a calm yet strong tone. “I'd say I owe you, but, well...”

Gio patted Clare lightly on the head, smiling, and waved off Ken.

“You don't have to worry, Kenny. Just do me a favor and admire the sight of New Eden for a couple minutes. Plenty of time for us to take our leave, hm?” Gio's sly smirk sparked one from Ken as well.

“.. Sure thing, old friend.” Ken took hold of his daughter, picking her up and placing her atop his shoulder.

“One thing before I go, Ken.” The King looked back as Gio motioned him. “.. It seems like she's already on her way. If not for her, a lot more people would have died. Good luck.”

Gio turned, lightly tapping Sera on the back to motion their departure.

Sera was still shocked at Clare's declaration, but she realized then that this wasn't the first time Ken and Gio ran into each other. The two of them were friends. Despite Gio's status as a Rogue, publically said to have been Killed In Action, Ken still trusted him.

That was good news for Sera, as it made getting home and out of the sitcom that much easier.

As both Ken and Lenna took a few steps, glancing out at the city, Clare enthusiastically waved back at the departing duo. Ken kept his smile going, even letting out a light chuckle, which Lenna couldn't help but inquire to.

“.. Sir? What's so funny? After what just happened...” She trailed off.

Ken then decided to place a hand atop Lenna's shoulder, causing her to jolt at the sudden sensation.

“You see, Lenna, let's just say... it's good to see that kid back on his feet.”

Her eyebrow raised ever so slightly.

“.. You mean after his fall from grace?”

Ken's laugh subsided as he looked up for a moment before glancing towards his own daughter and then back to Lenna.

“In part, yes... but there were quite a few other things. The fact that's he's up and around, the world needs that. New Eden needs that. It's just a shame we don't realize it just yet. And... that partner of his, Sera? She's done quite the job.”

Lenna couldn't help but be skeptical. Giotto Jaeger was a fugitive. Though she had to admit he wasn't a typical fugitive and his situation was different. To the public he died four years ago, but to the higher ranking Espers he was a Rogue who caused the death of hundreds – including his own Queen and Jack of Hearts.

Many didn't realize that the freelancer for hire running around New Eden saving the day was a former King long thought dead.

Even with what Gio may have done to help the city she believed in upholding the law of the Houses and the stability of New Eden. Despite her own conflicted feelings on the matter she would continue to do what she felt was right, in accordance with the regulations.

Perhaps, much like her King, she believed that the Wild Card was necessary. Under that cold exterior was a warm soul.

“Sir, what should we do about the news on the attack? Surely they will mention something about the mysterious Esper who initially fought the Chaotic. One without a House who wore the mark of Wild Card.”

Ken cleared his throat, watching Clare frolic back and forth on the rooftop. His attention was then turned back to where Gio and Sera once stood.

He couldn't help but sound a bit worried.

“There's not much we can do at this point... Old Man Victor and that kid of his— No, that's not right. She is a King, after all. Rose and Victor will probably be raising hell pretty soon. It's only a matter of time before he makes his move.”

He then looked back down towards where the battle began in the mall below. While his daughter was luckily too distracted to notice, he knew that lives were lost down there despite their precautions. Something like this hadn't happened before. Not in this way.

“The Chaotic that attacked... It was another strong one. Practically King-class, A-Rank for sure. That's only the latest. We sometimes went a year with maybe just one... now we've had several in a couple months. A shadow is creeping closer. Or, well, something like that.” He seemed a bit exhausted. “I'm sure us Kings will be getting a call to Central sooner rather than later.”

He looked back to the city, far into the distance where the tallest building around for thousands of miles seemed like a beacon. From out here at Clover it didn't quite look like the most important location in all of New Eden. From out

here, you could never tell that it housed the *Four Aces*; supreme authorities in all things.

Never before had such an explosive situation been on the horizon. One that would see the Kings involved in what could become a civil war. He wondered what the founders of New Eden would end up doing.

Ken's own face had a bit of a sour expression. He dreaded what was coming, but knew it was only a matter of time.

“.. Seems that we can't turn a blind eye anymore, Lenna. ***Things are finally coming to a head.***”

7th CARD | Katwood

Within the ranks of Espers throughout the Houses of New Eden, certain abilities were held above all others. To manipulate something, such as a basic element or the environment, was certainly something to be proud of – but what was truly amazing was the ability to manifest.

Like Gio, creating and controlling flames with his ability *The Fiery*. Like Rose, creating and controlling plant life with her ability *Red Rose*.

Powers such as these were held in the highest regard. To manifest and then manipulate, create and control, these powers were up on a pedestal. That being said, there was still something more. A skill that no one that possible.

An ability so rare that many thought such a thing to be mere legend.

Fodder for storytelling.

A joke at best.

That ability in question was one that perhaps the gods themselves had at their disposal – the ability to create *matter*, any matter imaginable, at will.

Think of the possibilities! An ability to end world hunger, to give limitless care to the sick, to aid the homeless, to save lives through any and all means. There was no end to what was possible with the power of such an ability.

Surely, an ability such as that was nothing more than fiction.

« — »

“S-Sire...”

Quiet like a mouse, a young girl's voice tried to call out to her sleeping King – Leon Kruger – seated beside her.

Her fair skin, offset by a series of freckles, seemed to signal that she was rather young. Her look was simple, with a blue short-sleeve shirt and white jean shorts. Throw in the large, thick, circle shaped glasses and long, light brown hair tied into twin tails, and you had yourself what would appear a young *bookish* type.

Such an assumption wasn't too far off – this was *Katharine R. Atwood*, Ocho Rank of the House of Spades. Though she simply went by *Kat*.

“.. Sire? A-Are you awake...?” Kat was incredibly soft spoken, hesitant to speak out.

It didn't help that she and her King were sat side by side in an enclosed space.

Both Kat and Leon were sitting, or perhaps resting, comfortably in the back of a spacious four door sedan. The car, driven by a fellow member of their House, was on its way to a particularly *shady* part of New Eden – District Thirteen. Their

destination was the *establishment* known as Wild Card, said to carry out various odd jobs throughout the city.

The same place which housed the *man* known as Wild Card.

Even as they sped along the no longer maintained roads of the Thirteenth District, Kat had no earthly idea why she was here. Her King had come to her just a few hours prior with a request to join him on a special mission. It wasn't an order but Kat took it as such.

For so very long Kat had admired Leon. She joined the House of Spades at the young age of just twelve, joining her parents who were at the time still members. From there she rose the ranks on her own merit even after her parents retired.

During these past five years she continued to have a great sense of purpose when it came to her King. It was true, in fact, that her admiration for Leon was a bit more than that. Perhaps it was a crush... or even something more.

Surely, Leon Kruger was Kat's first and only love.

".. L-Leon?" Kat was hesitant to use the name of her King so freely, but if he really was asleep... she raised her hand, preparing to poke his cheek.

The jolt of the car slamming on its brakes had other plans.

Kat went flailing into the back of the driver's seat, while a sleeping Leon simply opened his eyes without much of a care in the world. It was as if he never even felt the jerk of the vehicle.

"Hmm? Oh, are we... there already?" Leon still sounded half asleep.

"Sire!" A male voice from the front of the vehicle chimed in. "I'm sorry for the sudden stop. There seems to be a domestic dispute of some kind in the street."

Kat's world was still a bit shaken up from the floorboard that she was now resting on, but she heard the driver's voice and spotted her awakened King.

"My King!" Kat struggled to get up off the floor of the backseat, squirming about, but Leon soon reached out with a smile to assist.

"No need to be so frantic, Miss Atwood. Here, let me hel—"

The backseat door was suddenly swung open from the outside.

"Oi! What in the hell are *you* doing back here?! Thought we were done with your kind, *Mr. King!*" Sera, in much the same way she always was, showed no mercy.

Leon nervously let out a small laugh, unsure how to respond, but he watched as Sera ducked from a sudden fireball that was flung her way.

"Mosquito, where did you put my whiskey?! Enough of your games, today is not the day!" The familiar voice of Gio was a bit more fired up than usual, surely due to the aforementioned missing whiskey.

"If you want your 'effing whiskey then maybe you should go do a job or two and get us some damn money!"

Sera returned fire by picking up a number of rocks, chunking them over the car at Gio, whom just happened to be in nothing but a white t-shirt and boxer shorts in the middle of the street.

He was sluggish in his dodges, seemingly having just woken up, despite it already being the afternoon. A few of the pesky pebbles made contact, causing Gio to stumble, while both he and Sera continued their back and forth.

They were as bad as school children.

.. No, actually, they were much worse. Much, much worse.

Leon took the opportunity to slide out of the opened door. Sera and Gio's fight had moved, with the two of them darting around in the street. The King of Spades once again offered his hand to the flustered Ocho still lying on the floor of the car.

“Let's try that again, shall we?” Leon's smile was like the sun to Kat, melting away the defenses around her heart.

Even in her state of bewilderment she decided to take a deep breath and take hold of the hand before her.

Kat's freckled covered cheeks were beginning to grow rosy.

“T-T-Thank you, Sire...” She couldn't look at him let alone piece together two words without stammering.

“I told you before, Miss Atwood. Please, you should really just call me Leon. Everyone else does, after all.”

Leon was always kind to those around him, no matter who or what they were to him. It was said you could tell a lot by someone with how they treated the people whom didn't need to be treated with kindness. Normal citizens of New Eden, shop clerks, low ranking Espers – Leon treated them all with respect, with care.

He was truly concerned for the well-being of those around him.

That was probably a big part of the reason Kat had become so infatuated with him.

Leon turned his attention to the squabbling pair in the street.

“Gio? Hey, Giotto!”

Gio looked back for just long enough to be nailed square in the head by a baseball sized rock. His body then went spinning to the ground and he was down for the count.

“HA! Next time don't try and chuck fireballs at me, got it, scrub?!” Sera laughed maniacally as her victory had been claimed.

Kat watched the quarrel while adjusting her glasses, wondering if perhaps she was seeing things. These two were unbelievable. To make matters worse it seemed obvious that the man lying half naked in the street was the friend of Leon's they were here to see – Wild Card.

Kat hoped, even prayed, that this wasn't the case. This half naked man and her King couldn't have been friends, right?

“Miss Sera, it might be best to let him get away with this one. We have some important things to dis—”

Sera's response to Leon was a menacing scowl that seemed to pierce his chest.

“R-Right. Well, Miss Atwood, let's make our way inside...” He motioned towards the wide open doors of the shabby building beside them.

At the very least, as Kat cautiously made her way over, she could see that the inside was nowhere near as bad as the outside. In fact, the inside was furnished quite nicely. So nicely in fact it was hard to tell they were smack dab in the middle of District Thirteen.

“I'm sure it's fine to sit anywhere. Allow me to go round up our hosts.”

Leon left Kat to her own devices and the flustered female had little idea how to respond to it all. She decided the best course of action was to at least sit, so she made her over to the couch and did just that.

Reaching into her brown satchel she removed a small, equally brown, hardback book. She opened, seemingly to read, but the pages were all without words – completely and totally blank.

“.. What to write about today?”

Kat reached into her pocket, removing a long black pen. A single click and she was putting ink to paper.

It took nearly twenty minutes for Leon to corral Sera and Gio, not to mention getting the latter dressed in some appropriate clothing.

When it was said and done, the four were finally able to sit around the living room table and get down to business.

“Well then, Lil' Leo. What's on the agenda for today? You've got an important job, yeah?” Gio's voice had calmed from where he and Sera were before.

It was strange for Leon to show up unannounced, but in all the time he was getting Gio cleaned up he never mentioned just why he had arrived in such a way.

“.. That's right, Gio. It's one that I think you'll want to get started on right away.” Leon's tone, previously warm and comforting, had suddenly grown cold like steel and serious. “It involves a missing Esper, believed by some to have turned Rogue. Of course, there's no evidence of that, but for an Esper to simply go missing...”

“It doesn't happen often, right. Seeing as Espers are what they are, if one goes missing they are usually dead or they've defected. Seems like a pretty open and shut case, Leon. Not sure why—”

Leon raised his hand.

“—Because it's someone I think you'd know wouldn't suddenly turn. An old friend and pupil of yours, actually. From the House of Hearts, Septem Rank Ja—”

Leon never got the chance to finish as Gio pushed himself up off his chair and began walking towards the door. Sera jumped up as well, not sure what triggered the movement, but she remained where she stood.

Leon then stood as well, motioning to his old friend.

“Gio, you sure you don't want to think about this? If he's really gone Rogue, then—”

“There's nothing to think about. He wouldn't ever do that.” Gio's voice showed a seriousness to it that was rarely ever on display. “I'm guessing if he's out of the reach of those eyes and ears of the Houses, he's probably in the slums. Sera, let's go.”

Gio opened the door as Sera began slinking towards him, but Leon called out.

“Wait, Gio! I want you to take my Ocho here with you. Her name is Katherine Atwood, and I think the experience will be good for her.”

Despite his hurry Gio stepped back inside, defiantly glancing back to Leon.

“No chance in hell, Leon. I'm not a babysitter. Let your girlfriend there go on some other assignment with your own House—”

“—Don't forget this is still a job, Gio. Taking Miss Atwood along is part of that job.” An authoritative tone from Leon was a rare sight. “Trust me. She's not just an Ocho for no reason. Her ability is something truly impressive.”

Kat couldn't help but grow flustered, leaping to her feet just to try and stop from bouncing off the walls. She couldn't believe the praise her King was giving her and it almost made her forget what he just said; that Kat was supposed to tag along.

“S-Sire, I don't think—”

Leon's voice cut off Kat before she could protest.

“Show him, Miss Atwood. Your power.”

Gio was growing impatient.

“We don't have time for this, Leon! If Jay is out there—”

Kat wasn't sure what to do. She was nervous, shaking, and had no idea what she was supposed to show. In fact, the only thing that she could think of was how this entire situation had spiraled out of control, starting with the pair of Gio and Sera before her, whom only seemed good at fighting over a bottle of whiskey.

Bottle of whiskey...

A golden light began to envelop her small left hand, showing the number eight and the Mark of Spades, and from the air above Gio soon came numerous misshapen glass bottles that began to bury him.

Each deformed bottle filled to the brim with a brown liquid; whiskey.

“W-What did she just—” Sera turned back and forth between Kat and the partially buried Gio multiple times, unsure of what just transpired.

Kat herself didn't even seem aware of what she was doing. Once she saw the bottles forming and falling out of thin air, that glow around her hand pulsated – and as it flashed, the bottles of whiskey vanished entirely.

Gio was face planting the ground, having been caught entirely by surprise, but instead of standing back up he simply raised his head to stare across the room and back at the young girl.

A frightened look had fallen over her. She had angered the beast rumored to have matched a King in battle as recently as last week.

Instead of fire being flung her way, however, Kat watched as Gio stood and dusted himself off. He then directed his attention to Leon.

“.. You have a Housemate with *that* kind of power, huh? Who would've thought...” Gio's voice showed a bit of surprise. “If she comes, I won't guarantee her safety. You know that, right?”

Leon smiled, nodding.

“Of course, Gio. Safe journey to you.”

Kat still had little idea what to make of everything at that moment – but the sunglasses clad man at the door waved her over.

“Let's get going, what was it – Katharine? Move it, Kat.”

Gio gave no chance for a response as he walked out the door, with Sera following closely behind while making a rather obscene gesture towards Leon involving a certain finger.

Kat's worried look shifted to her King. She was getting dragged into something she didn't understand.

“Don't worry, Miss Atwood. I trust in Gio with all that I am – you can believe in him, too.”

With no other choice the young girl fought through her nerves and slowly began making her way after the duo. This was an order from Leon, after all. She couldn't turn him down. Even knowing this, it was tough to continue going along with it.

Why did my King do this to me, was all that her mind could muster.

Meanwhile, Sera struggled to catch up to her partner in crime. She could tell something was up but she didn't quite get the sudden urgency.

“Whoa, whoa, hold up! What's the deal with you all of a sudden?”

Gio didn't seem to even be listening as he made his way further down the street, ignoring Sera to a certain extent and not even minding to check if Kat was caught up.

Sera wasn't exactly enthralled by the idea of being ignored.

“Don't even try it!” She managed to dash forward, grabbing a chunk of Gio's jacket, and she used her physical strength to stop him and throw him against the nearby wall. “What is up with you?! Who is the Esper you two were talking about? You said his name, Jay, right? Don't think I'm someone you can just order around! You're not a King anymore!”

He swatted her grasping hand away with enough strength to cause even Sera a momentary shot of pain.

“We don't have time for your pseudo anger, Sera.”

“Pseudo?! Who the hell do you think you—”

“His name is Jay, yeah. *Jay Willow* – and it's my fault he became a member of the Houses in the first place.”

Gio turned, walking at a quickened pace once more, but Sera wasn't done. She matched his pace stride for stride.

“Fault? What do you mean, fault? He's an Esper so—”

“–So he should be in the Houses with or without me? Maybe. Maybe not. The kid was happy not being a part of the Houses. I'm the one that brought him under my wing and if something has happened to him, that's my fault.”

Gio never slowed his pace as he spoke, leaving Sera a bit surprised. This wasn't like the typical idiot she was use to taking care of. It reminded her of the mission to that arena, but this was even more severe. Gio was focused and ignoring everything else.

“You do know you can't control everything, right? If something has happened to him then it's not your—”

“–fault? Yeah, it is. Listen, just follow and be quiet—”

Though it wasn't Sera whom cut off Gio.

Instead, it was a loud crash from behind them.

The pair turned in unison to see the young girl, Kat, having tripped over a pile of trash and rubble. She had finally caught up to them, but she showed her spatial awareness wasn't quite what it should have been.

“...”

Both members of Wild Card weren't really sure what to say, but Gio was already back on the move. That left Sera to play big sister. Her frustration was marked by her deep breath and shaking head.

“Oi, come on, kid!” She ran back to Kat, helping her to her feet, and began to drag her along at a pace similar to Gio's. “If you don't keep movin' we're going to fall behind! Why'd that bastard have you tag along, anyway?”

Kat's own expression showed fatigue and confusion, having no idea why her King would have put her into such a situation. She wasn't the kind of Esper to go rushing off into conflict in dangerous areas. She was skilled in the use of her

ability, but she was far from being a fighter. A mission like this wasn't what Kat would call fun or exciting, but things were at least off to a... *different* kind of start.

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A journey to the deep slums wasn't a particularly long one. While District Thirteen as a whole was classified as being a slum, it was only when you went even further in that the true slum began. From *Wild Card* it was just a few miles.

The toughest part of the journey would lie in getting around much of the ruined buildings and then deciding on where to go from there. If one wasn't careful it was easy to get lost in the maze-like environment. Not to mention the fact that, in rushing out, Gio had no leads to go on.

Not yet.

Gio kept himself, and by association Kat and Sera, mostly to the shadows. Avoiding direct contact with others was a must. It helped them to both keep a low profile and perhaps overhear news of Rogue activity that others would not normally divulge.

In the slums there were few ways to entertain yourself on a regular basis, so many found great joy in gossip. There was little fear for repercussions in spreading rumors or talking behind another's back, so keeping a secret in an area like this was mostly impossible.

Gio was use to using such techniques to find information daily. Sometimes you would get nothing but made up stories used to try and cause a stir, but there were plenty of times you struck gold. News of some criminal plot, happenings around New Eden's shadier groups, and even what kind of shampoo high ranking Espers were using that week.

It seemed to be the best method for finding news on Jay and for what it was worth, it appeared to work.

News had spread through the slums of a gathering group of Rogues gaining both reputation and numbers. Their objective was simple; gain enough strength to match the Houses of New Eden and overthrow them. It sounded pretty insane, even for Rogues, but they were planning to establish their force with a special trump card.

With their secret weapon they would be able to learn details on how the Houses were spread and the places to hit them the hardest. They advertised this trump card rather proudly, hoping to drive more Rogues to their ranks – and in truth it wasn't a horrible plan, given what they had.

An Esper, fresh from the ranks of the Houses, captured and under their control.

There was no doubt in Gio's mind that this Esper from the Houses was his old friend and pupil, the same young man whom he brought into the House of Hearts five years' prior – *Jay D. Willow*.

8th CARD | Shadow Walker

“I understand the idea could be a bit scary, but...” The voice was familiar, belonging to none other than Giotto Jaeger, but he was about five years younger. “You have a pretty amazing gift, Jay.”

The nineteen-year-old Gio, King of Hearts, stood beside his twenty-year-old wife and Queen, Faye Star. The two of them were in the home of Jay Willow, a thirteen-year-old youth having finally been approached about joining a House of New Eden.

“.. No!” The voice was high pitched and defiant.

Jay stood before them with arms crossed, glaring angrily with those big blue eyes at the two who approached him.

He was only thirteen but he certainly seemed a bit older. He was tall for his age, his skin a dark brown and his jet black hair messed about. He sported a black tank top and light gray sweat pants.

Gio couldn't help but chuckle at Jay's response, kneeling down while Faye placed a comforting hand on her King's shoulder.

“Jay... joining a House, using your powers for good... isn't that something you'd like to do? To help people and make this city a better place. To be a hero... doesn't that inte—”

“No! I said no! I never want to use my powers again! I don't want to be a stupid Esper! I don't want to be a member of the Houses!!” Jay spun away from the two, sprinting away and down a lone hallway.

The slamming of his room door was all the response they needed.

A heavy sigh escaped the lips of the King as he stood back up. Faye decided to give a soothing smile.

“It's okay, Gio. You heard his parents before. We knew it'd be tough to convince him, but we did what we could for now.” She reassured him, placing her hand gently to his cheek. “Let's head back for today, okay?”

Gio agreed and the pair bid farewell to the Willow household.

That was the first time Gio had met Jay. He had known about him for a while, as had other Houses, since Jay's powers awakened when he was just seven years old. His ability, *Shadow Walker*, was based around teleportation. The problem with such an ability, though, was that Jay had an incredibly hard time controlling it.

Despite that lack of control Jay had always tried to use it and test it on his own.

This eventually led to an ordeal when he was ten. He had wanted to show his sister his ability and how he thought he learned to control it – unfortunately, he was wrong.

In attempting to teleport both himself and his sister at a playground he nearly killed them both.

His sister ended up impaled by a metal rod, barely missing her heart, and Jay nearly lost his arm when his warp lost control.

From that day onwards Jay vowed to never again use his ability.

All of the Houses had at one point or another come to see him and they continued as he grew older, but at that point his vow was sacred.

He would never again embrace his power as an Esper.

Though who could have expected that the Willow home would come under Chaotic attack in the middle of the city.

Gio, Faye, and a handful of others from Hearts had been standing by in the area. There was no indication that Jay was a target, but the area had experienced increased levels of activity. There was a buzz in the air, much like the feeling before a heavy storm.

Just one day after Gio's first encounter with Jay, the King was already rushing back to the scene – hoping to save the family from the rampaging beasts that descended upon them.

.. Sadly, the arrival of Hearts wasn't quick enough.

The group found complete and utter destruction to the Willow home and the surrounding area. Many had died in the attack before they arrived, but there were two who stood out – the mother and father of Jay.

Both of them, James and Martha, clung to life as best they could, but their time was coming to an end. Jay's brother, Ethan, and sister, Rachel, were badly wounded but not fatally.

The last words Jay would ever hear from his mother, from his father, were ones that would drive Jay forward. The words that would light a spark within him. Words that would wipe away his fear and hesitation in a single, brilliant stroke.

“.. *Protect... them...*”

They wished for Jay to use his gifts, his power, to save those who could not be saved. To be the hero that the people needed. Set aside your doubts and stand tall – that was their wish.

If that was what his parents wanted, if that was their dying wish, then Jay would overcome the fear that held him back. His chains would snap and his binds be broken.

He stood tall against the Chaotic which towered over him, gathered his power, and summoned the will to move.

In that instant the air changed. A heavy pressure was brought down on Gio and everyone else nearby. This was the force of an Esper's power being unleashed without any holding back. Some from Hearts found it hard to move, even falling to their knees, but Gio and Faye both stood tall.

They were both witnessing the birth of an Esper – no, a hero – who would protect the city for years to come.

Jay's power erupted in magnificent fashion as he warped, leaving behind a shadowy mist with each teleport, appearing all around the battlefield like he had been doing it for years.

In truth, he had, but for so long he refused to use his powers. Now he was unleashing that power, all at once, to protect the family he still had and to avenge the family he lost.

The thirteen-year-old boy, far from being a man, was fighting with a force that others twice his age never exhibited.

His stamina, however, was still that of a child.

Jay's relentless attacks fell to the wayside as the Chaotics recovered from his physical assault. They charged him, planning to finish him in his weakened state, but Gio had other ideas.

The House of Hearts charged into the fray. They displayed the supreme power that the top ranked Espers of New Eden held, destroying the beasts and preventing further loss of life.

Such a hollow victory was one that Gio would forever chalk up as a loss.

It was the day that Jay Willow, *Shadow Walker*, entered into the House of Hearts. It was also the same day that he lost the parents who raised him, who loved him and his siblings with all of their being. From that day onward Jay would ensure that the same thing never happened to others.

As a part of the House of Hearts, as Gio's pupil, Jay would become the hero that he had always admired.

The same hero that he saw in Gio; his *King*.

« — »

Night had fallen on the slums of the Thirteenth District. Luckily, Gio and company finally had their heading. The Rogues gathering together were easy enough to find, thanks to the fact they *wanted* to be found. The only kinds of people in these parts, Espers or Normals, were going to be less than respectable. Just what they wanted.

The Houses stayed away from the slums.

Near the edge of the city itself, where the slums were deepest, was where this particular group now called home. The landscape was that of a trade network of

supplies to and from the city. The area had once been full of active warehouses long ago, before there were ever slums in New Eden and long before Gio and Leon tried to clean them up.

It made a rather well fortified base for them. It even allowed them solid routes through the slums and into the city, as the old transportation roads were still around. Well, mostly. Even in their ruined state the pathways were still mapped out in prime positions.

The Rogues themselves seemed to be operating in a somewhat horizontal chain of command, meaning that the group appeared to have no true leader. It seemed counterproductive, at least long term, but the strategy appeared to be to gather as many Rogues as they could early. Finding a leader, finding a voice, could come after.

Luckily for the rebels, the news of capturing a member of the Houses was a great advertising tool.

Many who lived in the slums, many who had kept to themselves, began flocking to the group. All thanks to showing the ability to contain an Esper from a House. Even Normals were finding themselves joining up.

“.. That'd be them, then.”

Gio was quiet. He and the others were hiding near the back of a worn down warehouse. It was right near the middle of the enemy group but far enough away to give them a bit of wiggle room. It was also a location they paid no mind, given the state of the building.

Shame that the position didn't provide them the scope they expected.

“I don't... see him, though.” His voice was strained.

The emotions he seemed to be keeping in check were dangerously close to letting loose.

Sera caught on early that this was far from the *typical* Gio. He was supposed to be a total screw up, lazing about with a whiskey bottle in one hand and shades in the other. He was supposed to be fighting with her on everything, causing problems every step of the way.

That wasn't the case now.

“O-Oh!”

The stuttering yelp from behind had Gio and Sera turning back in unison.

“Is that... him?” Kat was pointing ahead of them, under what appeared to be a disabled and ruined crane.

Despite those thick glasses of hers inferring she had bad eyesight, it seemed like Kat was pretty good at spotting things. Closer examination by Gio showed that there was a strange glowing light in the same area. This light, round in shape, appeared just large enough to house a person – to keep someone captive.

A lone figure within the orb of light was none other than their target; Jay.

Gio turned back to Kat and managed a slight smirk. It was the first sign of acceptance or even respect that he was showing the young girl.

“Not bad, kid.” He turned back to look towards the orb. “Not bad at all...”

Kat couldn't help but feel a bit of pride welling up inside her, but she also wondered why someone just a few years older than her was calling her a kid.

Personal thoughts aside, the question now was how on earth to free Jay without alerting the militia of Rogues.

Between the three of them and the captive were various groups of enemies conversing and carrying out tasks. Some appeared to be loading equipment into small storage crates while others appeared to be unloading other containers and passing out gear to a line of people that seemed new.

Others were simply talking and hanging about, drinking what appeared to be cheap beer and smoking half spent cigarettes. Hardly a sophisticated fighting force.

The only real problem was their sheer size.

There was at least a couple hundred of them, if not more, and they were all in the way of the objective.

Even for Gio this was a precarious situation. They needed a solid plan before moving forward. However, time wasn't exactly their ally. He was ready to make a move and would do whatever it took.

“.. Sera, how quickly do you think you can get around to that orb?”

Her jaw dropped if only for a split moment, shock getting to her at just how stupid an idea Gio was potentially presenting.

“Huh? What, while you sit back here and have yourself a martini or something?”

Gio shook his head. His right hand was shaking ever so slightly.

“Not at all... I'm thinking I'll run in there, cause a bit of chaos, and get their attention. Should give you an opening to get close.” His eyes now rested solely on Sera. “That orb looks like the ability of an Esper, no doubt. I can't really sense from where, though. Means we have to find who's controlling it the hard way or break Jay out forcefully. I can take care of the Rogues and you can start trying to break him out—”

Sera quickly grabbed Gio by the collar, brazenly glaring past those sunglasses and into his brown eyes. Her own eyes were full of silent yet screaming emotion.

“You want to be a *decoy* against an *army*?! You're being real stupid, Gio. Way more than usual, too!” She was angry and understandably so.

She knew Gio was being far too reckless.

“What's the deal, huh? You said before that you got him into the Houses and feel responsible – get over it!” She pulled him closer, gripping tighter on his collar

and nearly choking him in the process. “You can't control everything; you know? You're not some hero that's unbeatable!”

His head turned slightly to the right, avoiding eye contact with Sera as she called him out.

“.. You wouldn't understand. If nothing else, this is something I can fix right here and now. I owe him that much.”

However, while the two members of Wild Card went back and forth about what to do, Kat had already begun moving.

Her curiosity had taken hold. She was examining the situation, the number of enemies, and the objective. Without even realizing what she was doing her mind was racing through various calculations and strategies, each one coming up as a failure.

Play decoy, rush the target, blend in, sneak around, guerilla warfare – they were all strategies that flooded Kat's mind and were instantaneously thrown out. This wasn't a situation that they could win. Not from a critical point of view. Her assessment was spot on and she knew it.

After all, it wasn't just Kat's Esper ability that took her through the ranks of the House of Spades. Her intellect was just as important, if not moreso, than her fabled skill. She was a master strategist. Few in any House could match her wits or knowledge.

“Maybe if I'm closer...”

Her best bet was to get a full grasp on the situation.

Kat looked around in hopes of finding a solid vantage point, but the lone position appeared to be atop the degraded crane – the exact location they needed to get to. Trying to get the same look from atop a damaged warehouse roof seemed highly improbable given their condition. With how rundown the buildings were they would probably collapse without much help.

It was somewhat silly to think, considering Jay was being held in the same position by the crane, but perhaps she could make her way there and get a better look at the enemy force. Maybe she could even find some way to free Jay without causing a battle.

The idea she could do such a thing was clouding her typically infallible intellect.

I can do this, I can do this, I can totally do this, her thoughts raced to give her confidence.

She kept to the shadows and avoided the piles of rock and metal. No one would care to notice a young girl sneaking around the slums, right? She had the advantage; she was smarter, trained, calculating...

.. And before she knew it she was *crashing down* to earth from her lofty perch.

A sudden, loud crash echoed throughout the area, which was already filled to the brim with Espers.

The initial sound was like a gunshot signaling the start of a race and what followed were akin to the thunderous sounds of a hundred stampeding horses. The sounds were of a crumbling warehouse, brought down at the wrong place, worst time. The collapsing roars became deafening as metal screeched and the earth itself moved from the force of the fall.

The building that had formerly been on its last leg soon found itself caving in with the might of an explosive rigged by an expert demolition team. Such a catastrophic event had to *surely* be caused intentionally as part of some grand plan, but the truth of the matter was far more simple.

Kat, young and naive, tripped face first into its only structurally sound wall with enough force to send it to the abyss.

Metal scraped against pavement as walls and support beams continued to come crashing down one after the other. The screech of the collapse was greater than even the mightiest lion, paralyzing with shock all in earshot as they witnessed the destruction. Years of dust and dirt billowed into the air, causing a gray cloud to descend on both the army of Rogues and the bickering pair off to the side.

No one, not even the Rogues, seemed to know what to do. Instinct had many shield themselves from the dust and debris, but they remained where they stood. With no leader to stand front and center many had no idea how to respond.

Was it an attack?

Did the building simply fall by chance?

No, the true answer lay elsewhere. Situated firmly on the untied shoelace of a little girl.

Kat's lighter-than-average frame had been blown away by the force of the collapse. She was lucky to not be caught under the rubble, but as the dust slowly began to settle her situation took a turn for the worse.

Her body covered enough distance to reach the very people she tried to avoid, mere inches from the formerly unsuspecting Rogues who moments ago had been going about their business.

The enemies who held Jay captive, who sought the downfall of the Houses, and the ones who would stop anyone who got in their way – they were now realizing that at their feet another Esper of the Houses had wandered into their lair.

Gio and Sera were free from the splash zone of the debris, but they had a clouded view of the situation from afar. All they knew was that Kat had been launched and unfortunately Gio noticed just where she ended up.

“The hell is that kid doing!” Gio pulled away from Sera, glaring ahead. “Let's move, she's going to end up getting herself killed!”

Gio was already running ahead before Sera had a chance to question him further.

“*Fine*, screw it!!”

The two were sprinting into the dust cloud that remained, knowing that on the other side was an army of Rogues. The enemies were alert to someone's presence and now had Kat at their feet, but if Gio and Sera could get the jump on them it might be salvageable.

That meant unleashing everything they had before it was too late.

It meant diving head first into a situation they were clearly destined to lose.

At the same time, a bound Jay finally sprang to life. Despite being considered an adult at eighteen he still preferred ‘simplicity’ when it came to style and avoided his uniform like the plague. Truth be told it was probably just a bit of laziness. A charcoal colored, sleeveless hoody, and a pair of white shorts were all he cared to wear. His hair was short and messy. If one didn't know any better they'd think he had just crawled out of bed.

But of course that wasn't the case. Jay was captured and being held prisoner by these Rogues – the enemies of the Houses and New Eden itself.

Jay still couldn't believe that he was in such a predicament. Not even fresh Numbers on their first mission would mess up this bad. He had only himself to blame for being so quick to rush to what was obviously a trap, but even after being tricked he wouldn't have done anything differently.

He went to save a girl in distress, or so he thought.

Rushing in to save the damsel was what a hero did. Jay took pride in that side of himself.

Now, however, it looked like the damsel was coming to save him.

Jay instantly caught sight of Kat being flung away from the collapsing warehouse. Despite the heavy smoke that others had to shield their eyes from though, Jay was inside of a seemingly impenetrable shield – he could clearly look around without hesitation.

The sight of a short, seemingly frail girl, was a surprise to say the least.

“Is *she*... here for *me*?” His voice held just a fraction of disbelief.

A smidgen.

Perhaps about forty percent.

.. Okay, the truth was the thought of that freckle-faced girl coming to save him seemed a bit silly.

But that doubt would soon turn to newfound faith. From the clouds of dust and smoke came a bright light, drawing the attention of the Rogue militia. Even Jay was drawn to the sight. Like a small sparkle at the end of a long tunnel.

A few moments later and that hypnotizing light turned into a downpour of fireballs, much like meteors raining down from space itself. The flames burned brilliantly, turning the pitch black night into what appeared to be high noon.

Seconds became eons as the hellfire scorched the entirety of the ruined area, sending Rogues flying and fleeing in all directions. The fireballs were essentially grenades with no prejudice. The sudden attack had many running for the hills already. They weren't all use to fighting or combat, so to see such an assault was just about all they could take. It would at least help even the playing field.

“F-Flames?! On such a level—!!”

Jay's voice screeched as the fireballs reached even him, crashing all around his cage. A few even slammed right into the sparkling blue energies that held him in place. The explosives rocked all around him, but his cage stayed strong and kept him from even suffering from the vibrations. As the ground around him began to give way, it was even noticeable that his sphere went through the concrete below.

“Hey! Let me the heck out of here!”

The young man finally had some fight in him as he began to punch and kick at the force field around him. Desperation was sinking in for the Septum of Hearts. Jay had no idea who would attack so wildly and at this hour. It was even possible that whoever was attacking was actually a rival group, planning to take out his captors.

If that was truly the case, then it was all the more important to bust out now. Surely a rival gang would have little use for a member of the Houses foolish enough to be caught. But, they probably wouldn't let him leave unscathed.

“Damn! Come on, Jay, think!”

His blue eyes were bouncing around his head, hoping to find an opening, but the cage was solid.

“If he was here, what would, what could...”

Jay's left hand was glowing with the Mark of his House, showing the number seven and the intertwining Hearts insignia.

“.. It didn't work before, but maybe in this confusion...”

He closed his eyes. His one chance to escape this cage was right before him. While it held him physically and also prevented him from teleporting out, maybe just maybe there was a weakness.

Flashes of shadows, black smoke, consumed Jay and bounced furiously around the sphere. It looked like storm clouds swirling and colliding at high speed. The shadows dimmed and he appeared in the same place as before. His body remained trapped.

“Damn!”

His frustration was obvious. Though, the battle before him was getting closer.

Now was the time that things would begin to change.

The flames of the mysterious attacker that burned wildly had lit up the area and the clouds of dust and smoke were finally settling. Bodies were sent flailing back in different directions, a few crashing around the imprisoned youth.

Jay now had the perfect angle and lighting to get a clear look at a newcomer to the scene. Was it a rival gang? Perhaps it was an Esper from another House? At first he ignored the face which seemed to catch sight of him at the same moment. Instinctively he looked away, as if embarrassed for some odd reason, and instead he noticed the stranger wasn't wearing anything from the Houses. It must have been someone off duty, or maybe it really was a rival gang... but that wasn't it.

His eyes now locked with the stranger's.

What he saw in that moment was surely an illusion his mind brought on in a time of fear.

".. It's not possible..."

Even with the fire burning it was still late, so surely Jay's eyes were just playing tricks on him. He had been held captive for quite some time, after all. But as the fractions of seconds passed, the reality of what he was seeing began to sink in fully.

Standing not far from him, right in the middle of the flickering flames, stood a figure that Jay had always believed he would see again. Despite the news of his passing, the reports of his Fall, Jay always held out hope.

Hope that his mentor and dearest friend was still alive.

"Giotto...?"

The Wild Card was focused on the fight that was upon him. He had drawn the attention of nearly all the Rogues that remained to stand and fight, which meant that a brawl was about to begin – but not before he made sure Kat was back on her feet.

Luckily, Sera was already continuing her big sister role. She had dashed in during the barrage by Gio and was sliding into place just as the smoke clouds died down. Looking back, she could see that the Rogues who stayed were regaining their composure and slowly but surely moving in on their target.

It even included the Rogues who had moments ago been preparing to investigate Kat. For the moment she was safe.

Sera planted herself right beside Kat, with little time for words. She was using her brute strength to get the rookie back on her feet, but at the same time keeping her crouched. She was going to lead Kat out of the battle zone and to a safer location, then get back and work out some frustrations in the form of combat.

"M-Miss Sera!"

“*Shhh!* Keep it down – and not just your voice, geez!” Big Sister Sera struggled to force Kat’s rear back down, as the so called crouching was more of a lazy bend over. “Butt down, head up! Aren’t you trained for combat and stuff?”

Fortunately, the army was already focused solely on Gio. It didn't really matter at that point if Kat revealed herself further or not.

Rumors of the Wild Card and his fire ability spread much like those flames burning across the battlefield. It was also known that the bounty on that same man was astronomical. Gio probably didn’t have to do all he did to get their attention given his status as a wanted man, but what was done was done.

Meanwhile, while most were moving towards him, Sera was quick to spot a young woman who was hanging back. She was dressed pretty poorly, far differently from the other Rogues decked out in military-grade gear. Her clothes were old and torn, sliced up in various places with a few blood stains. If one didn't know better, they would have said she looked like a homeless from the slums who had been abused and brutalized on more than one occasion.

That, however, was far from the truth.

Sera's eyesight was on point, even in the returning darkness, and she could see that the apparent bloodstains and holes in the clothing didn't match up with any kind of scars. What appeared to be a homeless girl covered in past wounds was actually a well kempt young lady with a pretty face.

“.. You know, that’s interesting.”

Sera's voice confused Kat, whom mid-crouch was still trying to flee the scene.

“W-What’s inter—”

“No time! Listen up, you can pretty much craft up anything, yeah? How about making something to take out that girl over there?”

Sera pointed to the poorly dressed lady which further confused Kat.

“.. Um, isn't she already pretty hurt? She's covered in blood..”

Of course Kat was hesitant. After all, the costume of that girl was pretty convincing. Though, the fact that she was the lone onlooker not moving in to fight or fleeing meant that she had to stay there. Being so close to the cosmic cage made it pretty obvious she was, at least in part, keeping Jay captive.

Sera could only assume that since the girl was hanging back, near Jay, that she was probably the one keeping him locked up. Even if she was wrong it would be one less Rogue to worry about.

If she was totally wrong and that girl was innocent, well, she could apologize later.

“Oi! Do you want to help or not? Just take care of her before I have to, alright?!” Sera was shouting just enough to make Kat act in fear. So much for a low profile.

Kat's legs then gave way and she fell to her knees, frantically trying to do what she was told. Seconds later the young girl was bringing out her book and quill-shaped pen.

"I-I'm not sure what to—"

"Bloody hell, *anything!*"

There was no time. Sera jumped to her feet, leaving Kat, and charged towards the Rogue – but just as the enemy noticed her, a heavy metal object came plummeting onto her unsuspecting head.

Sera froze in place as she realized a large iron anvil had just appeared out of nowhere, just like an old school cartoon, and had knocked out the enemy in a swift comedic motion. She turned back to Kat. A look of disbelief had washed over Sera's face, but Kat could only nervously look back with what looked like a smile.

Whether Kat was ready for a mission like this or not was a good question, but at the very least she certainly had one heck of an ability.

"Hey, not bad at all. That's some great taste you—" Sera's voice trailed off as a burst of shadow energy rippled through the air around her.

Jay's glowing cage flickered and gave way at the exact same moment that the anvil knocked out his false damsel in distress. At the time he had no idea who or what had freed him – but he knew who stood across the blazing battlefield.

"*Giotto!!*"

His voice rang through the night as blackened energy began to consume him once more.

Gio couldn't help but look back, catching sight of Jay if only for a moment before he was gone.

The next moment the young man was warping in front of a random Rogue, arm outstretched to deliver a fearsome clothesline. The force of the blow was so mighty that the Rogue slammed into the ground below, cracking the concrete beneath him, and instantaneously being KO'd.

Another flash of black smoke had Jay appearing and delivering a series of kicks to the chins of one Rogue after the other. The attacks were relentless and nonstop, with such intensity that it only took a single blow to cripple each foe. One by one they began to all fall down thanks to some good ol' sweet chin music.

The enemy began to panic and attempted to regroup, shouting out to each other to form ranks and carrying out various strategies. They surely believed that up against a teleporter they could win by covering all possible entry points.

It wasn't a horrible strategy, but it did little to help them when Jay wasn't the only threat.

"*Ohoho, so this is the dangerous threat... Explosion.*"

Gio's finger snap was like the hammer pulling back on a loaded revolver. Flames would swarm, erupting from nothing but a simple spark. The fires would expand rapidly to cause wild and rampant explosions. They consumed the groups of Rogues leaving only a few gaps to escape.

No matter the enemy or their condition, the flames would eviscerate them.

Luckily for most, the explosions were not entirely lethal. It was as if something was being held back. Some injuries were severe, for sure, but there was a slight mercy in the movements of the fire and flames.

As the blaze continued to spread across the ranks of Rogues, Jay's own movements slowed. He was confused and couldn't help but be stunned. For some reason it felt like he wasn't used to seeing Gio like this. The young man of Hearts didn't quite understand how his former King's fighting style had changed.

Despite that thought he pulled himself together, focused, and continued his own attacks. Warping in and out of the Rogue groups gave him the perfect chance to attack multiple enemies and then back out, allowing flames to wash over the stragglers.

It was only Gio and Jay attacking, but in almost no time at all they were clearing out the Rogues like ants. An onlooker might even think it was somehow not a fair fight... and they were right.

Jay was one of the top physical fighters in all of the Houses, aided by his teleporting ability that gave him unmatched access to an enemy's openings. His *Shadow Walker* ability also allowed him to attack a large number of enemies at the same time. That combat prowess was clearly above his current rank as a Septum.

Gio, being both the Wild Card and former King of Hearts, was naturally a skilled fighter as well. He was even the one who trained Jay. But what truly gave him an edge against even the Rogue militia was his *Wild Card* ability. There was nothing else quite like it in all of New Eden.

To have access to multiple abilities, as well as *The Fiery*, he was quite literally a one-man army.

The battle that seemed so daunting and impossible was turning into more of a *warm-up*. No pun intended.

Sera found herself lashing out a handful of Rogues that lingered around both her and Kat, attempting to escape, but the bulk of the action was left to the boys. Frustrating as it was to pass up a chance at stretching her legs, it was better to get the job done and get the others back to where they belonged – meaning of course, Jay and Kat.

She watched as Gio and Jay brought the large militia down to nothing more than a few scared school boys and girls running swiftly for their mommies.

Within just a few minutes that almighty fighting force they tried to avoid was turned to ash. Metaphorically, of course. Even with the intensity of Gio's flames none of the Rogues *appeared* to be dead. The same could be said for Jay's attacks that seemed to keep their recipients breathing.

Gio and Jay fought with a similar idea in mind since they trained together, to spare an enemy if they could – or rather, to avoid using excessive force. Maybe they both simply realized that needlessly killing the Rogues would cause more problems than it would solve. There was little reason to use a nuke on an ant.

Regardless of the condition of the Rogues, the mission was never really about them.

The mission was to save Jay Willow, assuming he was captured and not a traitor, and that was exactly what they had done.

Given that the event would be bringing New Eden's attention in full, it was time to head home. Mission cleared.

Kat's clothes were covered in filth and partially charred, but she was coming out of the whole ordeal in pretty good shape. She made her way towards Gio and Jay with Sera following beside her, but the atmosphere around them seemed to suddenly grow uneasy.

A serious look fell over both boys as they gave each other a not-so-friendly stare down, seemingly seconds before a duel.

Boys will be boys.

Perhaps Jay had a right to be upset, to be emotional, which his shift in demeanor suggested. He was upset yet relieved, astonished yet calm, and found it hard to control the raging seas inside him.

“So, *Sire, Teacher...* No, none of those... *Giotto – Gio*. You were alive...” Jay's voice appeared calm, but it was a poor façade. He was getting choked up. “You were alive... and *never*—”

“It's good to see you, Jay.” Gio's serious look was long gone as he cracked a smile and a cheerful tone. “Shame that you're still getting roped in by a pretty face, though!” He laughed, smashing through the uneasy atmosphere with a cannon blast.

“That's... *That's* what you have to save after all these years?!” Jay's emotions were overflowing.

He was angry.

He was overjoyed.

“What's wrong? You seem a bit upset, bro.” Gio smirked and stepped towards Jay, going for a hug, but the young man pulled back.

“You!! You were thought dead by everyone this entire time! Yet here you are with some flashy flames and as the wanted criminal *Wild Card?!?*”

Gio's laughter grew even louder to match the emotional outbursts.

“Well, hahaha! I guess you're not wrong there. I am the Wild Card, after all. A dangerous criminal if you listen to that Ol' Diamond Prick Victor Ferris. But, well, I guess you could say news of my death was...”

His tone shifted and his laughter subsided as he reached into his jacket pocket, removing his treasured shades to place them atop his face.

“.. *Greatly exaggerat—*”

Sera's swift fist to Gio's chin nearly sent him to the ground, causing him to stumble.

“Oi, this is no time for your freaking memes! We've got to get a move on!” Sera then, rather frantically, pointed back towards the streets where headlights were appearing in the distance.

Numerous vehicles, expensive black SUVs all nearly identical, were moments away. It seemed a House was rushing to the scene as expected. Just like clockwork.

Gio noticed and once again shifted his tone. This time from comical to restrained. He stood back up straight, lightly massaging his aching jaw.

“Ow. I guess you're not wrong, mosquito. Well, that's it for us.”

Placing his shades back in his jacket, Gio grabbed hold of Sera's hand somewhat suddenly and unexpectedly.

Jay wasn't finished with his raving, stepping towards Gio, but the glowing right hand stopped him in his tracks. Jay didn't seem to notice nor care as the swirling black and white glow passed over his chest.

“Don't think you're just leaving now, Gio! It's been four years! I've thought this entire time you *had* to be out there and now here you ar—”

“Listen, we can talk later. For now, you and Miss Ocho here get to have a gold star.” Gio raised his hand that had stopped the glow and pointed back behind them to the incoming vehicles. “She just saved you and in turn you two just took down this entire Rogue militia by yourselves. Wow, what a team! Great job!”

Jay prepared to protest further, this time as the one reaching out, but he was then witness to a series of shadows rising up between him and both Gio and Sera.

“What?! That's—!!!”

But his voice fell on deaf ears. Gio and Sera were whisked away by the very shadows Jay cultivated as his own. He never expected to see that ability from someone else's perspective. Quite frankly he had no idea how to respond or what to say.

Between everything he just experienced he was more than just a bit flustered. Jay was lost in his own mind.

So much had happened so quickly. His mentor and perhaps best friend was alive. He was saved by the team of a criminal, a sadist, and a bookworm. He even

witnessed a supposed dead man somehow use his Shadow Walker ability to skip out on a confrontation.

And now with no time to recover or let the shocking revelations sink in, he was watching the mobilized Espers of another House coming to a stop around both himself and the bookworm.

“*W-Well...*” Kat's timid voice finally chimed in, prompting Jay to look back.

“.. Well, what?”

“Nice to... m-meet you...”

Kat nervously held out her hand, prompting a heavy sigh from Jay – but also a fellow hand to shake with.

“Right, my names Jay. Jay Willow.”

“.. Mhm! My names Katharine– I mean, Kat. You can call me Kat... Oh! My full name, it's Kat Atwood.”

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Back at Wild Card, Leon Kruger had been long asleep. In fact, based on the drool stains on the couch, he had been asleep since the moment the team left.

Not even the arrival of Gio and Sera by teleportation stirred him awake.

“L-Let go! Geez, pervert!” Sera jerked away from Gio, causing a bit of surprise. “Don't just up and grab me to start jumping around from place to place like you're in some crappy hero movie!”

“Right, right, we'll forget the fact I saved us.”

Clenched fists showed Sera's boiling rage, but instead of lashing out further she turned and headed towards her room.

“I'm taking a shower; I smell like smoke. Make sure he's gone by the time I'm out!”

Her door then slammed in the distance.

“.. You two have a fight?” Leon spoke with such a casual, out of nowhere tone, that Gio nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Damn it Leo!”

The King smirked, standing and stretching. The catnap was over.

“Job's nice and done, yeah? I think I heard a mass of cars flying by not too long ago. That or I had a strange dream about racing. I assume your mission got a little hectic?”

Gio sighed and flopped down on the couch.

“Gee, how'd you guess?” He was a bit snarky. “.. He's alright, though. Mission accomplished. Surprised that the Houses would come out to the slums like that, though. Especially that quickly.” His eyes closed as he let himself start to relax. “Your little Ocho is with him and that House, in case you're wondering.”

Leon nodded and laid a small envelop on the coffee table, one which held his payment.

“I’m sure you kept her safe. I’m hoping it was quite the experience for her.” He made his way to the door. “And don't get too surprised, Gio. The news of a Rogue army gathering? That attracts attention. Add in the fact that the Diamond King is out for your blood and the Houses, particularly Diamonds, will be quick to arrive.”

Gio simply waved his best friend off, not seeming too worried.

Leon smiled and opened the door, taking a single step outward before looking back.

“There's one thing I wanted to ask you, though, Gio... and I suppose it's something I've only just now realized after all this time, so I was a bit worried.”

“Hmm? Spit it out!” Gio slipped his hand under the coffee table, grasping at a half empty metal flask with a wide grin building upon his face.

Leon seemed hesitant. The look on his face had grown a bit more solemn, contrasting with Gio's.

“I was curious... why is it you've been using *The Fiery* so much? In all this time it never clicked for me, but since then all you ever use consistently is that same power. Nothing else, you know?”

.. Silence.

For one moment, then another, not a single word was uttered. In fact, if you didn't know any better you'd have thought the two had quit breathing altogether. The air which had been so casual was heating up. Tensions were rising, but why? Why did something like that warrant such a drastic shift in tone?

The question didn't seem too silly, either. Jay had commented just a few minutes' prior that Gio had shown up with *some flashy flames*.

Despite the tension Gio let a sudden laugh rip through it like he always did. Forced as it may have been, he followed through brilliantly.

“Haha! Leo' ya had me worried there for a bit. *That's all*, huh? Well, the answer is pretty simple—” Gio stood quite quickly, nearly propelling himself into the ceiling with his sudden energy spike. “— what else would there be for good ol' Giotto Jaeger, hm? Besides, fire is a pretty *cool* thing if I do say so myself.”

Leon didn't seem sure what to say in response to something like that. He stood there for a moment, soaking in what Gio said to him, and finally the King could only nod in some form of agreement. Better to let him have the victory for the time being.

“Of course, Gio. Well then, till next time.”

The door closed behind Leon as he left, leaving Gio to stand alone in his living room.

Gio's metal flask had its top popped off in a single motion. The sweet release of the caramel liquid was a blessing in a bottle. That was how he saw it.

His forced laughter and accompanying smile had faded away like sand ticking away in an hourglass.

“.. Why the fuck would you ask me that ...”

9th CARD | The Totally Legitimate Beach Vacation

Seven years ago Giotto Jaeger, Leon Kruger, and Faye Star, each climbed through the ranks of the Houses in record fashion. Gio and Leon managed to snag two freshly vacated positions as Kings, the youngest in the history of the Houses, while Faye joined Gio as his Queen.

Such a dramatic rise had never happened before. There was even some outrage among the Espers across New Eden. How could three teenagers barely old enough to drive rise to the ranks of King and Queen? Why had they not joined a House when their powers first awakened? Who did they think they were, taking the positions from others who had waited a lifetime for such an opportunity?

Questions continued for weeks and the lack of answers never quite satisfied the masses.

Instead of answering them directly the three decided to show their skill by action.

Leon found his chance early on when facing off against an A-Rank Chaotic. A-Rank was of course about the level of a King, creating a situation that could quickly spin out of control. Such a powerful Chaotic was extremely rare, especially near the city.

This beast, however, was even more troublesome than its rank already implied.

The Chaotic had rampaged for days in the outer areas of New Eden by digging underneath structures and causing them to collapse. Sinkholes were popping up all along the city's borders, severely injuring and even killing those caught in the attacks. Unfortunately, since the Chaotic had the ability to dig at high speeds, he was able to evade the Espers by hiding underground outside the city.

It was then that Leon, with members of his new House backing him up, pursued the beast through its own tunnels.

In little to no time at all the Spades members had tracked the Chaotic to its nest.

The beast lashed out as they approached, trying to cave-in the tunnels around them and create their tomb – but Leon didn't let that happen.

His ability, *Leonhardt*, lit up the darkness with a magnificent golden glow. His fists punched away all of the rubble that threatened to bury his team alive, using enough force to turn titanic boulders to dust. His speed, his power, his accuracy – no one had seen such a power or ability before. It was as if his strength surpassed all known limits.

With that same boundless power, Leon fought the Chaotic which had caused so much destruction – and within mere seconds the beast was nothing more than piles of fertilizer.

Golden light tore the A-Rank Chaotic asunder.

None questioned Leon's position after that.

The easy going King, full of warm smiles reflecting his kind heart, became an instant idol to the citizens – both Normals and Espers alike.

Around the same time, Gio and Faye found themselves in a rather sticky situation close to home.

Hordes of Chaotics, resembling all manner of insects, began to swarm from within the *heart* of District Four. The same District near the center of the city that was assigned to the House of Hearts.

Many of the Chaotics took the forms of flyers such as venomous hornets or moth-like creatures. This created mass panic and was an attack that even Espers would have had trouble containing.

So, as Espers charged in to fight the Chaotics, it wasn't long before the horde began to spread out. They weren't going to simply stay in one place and it became obvious that if they weren't stopped then all of New Eden would be engulfed in no time at all.

Luckily the newly appointed King and Queen were on the case.

Chaotics that began to escape towards other Districts were suddenly and violently struck down by swirling fire and shards of ice.

For onlookers it almost felt like these insectoids were hitting an invisible wall. Upon contact with said wall they would either burst into flames or be flash frozen, which led to them plummeting to the ground where they shattered like glass.

The Espers who had tried to contain the horde were unsure where the attacks were coming from. To them it was a battle that was overwhelming, but somehow a hero had risen to strike down the Chaotics which raged.

Flames continued to flare through the sky, streaking in between the Chaotics as glittering clouds of snow consumed the swarms. The blaze burned the insectoids to ash while the shimmering shards of ice froze them from the inside out, exploding them from within in the form of a swirling blizzard.

What was once a dire situation turned around in a flash of fire and ice.

Onlookers were greeted to the appearance of both Gio and Faye, the King and Queen of Hearts, standing back to back in the middle of the battleground. The last of the Chaotics fell just beside them as the flames and ice that filled the streets faded away.

It was the first time that the citizens caught sight of the top two members of Hearts in action and it was a time they would never forget. This was the might of the newly crowned King and Queen.

From then on Giotto Jaeger, Leon Kruger, and Faye Star were never questioned about their abilities.

Leon, King of Spades, became known as *The Golden Lion*. The ultimate fighter armored in golden light.

The duo of Gio and Faye, King and Queen of Hearts, became known as *Blue Crimson* – the ultimate fire and ice combination that no Esper nor Chaotic could ever hope to match. The unbeatable team.

Those days were a time of prosperity for not only their individual Houses but for the entire city. The three did great work across all of New Eden, bridging the gap between the Houses and creating a better daily life for both Normals and Espers.

How unfortunate that those days had long since fallen away to the past.

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“Wonderful! Aren't you glad I suggested a trip to the beach, slacker?” Sera's voice was unnaturally chipper.

A groan was the only response Gio could muster.

The two were laying comfortably underneath a large, multi-colored beach umbrella. Their lounge chairs were secured in the sand beneath them with a remarkable view of the shining sea before them.

Well, what had appeared to be the sea.

Here in the Ninth District was the appropriately named *Paradise Beach*. Pearl-colored sands trailed for what seemed like forever while crystal clear waters washed up and down the coast. Thousands of patrons were here day in and day out, thanks to the round-the-clock perfect weather.

You see, this wasn't an actual beach.

The sand, the sea, even the sky, was all artificial. It was deep within a city and not exactly near the coastline.

Paradise Beach was kept within a superdome, much like a stadium for various sports teams, albeit even larger.

Despite being artificial it was one of the most popular attractions in all of New Eden. Families would venture there for vacations and couples for a romantic getaway. Then of course there were the many who came to watch not the waves, but the beauties who lined the sandy shores.

Men *and* women, of course. Few could resist the sight of bronzed skin, be it male or female. Swimsuit weather was a great time for *all* involved.

Unfortunately for the shade wearer there was little wish to actually be at the beach. He was practically dragged there kicking and screaming.

“You could at least *pretend* to enjoy it, jerkoff.” Sera scoffed, not even bothering to look at him.

Gio shrugged and sipped from a half empty glass of the classic rum and coke mixture he knew and loved. A nice change of pace from whiskey since they were on a *vacation* of sorts.

“.. Not really a place for a *wanted criminal*, you know.”

He wasn't wrong.

Though even with his protests Gio was somewhat relaxed, if only thanks to his cold beverage to lighten his mood. Both he and Sera were clad in their swimsuits, enjoying the protection from the artificial sun that their umbrella provided. Gio wore a pair of black swim trunks and a simple white t-shirt, while Sera sported her own red t-shirt over a one-piece blue and white swimsuit.

Both were dressed somewhat modestly, as if showing they weren't especially fond of sunbathing. Sera in particular seemed to be going out of her way to hide the *assets* Gio was so quick to mock.

Obviously the trip wasn't Gio's idea in the slightest. Sera had bugged him for weeks on end to go to Paradise Beach, but he had turned her down at each and every turn. She wasn't a kid, so surely she could have taken herself if she wanted to go that badly.

Unfortunately, the final nail in the coffin was the day that Sera took and hid every single bottle of Gio's high-dollar whiskey. That wasn't the stuff for everyday drinking, either. We were talking about high class events – *like Tuesdays*.

Rather than fight with Sera or tear his home apart in searching, he found himself actually caving rather easily to his manager and partner.

Shortly thereafter the duo were smack dab in the middle of the sun and sand.

“Oh shut up already, geez. No one is going to suspect you're some criminal if you would stop bringing it up. Just act casual for crying out loud!” Her voice drew the attention of some fellow beach-goers nearby, but she simply laughed in hoping to make it seem like a joke.

“Right, right... Well we're here, so go do whatever it is you do at the beach.”

Sera's glare sought to pierce through Gio's shades and through his skull.

“Why don't you try having a better attitude once in a while?! You make enjoying myself impossible!” She then leapt up from her beach chair, crossing her arms and storming off towards a drink stand.

Poor Gio could only sigh and sip his own beverage. Sera had pushed for this trip for so long, but now that they were here she wasn't even doing anything. She wasn't trying to get a tan or even going for a swim. She didn't even participate in some of the nearby activities like beach volleyball or Frisbee.

What was the point of coming here if she wasn't going to do anything, was all that crossed Gio's mind.

Meanwhile, Sera's adventure to the drink stand had taken a turn.

As she waited in line, hoping to make it to the front and acquire her beloved root beer, nearby whispers began to catch her off guard.

"Pssst, did you hear? They say that Wild Card is actually here at the beach," said one young man to another.

"What? No way! That guy's a wanted criminal. It would be pretty stupid to show up here," responded the second.

"No really, I heard that too!" A third, a young woman, joined in. *"They were saying he caused trouble further up the beach at a bar. Refusing to pay or something while causing a scene about who he was!"*

Sera was so engaged in the whispers that she didn't even notice she was next in line.

"Miss? Excuse me, Miss, what's your order?"

She snapped back to reality and shook her head.

"N-No, it's nothing! Sorry, I have to go." Sera then spun around and started speed walking back to Gio, all the while thinking; *just what the hell is that idiot up to now?!*

It didn't seem to dawn on her that she had been with him practically the whole time. Surely he hadn't caused a commotion in the mere ten or so minutes she had been away.

Up and down Paradise Beach, rumors of the Wild Card causing trouble were beginning to spread like wildfire. No pun intended. The whispers grew louder and spread faster as the seconds ticked by. News of other incidents, including a vandalized parking lot and stolen barbeque, added to the public disturbances.

The talk even reached all the way to Kenny Blume, King of Clubs, along with his daughter Clare and his Queen, Lenna Vermillion.

The three of them were enjoying Paradise Beach for their monthly trip in which Ken always took his daughter to play. Lenna, being the ever loyal Queen, always accompanied them. After all, with Ken acting more like a child than a King, he and his daughter needed someone to chaperone them appropriately.

It was practically a scene right out of a comedy to see the bulging muscles of Ken, flexing back and forth while playing cheerfully in the waves with his small daughter.

"Papa! The castle is in trouble!" Clare was frantically rushing to their small sand castle, poorly put together, that was right in the path of the waves.

"Not on my watch!!" Dramatically, Ken leapt into the air like a graceful swan.

The waves were seconds from smashing into the sand castle and there was no time!!

A loud thump then echoed as Ken's large frame missed its target, crashing into the sand castle, while the supposed destructive waves didn't even reach where the castle once stood.

“Papa, no!!”

Tears began to stream down Clare's face as Ken realized his critical error.

“C-Clare-bear, I... I didn't... No, there's no excuses! I can never again show my face to you... I am sorry, for everything!!”

Both father and daughter were crying hysterically, catching the attention of others all around them.

Lenna could only hang her head in shame.

“.. I'm surrounded by id—” Her voice froze as the sprinting Sera came into view. “—*Idols!!*” Lenna's cold demeanor was gone as quickly as the sand castle crumbled.

She leapt into the air, catching Sera off guard as the two went tumbling to the sand.

“W-What are you doing, lady?!” Sera was about to lash out with fists until she realized it was the Queen of Clubs. “You!? Get off me!” Even after realizing it was Lenna she almost resorted to fisticuffs.

Sera struggled to get free from Lenna, who for some reason found herself obsessed with Sera's own petite frame. It was a side of Lenna that only Clare and Sera seemed to draw out from her. The stoic, monotonous Queen, would quickly turn into a childlike entity seemingly experiencing her first love.

“Oh, sweet, sweet Sera... Fear not, for I am here!”

“Oi! Everyone in your damn House is insane!!”

Sera finally pushed Lenna away and stumbled forward, breathing heavily as the Clubs members looked at her with more serious tones. The tonal shift seemed to hiccup as part of a sandy castle was still protruding from Ken's forehead.

“.. Sera? What's got you so frantic?” Ken's attitude certainly didn't match his situation, where he seemed incapable of noticing how silly he looked.

Clare playfully tried to knock away the part of castle still stuck to him.

“It's nothing! Nothing that some members of a House need to concern themselves wit—”

“Hey, the Wild Card is fighting some kids up the beach! Let's go check it out!”

Nearby patrons caught the ears of Sera and company.

Apparently a crowd was forming further up the beach where a fight had broken out – one that involved the Wild Card.

“What is that idiot doing now?!” Sera began to sprint, but a large hand was placed on her shoulder.

“We'll be going with you.” Ken's deep voice and serious tone was almost comforting.

Again, the tone didn't quite match his situation, as pieces of what was once a sand castle now clung to his chest like an enlarged sand nipple.

At least his head was clean, now.

The King of Clubs gathered his jacket, and now he and his Queen were on the move alongside Sera and his own daughter.

If Gio had truly began to rampage, then there was no question that he needed to be stopped.

But, did Sera still really think Gio could have gotten himself into that much trouble so quickly? Sure, this was the same guy who drunkenly tried to fight a *vacuum cleaner* once, but there was at least some restraint in public... right?

While the crowds gathered just a stone's throw away from his umbrella, Gio was contempt continuing to sip his beverage. He didn't seem bothered by the nearby whispers of the so-called *Wild Card*, nor did he care about the commotion. All that seemed to pass his mind was the wish for Sera to have her fun and for them to be headed back home.

The beach wasn't a bad trip, far from it, but Gio wasn't really in the mood to go out and have a play day. Besides, he'd much rather experience the real ocean and real beach rather than this fully artificial substitute.

“*Gio!!*”

A voice that was perhaps the last Gio expected to hear made him perk up.

The crowd had grown so large that the backs of the onlookers had nearly engulfed his lounge chair – and just ahead of him, clad in a yellow t-shirt and white swim trunks, was his best friend Leon.

“Huh? What's he...”

“Gio!” Leon was shouting into the crowd, surely trying to get his attention.

He hadn't noticed Gio wasn't in the crowd, but was lounging just beside him.

It seemed he had believed the rumors of the Wild Card were indeed about Gio.

“...” Gio face palmed with a heavy sigh accompanying the smack. “Leo! Why don't you turn about seventy degrees to your left?”

It took a moment to register for Leon, but he soon stopped trying to force his way into the crowd and looked to the side to see his friend casually sipping his drink.

Leon then rushed him, grabbing him by the shoulder, with a rare look of exasperation washing over him.

“What could you be thinking, Gio?! All this time you've been working to stay hid—” His emotional outburst began to trail off as the sound of Gio slurping the remnants of his drink intensified. “.. been working to stay... hidden... *what?*”

Leon did a double take and let go of Gio slowly. He gave a slow turn towards the crowd gathered around the so-called 'Wild Card.'

“Gio... what is... going on?”

The shade wearer simply shrugged and set down his now empty drink.

“Beats me, Leo. What I do know is this crowd is going to make it impossible to get a refill.”

“How are you so casual about this? You realize someone is causing trouble under the guise of the Wild Card, right?” Leon was a bit floored by Gio's lackluster response. In turn, Gio was a bit surprised by his friend's reaction to it all.

“It's not like it's actually me, right? Besides, maybe people thinking they're the Wild Card will work out in my favor, ohoho.” Gio smirked, but his enjoyment faded when he saw the serious look emerge from Leon.

Perhaps letting things go on as they were wasn't the best idea after all. Leave it to Leon to get Gio thinking all responsibly.

Gio swung his legs over his lounge chair and jumped to his feet, nearly head butting his umbrella. He then stretched a bit and stepped free of the shade, catching sight of a poorly hidden Kat Atwood back behind another drink stand further up the coast.

It seemed Leon's Ocho, who was oddly infatuated with him, had decided to follow him to the beach.

“.. Hey, Leo, you know that girl is following you, right?”

“What?”

Leon turned, but the street clothes clad Kat had ducked back into hiding.

“Who?”

“.. You never did understand women.” Gio shook his head and decided to put his attention back to the large crowd.

“Look at that guy go! He's an Esper, no doubt! Those kids are toast!”

“The rumors were true!?! Whoa!”

The gathering crowd continued to whisper amongst themselves about the sights of the so-called Wild Card. Up and down the beach he had caused problems. From vandalism to thievery and now, assault.

While there was a part of Gio who would have loved for this imposter to take the fall for him, that would probably not be the best. In addition, it wouldn't do anyone any good if the culprit was free to continue rampaging about.

So, with Gio forcefully making room through the crowd, he and Leon made a beeline right for the center of the commotion. They would put an end to this charade once and for all.

“Hey, jerkoff! Where the hell are you?! I'm going to tear you limb from fucking limb!!”

Gio's progress was stilted at the sound of that familiar feminine screech.

Sera and the members from Clubs had made their way towards the center of the circle from the opposite side. The timing was so perfect, in fact, that the two parties spotted each other the moment they made it to their destination.

“L-Leon?!” Ken's large frame nearly collapsed with his surprise. “Don't tell me you've... you've been conspiring with Gio this whole time?! Another King has fallen?!”

Ken was beyond melodramatic as he fell to his knees, tears flowing like twin waterfalls to the pearly sand below.

“Papa, you can't cry!”

Clare tried her best to comfort her hunched over father, but his tears became contagious. The two Blume's were left to hold each other and let their outbursts continue.

“W-Wait, Sir Kenny—” Leon didn't get a chance to respond before Sera was rushing both him and Gio.

“Watch it, mosquito!” Gio rushed into the open area to stop Sera from doing anything crazy, but as he ran in he nearly trampled a kid who just happen to get in his way.

Instead of running him over, both Gio and the child, a boy surely not a day over twelve, spun wildly into the sand.

Sera froze and her blue eyes seemed to shift to a red glow which showed her unrivaled rage.

“It was true?! You were beating up children?! You drunken jackass, worthless piece of camel shi—”

She was pulled back by Lenna before she could continue and a moment later the sand which she had been standing on turned to glass.

A surge of hot air had appeared right where she had been standing. One which may not have critically wounded her but it would have no doubt left her a brutal burn.

“*You dare to cross my path?!*” It was a high pitched yelp, cracking as it spoke.

Sera looked back, assured that it was Gio who just tried to attack her, but the uneven voice was from the boy who had just been knocked down.

Closer examination showed that the boy was wearing an outfit not unlike Gio's typical attire, with a few subtle differences. Black shorts instead of long pants, a black t-shirt with a lone white stripe instead of a jacket, and atop his face the all-important black sunglasses mixing with long blonde – not brown – hair.

Gio jumped back up to his feet, as did the child he tumbled with.

“*I am the hero of the night, on which this city both deserves and needs altogether! They call me the almighty Wild Car—*” The kids totally epic monologue ended as the much larger Gio picked him up by the shirt collar and

lifted him up to eye level. “H-Hey, what are you doing mister?! You better set me down before you face the wrath of my unstoppable flames of *justice!*”

A pale glow radiated from the kid's left hand, but no mark appeared within the glow.

There was no doubt this boy was an Esper – but he had no House.

Gio allowed the kid to carry on, despite the apparent power he had which turned that sand to glass, but as the air became super-heated around him there was no sign of the attack hitting its mark.

“Huh?! Come on, stupid fire, *work!*”

The kid began to struggle, trying again and again to burn Gio, but the more he tried the more worn out he became.

An average onlooker wouldn't have noticed, but the attack the kid tried to use was being countered by Gio's own *Fiery* ability.

The crowds which had so quickly gathered to witness the Wild Card in action began to dwindle. The sound of laughter, of distant chuckles, seemed to echo all around the young boy as Gio held him in the air like it was no big deal. The so-called Wild Card was just a snot-nosed brat throwing a temper tantrum.

After just a few minutes the only ones that remained were the sobbing father and daughter from Clubs, the stone cold Queen Lenna, Leon, and Sera. Oh, and of course there was Gio and the kid.

“Let me– *Let me GO!!*” The boy could shout with everything he had but his body had given up.

Using his ability so frantically to try and earn his freedom from Gio had drained him dry.

“.. Where's your mom and dad, kid?” Gio spoke softly, almost as if he was trying to comfort the child, but nearby Sera seemed unconvinced.

At the mention of a mother and father, the kid stopped struggling altogether. His head was hanging low.

Not even Sera felt like snapping at that point. She, like all those present, understood a reaction like that.

The boy was clearly on his own.

“Well then. How about your name?”

Gio finally set him down and kneeled down himself, getting on eye level with the kid. This time on the child's own turf.

The boy was hesitant to do anything or say anything else, but when he looked up he realized Gio had removed his own shades. For a moment he almost felt like he was looking into a mirror instead of staring at the adult who finally caught and scolded him.

“.. *Kai.*”

The boy's, or rather Kai's, voice had grown quieter than a whisper. Even so Gio and the others caught it.

“Kai, huh? Not a bad name if I do say so myself. So then, Kai, how come you're causing all this trouble? Saying you're the Wild Card? Not to mention, using your ability like that.”

Gio's left hand rested in the sand and silently motioned to Leon behind him. It was to get him to come on over.

“.. But, *the Wild Card is a hero!* But that *smelly Diamond* guy, he, he says that the Wild Card is evil!!” Kai was obviously referencing Victor Ferris and Gio couldn't help but snicker.

“Hah! I can't disagree with you there. He sure is one smelly guy, ya know? But even so. Doesn't mean you can go causing trouble in his District.”

Leon at last stepped beside Gio.

“Listen, Kai... This guy here, you know him, yeah?” Gio pointed to Leon, the two smiling in hopes of comforting the child.

It took a moment but the boy's solemn expression began to change to a brighter one.

“Y-You're the, the, *Golden Lion!!* King of Spades!!”

He was suddenly full of energy, spinning back around to look at Lenna and Kenny – and he realized they were the Queen and King of Clubs.

In all the trouble he caused, Kai had somehow found himself in the presence of two Kings.

Leon reached down to shake Kai's hand. Gio and Leon then shared a momentary glance and accompanying nod.

“Say, Kai...” Gio once again had the boy's full attention. “How's about you put that talent of yours to a better use? This fellow right here, Leon Kruger, you know he's a King – and I'm sure he and even ol' Kenny over there would be happy to have you join their House.”

Kai's excitement exploded all at once as he began running wildly in a circle, arms trailing behind him as his own smile fueled his legs to reach greater speeds.

“*A House! A House! I can join a House!!*”

Gio's own smile seemed to grow just as much as Kai's, which caught the eye of Sera.

She had been so ready to tear Gio limb from limb just a few minutes ago. He had been stubborn for weeks about the beach trip and once they were there he was impossible to enjoy it with... but even so, seeing this side of Gio every once in a while made a trip like this worth it.

It was at that moment she couldn't help but have her own smile.

Kai then slammed on his brakes and darted back to his counterpart.

“Say, mister, what's your name? What House are you in?”

The question took everyone aback just a little, but Gio patted Kai on the head and just laughed.

“I don't have a House, champ. But you can call me Gio. It's nice to meet you.”

« — »

Their laughter was something to be jealous of, but not everyone looking on from afar would agree with the use of *jealousy*. For Victor Ferris and Rose Jalice that word would be more like *disgust*.

“Sire— *I mean...* father...” Rose spoke silently, nervously.

The two were hidden, watching the group from the inside of a darkened control room. They had been monitoring Gio and company for quite some time, or so it seemed, thanks to the multitude of monitors lining the wall frozen on various angles of Gio's recent ventures.

Video and images of Gio and Sera the day Victor fought with them, of when they infiltrated the underground arena, from various encounters with Chaotics and even of their rescue involving Jay Willow – they were all there. Big brother had been keeping a watchful eye on them.

Victor had an obsession with Giotto Jaeger, with the Wild Card, and with completely and utterly destroying him. That kind of unnatural hatred was hard to understand. The reasoning behind it seemed to stem from his love of New Eden and his desire to crush any threat – which Gio was in his eyes – no matter the cost.

“Dear, sweet Rose. Know that the time of the beast, of the parasite that continues to infect my fair city, will soon come to an end.”

Victor turned from watching the scene at the beach, shutting off the larger monitor. He remained seated behind a large wooden desk in his black leather chair.

“Yes, father, I understand. As your fellow King I shall cleanse New Eden of his filth.”

Rose eagerly awaited recognition from her adoptive father, though it seemed this was a time she would be left wanting. You would think her becoming King meant something. It seemed that not even her position could draw the doting eye of her father. He was a different man since he became fixated on Gio four years ago.

“The time has finally come. We have the means, now. It's time to stop letting that disease spread further. Let these coming nights be the last that the Wild Card finds salvation in his dreams.”

Victor's typically grainy voice seemed to be full of electricity.

This was, after all, what he had waited for.

“What's the plan then, father?”

Victor looked back to her, crossing his hands and resting his face against them.

“That’s being handled by our very *special* ally in this fight for our city’s livelihood. Starting tomorrow, I shall call forth the first emergency Roundtable in nearly four years. There, with this evidence to back it, I shall convince the Aces to finally let us act.”

Victor then leaned back slightly, slamming his gloved fist into the table. Cracks formed along table, nearly giving way.

“.. Leon, Kenneth, they will no longer be able to protect him.” Victor’s eyes pierced the darkness, then diverted towards Rose. “In just a few short days Giotto Jaeger's world will crumble to pieces and nothing, no one, will be there to put him together again... *Not this time.*”

10th CARD | The Roundtable

Meetings that involved high ranking Espers from the Houses were a somewhat common occurrence in New Eden, and they were often referred to as *The Roundtable*.

It made sense considering that the ones in charge of managing and maintaining the city fell to the hands of the Houses, calling for meetings to discuss various issues. Most times you would see the Jacks of the four Houses or perhaps even the Queens, accompanied by various Numbers, attending a monthly or bi-monthly Roundtable. Sometimes there might not even be a Jack or Queen present, especially when a Number from a House may be well-versed in handling any given situation themselves.

The Roundtable would cover a wide range of topics – from economic trends to city infrastructure, public events planning to product shipping orders, and of course Chaotic reports and Esper news.

Of course there were also the rare occasions where a King would join.

It wasn't normal, outside of yearly King-only meetings, but they would attend Roundtables if there was a pressing matter that required their attention. Most of the time this would be a single King, focusing on their own coverage area. Other times the matter may be a general happening or even a circumstance beyond the city limits.

An even rarer sight would be multiple Kings attending a Roundtable.

If such a meeting were called it would mean that the Numbers tagging along would remain at their headquarters. Even Queens and Jacks would most likely stay behind.

A King-only meeting took place only once a year. Any other time was mostly during emergencies and large scale disasters. To gather in one place meant a dire situation had emerged. They were, after all, the four who *governed* absolutely in New Eden. The four strongest beings in the entire city.

Or so they appeared.

Above the Kings were those who *ruled* absolutely; *The Aces*.

Truthfully there weren't many in the public who took a look at the governing structure and noticed Aces. They were, for the most part, completely concealed from the outside world. Not even the Kings themselves could meet with the Aces regularly.

Such a set up was strange to say the least, but at this point in New Eden's history there wasn't a reason to question it.

A little over a century ago the Aces were the ones who founded the city in its current form and established the Houses, including choosing the Kings who in turn chose the members of their House.

Yes, that meant the Aces were as old as the city itself and beyond. Such was the power they possessed. The ultimate power of immortality, or at the very least, something very close to it.

The Aces locked themselves away in what became *Central* – the tallest building in the city, right at the center – where no citizens were allowed to normally venture. The reasoning behind such a move seemed to be a way for the creators of the city to watch over it while remaining on the outside of most situations. At the very least that was what others in the past had believed.

Central itself was a fortress at all times, even when Kings were summoned there. Private security forces in the form of automated systems barred entry. Individuals who were specifically chosen to be guards to Central were posted at various points at all times. These individuals, all Espers, once belonged to Houses before being chosen as Central guards.

The security was top notch, but it was almost a pointless stationing of people. These were the *Aces*, right?

Aces created the Houses and discovered the power of the Espers. They were above the Kings – the same individuals with enough firepower to obliterate the entire city.

With the Kings being that strong, didn't the ones standing over them have to be practically gods?

Practically might be the wrong choice of words, though. The Aces were well over a hundred years old and still they controlled the flow of power to the Houses. There was little doubt that they had to be gods in some form or another. Their near immortality, the knowledge that they essentially brought forth the power of the Espers, it all added up to being something akin to a god.

So, if not only the Kings but the Aces as well were to hold a Roundtable, just how serious would things have to be? How dire a situation to have all of these unstoppable forces under the same roof?

The only other time in recent memory that such a meeting took place was four years ago – when Giotto Jaeger, a King, Fell from Grace.

« — »

“Kruger! As a known friend to the Rogue known as Wild Card, surely you won't let your personal feelings get in the way now. Correct?” The fierce, high and mighty tone was no doubt Victor's.

Just across the sleek gray table, which just so happened to be *circular*, sat the King of Spades. To his left was the King of Clubs, Kenny, and to his right the King of Hearts, Rose. All four were in official attire, sporting their uniforms and House colors proudly. It was unfortunate that they were gathered here for such a sour discussion.

“Answer me, Spades King!”

“Hey, hey – Let's not get so hot headed over this, Victor.” Kenny wanted to try and stop things getting out of hand, but that was easier said than done.

“.. My duty lies with the city and its citizens, yes.” The Golden Lion's response was calm, but there was a serious lack of emotion in those words.

It was obvious that things reaching this point were putting a strain on Leon, but he had to stay true to his role as King. At least he had to try.

A rather smug, satisfied look washed over Victor as he leaned back in his own chair.

“Then I can expect your full cooperation in apprehending him immedia—”

Kenny wasn't liking where this was going and made his voice heard.

“You can't be serious, right Victor? Say what you want, but you and all of us here know that Gio is far from a problem. He's out there protecting the city, same as any of us.”

“Protecting? Ha! Haha!” The Diamond King slammed his fist onto the table, causing a minor spark of electricity to rise up from the impact. “Do you dare forget the destruction that Rogue causes on a regular basis? How about the multitude of laws broken by him and his partner in crime? That *Sera Noel*, whom seems just as suspicious.”

Another spark from his clenched fist caused Leon's own eyes to narrow. Leon had a feeling what was coming next, and the truth was that hearing it may turn this discussion into more of a brawl.

“.. And of course, Kruger, I'm sure you remember what happened four years ago. When that Rogue killed—”

“*Enough!*” Leon leapt to his feet, chair flailing back behind him.

Victor was taken aback for an instant, but he stood his ground.

“These are the facts, Kruger. He's a rabid dog that should have been put down when he was discovered to still be alive years ago. However, *you and Blume* are far too soft and sentimental.”

He looked to his daughter – no – to his fellow King; Rose.

“Things are not as they were when we had this discussion so long ago. Now, you no longer hold a majority. With the Hearts King and myself, we stand divided at two for and two against the apprehension and *execution* of Giotto Jaeger.”

Rose remained silent. She barely even moved.

Kenny felt like a broken record, trying to speak reason, but they were all getting a temper. Emotions were high. He tried again.

“You still aren't listening. Gio isn't a bad guy, Victor. He's helping the city. What happened back then, we can't even be sure that was a Fall – he *survived*. Not only that, he *gained* a new power – one that we've never seen before.” Kenny's attempted defense of Gio didn't seem to faze Victor in the slightest.

“Correct you are, Blume. He gained a new ability, the likes of which we haven't seen and cannot explain, and you expect us to accept that he gained this by being a *victim*? He caused that event and the death of hundreds, including his House's Queen and Jack, all for pow—”

A golden flicker of light burst past Victor and in turn a bolt of lightning zipped across and back at Leon, missing ever so slightly. Kenny and Rose were to their feet, the former of which was still hoping to settle things peacefully.

“Attacking a fellow King, Krug—”

“—You can say a lot of things, Victor, but do not sully the names of the dead. Especially of friends... as for Gio's power, it's...”

“Not something you can explain, right, Kruger? You assume that he has done nothing wrong because he is your childhood friend. Your judgment is clouded. You have little right to dawn your Mark as a King of New Eden.”

Leon's frustration and emotions were breaking through his typically calm demeanor. Sadly, Leon couldn't dispute Victor's words. Not entirely. He trusted Gio as a brother, but there was an obvious oversight from the event four years ago. What caused the so-called Fall from Grace? Why did Gio acquire a new ability afterwards? He knew that Gio wondered the same things but that didn't mean he was totally ignorant of the cause.

Victor felt the answer was obvious as he stepped back from the table and his fellow Kings.

“I accurately predicted this Roundtable devolving into what we see before us. So, as the longest reigning King of New Eden, I have requested the presence of our *seniors*.”

All three Kings looked on as Victor turned to the side, revealing a flickering screen emerging from the darkness behind him. The screen grew larger, revealing itself to actually be multiple screens. One by one they came to life with static sounds – and in a sudden rush, the wall of white noise behind Victor turned to an image of the four House symbols.

Diamonds, Hearts, Clubs, and Spades.

The sound of static faded to silence.

Victor turned to face the screens, crossing his arm in front of his chest and bowing ever so slightly. Rose followed suit from where she stood, and while they

both hesitated and looked to each other with worry, Kenny and Leon joined in a bow.

“As Diamonds King, I thank you for taking the time to join us – *Lord Aces*.”

Those words were like needles prying into the spines of Ken and Leon. If Victor called the Aces to join the Roundtable, then that meant they were about to be faced with bad news concerning Gio. They both saw little reason other than bad news that the Aces would show up.

SPEAK. SPEAK NOW.

Words appeared on the screen, showing the response of the Aces. For quite some time, most likely due to their already lengthy lifespans, the Aces themselves had refused physical contact. Hence the elaborate, yet simplified, way of communication. Their voices were long since forgotten.

Even with the theatrics, all of the Kings respected even just an image and text on a screen. The Aces were the source of the Houses power, and in a way, the power of the Espers.

Victor was quick to take the floor once more.

“Certainly. As you have seen and heard, the Rogue known as Wild Card – Giotto 'Gio' Jaeger – has finally crossed lines that can never be uncrossed. He confronted and assaulted myself and other Diamonds Espers. In addition, he interfered with the Hearts King's capture of another fugitiv—”

“—That's not true at all, Lord Aces!”

Leon quickly stepped around the table and past Kenny, running to stand opposite Victor in front of the screens.

“Gio was not the instigator of any conflict with Diamonds or Hearts. It was in fact the King himself who drew Diamonds into battle with Gio, and the Hearts King was operating on her own without any notice to even her own House.”

While remaining quiet, almost obsolete, Rose seemed to finally let a sliver of her own feelings out.

“How dare you, Leon!” She stepped towards him, only to be frozen in place by more words before them all.

THE FORMER KING. GIOTTO JAEGER, WILD CARD. THREAT LEVEL ASSESSMENT?

Leon started to speak, but Victor cut him off. The latter seemed like he was reading from a script with how quickly he dished out his anti-Gio speeches.

“There is no doubt, Lord Aces, that Wild Card is a bigger threat than any Chaotic or Rogue to ever plague this city. He must be put down immediate—”

“Listen, listen! Just recently, Gio saved countless at Clover – he even defeated a militia of Rogues gathering illegally, with the intent to take down this very tower, all the while saving an Esper who was from the Houses.” Leon pleaded.

He wasn’t wrong in terms of Gio’s good deeds, but they weren’t going to be enough.

“Really, Kruger? How interesting. Surveillance already informed me as a such, but if you yourself knew of his involvement with that militia you must have led him to it, no? To his old pupil, Jay Willow? The official reports actually stating that child and your Ocho beat back that group, hah!”

Victor mocked, confident, but Leon wasn’t one to simply lie down.

“Lord Aces, I’m sure you don’t need us to show you. I’m sure you’ve seen the good that Gio has done, correct? There has to be—”

CAPTURE. DETAIN AND QUESTION. SEAL HIS POWERS BY ANY MEANS. WE MUST LEARN ALL WE CAN.

“C-Capture?!” Victor's surprise caught the others off guard. His reasoning for surprise, though... “You cannot be serious, Lord Aces. We must eliminate him before he has the opportunity to cause more damag—”

THESE ARE YOUR ORDERS.

Leon shook his head, pleading once more.

“Please! You have to reconsider! Let us prove to you that he is not a threat – he is doing good work for this city and its citizens!”

Both Leon and Victor were exasperated, pleading with a serious of computer screens for completely different reasons, but they were met with the same response – silence and the sudden darkness as the screens cut off.

Despite their disappointment, both sides did have something positive to pull away.

Victor finally had the green light to move on Gio, while Leon had stayed the execution for the time being.

“What’s done is done, then.” Victor turned back to the other Kings, Rose making her way to stand by his side. “There’s nothing more that you two can do now. I’ll be sending the full might of New Eden to apprehend that villain.”

Leon’s hazel glare seemed one given right before all-out war.

“.. You say that, but you still have to bring him in alive. You can’t try to execute him—”

“Can’t I?”

Ken and Leon's faces were left contorted, surprised, at such a brazen comment by a loyalist like Victor.

"You mean to defy the Aces?!"

"Oh my, what a foolish question, Kruger. Unlike you and your compatriots I would never dream of such things. That being said, the apprehension of a dangerous criminal can always get... *messy*. The situation may get out of hand. I will use whatever force I must to subdue him."

Victor turned to leave, Rose following suit, but another flash of golden light soon went flying past him and slamming harmlessly into the field of monitors.

".. Yes, Kruger?"

"You can scheme all you feel you have to, Victor... Just know that it's not something we, or Gio, will have to do. You'll learn soon enough that your blind rage isn't justified!"

Victor could only manage a chuckle, slipping himself and Rose into the opening doors of the room's lone elevator. They stepped through, looking back at the Kings as the double doors closed.

Kenny and Leon were left looking back to each other.

"What now, Kenny? We have our orders."

Ken seemed beside himself, but he focused back and breathed out his hesitation.

"Now, I'd say you have somewhere to be. Until that Old Man's got his force on the move, you have some time to have a final chit-chat with someone."

Leon nodded slowly, looking back to where Victor had been standing seconds prior.

"So it's really happening... Victor was right. We can't protect him anymore, but maybe..."

The pair shared a brief nod and then they headed for the elevator as well. The cogs of fate were turning en masse.

"If things become clouded, Leon, what will you do?"

The Spades King stared at the elevator before him, eyes never seeming to trail away. It was as if he was looking past the building's stone, metal, and out to the city outside and even beyond. He was focused and appearing to come to a decision that he had thought long and hard about for some time.

".. I'll do what I have to." The elevator doors then slid open once more, and Leon stepped forth.

"What you have to?" Kenny followed his lead, the two standing comfortably in the lift as it closed.

"Yes. I won't abandon my friend. I can't say anything for certain, but... if it calls for it, ***I will act.***"

11th CARD | Wanted

A *Fall from Grace* wasn't a common occurrence. Far from it. When such an event happened it brought with it headlines of the fall and of the destructive aftermath. An Esper's light was extinguished.

No one had ever survived a Fall from Grace. It was something which caused the Esper in question to lose control of their power in a brilliant explosion of pure, unchecked energy... and if the Esper somehow 'survived' they would find themselves becoming a Chaotic. So yes, maybe by some standard Espers *had* survived in the past – but becoming a monster was not exactly surviving.

They would then be cut down by their former peers.

That was the routine of a fall since the beginning of the Espers, since New Eden was founded.

It remained as such until Giotto Jaeger's Fall from Grace – one which was still shrouded in mystery.

Gio was the first King to *ever* fall. After all, a King's power was absolute. That meant their control was just as unyielding. No one would ever predict that a King could lose control.

Perhaps the fear of a King being seen as lesser was why the truth of the fall was covered up. Gio had been declared dead at the time, but the Aces, the Kings, and those closest to them knew the truth.

He had survived his Fall From Grace and become something more – he had become the *Wild Card*.

He never expected it, either. A day like any other, filled with the normal routines of a King. Alongside Faye, his wife, Gio approached everything with the belief he would do the same thing tomorrow.

Not even the momentary thought that he would never see his wife's face again, or that his life would never be the same again, ever crossed his mind.

Perhaps it was him being too comfortable.

Perhaps he became careless.

But that wasn't quite right. Gio could be cocky, maybe even arrogant at times, but his lack of fear for tomorrow was thanks to those closest to him. He had absolute trust in Faye, in Leon, in the members of his House and every Esper whom he crossed paths with. That trust gave him the security that his halcyon days were far from over.

It just so happened that fate teetered a little differently. Those days were never going to continue.

The fall was something beyond his control. A thousand different decisions in a hundred different ways would have all lead to the same conclusion. It was the day that Gio would fall and that those closest to him, along with countless others, would see their lives extinguished.

It was then, like a star coming to the end of its life, that the fires burned brightest.

The suffocating smoke was still memorable. The sight of blood soaked streets beneath the rubble that were once buildings was still vivid. Screams in the distance still rang like a never ending chorus of lost souls.

Gio's own body was heavy. It felt like a two-ton brick lay atop him and well, that wasn't far off. Collapsed metal and concrete had buried many, himself included, but his body had somehow come out intact. His own blood flowed like a crimson river, but the loss was minimal compared to others. Bones were broken and the body was bruised, but more than that, he was still alive.

Struggling to get free seemed silly, but he grasped at anything he could to get a grip on. His body was working on instinct, trying to survive, despite the fact his mind had yet to catch up.

Where am I...? What Happened...? Thoughts raced through his mind at a snail's pace, but even so his body kept moving.

He knew deep down that whatever happened did so quickly. A flash was all that he seemed able to remember, but in that flash came the annihilation of everything and everyone. Where he lay no longer resembled a city block. It didn't even resemble a trash heap.

Everything was blended together in a cold gray that not even the burning fires could warm.

The flickering lights of the fire then seemed to spark something in Gio. A realization. His mind was catching up.

What was I doing here...? Was I with someone...? Where... where... where is—
!!!

His body fought harder. His hands that struggled to reach anything took hold of the air and slowly, surely, found strength that had moments ago been lost. He tried to push against the ground and lift himself up, to prop up his body, but as he moved he could feel the strain on his own body.

He could feel the sensation of his forearm bending, cracking, and snapping. His bones were grinding together and against his own skin. Much more and surely a bone or two would rip through flesh.

His body hit the ground but he didn't stop. Gio's mind was entering a dull state. He was there at the scene and yet far away, sinking to the bottom of a black sea. Sounds faded away, sensations slowly returning were lost.

Let me out!! Let me out!! This isn't right, this isn't normal!! I can't see her... I can't hear her; I can't feel her!!

The fires intensified and burned all around him, giving no quarter.

But despite the pain, his broken body, and the suppressive force of the flames, he continued to claw himself free. He would fight against the current that tried to pull him under, to push him back, and instead he tried to latch on to his pain like a lifeline. It proved he was still alive, still struggling.

No matter how improbable it had seemed, he pulled himself free of the tomb that had formed around him.

His body rolled away as the crumbled building collapsed further, giving way entirely where it once rested atop his spine. Luckily he was spared.

It was getting harder to breath, perhaps because of the smoke or perhaps because of the ribs piercing into his lung. Gio tried to cry out to the world around him but his voice wouldn't come. He was alone. Any who once stood near were gone from this world.

Why... is this a dream— a nightmare?! Wake me up... please, wake me up!! I don't want to feel this anymore!

His body began fighting once more. His pain continued to fuel him, seemingly due to shock, or perhaps he was simply dull to the piercing sensation. He tried to sit up and look around him, to find a way to freedom... but his body no longer cooperated. Not even his survival instinct could push his broken bones any further.

He collapsed back against the ground.

Like the others, he would die amidst the golden glow of the flames.

.. Faye, where... are you... Help me...

The light began to fade and Gio's eyes grew heavy. The fight was over.

« — »

Gio's body nearly went flying out of bed. White sheets were tossed aside and into the darkness of his messy room, joining all sorts of clutter scattered across the hardwood floor. It was so dark that his eyes took a moment to adjust. He was soaked in his own sweat from head to toe, but he didn't bother trying to get up further.

His head rested in the palms of his hands.

That dream... why that dream, almost every time...

“You had another nightmare?”

Gio's eyes narrowed towards the sound of a voice, his left hand flying upwards as if he was about to attack, but he calmed down when he realized the source. It was Leon, sitting calmly in an old rocking chair in the corner of the room.

“.. It's just you, Leo'... If you don't mind, I'd like to not have someone staring at me creepily while I snooze.”

Leon managed a smile, but it was obviously uncomfortable for him. He knew the nightmares that haunted Gio. It wasn't just a dream, either, but a memory of past events. It was unfortunate that he couldn't seem to help his friend with this personal trial. All he could do was reach out his hand.

“One of these days, Giotto, you're going to have to move past what happened. You know I'm always here to—”

The look upon Gio's face caused Leon to freeze up. Even in the darkness, Leon's already adjusted eyes could see the look of rage building. He decided to let it go for now.

“.. Well, Gio, you should know I didn't come to watch you sleep,” he spoke as he stood, walking calmly over to his best friend. “They've made their move. King Victor Ferris and his daughter, King Rose Jalice.”

A confused gaze was all the response Leon would get.

“A Roundtable was held. One with the Aces... what I mean to say is they've made Wild Card's identity known. Former King of Hearts, Giotto Jaeger, a Rogue that has caused wanton destruction and death. The most wanted man in New Eden finally has a face after four years – and *they are coming*.”

It still didn't seem to register, partially due to him just waking up and partly due to his current state. Though, Leon's continued gaze pulled him out of his drowsiness. Gio was realizing that things had suddenly taken a turn he honestly wasn't prepared for. He knew the day would come eventually, but he was naïve.

Gio noticed a look upon his friend's face, like there was something more.

“.. Leon, what else have they—”

But those words were interrupted by the sudden bedroom door swinging open, slamming against the adjacent wall and back, and bringing with it enough light to drown out the darkness.

“What the hell is this?! My face– *MY* face is all over the news! My name, they have my name, Gio!!” Sera was exasperated, clad in her own night apparel of an oversized t-shirt and gym shorts.

There was a slight pause as the three stared at each other, perhaps as much as a minute, but the silence was broken with little regard for the heavy cloud hanging over them.

“.. Aren't those my clothes—”

Gio's voice was struck down with authority in the form of a flying pink hair dryer, crashing into his face and sending him flailing off the other side of the bed.

“What is going on – and *YOU!*” Sera's anger shifted to Leon as she fearlessly grabbed the King by the collar and lifted him up off the ground. “How did this happen?!”

It was a moment of weakness for Leon. He felt that had he done things differently or been more aware, he could have stopped things from getting this far. Perhaps he could have persuaded Victor to put aside his vendetta before it went too far.

What could he say? There weren't any words that he could think of. He felt horrible and wanted to make things better, but it seemed this was one time that the Golden Lion would come up short.

“.. Just let him go, Sera.”

Gio was back on his feet and decided to finally flip the light switch by his bed. Perhaps a visual representation of his own mind finally coming to.

“Let him go? Do you understand what's—”

“I understand fine. It's not his fault. He's done nothing but help.”

Gio sounded a bit defeated, but Sera followed through and let the King go.

With his freedom, Leon stepped back towards the bed and looked across to Gio. He was surprised to see him looking so very... gloomy.

“There may be a way to get out of this.” His tonal shift caught Gio off guard.

“I'm sure you know what I'm referring to, right? That day four years ago... when all of this transpired. Avoiding it won't do you any good anymore—”

The shade wearer's fist flew through his wall, the lights flickering wildly as he did so. Sera and Leon were caught off guard, but the later stood his ground firmly. Gio's emotions were breaking down.

“What the hell would you know?!” The glare that shot through Leon's very soul was one that few others had faced.

“.. I know it's hard, Gio. Now is not the time to sit around playing games. The sooner you accept it and move on, the sooner you could start to mend—” Leon's body went flying back, past Sera, with Gio having leapt over the bed and slammed his entire body – elbow first – into his friend's.

Neither man blinked.

“What good does it do to look back on that day?! It was a fall! It doesn't do any good now!”

“.. If it wasn't *your* fault there's a chance that the Aces and Kings could—”

Gio's fist slammed into yet another wall, this time inches from Leon's skull. Still, he didn't flinch. “.. could forgive what happened and work to uncover the truth... This could be your chance, Gio.”

Sera looked on with a look of hesitation. Seconds before she was told to let Leon go, and now this.

Obviously it was a touchy subject, but she wasn't sure what to say or do. On one hand she wanted nothing to do with Leon and the Houses, but if that day four years ago, Gio's Fall from Grace, wasn't his fault...

“Just leave. Just leave, Leon. I... I have nothing more to say.” His arm pulled back, bringing with it the chalky substance of the structure's dry wall. “Please, just go.”

Leon watched as his friend stumbled back to the other side of the bed, sitting with his back towards the others. There was nothing more that could be done. It was unfortunate but it was reality. He himself turned from Gio, heading towards the doorway, but he stopped and turned to Sera.

“Keep an eye on him. You two need to be careful from here on out. There's no time for games going forward... you should also get yourself ready. You two can't stay here anymore.”

With that, Leon stepped out into the hallway and disappeared towards the exit.

Sera was left to watch as Gio became trapped in a trance. He was in his own little world, sitting calmly on the bed while staring at his night stand. Atop the nightstand was a simple digital clock, a small lamp, and a golden picture frame.

Within the frame lay a picture taken just the other day at the beach. The first picture Sera could recall in almost her entire time here.

So many were present; Kenny, Clare, Lenna, Sera herself, Leon, and of course a distant Kat stalking ever so carefully. However, smack in the middle was Gio and the young boy whom they had met, Kai.

It was the first picture Gio could remember caring to get a copy of in a long time. He just wasn't the kind of guy to take many photos or be involved to take a group shot, but that picture atop his nightstand clad in golden frame was the proof he needed. It was what made his day at the beach tangible.

That day was the first time in far too long that the former King simply had fun with others. It was a day he could finally see he wasn't as alone as he appeared to make himself out to be.

« — »

Meanwhile, deep in District One, the Diamonds Headquarters was abuzz. Members of the House were mobilizing, suiting up and preparing for what looked like a war. They were clearly set to be going after Giotto Jaeger, Wild Card, but this force seemed like overkill for one man.

Victor, clad in his black and blue uniform with the Diamond insignia proudly on display, could only smile and watch his House with joy. After years it was finally time to obliterate the parasite which plagued New Eden. His glorious city would be cleansed.

However, the King was not alone atop his perch. There was a figure, not Rose, blending together with the shadows behind him.

The figure had a voice, one which seemed to *slither* its way to a listener's ear like a *snake*.

“You surpassed even my own expectations, *Adamant Charge*.”

It felt like there were multiple voices, echoing back and forth in a small space, while at the same time sounding further and further away.

It didn't sound like any noise a human *nor* Esper would make.

Victor turned to his right slowly, full of purpose, with an uncontrollable grin spreading across his face.

“So, the *guardian angel* returns? I dare say I did not expect to see you so soon. How goes the preparations on your end?” The familiar tone meant one thing – these two were acquainted.

Partners in their actions against the Wild Card.

“Oho, you are *quite* the curious one, *Adamant Charge*. I do like to see that *eager* side of you. Especially when you're glowing with that much *killing intent*... it really *brings out your eyes*.”

There was a moment in which time seemed to flow ever more slowly, and not even Victor could notice it. In that instant the figure emerged from the shadows in full, hunched over with a bounce in his step, propelling himself to stand back to back with the Diamond King.

Their face and even their entire body remained hidden behind a hooded cloak. Strangely enough, the attire seemed like it was a part of the darkness. The clothes that hid his person entirely were practically alive, flowing around him in a constant motion of shadow.

Victor noticed too late, spinning back around, but the figure was once again gone from his view.

That look of unrivaled joy faded from Victor's face. He then composed himself, hiding the impossible feeling of fear that had somehow crept up on him in that moment. For him to feel fear, even hesitation, was far from normal.

“Ahh, ever the prankster. You have got me on many occasions. I must become more aware of my—”

“—*surroundings*?”

The hooded figure latched itself onto Victor's back, but the King didn't move. Perhaps he was afraid, or perhaps he held an intense desire to not show any trepidation.

“Yes, my *surroundings*.”

The being brought his right arm upwards, a hand of blackness reaching out from his sleeve to lightly stroke his partner's bearded cheek. Then, he was once again gone, leaving Victor to continue his conversation with the shadows.

“.. I assume that you being here means it is all taken care of, yes?” Victor's formal tone seemed spot on, not shaken in the slightest... but it was more a front than anything else.

There was a chuckle, quiet at first, until it reached out and enveloped Victor whole.

Then silence.

“Yes, my dear *Adamant Charge*... You and your precious *Red Rose* will have the perfect opportunity to *snatch* that *Wild Card*. The day you have worked *ever* so hard for is finally here.”

The fear that Victor had felt throughout his body soon gave way to that familiar sense of joy.

After years of facing what he believed to be the cancer of New Eden, he would finally be able to silence Giotto Jaeger once and for all.

It was simply perfect. The downfall of Wild Card *was all but assured*.

12th CARD | Paradise Lost

In a place such as District Thirteen, the crumbling structures and fallen overpass highways blocked much of the sky. Even so, the morning sun was still just an hour or so off. The cover of night, hidden from the moonlight, might have been just what the pair of cloaked figures – Gio and Sera – needed.

“Hey! Slow dow—” Sera's voice peaked as she slipped, beginning to fall, but Gio's arms soon caught her and in one swift motion stood her back on her feet.

“We can't slow down, Sera. Not now. Stay on my six.”

His voice was as serious as Sera could ever remember him being. She couldn't help but fall in line with his order. This was a part of Gio that she had never quite seen before. Sure, he could get serious which was rare, but he never appeared like this. He was serious, yes, but he also seemed... afraid.

As quickly as the two were stopped they were back on the run, ducking down various alleyways and back roads covered in trash and human waste. This was the state of the slums after four years of being ignored by the very city that gave birth to it.

It hadn't been long after Leon left them that Gio had Sera getting dressed. They both left nearly everything behind, taking only the clothes on their backs and a few small trinkets in their pockets and a small backpack.

Sera could never remember Gio being so cautious, so fearful. Her thoughts rambled off, wondering just how serious this could have been, and she nearly went crashing into Gio's backside. He had frozen in place, just at the edge of the alley's entrance.

His eyes had spotted movement atop the few rooftops still in one piece.

“Gi—” Sera stepped back, watching Gio remove a small black box from beneath his cloak.

A worn red button rested dead center atop it.

“What is that? Gio, why do you have that?”

She tried to reach out, to shake him and get his attention, but he was zoned in on the figures moving in the distance.

“.. Sorry, Sera. Looks like they've spread out further than I expected. Keep your head down.”

Without a single hesitation Gio's left thumb pressed firmly against the red button, a single click chiming a chain of explosions in the distance – from where they had been just a few minutes prior; *Wild Card*.

“What the hell are you thinking! Gio!” She tried to wrestle the detonator free from him, but he simply released the device and let it hit the ground with a thud. The same ground which continued to quake.

“They were there, Sera.” She stopped trying to fight him, her hands still gripping onto his left arm. “These aren't Espers. They aren't from the Houses.” He looked upwards, watching the shadowy figures momentarily freeze. “.. These are bounty hunters... hired help.”

Smoke was rising in the distance, further blocking the night sky from view. Sera still didn't know what to think, but there was no time now. Gio was lacing his fingers with hers – and he was pulling her along in a sprint.

The two went sprinting into the street with little concern for being spotted. The explosions back at their home had been placed long ago by Gio, even before he ever met Sera. They were a failsafe should he become exposed and have to make a sudden getaway. It felt like overkill. It felt like a pointless action.

Now, the bombs were both a momentary distraction and a weapon against the hunters who decided to focus on his home.

“Gio!! How can you justify killing them?! Doesn't that go against—”

Sera's arm was jerked to the side as Gio led them down another alleyway, a dozen or so figures leaping across the rooftops just overhead.

“It doesn't go against anything, Sera. There are times when you have to take action, no matter the cost – I've come to terms with what must be done.”

She couldn't help but become a little distant in that moment. Sera knew full well just the kind of things Gio would be willing to do to survive, to protect others, even if that meant taking the lives of corrupt individuals. Even knowing that, however, Sera didn't want to believe that Gio would go that far. Or perhaps that he would go that far so easily.

“*Duck!!*”

Sera snapped back to reality as she felt Gio's free hand reaching back, pushing down on her chest to bend her backwards and to the ground. They both slid across the dirty streets, silver and red flashes flying overhead where they had just stood a second prior.

She was so zoned out that the gun shots never even registered with her.

From the ground Gio pushed off, not once letting go of Sera's hand, and he leapt to the side pulling her along for the ride. They slid just in between a collapsed wall and the relatively intact building beside it, just as a barrage of bullets rained down from above.

The hunters knew just where their targets lay and they were gathering their forces.

“Sera, listen!” Gio spoke quickly, constantly glancing all around. His body was shaking. “You’re going to have to stay low. I’m going to get them focus on me. Then you need to quickly—”

The echoing smack that Sera delivered reverberated through the darkness.

“You expect me to run and hide?! You’re a stupider mutt than I realized!” Her voice cracked, emotions giving way. “I can fight too, you know. Not to mention these aren’t even Espers *or* Chaotics!”

Oh, what horrible timing those words brought with them.

The hunters themselves were clad in various mismatched clothing, though much of it was military-grade. Most carried with them various firearms and bladed weapons, all of which were an obvious arsenal for Normals – humans with no powers.

However, there were those scattered among the group who carried no weapons at all. These hunters were none other than Rogue Espers, here to collect on the richest bounty in the history of New Eden.

“There are Rogues in their ranks. *Damnit*, they closed in a lot faster than I expected. They must have known.” Gio was looking around frantically, trying to find a solution to the problem, but they were vastly outnumbered. Those odds were getting even worse by the second. “They knew about the bounty before it was announced publically... there’s no other way they made it here so quickly. The information was leaked to them by the Houses... *Damn that old man.*”

As more bullets rained down, ricochets began to become a problem. Shrapnel began to skid into their hiding spot, some of it whipping by and clipping Gio’s right arm. The blood that began to drip was ignored.

“*Now!!*”

Gio sprinted from cover, dragging Sera along with him, just as the bullets seemed to drop in number. He had waited for the time that a majority were reloading and while bullets continued to fly, the number was manageable. His right hand had begun to glow with a white and black light, the symbol of a jester hat and the four suits prominently on display.

His ability was finally manifesting.

Sparks of flame then shot through the air, each faster than the last, all on a trajectory to impact and obliterate the bullets still incoming.

At the same moment, hunters had moved to ground level, rushing wildly at the pair trying to escape. Gio spotted them, flames bursting forth from around him and Sera to shoot out like a cannon right in the middle of their ranks – but the flames became blocked by rising earth and concrete. A Rogue with the ability to manipulate the earth lay within them.

“Gio, we can’t go on at this rate! Stop being so damn stubborn and let’s work this out – together!”

Sera pleaded, trying to reason with him, but it did nothing. She found it hard to believe how determined he had become. This desperation, this wild style, was something she had never seen. Not like this. He was fighting without a plan, letting fear drive him, and that just wasn't his style.

The last time she witnessed anything remotely like it was back when she was in that arena against a Chaotic.

It was a time that Gio feared for her life, but he tried to act as if such feelings never crossed his mind. Sera being who she was, though, she had known. She wasn't an idiot nor was she blind to the pain he thought he passed off as humor.

Gio was being desperate because he was trying to protect Sera. He was trying to be some white knight for her sake.

Or perhaps he was trying to avoid a fate worse than her death. He was trying to prevent history from repeating itself.

“Hold your fire, men. Looks like we got 'em rattled enough.” A smug, elderly gentleman stepped out from behind the ground forces, a nearly burnt out cigar resting comfortably in the corner of his crooked mouth. “Time's up, *Wild Card*. Or perhaps I should call you '*Sire*' – my *liege*!”

The hunter laughed, spitting off to the side as he stepped over some of the raised earth in the street.

“Let me tell ya how this little bit of business is gonna go, *you get me*?”

There was no question this guy was a veteran among bounty hunters. Perhaps that was why men and women normally in it for themselves decided to abide by his orders. However, he was just wielding a sub machine gun and sported a pair of combat knives tucked away on his assault vest...

He wasn't an Esper.

Perhaps that gave Gio the advantage he needed.

“.. What? You're planning to tell me what to do?” Gio smirked, beginning to take a single step – but a spire of stone soon shot upwards, right where his foot would have landed. “.. I see you have a talented elemental Esper in your ranks. Well, I suppose you are trying to cover all your bases.”

The hunter laughed again, nearly losing his cigar in the process. He then stepped closer, raising his gun towards the pair before him.

“You're outnumbered Mr. *Former-King*. Not even you could hope you get out of this one. Luckily for you, I'm an *honorable, hardworking*, kind of man.” He then motioned behind Gio, pointing towards Sera, and then back to Gio's left.

Back behind the initial line of hunters, nearly hidden in the darkness of night, there were figures. Each of them were down on their knees with a hunter stationed behind their back.

Gio's fist clenched tight and he nearly broke the hand of Sera's that he continued to hold onto.

These hunters were using civilians, members of the slums, as leverage. Innocent people who had nothing to do with anything were being bartered with. Not to mention it appeared that the hunter was using both them and Sera together in an attempt to force Gio to submit.

“Judgin' by that reaction of yours I bet you understand my generous proposal.”

The so-called 'generous proposal' was anything but. Though in this situation it almost felt like Gio's only option.

Despite that, there was no way he could trust these hunters.

He also knew that this was a scare tactic of sorts. Sure, Gio and Sera were outnumbered, but if he went all out there was a very real chance that they could escape. The hunters most likely realized that, especially the apparent boss, which explained them involving civilians as hostages. The hunters would still act as confident as could be.

“How about you back down while you can, grandpa? You seem to be really overestimating the ability of you and your rag-tag bunch of *mystery men*—”

Ahh, Gio was a bit careless. The gunshot in the distance made him freeze up instantly. He could barely look off to the side in time to watch one of the faceless civilians hit the ground with a minor thud.

Sera felt Gio's grip loosen and she stepped forward, ignoring whatever danger lay ahead.

“You bastards want to play games like *that*?! Don't think you can get away with anything you damn well please!!”

She began to dash ahead, her hand slipping free entirely of Gio's, but he snapped his arm forward to grab her cloak and forcefully drag her back to him at the last second.

“*Let-me-GO!!*”

She swung at Gio, fists slamming against his chest and even clipping his face, but he didn't flinch.

The veteran hunter had made his point. He had won.

Gio wanted to fight back, to unleash his power, turning this street into a hellish mix of fire and death. His anger was boiling over. Despite those feelings of rage, he kept himself in check. Sure, he could fight off these hunters right now and survive. He was certain of that. His fighting power would overwhelm even this impressive number of foes.

But he couldn't guarantee that the innocents being held captive would survive. He couldn't guarantee their lives, or most importantly, the life of Sera.

“I see you're finally understandin' the situation in full, *hero*.”

The hunter stepped forward once more, now just a mere arm's length away. Gio pulled Sera further back, standing between her and the enemy before them.

“*Let them go...*”

“Huh? What was that you said?” The hunter was leaning in, mocking Gio's plea.

This veteran was pretty good at rubbing salt into fresh wounds.

“Let them go! You want me and you got it. Tell your goons around here to back off and you've got yourself a former King to turn in for a lifetime of wealth.”

Sera couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her partner was just giving up? She knew that she could take these guys, that she could fight and survive just fine, but Gio didn't seem to see it that way.

The stubby cigar was tossed aside as the veteran hunter motioned his hand upwards, swirling it around. The gesture was the signal to begin moving off. There was a bit of hesitation among the large force, especially from those who appeared to be Rogue Espers, but they did as instructed.

The civilians were left on their knees, tied and gagged, and the gunmen surrounding the street pulled back.

The veteran hunter then turned to the side, bowing with the utmost smugness.

“After you, *Mr. Former King*.”

It was then that Sera felt Gio release her, leaving her to her own devices, and she wasn't going to take this lying down

“Don't buy into this BS, *Gio!!*”

She took a step, preparing to gather her strength and crush the veteran hunter's skull in —

“*—That's enough, Sera!*”

She hesitated, practically turning to stone.

“.. Find Leon, now. Let him know what's going on. He can keep you safe for now.”

She began to call out once again, her own face showing the emotion that Gio now kept contained, but she didn't. Her voice wouldn't respond to her own will. It was as if her own body had betrayed her, instead following the will of Gio.

“That's how a proper transaction is carried out. *Pleasure doin' business...*” The hunter grinned, removing from the side holster on his hip a strange injector with a bright green liquid. “Now, you just play nice. After all, *the bounty wasn't just for you.*”

Those words triggered an instinctive response as Gio spun around to confront the hunter, but the injector was already piercing into his neck. In a flash the liquid had dispensed, flowing into Gio's body at a record pace.

“*Gio!!*”

Sera's call sounded distant. Gio could tell almost from the moment the needle made contact that this was some sort of super synthesized drug. Time began to slow all around him. His senses dulled further and further with each passing second, all of which felt like they lasted an eternity.

In his slowed state he watched as snipers took aim from the rooftops, firing maliciously at the remaining civilians across the street. A single bullet to the head was all it took to take them from this world, but the snipers took pleasure in filling their bodies with more and more bullet holes.

His blurred vision then watched as Sera threw away her cloak, raising her fists to fight the veteran hunter – but electrical sparks flashed around her. Tasers from the roof above and the street below took her down in a series of flashing lights.

What Gio had tried so carefully to avoid had suddenly become reality.

Even in his drugged state he could still feel the emotions boiling inside of him. His awareness was vastly hampered but that didn't stop his mind from racing. His body, fueled by years of combat experience, was beginning to act on its own.

Most of the bounty hunters who looked on probably thought this was the end of their mission. The female partner, Sera Noel, was subdued. The main prize, the former King Giotto Jaeger, was drugged and fading fast – but to the someone fighting for survival, battle instinct would be all one needed to overcome the relativity of time.

The flames that appeared were sudden. There was no build up, no spark to start the wildfire. One second the hunters were mopping up – the next they were being lost in pillars of fire gushing up from nothing and extending to the heavens.

It was like a vicious game of cat and mouse, except that there were a thousand cats formed of fire and a hundred paper mice soaked in gasoline.

Numbers that were just over a hundred began to drop by two, seven, twelve, twenty at a time. What was a pseudo-lifetime to a drugged Gio was merely a handful of seconds to everyone else.

Not even the screams of the fallen had time to escape their fiery grave.

The sound of death was silence.

“.. *Show's over, Giotto Jaeger.*”

The flames were relentless, but a single ray of sparking blue energy bolted through them like a bat out of hell. The lightning danced, maneuvering at the will of its master, and it slammed forcefully into Gio's chest.

He went flying back, the flames falling off instantaneously as a patch of thorn covered vines latched onto him mid-flight.

Standing just behind the vines, the mark atop her left hand glowing a beautiful red, was the King of Hearts; *Rose Jalice*.

Opposite her, in the direction from which the lightning came, was the six-foot five-inch King of Diamonds – *Victor Ferris* – standing proudly amongst the ashes scattered to the wind.

“*K-Kings?!?*” The veteran hunter, already mentally throttled by the sudden attacks by Gio, was now trembling and falling backwards over the limp body of Sera – out cold from her taser encounter.

“Yes, *Kings*. What a simpleton.”

Victor was as high and mighty as ever, but he cared not to converse with a hunter. His eyes were set on Gio, who remained restrained by his daughter.

“You've done well, Rose. You caught him in magnificent fashion.”

Rose smiled, her first sign of emotion, but she found herself struggling ever so slightly. It wasn't such a simple task to subdue someone of former King status. Or was that actually what this was?

“F-Father! Something is, well, something is happening – look at his hands!”

Victor had noticed before she had the chance to speak out.

A crimson glow lay atop his left hand while the right continued its mix of white and black energy. The right hand, of course, dawned the mark of the Wild Card... but appearing on his left was a mark long thought lost.

It seemed that as Rose appeared, so did his *former* mark as King of Hearts.

Such a phenomenon was wildly intriguing to Victor – especially when it appeared that Gio, whom remained conscious and struggled like a wild dog despite being drugged, was in an absurd amount of pain. A pain that only occurred when around Rose.

“*Interesting*. However, for our purposes—” Victor's own left hand sparked wildly, a blue glow atop it showing his own mark as King of Diamonds. “—*It matters not!*”

Victor slammed his left fist into Gio's gut, unleashing a surge of electricity throughout his entire body. The power was so great that even the surrounding area showed environmental effects, with natural lightning forming overhead and connecting with the very field Victor had created.

The attack was so great that Gio, in his weakened and drugged state, fell limp and unconscious without even a yelp. In his emotional state it was quite the feat to shut him up so quickly. Victor would be hard pressed to appear more satisfied with himself.

“You may release him now, Rose.”

On his command she did as told and the vines containing him slipped away and back into the earth below. Victor then reached down and unceremoniously tossed Gio's body over his shoulder.

His mortal enemy for four years – his prize for finally following through on his longtime plans – was now resting in his personal care. Slung over his shoulder like carryon luggage.

“Now then, we shall depart—”

Victor's speech fell to the wayside as he turned back around to an expected sight.

Standing before Rose and Victor, two Kings, were their fellow Kings – King of Clubs; Kenny Blume and King of Spades; Leon Kruger.

For perhaps the first time in many of their lifetimes, all four Kings of New Eden now stood on the same battlefield.

None made any sudden moves in that moment.

The four, looking across at their counterparts, were left to merely contemplate the next action. Such a standoff was unheard of.

Ten seconds, twenty, thirty, a minute – time passed on without a twitch or a word.

It was a crash that broke the silence.

A certain frightened hunter nearby, supposedly a veteran, crashed into a pair of trashcans in his attempt to escape the four Kings of New Eden. Fear consumed the once fearless man who so casually triggered the death of so many.

“King Victor!” Leon finally called out, stepping forward. “What are you doing? Conspiring with bounty hunters to carry out a job for the Houses?!”

Victor could only laugh. It was a laugh that resounded with the might of thunder.

“How dare you *presume* such a thing, King Kruger. Surely you would not accuse a fellow King of treachery. I just so happened to stumble upon this battleground and I took the opportunity to apprehend this criminal – *former* King, Giotto Jaeger!”

The sly smirk of Victor told both Kenny and Leon all they needed to know. It was a crooked operation from the get go.

“Well then, fellow King Vick– err, Victor, sorry.” Kenny stepped forth, outstretching his hand. “Let's work together on clearing this battleground up, yeah? We can take Gio Jaeger into custody as well as these men and wom—”

“Do you take me for a fool, King Blume?” Victor stepped forward, motioning for Rose to do the same. “Do you think I know nothing of you two and your relationship to this criminal? Not only have you worked with him, you've *both* let him escape your grasp on numerous occasions. As Kings, you both knew – this man is wanted for the death of hundreds, including his own Queen and Jack. These are the same orders you, too, were given. Now, stand aside as I carry out the will of the Lord Aces.”

Kenny and Leon both looked to each other as if trying to find the words, and Leon took his chance.

“Victor, you should know that this is not a case that is so black and white. There's more to be uncovered here. Gio... You should know that Gio is not the kind of man you claim him to be!”

But the words fell on deaf ears. The Kings of Clubs and Spades were treated to both Victor and Rose dashing behind them, both doing so in such a fashion that not even a King could catch them.

There would be no time to discuss anything at all.

“We bid you good day, Kenneth, Leon. Know that we will take care of this criminal in the way that New Eden sees fit. *Please*, feel free to round up these hunters for further questioning.”

Such a declaration was too far for Victor, and Leon's body moved to grab him forcefully – but Rose and Victor were soon swallowed up by a bolt of lightning. Leon was forced backwards, sliding across the ground, and both of the other Kings were gone.

Victor had what he wanted – he had Gio. Now, there were few if any options for both Leon and Ken.

In this situation, at this time, the four Kings of New Eden were divided – and behind those juggernauts lay a *single* figure of shadow mocking from a distance as the pieces finally fell into place.

It appeared that, whomever was aiding Victor, had their *own plans coming together*.

13th CARD | Shackled

“Gio, it's okay.”

A voice called out. A voice lost to time.

Faye Star, Gio's late wife, calling out from the darkness.

“This isn't your fault. It's okay. I'm right here.”

He wanted to reach out and take hold of her hand, but there was no way to do so. All that lie before him was darkness. His own body was gone. His senses were lost. He tried to figure out where he was and what was going on, but his thoughts were a blur.

Memories flooded through him like a busy intersection at rush hour. The moment he thought he could hold onto a scene to play it out in his mind was the same moment the scene had passed him.

This wasn't a dream nor a nightmare.

It was both real and not.

Time and space were present but lost.

Though, despite the trials that plagued him, Gio pushed further. The darkness began to give way in the distance. A small, flickering flame, illuminated the world – but as hopeful as that flame was, it was just as devastating when it faded away.

“Gio...”

A voice that wasn't Faye's rang, echoing through the void. A voice with no substance and yet the ferocity of a lion's roar. It called out to Gio, pulling him in, constricting him. It was suffocating.

“Burn... burn... burn it all away...”

Once again the flame returned, far in the distance, but Gio could no longer reach it. The foreign voice had hold on him. Escape was not an option. The only option was to accept this fate. The fight was over.

“Burn... burn... Hurry, a frost is coming...”

The flame flickered wildly, dancing, and soon it began streaking across the darkness. What was once an endless void gained color, substance, and as the flame grew closer Gio could feel his *shackles* weakening.

“Burn... burn... BURN...”

Gio's body was free as the fire consumed him, burning him from head to toe, revealing the body and soul that had moments ago been nothing. However, the more the flame revealed, the closer Gio grew to the sight of something horrible.

Standing before him was a figure born of the flames, just as his own body returned to him. At first the figure seemed unrecognizable, just a mass of flames given human shape, but it was the sight of his wife.

Her body, bloody and broken, burning to death all over again. She couldn't scream. She didn't even flinch. All Faye could do was smile, reaching her hand out to Gio.

"It's okay."

Screams of agony burst forth, consuming everything.

The screams were his own. He was crying out in pain.

« — »

"It appears he's finally coming to. Perhaps I'll tone down my power in the future."

Victor's old and wrinkled face was not quite the sight Wild Card expected to be waking up to.

He was still groggy from the drugs and attack, though Gio himself didn't remember those two things very well. All he could remember was giving himself up to the hunters – and then everything became hazy. With the sight of Victor before him, Gio instinctively struggled to be free, but he was restrained. Thorns cut into his arms, legs, neck, and torso.

The vines of Rose were ferocious. Questioning her rank as King seemed rather foolish.

The real problem was the searing pain shooting up Gio's left arm. A pain that only came to be when around Rose. First there was the encounter at the arena which crippled Gio for much of the fight, then today. Something was occurring which shouldn't have been possible.

"Y-You..." It was barely a whisper. Gio's voice seemed lost.

"No need to strain yourself, Jaeger. You're in the custody of two Kings of New Eden. You won't be going anywhere but the executioner's axe. Well, hahaha—" Victor's sarcastic laugh was nauseating. "—I guess you won't actually be going to someone's axe. I plan to silence you once and for all myself. Before then, though..."

Victor stood from his wooden chair. Gio's eyes followed him, revealing the group to be in a rather fancy looking penthouse of some kind. With how large and luxurious it appeared to be, there was a good chance this was the personal residence of Victor himself.

"Before I end you, Giotto Jaeger, I'm curious. What makes you tick, hm? This *Wild Card* that you've become, what did it take? Simply murdering your Jack and Queen? What's also interesting – how do you *still* have a connection to the King of Hearts? Why does your mark glow and cause you pain around the new King? She even seemed ever so slightly affected before."

Victor could barely contain himself. He wanted to poke and prod at Gio before he killed him. There was no mistake to be made – the Diamonds King wanted him dead. But he felt it was vital to understand the power of the Wild Card.

Victor was sure that if a being such as that could exist, there was the chance for *more* to appear in the future. He had to be ready to defeat future Wild Cards. This was the evil that Victor was certain posed the biggest threat to New Eden. A being with the power of the Wild Card, able to use the abilities of others and to such an extent, was dangerous.

That wasn't the sole reason, though.

Victor could deal with dangerous. Many Espers were dangerous but they could be taught to control their power. As far as Victor believed, the Wild Card had the potential to randomly kill thousands without a second thought. A single awakening of the Wild Card power was enough to kill a Queen, a Jack, and hundreds of others. It was enough to cause a King to fall for the first time.

Victor would stop such things from happening again.

His methods were questionable and his sanity seemingly lacking in his old age, but, Victor cared for the city and its citizens above even his own life. He felt that this was the only course of action for him to take.

Perhaps he was even right.

Perhaps the Wild Card was the true enemy of New Eden.

Not even Gio could say for certain that he wasn't. The incident four years ago was reason enough for him to doubt his own power.

“Can't find the words? I suppose that these restraints aren't the best for conversing in. Unfortunately, they won't be coming off anytime soon. It is best to get comfortable.”

Victor stepped closer to Gio. He was examining his left hand as it continued to glow a crimson glow that it should have long stopped doing. It truly threw him for a loop how such a thing was possible.

The marks of the Houses represented a connection to said Houses. All who bore a mark had with it their rank and House in clear view. Of course, these marks weren't natural. The Aces, long ago, created the marks and granted them to the first Kings of New Eden – a position that Victor first held at the age of eighteen, sixty years ago.

These marks were then capable of being distributed to Espers by the Kings. A single *King*, a single *Queen*, and a single *Jack* – they stood above the *Numbers*, ranks filled with multiple members from two to ten.

When Gio Fell from Grace four years ago his connection to his own House, Hearts, should have been severed.

Something that was made more obvious by the fact a new King had been appointed by the Aces – Rose. Despite this, Gio still held his mark.

Victor's thoughts began to race.

“Rose?”

The Diamonds King turned, facing his monotonous daughter behind him. A daughter blindly following the will of her father despite she herself being a King as well.

“.. Rose?”

He spoke again, Rose snapping her attention back to him with a stiffened jolt.

“S-Sire! I mean, father, I—”

“Do you feel anything right now?”

Victor didn't even give her the chance to speak her mind openly.

Perhaps what *Patricia Barnes* said in that underground arena was true. Perhaps she was just a *puppet*. Unfortunately, now was not the time to be lost in thought and Rose nervously shook her head in response.

“Hmm, nothing? Interesting.” Victor reached down, taking hold of Gio's glowing left hand. “She feels nothing now and yet you are crippled? That in itself is a mystery... but why had your mark not vanished in your fall? Why did the Aces not feel your presence and have the ability to forcefully remove it?”

He released the bloodied hand and stepped back towards Rose, examining both her and Gio back and forth for a moment.

Then, a look upon his face that was the personification of the word *eureka*.

What was so obvious, what had never been said before, truly made the most sense.

Rushing back, Victor gripped tight on that illuminated left hand with such ferocity that Gio's raspy screams escaped him.

“It was there! Right there the whole time! Oh, how I was so blind. It makes all the sense in the world. Everything we thought we knew, we knew nothing!” He smirked, looking back to Rose with overflowing confidence. “You see, daughter – Giotto Jaeger, Wild Card, *never Fell from Grace*.”

As they say; *eureka*.

Rose's own static disposition shifted, her contorted face showing obvious confusion, but she was overpowered by the look her father gave.

“H-How can he not be a fallen...?”

Victor once again released Gio and stood tall, ignoring the blood that now smeared his own hands.

“That, my dear, is the ultimate inquiry. For any and all who know of the event, Giotto Jaeger surely fell that day. The catastrophe was just like other falls – worse, even. But if he did indeed *not* fall that day... if it was something *else*... But, *what*?”

The ramblings of Victor did little to distract Gio from the pain which consumed him. He didn't even feel the thorns of the vines. All he could feel was

the pain resonating from his left hand. Though as Victor rambled further and further, Gio's interest slowly drew him to the present and away from his mind numbing pain.

Never fell, he says? That's impossible. Any idiot could tell you what happened. I killed hundreds of innocents.

A few stray tears began to fall down his dirty, blood stained face.

I killed them all, but most importantly, I killed friends. I killed my Jack. I killed my Queen... she was—

The fog in his mind began to slowly clear. Gio was regaining his coherent thoughts. He felt the pain, yes, but he began to truly soak in his surroundings of what was there – and of what wasn't.

Sera, his partner, his friend, was not there. Gio was restrained against a wall. If she was in the same room, he would have seen her. Not to mention, if she was there, surely Victor or Rose would have kept an eye on her just to be safe.

Though both his captives were here. Sera was not.

Sera? Where could she... what happened? What happened?!

His body, supposedly held perfectly in place by the vines, twitched. Normally it would have meant nothing, but the way Gio was held meant he shouldn't have been able to do even that. The fact he could manage even a twitch showed that he was in some way overcoming the plants which bound him.

Victor and Rose were caught up conversing, but Gio could no longer understand what they were saying. His mind and body were focused on the fact Sera was absent. Another twitch. His heart rate was sky rocketing. Within him, he was beginning to relate Sera's absence to that of his wife's.

What happened to her?! How did I get here?! Where are those moments of my life!! Give them back to me, give them back!!

The sight that Gio saw began to shift from that of reality to that of his dreams. Of his memories. One second he was watching two Kings, the next he was being consumed by fire, buried beneath a building. He was switching from the high class penthouse suite to miles of death and destruction.

Faye, where are you?! Faye!! Faye!!

His twitches soon became a constant, continued struggle. He pulled his arms forward, trying to break free of his shackles, and the vines were beginning to give way. The thorns cut deeper, slicing flesh like confetti, but he didn't even notice. His own pain was inconsequential.

Faye!! I... I can save you!! ... Sera!! Sera, where are you?! Damn it, let me go! Wake me up! I won't go through this—

“—Not AGAIN!”

Victor spun back around as Gio screamed out, but not even the man considered the greatest King was fast enough. Vines snapped like twigs. Flames erupted

through the floor, consuming Gio's entire body and the remaining constraints. The two Kings tried to react, rushing forward, but flames blew outwards and sent both flying back.

The walls of the penthouse were consumed by the same fire, blowing outwards, and causing an explosion of hot air to consume the entire upper floor of what the morning sun revealed to be a skyscraper standing tall right in the middle of New Eden.

This was indeed Victor's personal residence – which just so happened to be atop Diamonds HQ in District One.

“Rose! Rebind him, now!!”

Victor's sparking lightning spun around him and latched onto the floor. It spread across it, creating an electrified walkway – but most importantly he remained glued to the burning penthouse rather than being blown out into the city below.

Rose's vines had latched onto the remaining support walls near the center of the floor, but she struggled to even stay in place.

“How can I contain *that*?!”

Flaming twisters shot outwards, cutting through chunks of the floor, forcing Victor to leap upwards and use his electricity to hang from the patches of the ceiling still intact. Rose used walls of thick wood, spawned from crimson lights behind her, to rush before her and block the attacks – she was barely fast enough to do so.

“Charge, now! As Kings we must face this threat with all that we are! *Do not hold back anymore, daughter!*” Victor was moving as he spoke, touching down on the ground and using pure electrical energy to slam into the flames head on.

“Giotto Jaeger, you are too dangerous to be kept alive any longer! I hereby sentence you to death!”

Razor sharp vines flung forward, aided by the lightning cutting a path through the flames.

Contact was made, evident by the screams, but the flames blocked the sight of Gio.

“*Cut him down, Rose!*”

Sirens sounded from the streets below as emergency personnel were on the move. That included the forces of the House of Diamonds, mobilized to rush into the building of their King.

Thousands of citizens still asleep in their beds and out on their way to work were witnessing the sudden explosions at Diamonds Headquarters, unsure what it was they were watching. Even normal citizens without a supernatural bone in their

body could feel the weight, the pressure being put out by not just one King but multiple.

Gio was, of course, putting out the same power as a King.

Rose continued to unleash attack after attack, following the path of lightning to get close to Gio, and his screams of torment continued – but they were not the end of him. Perhaps those screams didn't even have anything to do with the attacks.

The fire began to fade, seemingly a signal of the Kings' impending victory, but that was not the case. Gio was moving, dashing forward and right at Victor. His body moved back and forth, dodging the continued attacks of Rose with a hair's width to spare. Victor had to use his power defensively, holding himself in place and forming an electrical barrier for the fires of Gio.

“Where is she?! Where is Sera?! Victor!!”

Gio saw nothing but rage and blood. His emotions had boiled over to the point he was no longer himself. Memories from the past that were unclear began to meld with the present, sending him deeper into despair than he had ever ventured before. His ability of *The Fiery* was now his outlet for that emotion. He was going wild.

He was fighting to kill his enemies. He was fighting to kill both Victor and Rose.

Flames were passing along the entire building, ripping through supports and consuming anything they could get a hold of. This was the beginning of the end – this was the growing power of someone who could destroy the entirety of New Eden.

Victor stepped back, no longer using his power to maintain a footing, and instead he gathered it around his hand and threw a ferocious fist right at Gio's nearing skull.

“Sera Noel?! The partner you brought down your life of crime?! She has been left to the hunters! Her fate was her own doing – no, excuse me, it was *your* doing!”

Gio's own hand, his left, gathered flames – but as the pain from before grew more intense his flames stuttered.

The electrified punch made contact, sending Gio crashing backwards through the floor and down to the room just below.

“Quickly, finish him!”

Victor leapt after him, but Rose hesitated.

For a moment she questioned what this was and what they were doing. She had not done so before, but, watching her father act this way... it wasn't like him. This wasn't the same man who saved her and took her in to his home.

Despite her sudden feelings of hesitation, she dove in just a second later.

Gio's body was covered in flames. They were burning all around him, but of course he was spared of their destructive power. He stood from the shattered tiles that covered the now ruined kitchen, looking up as Victor dove right at him.

Flames and electricity met once again, the force of both attacks so great that Victor was suspended in mid-air as the two magical properties collided – but Gio, no matter how strong, was at a disadvantage.

Leaf-shaped objects began to appear around Victor, made of a garnet colored energy. These leaves swirled, gathering more and more in number, and finally they released their built up momentum to slice through the flames. Gio tried to match them, fireballs flying out to greet them, but he was overwhelmed and once again went flying backwards.

This time he crashed into what remained of the fridge, his body making a human-shaped dent in its metal coating.

The flames were fading away. Gio's strength was fracturing due to the overwhelming strength of the Kings he faced and the fact his body was reacting so negatively around Rose.

“This is it, Giotto Jaeger! Your disastrous deeds come to an end today.”

Victor's electric energy formed again around his hand. They then stretched outwards, forming what looked like a sword made of lightning. With Gio unable to properly stand and his flames becoming nonexistent, this would be the end of the battle.

“.. For what it's worth, former King of Hearts,” Victor now stood directly in front of Gio, his voice having only slightly softened. “I do feel a bit of remorse that you went down such a path. Perhaps in death you may see the error of your ways.”

The lightning blade in his hands was held upwards and to the right, slashed at an angled stroke, aiming to behead Gio in a brilliant flash of light.

I still need to find her... Sera, where are you... I'm sorry I got you caught up in this.

In Gio's mind, even as the sword that meant his death fell towards him, he found the time around him to stand still.

I can't even protect those close to me after all this time. Nothing has changed at all. Sera, Faye, everyone... I'm sorry.

His rage that blinded him seemed to fade as the flames around him dispersed entirely. His desire to protect those closest to him remained, but in his condition, his conviction seemed to fade just as quickly.

.. But there was a voice inside him that still cried out.

A voice fighting to be heard.

A voice that wanted to free Gio from his past, his pain.

That's not like you at all, Gio!

That snappy yet playful tone of hers that always felt warm even when she was angry. Like she was a child trying to play the responsible adult. Faye was still there, trying to push Gio on, but it seemed he wasn't able to live up to her expectations.

You know things are never going to be easy, right? That's why you have friends; there to help you, to support you, to protect you.

Gio didn't quite see it that way. He had hurt those closest to him in the worst way. Death followed him everywhere. He pushed those that were still there even further away. His world was tucked away, close by, only for himself and no one else. Getting close to others was just another way to cause them pain.

If what you felt was so true, why do so many people continue to lend you their hand? Even in chance meetings, you connect to so many people so quickly, Gio.

Perhaps Gio saw it as a curse. His connections to others that formed so quickly was what made it easier for him to put them in danger, to cause them sadness. Just like four years ago.

You're wrong, Gio. There's a goodness inside of you. A heart of goodwill. Even in the bitter cold, you are still a warm person. These flames that have protected you for four long years—

The pain that consumed Gio from his former mark of the King began to fade away, just like the mark itself. The red glow of Hearts was fading from his hand, the sight of which left Victor's blade attack frozen in mid-air.

*—Let these flames, my flames, finally melt away the icy shell around **your heart.***

14th CARD | Fall

“*Oh?* What's got you looking so serious right before a simple patrol?”

Faye giggled, looking down at the sitting Gio who was carefully going over a number of documents.

The two, Gio Jaeger and Faye Star, were right in the middle of District Thirteen at a small park. What had once been the slummiest part of New Eden had turned into a beautiful newfound paradise. The city streets were clean and buildings, filled with shops and apartments, were bustling with activity.

The park they were in, filled with flowers of all kinds and a small playground for the children, was a personal favorite of the King and Queen. Beautiful cherry blossom trees were in full bloom throughout the park, and Gio's favorite spot to sit was a little park bench just under the protection of the largest tree. The same place which he sat now.

Watching her husband continue to go through his papers despite her question made her pout, but Faye soon lifted his head by the chin and pointed to the cherry blossoms overhead. His shades slipped slightly down his nose, revealing those curious brown hues.

“What was it you said these trees use to be called? *Sakura?*”

Gio couldn't help but turn a bit red in the face as he stared up at Faye with the background full of blossoms, and he quickly turned away and back to his papers.

“Y-Yeah, that's right.” He flipped through a few more papers, carefully examining the information on them as he did so. “They say that a long time ago these trees were pretty much no more. It wasn't until someone found some old ruins where samples were kept that we were able to spread their seeds once more. That same ruin had the name '*Sakura*' attached to them.”

“Hmmm. ~” Faye smiled as a few blossoms swirled around her, catching Gio's eye. “I can see why you like them so much. A bit of mystery behind such a beautiful looking tree.”

She then sat beside him, peering over the documents he seemed so invested in.

“What's all this, then? Looks like a bunch of profiles on Rogues we've already dealt with?”

“That's right. But they aren't all Rogues we've captured. Some of these guys are still wanted... but it's not why I'm concerned about them.” Gio flipped through a few more. “Most of 'em seemed to be working together, based on their crimes, but I can't find anything to actually connect them.”

Faye leaned back, throwing her hands comfortably behind her head.

“Trying to find something that connects them to the Rogues still at-large, huh? Not bad. I knew I didn't just marry you for your good looks, hehe.”

Gio slowly turned to face her with a dulled expression.

“It was all for my hidden stashes of gold and jewels, right?”

“Precisely! I need a rich man in my life so I don't need to work.”

He couldn't help but continue to stare blankly at her, however she held that ground with considerable ease.

Before they could delve deeper, an older gentleman began to approach them. His whitened hair and somewhat wrinkly skin showed his age, but his white uniform and proudly displayed mark of Hearts showed him as a member of Gio's House.

The rank marking atop his breast pocket showed that this man was none other than *Jidan Cross*; Jack of Hearts.

“Ahh, *Grandpa Ji*—”

A swift kick by the old man sent Gio flying up into the cherry blossom tree as his pile of papers landed comfortably in Faye's lap.

“I keep tellin' ya, kiddo. Don't go calling me Grandpa. I'm not that old.”

Atop the tree, Gio found himself tangled in branches.

“—Then how about you stop calling me *kiddo* all the damn time?! Man! *What's with your kicks?!*”

Faye couldn't help but laugh as her King finally managed to get down from the tree, albeit rather ungracefully.

“Man...” Gio's body was now covered in blossoms, which he carefully began to brush off. “One of these days you guys are going to start treating me like a King. Sometimes I'm so jealous of Old Man Victor and Lil' Leo'. Even Kenny! Their Houses are so mature...”

He sighed heavily as his Queen and Jack shared a laugh at his expense. Even in his frustration, he too couldn't help but laugh.

“So, what's up Gran—” Gio remembered the kick and stopped midway. “—I mean, Jack! Jack Jidan? J.J?”

The old man waved him off and took the last remaining seat of the bench where Gio sat prior.

“For starters, I did some digging into the last batch of Rogues we wound up. Nothing was really out of the ordinary, but something about their testimonies was odd—”

“We already know about that, J.J. Despite not working together they were all caught with data drives with information on various Espers throughout the Houses. Pretty dangerous stuff to have just fallen into their hands.”

Jidan reached out and gave his King a slight thump on the head.

“Yes, but there's something else. This is new information we just got out of all but three of them – they admitted to having been offered the job by *a single man*.”

Both Faye and Gio tensed up, turning to look at their Jack. It seemed that connection was exactly what they had been searching for.

“What? You serious J.J?! How did they get that out of them?”

Jidan glanced away, off to the side, sighing ever so slightly.

“.. It's not something we can be proud of, I'm sure. I heard King Victor had one of his *Sechs* handle the interrogation. Apparently, it was his adoptive daughter who's recently been moving up in Diamonds.”

Faye lowered her head, knowing full well that Victor was capable of such tactics, but it was still a bit unsettling. Gio stood, adjusting his sunglasses as he stared up through the branches of the cherry blossom tree.

“It's not the way we should do things... but, the fact they had the same story...” Gio's mind started racing just a bit.

Jidan's did the same.

“Then it makes sense to think a single person, a single Rogue, is somehow making a move against the Houses—”

“—*Alright boys*, enough of all this serious talk. It's a real downer, you know?” Faye stood beside her King, smiling at both him and their Jack. “If we're going to go over something like this, how about we do it back at HQ?”

Nervously, both Gio and Jidan turned simultaneously. They couldn't help but be a bit flustered at that overpowering smile of hers. Though, she was right, and Jidan stood as well.

“Well then, Miss Faye, *and Gio*...”

“W-Why you saying my name like that, J.J?”

The three shared a momentary laugh and just as quickly were making their way to the nearby street... though, some things were not quite right.

Jidan, Faye, and the many patrons of the park had suddenly stopped moving. Not just them, either, as even the birds overhead and falling cherry blossoms appeared to be caught in a still frame.

“*Huh?*”

Gio didn't even seem to catch on until he realized he was the only one moving. Not only that, but he felt nothing in the air – no energy, no malicious intent. Nothing at all. Almost like it was void of any feeling at all.

He realized that this was far from normal or natural. This was the work of something or someone.

“A Chaotic? No, maybe a Rogue – but where the hell are they?” He stepped forward, ahead of his frozen Housemates, looking around every nook and cranny he could spot. “How the hell does an ability do something like this? Damn it, this isn't looking—”

“—*good?*”

Gio's body tensed up as a voice whispered into his ear, a shadowy figure now floating just behind him. Cloaked in darkness, this figure somehow had a presence powerful enough to cause Gio's entire body to stop moving out of *pure*, unadulterated *fear*.

“I've been waiting for *so* long, *Giotto*...”

The voice was practically inside Gio's head. His body, even with his obvious acknowledgement that this being was an enemy, could still not move but an inch.

“W-Who... *what*... are you?!” It was a struggle just to speak four small words.

Suddenly the figure was gone and Gio's body spun, acting on instinct to strike at the enemy that had been there, but of course his punch passed through nothing but air.

“What the hell are you doing?! You obviously know who I am! Show yourself!” His ferocity was building, as evident by the red glow radiating around his left hand.

“That won't do, *Giotto*. You're not quite *equipped* to fight me like *that*.”

Gio was again paralyzed by fear as the figure appeared behind him once more.

“I want you to *become* a little more interesting, okay? *Giotto*, *my dearest Giotto*... You won't be needing *this* anymore—”

An arm of darkness reached out, a blackened hand grasping Gio's own left hand. Another hand then stretched around Gio from the other side, dangling a silver colored jewel at the end of a golden chain.

Without even realizing it Gio had become fixated on that jewel. Its cosmic aura was suddenly overwhelming. It was as if his entire being, body and soul, were being sucked into the glow it emitted.

“.. What... is...”

“It is your destiny, *dearest Giotto*. Now, take hold—”

Like a puppet dangling from a string Gio's right hand raised upwards, grasping the jewel, and in that instance his body was suddenly sent flying backwards and through the shadowy mass of the mysterious figure.

He hit the ground with a thud, blood beginning to spew from his right hand where it seemed an invisible blade was cutting his flesh. He screamed out, his mind going blank, and his entire body began to be consumed in a swirling mass of light. However, as the seconds passed, that glow began to turn to a black and white haze.

“Gio!!” Faye rushed back, watching as her husband had suddenly gone flying back, but she was then sent flying in the opposite direction as she grew close.

“*What?!*”

Jidan grabbed Faye by the hand, pulling her back to the ground before she got past him. She landed on her feet, ready to fight.

“What is that, Miss Faye?”

“I don't know! He just suddenly— no! *A fall?*”

Clouds gathered overhead in mere moments. What had been a sun filled sky became dark and stormy. Winds howled, swirling around the entirety of District Thirteen. Thunder crashed and shook the earth as lightning fell from the heavens, exploding parts of the nearby area with no remorse for the citizens in its wake.

Such a dramatic environmental change was impossible, right?

“A fall? Gio? Miss Faye, that can't be – he's a King! This isn't... this isn't that. I've never seen anything like this! No fall happens like—”

Gio's body flew upwards, floating just above Faye and Jidan. It then began to pulse wildly with energy, the force of the waves sending the Queen and Jack skidding across the park. Others, children and adults, were sent flying unceremoniously.

The energy being expelled began to affect more than just the surrounding atmosphere. The ground quaked further, fissures ripping through what had seconds ago been a park of tranquility. Underground water and electric lines burst from the ground, ripping up the streets and crashing through storefronts nearby.

Faye had never felt such helplessness.

Her mind was still in shock from the sudden turn, but she began to find her focus as those around them became victims to this phenomenon. Her eyes narrowed, staring up at her husband, and she spoke out to Jidan.

“We have to contain him, alright? Try to get a handle on the nearby area and I'll take care of him!” Her kind expression had turned into one of determination. Her focus was overcoming any shock still in her. “*Now, Fiery!*”

Flames swirled around her feet as she jumped up, using the fire to propel her closer to Gio. No matter the force that pushed her back, she seemed capable of cutting through.

“Affirmative, be careful, Miss Faye!” Jidan spun around, darting towards the street where the weather and underground continued to conspire against the innocent civilians close by. “*Let's go, Tempest!*”

The water that had exploded with enough force to shatter stone soon began to waiver, the flow being forcefully altered by Jidan's *Tempest* ability. He then summoned forth his own water, spinning just behind him, to form high pressure walls between the people nearby and the exploding earth.

At the same time, Faye was able to finally get close enough to reach out to Gio. Her glowing left hand stretched, trying to take hold of his strangely colored right hand, but she was just inches too short.

“Come on, *Fiery!!* Don't you get tired on me *now!!*”

Flames then gathered around both herself and Gio, swirling to form a pillar that went from the ground and all the way high into the clouds above. The fire was spinning constantly, gaining speed, and the amount of said fire was increasing each second.

“*Gio!* Open your eyes! This isn't you, okay?! You've got to fight whatever this is—”

Lightning struck from inside the pillar of fire, searing Faye's left arm and throwing her backwards through her own fire. Even so, despite that, she gave no screams of pain. She became more determined, her ability keeping her in the air and rocketing her back towards Gio.

“I'm not so weak as to back off after that!”

“*You're quite the annoying one, Faye Star – Faye Jaeger!*”

Faye's body tensed just before she entered the pillar. In that moment the familiar shadowy figure who began this chaotic event emerged, standing between the Queen and the King of Hearts.

“!!!”

Faye's body was slow to react, thanks to the feeling that now crept through her veins, but the flames redirected her path to the left and then back towards the pillar just in time for—

“—*Where are you going?*”

The blackened hand grabbed Faye by the throat, stalling her in the air, and her body began to go completely limp.

“What the heck?! Who are yo—!!!” Her voice was lost as his grip tightened. Somehow, her strength to fight back was leaving her body. Flames began to disperse.

“Miss Faye!!” Jidan fled the streets, rushing towards Faye and the figure which held her, but black beams of light soon shot outwards to block the Jack's path. “Be gone, scions of darkness!”

Jidan's body was propelled off the ground and sent flying into the air by a burst of water, while swirling blades of wind fell from above to strike down the black beams. However, the beams were not so easily defeated.

They tore through the wind without a single moment's hesitation.

“There's no way!—”

The beams twirled, ripping through Jidan's wind and water combos, and in just three seconds collided with and skewered his body from head to toe.

“!!!” Faye tried to cry out, but the bloody heap of Jidan was sent flopping backwards to the ground. The hand around her throat continued to suck the life right out of her.

“*Remember this sight, Faye Star. This is the dawning of a new age – and you get to be front row.*”

As the shadowy figure spoke, any remaining flames around Gio faded away entirely. His body was now consumed in a swirling mass of white and black lights.

“Ahh, here we go. *Thank you for bringing him this far, dearest Faye Star.*”

She wanted to call out to Jidan, to Gio, to fight back... but all she could do was watch as the energy around Gio reached a critical mass.

There was a brilliant flash, like the moment a beautifully crafted firework lights up the night sky, and then what remained of District Thirteen was consumed in a destructive wave of flame. In just a few seconds, hundreds, thousands of lives... were silenced.

District Thirteen was almost entirely wiped off the map.

In her last moments Faye could only pretend to reach out, her limp figure crying out. She was worried for Jidan, worried for the deaths that cried out around them all at once, but most importantly she wanted to hold her husband's hand one final time.

She wanted to let him know that she would always be right there to warm his icy grip. That no matter what the future held in those moments, she knew he was strong enough.

« — »

It's up to you to keep going, Gio. You're ready to accept it. This tragedy was not your fault.

Faye's voice was, even now, comforting Gio in what could have been his final moments.

These flames of mine are your protection, but now, you can face it. You no longer need me holding your hand.

While she spoke the truth, Gio was still unsure. He was hesitant. He worried. What could he do in face of the trials ahead? What could he do to right the wrongs of the past, to bring the truth to light?

You've always fought hard. I know, even now, you keep fighting – you're not one to give up.

Sure, she was right. He was stubborn and full of pride. He never liked losing, even in friendly wagers.

That's the man I married. The man I love. You have the strength to change everything, Gio.

The pain was fading away. The fog was clearing. There was a light that enveloped him and consumed his entire being. A light that resonated within his own heart.

Let these flames at last give you their all, to propel you forward! Stand, Giotto!

His eyes were full of color. His breath had quickened. His body that fell limp, numbed by the pain, was full of euphoric sensations brushing across him from head to toe. For the first time in four years it was as if he could finally see the world around him without the past obstructing his view.

Giotto Jaeger was finally waking up.

“.. *Absolution...*”

The lightning blade aiming at his neck had already come to a full stop, and now electrical energies were discharging all around both Victor and Rose. Neither had the chance to question nor to counter, as a luminous silver light engulfed the three combatants.

Onlookers could see that the penthouse suite where flames and lightning had danced, tearing it asunder, had suddenly adopted an eerie calm. A silver light had brought the fighting to an abrupt halt.

The aftermath of the flash was the sight of a new swirling spire of white smoke, resting on what used to be a rooftop. Slowly but surely, though, the smoke was dispersing.

Victor faced forward, seeing his breath take shape with each gasp he took.

The temperature had suddenly dropped well below normal. In fact, it was dipping below freezing and continuing to plummet. It was a feeling that Victor had not felt in over four years.

“.. I never imagined *this* was still in your arsenal, Jaeger. Just how are you capable...?”

Victor's surprise was reflected before him, his face being shown to him in the *wall of ice* that had erected itself high into the sun filled sky above.

The entire top of the skyscraper had been consumed in a clear, diamond-like ice, one which covered every inch of the exposed penthouse – save for Rose, Victor, and Gio. A light snow fall had even centered on the battleground itself, glittering in the sunlight.

The former *King*, the *Wild Card*, now stood comfortably across from both of his former allies. His left hand no longer radiated with a crimson glow. In addition, a rather familiar sight lay resting upon his face. Those seemingly indestructible shades that had become his calling card were back.

Gio no longer looked angry, nor afraid. His emotional seas were calmed.

“Well, you see, *Old Man Victor...* it seems I've finally figured out a few things.”

The mark atop his right hand, once filled with swirling white and black lights, now radiated as a single silver glow. He raised it while pointing to his foes. The light then expanded, stretching outwards, and a single one handed blade formed out of ice in just a fraction of a moment.

It was a speed at which not even Victor's lightning or Rose's plants were able to work.

“Since you're so keen on having things go this way, *Old Man*, I'll have to knock some sense into you both. Then, I'll be saving that *partner* of mine.” His words prompted Victor and Rose to drop into combative stances once more, while Gio readied his own manifested blade. “Now, come forth — ***Absolution Zero!***”

15th CARD | Absolution ZERO

Blue Crimson was a name that struck fear into the *hearts* of evil-doers all across New Eden and beyond. No, it wasn't the name of a superhero battling injustice. Not exactly. 'Blue Crimson' was the nickname given to two individuals; Giotto Jaeger and Faye Star.

Once they entered the Houses and rose to stardom as King and Queen of Hearts, these two made a name for themselves as being one of the strongest duos in New Eden. Their powers as a team were able to topple Chaotics and Rogue Espers with ease. Whether they were up against one or one-hundred, none stood close.

Their dual attacks were so perfect and in sync that onlookers couldn't even tell who was the master of ice and who was the master of flame. For a while, some even thought that Gio wielded the fire and Faye the frost.

That was of course not the case.

Faye's *The Fiery* ability was the top fire elemental ability in all the Houses, while many hailed Gio's *Absolution Zero* as a rival to Victor's *Adamant Charge* for the strongest power in all New Eden.

Who would have thought that these powers would one-day all clash, where so much – even their own lives – were on the line.

“Damn it, why aren't you driving any faster?!” Sera's voice peaked like nails driving into Leon's skull.

“I-It's not easy, you know. Don't worry, Miss Sera, we'll get there soo—”

“—*Soon* doesn't cut it! Just let me drive!!”

Sera tried to reach the steering wheel of the black SUV from the backseat, but Leon's reactive swerving sent her crashing back into her seat.

“Hey, Sera, just let him dri—”

Kenny's voice fell silent as Sera's glare pierced into his soul. Not even his Queen, Lenna, could break him *that* easily.

The trio had commandeered an SUV back at the scene where the hunters were being taken into custody. There was no time to get a helicopter to the slums, and with Sera tagging along as well they needed to get a vehicle. Their obvious destination was, of course, the current battle ground atop Diamonds HQ.

“*Damn it, damn it, damn it!!*”

Sera's fist slammed into her car door, ripping through the interior and tearing through the steel of the car frame. Her physical prowess was obvious, as was her frustration. Gio had been captured by Victor, and Sera thought that the blame could easily rest with her. Perhaps Gio would have escaped if he had left her behind.

The two Kings whom sat in the front of the car knew perfectly well what she was feeling.

Leon and Kenny had both decided to intervene when Gio's bounty was sent out. They were willing to risk it all for someone they felt was innocent in his charges. Willing to bring forth *civil war*. They had seen all the good he had done.

Unfortunately, they arrived on the scene just a few moments too late.

Since Victor and Rose had arrived, taking Gio, there was nothing that could be done then and there. If they had done anything it could have escalated into a massive battle that completely ruptured the structured system of New Eden. The entire city could have collapsed in on itself.

They had been willing to start a civil war, but at the one moment they had to act they hesitated. Their resolve to face their fellow Kings weakened at the last possible instant.

Now, news of the battle atop Diamonds HQ had spread to all Houses. A State of Emergency had been signaled throughout the city. Civilians were told to stay in their homes as Espers flooded the streets, all Houses converging on the warzone.

In looking to avoid a massive battle they were now driving towards one.

“Look!! There!!”

Sera pointed out the front windshield, spotting the crystal spire resting atop the penthouse suite at Diamonds. She even spotted the sparks of lightning lashing out from the structure.

Then, they all noticed the ice glistening in the light of morning.

“What is that? Is that... *snow*?” Her anger momentarily gave way to confusion.

Sera had no idea about Gio's own personal power, but the sight of it caused both Leon and Kenny to share a worried gaze. The two of them had no idea if seeing that power unleashed was a good or bad thing.

For a certainty it did mean one thing – the battle above was being waged by two of the strongest forces on record.

« — »

Spears of lightning gathered like hornets from a rattled nest. They filled the open air in massive numbers, surrounding Gio and leaving him with no escape. The feat was incredible and the power displayed nearly unmatched, but the shade wearer remained still.

“It matters not if you use that power of old, Jaeger. Even with it you are still no match for two Kings, *let alone my Adamant Charge!*”

Lightning spears rushed, cutting through the air, while Rose used the chance to raise up a herd of thorn whips through the ice-covered floor. Each vine grew larger than the last, the thorns that rested upon them being the strongest Rose could

muster. The thorns were not only capable of cutting through steel like tissue paper, but the poison which now coated them was lethal to even Chaotics.

The dual attack from above and below seemed sure to spell the Wild Card's doom.

“*Frost!*”

Gio spun his body around, slashing his ice blade across the ground and then swinging upwards – a move that triggered blue and white lights mixing together in a cross-shaped pattern, spreading out and engulfing the three separate fighters.

Victor and Rose reacted perfectly, leaping back to dodge the wave of ice that consumed where they just were.

.. Though, they didn't exactly expect that the ice would have been strong enough to stop both their attacks.

Surrounding Gio was a spiked wall of ice, one which didn't seem to crack whatsoever under the mighty force of Victor's lightning. Even the vines that shredded steel were captured, frozen in place by the frost magic that burst forth.

The crystal formation then scattered to the winds like a snow flurry. Gio stepped forth, seemingly unfazed by the joint attacks. It was as if his physical condition was entirely different.

Closer examination showed his wounds from before that had bled so considerably were now covered by a thin layer of ice. Gio had stopped his blood loss by freezing those parts of his body. A temporary fix at best.

“It's going to take a bit more than that, *Old Ma*—”

Victor didn't give him the chance to speak further, rushing forward with lightning blade in hand. He slashed downwards, aiming to cut through Gio from the shoulder down, but spires of ice exploded upwards and slammed into the Diamond King.

Ice sliced against Victor's forearm, further damage only being avoided by his quick retreat back.

“Father!”

Rose gathered her own personal thorn whip in her hand, lashing out, but a slash of Gio's sword sent spears of ice flying at her path. She wasn't backing down that easily.

“Not good enough, *Rogue!*”

Rose followed the rules of dip, duck, and dodge. The flying spears, while fast and plentiful, were avoided. She had a clear shot at Gio!

“!!!”

Gio used the time she had to dodge to form a second blade of ice, now wielding two identical one handed swords. He then rushed to meet Rose head on, slashing with both weapons as her whip spun with a mind of its own. Ice chipped

away from the swords, showing the incredible cutting power of Rose's whip, but the blades were rapidly repaired within a second of being damaged.

The speed at which the magical frost moved and formed was incredible.

Back behind Rose, Victor's body gave off a flash of blue light. He then sprinted forward, as if charging at his daughter's back, but his entire body then burst into the very lightning that he wielded. It bounced wildly around the ruined home until his body flashed back into existence at Gio's blindside.

"Giotto!!" Victor cried out, his emotions overcoming his typically calm demeanor, and his bloodied arm cut towards Gio's back.

Lightning sparked furiously, as a constant barrage of electricity coursed through the air.

The shade wearer then pivoted, using one sword to match Rose's whip and another to meet Victor's blade head on. The change in position caused Gio to momentarily have his defense pushed back, but he recovered and showed his dexterity. He wasn't going to let them get the best of him.

"You cannot best the *both* of us! Today your destructive, cursed presence, comes to an end!"

Victor was determined to give it his all in the end, but even with his determination and desire to see it through, he felt a momentary hesitation. He remembered the words that his fellow Kings spoke in defense of Gio. Images of a past with Giotto, in which Victor saw him as a King not unlike himself, came flooding back to him.

Even so, he had to press on. He had come too far to stop now.

"Father! We have to use it, there is no other way!" Rose pleaded, her own whip continuing to grind against the blade of ice that halted her progress so tirelessly.

Victor gave a sudden, reassuring nod.

Just what *it* was remained to be seen, but clearly the two of them had something up their sleeve. In this battle that was so drastically turned in the other direction they needed to use whatever they had in the tank.

"I won't allow you to continue your existence!" Victor's momentary lapse in confidence was replaced by that Diamond willpower of his. He knew what he had to do and his daughter was here to give him that push he needed. "If it calls for it, I shall unleash *all that I have*—"

Those words were like a trigger, or perhaps a warning.

Gio frantically pushed off the ground backwards, flipping quickly as his blades continued to match his opponents' movements, and his feet landed against a newly formed wall of ice perpendicular to the ground. His body that should have fallen remained stationary, surely with his feet frozen to that wall.

No time left, I need to end this now, Gio's own thoughts were as frantic as his sudden moves.

The odd tactic left a single moment's hesitation from the two Kings and their attacks.

It was an opening that Gio would take full advantage of before his enemy could play their *trump card*.

He pushed off his ice wall, adjusting both swords to extend outwards and away from his body while his arms were tucked close.

“*Cyclonic Frost!*”

His body then spun rapidly like the name cyclonic suggested, and as his blades trailed in the air they released pulsing waves of ice. These flashes of silvery light shot outwards, piercing everything and anything in their path for a fifty-foot radius. Bursts of ice spewed forth and ripped through any parts of the penthouse that remained, skewering the ground and roof alike. The spires of ice reached high into the sky.

This wasn't just a casual attack. It was a finishing move meant to end the fight before it had the chance to spin further out of control.

For those watching, the crystal clear ice which continued to manifest looked almost like a series of diamond towers atop what was in fact the Diamonds HQ.

Gio's own body was lost in the initial chaos, but twenty or so seconds later he landed comfortably on the other side of the ruined floor. It was about sixty or so feet from where his attack had begun.

He did well to hide his fatigue. The urge to fall to his knees was overwhelming.

Not only were his wounds and the fight dragging him down, but his own maneuvers took a toll. His Absolution Zero ability had resurfaced in his arsenal and clearly he was stronger for it, but he also hadn't used it in years. This power was almost new to him and using it was difficult.

That was why he poured just about everything he had into his last attack. If he could finish it, especially before the Kings used their own tricks, perhaps that would bring this battle to a close. He had to hope his attack succeeded or he might not have lasted long enough to try it again.

Fortunately, both Victor and Rose had fallen victim to the raging cyclone of ice. Two figures, two Kings, lay frozen in the wake of Gio's assault. The lord of lightning and his daughter were statues that marked their defeat.

If it had been just a few moments later, perhaps even sooner than that, Gio would probably be the one in their position. That secret weapon of theirs was lying in wait and Victor had been driven just far enough into that wall to use it. The frantic finisher seemed to work.

Now it was time to let the curtain fall. The show was over.

“.. *Release.*”

His command resonated with the ice which covered the rooftop. Like a fine set of glassware dropping to the floor, all of the beautiful frost and snow scattered to the winds, shattering in an instant. It freed both Rose and Victor as well, both of whom flopped to the ruptured ground at their feet.

In what was seemingly a handicap match, two Kings against a single man, Gio emerged victorious. His techniques, his *Absolution Zero*, proving to be absolute in its power. For the most part, at least.

There was no question that Gio wanted to end the fight as quickly as possible. Once his power returned to him and he could feel that edge he possessed, he knew he had to take advantage. Because he knew a secret that few others knew about the Kings of New Eden – that their boundless strength was, in fact, bound.

When one became a King it signaled their ascension to a throne of power, but it also meant they themselves possessed unrivaled strength. This strength, if left unchecked, could spell certain disaster for the city itself. Any battle had the potential to have their power spill over.

Hence the *limiter* placed on Kings. A limiter that had to be removed.

It wasn't terribly difficult to do, not in the slightest, but to do so was dangerous. Especially in the heat of battle. All at once that energy would come to them – and potentially it could become wild and destructive.

Gio acted before such an event could take place. A few moments later and the results would have been reversed.

The downed Kings remained motionless, save for the slight elevation in their chest that signaled they were both alive.

The fight was over.

Only the occasional snowflake remained, twirling around the destruction.

This was the strength which Gio possessed. A power that was as destructive and merciless as it was beautiful and captivating. *Absolution Zero*, his original ability, was one which drew the attention of all other Espers. It wasn't even just about the overall strength.

What was truly amusing about *Absolution Zero* was the seemingly bottomless well of energy within Gio. This energy had been stretched to its limits time and time again, but each time it seemed to grow exponentially. When he hit a wall he would suddenly rebound and smash right through it. Time and time again this process continued.

It was as if Gio's greatest strength, a power that lay within him before he became the Wild Card, was his near boundless potential. An energy coursing through his entire being unlike most others. Energy that was truly—

“—*Limitless*. You truly are one of *limitless* potential, *dearest Giotto...*”

Gio's body moved without him even thinking. He spun, slashing both ice blades in unison – but they were shattered by the outstretched hands of the cloaked figure now standing before him.

“Y-You—”

Gio moved as he spoke, forming two fresh blades once more, but their upwards slashing motion was halted as they shattered once more. Despair was setting in.

“You *remembered*, yes? Just as I had hoped...”

The plan of attack changed, bringing with it spires of ice that shot upwards from the ground as Gio stepped towards the figure. This time the enemy phased through the attack entirely, his body becoming a black smoke that dispersed into the air.

“What the hell *are* you?!”

His body tensed as the blackened hand reached out, running gently across his back.

“I am the one who brought *you* to the *here and now*. It was such a *long* game, but the pawns finally *pranced to the finish*.”

Gio had become incapacitated, a feeling that he now fully remembered from four years ago. This enemy, surely the same from back then, couldn't be human. It wasn't possible. Its voice and presence were enough to paralyze others with fear. He couldn't remember the details from back then and he couldn't even piece together the entire scene from it, but he remembered this feeling.

It didn't appear to be an Esper ability, or at least, there wasn't one like this on record. The truth was, though, that such a feat didn't *feel* like an ability. There was little doubt that this effect was solely due to the being's presence. It was preposterous to think that a human or even an Esper could do such a thing.

Despite the feeling that disabled him, Gio knew this was the one – the same being who brought about his transformation into the Wild Card.

The same one who took everything from him.

“I know it might be *a tad difficult* to show how you're really feeling, *dearest Giotto*, but I want you to know we're *finally* moving forward. *Together* this time.”

The cloaked figure stepped around Gio, leaving him and walking to stand over the defeated Kings. He then turned back while pointing his hands down at the fallen foes.

“These two served my needs well, bringing out that *power* of yours... but I know they must have caused you a great deal of *distress*. Since their usefulness to me is over, *dearest Giotto*, how would you like me to *kill* them both as a *show of good faith*?”

Gio tried to speak, but he couldn't muster the words.

It wasn't that he wanted them to be struck down or even that he was hesitant. It was his voice that was lost. The fear which gripped him tight was quite literally choking him.

That silence seemed to give the cloaked being all the permission he needed.

Blades of blackened light burst forth from his sleeves, stretching out and merging with his charcoal colored hands. The blades of black light were highly concentrated energy and their radiating power could be felt pulsing all around the four figures.

It was clear that this energy the figure used was of an incredibly high level. Perhaps even greater than Victor's lightning or Gio's ice.

“As you wish, *dearest Giotto*—”

The cloaked figure ducked down, raising both blades of light upwards. He then snickered, ever so slightly, as his blades slashed mercilessly downwards at the necks of the fallen.

An execution fit for a King, as *twin geysers of red erupted*.

16th CARD | The Serpent

A pool of blood had formed atop the jagged, open air penthouse roof. A constant humming still persisted in the air, the source of which were the twin blackened blades of light striking flesh. The blades both made contact, but unfortunately for the cloaked figure he had not quite found his mark.

“.. It would be a lie if I were to tell you I *expected* such a response. For you to move in a way *like that* is beyond even my expectations. I'm impressed, *dearest Giotto.*”

Gio's already damaged body had somehow overcome the fear that held him prisoner. He had been able to push his body, rushing forward in the instant before the blades struck Victor and Rose. Though, instead of blocking with his own blades, he found himself using his body.

It wasn't that he didn't want to use his weapons, even if they had been easily disposed of moments before. The fact was he couldn't move his body entirely as he wanted. His arms didn't listen and the only solution was to use his own flesh as a shield.

A blade of black light now rested deep in his right shoulder, humming ever so quietly as the energy pulsed. The maneuver protected Victor. The second blade was 'grasped' awkwardly in Gio's own left hand in order to protect Rose. Truthfully, grasped was the wrong word – his hand merely blocked it.

If the enemy had sliced with even another fraction of pressure, it was a certainty that Gio would have lost both his hand and an arm. The only reason either remained was due to that last moment's hesitation mid-swing.

“*Why* did you do such a thing, *dearest Giotto?* These two have driven you into a corner. Not *only* that, but they potentially brought about the death of your *precious partner*. It seems rather... *strange*—”

“— I don't give a damn what you think!”

Frost covered the ground before Gio as spires shot upwards at the figure, a move which caused the smoky figure to once again disperse.

“!!!” Gio gasped as the blades vanished from his open wounds and he nearly collapsed forward.

Blood was beginning to flow rapidly from his shoulder wound. There was no doubt that the injury was a potentially fatal one, due to the size. His breathing grew tense, fighting the oncoming shock and pain. Oxygen was a luxury.

Ice formed over his left hand, sealing the wound as best as he could. The same was done for the shoulder injury, but the wound was so severe that his right arm

had become useless. Using ice to potentially stop him from bleeding out was a tried and true method, but it came too late. Or the damage had simply already been done.

He had already lost far too much blood to keep fighting normally. Between the fight with Kings and the severity of this most recent attack, he was at the end of his rope. Time was ticking away on just how long he could stay conscious.

His vision was fading and his breath was coming to a crawl. His own body was shutting down.

“It's *clear to see* you aren't well.”

A blackened hand rested on the ice covered shoulder of Gio. He found himself once again unable to move, but this time it was more so to his body's weakened disposition. Luckily he could still glare upwards through his shades and right into the shadows before him.

It was a look of killing intent.

“I don't quite understand that *anger*. You see, I gave you the *greatest gift* that *anyone* could receive. Your power as a, what do *they* call it – *Wild Card*? It is boundless!” His voice, its voice, continued to strain the senses.

Like a whisper, but everywhere all at once. A lingering force that wriggled its way into the minds of any who would listen.

“*No power can top it, not even the foolish Aces watching over this paradise from behind closed doors.*”

Gio didn't care about whatever this guy was saying. The only thing this so-called gift gave him was the death of those closest to him, as well as countless others whose only crime was going about their daily lives. The power of the Wild Card was nothing more than a curse plaguing him. He now thought that maybe Victor was right, in the sense that this power was a disease that needed to be cleansed.

Even so, no matter the painful memories that lingered, Gio's body began to twitch. He was trying to raise up to at least his knees. He was trying to fight back. Not even his circling self-doubt could stave off his survival instinct.

“I don't care... for whatever you have to give. The *only* thing I want is—”

“— *your loving wife back? Friends? Peace? Love? Oh, dearest Giotto, you don't know what you want.*”

Those words triggered his body to jerk forward as his bloodied, frozen fist, went flying in a punch that was far too telegraphed.

“I know just fine! Because of you, they're gone! I'll *kill* you, I'll *kill* you, whoever or whatever you are I'll *rip your fucking head off*—”

A force sent Gio's body went flying forward before he could spin around at his foe. He bounced once through glass and blood, skidding across the ground. The figure's own power was mighty. He possessed a telekinetic force, as well as the

ability to seemingly become incorporeal. Not to mention the ability to manipulate energy and create an atmosphere that paralyzed others.

“.. Don't make me angry, *Gi-o-tto*.”

The figure vanished and appeared again, this time in front of Gio who lay flat on his stomach, unable to stand.

“..The hell are you... what do you want...” His voice was fading.

“*Oh*, silly me. I suppose you wouldn't know, *would you?* That's quite alright, *dearest Giotto*. I forgive you even if no one else will. For now, you may simply call me...” He hesitated, thinking carefully, as if accessing a part of his memory that was locked away. “Hmmm, what would be an *interesting name* – Oh! There *was* one. Something to match *the snake they made me out to be.*”

Once again he stroked the cheek of his prey, as if petting the head of a dying dog about to be put down.

“I believe the name... *yes, yes* – it was *Naga*. A *fine* name for one such as I, wouldn't you agree?”

The so-called Naga managed another snicker. This really was like a game to him – a game which he was winning by near insurmountable odds. He seemed to take a sick pleasure in playing such a villainous role. It was as if the cliché act was just a performance on stage.

“As for what I want? Oh no, *dearest Giotto* – it's what *we* want. That which will bring about *the reincarnation* of this world – this *paradise* that so many wander blindly in. To *change the world*. That is what *we* want, *dearest Giotto.*”

Naga's body began to float upwards, levitating a few feet off the ground and above Gio.

“To do that, however, I need you to do something for me.” He chuckled, amused by his own speech as he paced through the air as if walking along the ground.

“Something for... you? Tell me then, *psychopath*, is that before or after *I slit your throa—*”

Gio's body was flipped over by that same unseen force, held down against the ground, and then flung backwards into a lonely pillar already crumbling. His body slammed into it hard but the pillar remained.

He was then pulled forward, back to where he had been, and thrown once again like a ragdoll – this time he slammed through the concrete, bones giving an audible crack, and he dropped to the floor.

Naga acted like nothing had happened at all.

“*Do you remember the days of old?* When that place you now call home was more than just a degenerate wasteland? And I'm talking, of course, *before* you and your *flowers* dressed it up.”

Of course Gio remembered, but he had no idea why it mattered. District Thirteen had been a slum since Gio was a young child. Sure, before then it had been a normal district like any other, which was part of why he and Leon tried to restore it seven years ago. But why would it matter? To bring such a thing up now was so out of place. He didn't even bother mustering a nod, refusing to play these pointless games.

His body wasn't exactly responding to him, anyway.

".. No response, *worry not*. I'm *sure* you remember, but what I'm sure you've *forgotten* is when it all changed." Naga floated back down, touching down on the ground and kneeling just in front of Gio. "*Abandoned* by the Houses, but the reason was *never* explained. Not the *real* reason. You see, there was *something* there within the bowels of Thirteen."

Gio managed to lift his head up ever so slightly and look as Naga revealed *that crystal*. What had been locked away as a forgotten memory was now fresh in his mind. The crystal clad in silver light, that was no bigger than a small rock, which dangled from a golden chain. It was the same one which began his despair four years ago.

This was the crystal which, as far as Gio could tell, changed him into the Wild Card.

"What you *see* here is what *they* never wanted you to. This is from what lay beneath *paradise*. The *apple* for which we may find sustenance. A *single shard* from a *world of limitless power*. A power that could *change the world*, one to free mortals from their cage."

Those words didn't change much.

Who cared if some power was found there? A story of fiction hardly seemed possible of changing the world so drastically. It was obvious that this Naga was trying to further string Gio along, slowly but surely, and the latter wasn't going to let that happen.

That being said, there was a part which caught Gio's attention.

The idea that the crystal dangling above his head was only a *single shard* from this 'world of limitless power.' Such a choice of words inferred that the power of the Wild Card, the same which sent Gio down this road, was a percent of a percent in terms of the overall potency of whatever lay hidden there.

When thinking about it like that Gio couldn't help but be more alert, even as his consciousness faded more with each passing second. Something with that amount of energy could potentially be just as Naga said. It could even be the power to *preserve* or to *destroy* paradise in one fell swoop.

Gio's voice, weak and raspy, did its best to be heard.

"Why bother... telling *me*?"

Naga placed the necklace back into his shadowy cloak. He then reached out, gently stroking Gio's cheek in an almost seductive way.

“Dearest Giotto, poor, sweet boy, don’t you remember? You, who once picked the forbidden fruit...”

“.. W-What?” He tried to move his body but it wasn't to be.

“You were *so* young, so perhaps you wouldn't remember perfectly.” Naga stood back up as he spoke. “Beneath this *holy land*, a small team worked *so very tirelessly* to better understand the power that rested within Espers. Such a *noble* task.”

Naga’s black, cloud-like presence began to spread, enveloping him and his prey.

“How were *humans* able to become *Espers*? What was the *source* of their power? *Their evolution*? What were the creatures which followed them, bringing with them only *chaos*? What lay beyond the realm of *possibility*? Only the *brave*, or perhaps, the *foolish* dared to ask.”

Gio wanted to speak out but he struggled to even see Naga directly in front of him. Naga's blackened disposition blended together with the smoke. His own vision became blurry and the void of unconsciousness crept in.

Naga realized that his audience was reaching its physical limit. Luckily he had just enough time.

“Dearest Giotto, it pains me that you've forgotten so much. Without you there would be no us.” Naga sounded as if he was salivating, remembering a good meal. “After all, not even those who tried to answer the questions could find truth without *you* there to guide them. Those who gave *life to the old you* – the *birth parents* of you and your *precious* companions.”

To be fair, Gio couldn't remember his parents very well. He was nine years old when they passed, so he had some fond memories from before then, but fifteen years later he struggled to remember their faces or even their voices. He certainly didn't remember anything like what Naga was describing, either.

He did know they were working on something related to Esper origins, which wasn't some secret. They were researchers and they frequently worked on learning about Espers, Chaotics, and how they came to be in this world. Not only that, but they worked with both Leon and Faye's parents. The six of them were close friends and coworkers. All of them were the top in their respective fields.

Such a team of researchers being close, being friends, was surely how their own children became such good friends.

Their renown made it quite a news worthy headline when they all fell victim to an accident in their field lab, leaving their children as orphans. The accident was said to be caused by an experiment and the arrival of an S-Rank Chaotic, one which the non-combatant researchers had little hope in besting.

Coincidentally it was around the same time that District Thirteen became abandoned.

Their deaths contributed to the desertion of Thirteen. The district was deemed unfit to live in, said to be unsafe, leading to it becoming a slum. Whether this was due to the experiments the team performed or some other phenomenon was unclear, but there was a noticeable rise in Chaotic activity that not even the Houses were prepared for.

“*The Jaegers, Krugers, Stars – the birth parents that you lost were all working to uncover truth and they paid with it in full with their lives. Do you understand what I mean by that, dearest Giotto?*”

What Naga was inferring was obvious, but Gio wasn't buying it. He was suggesting that their deaths were a toll they had to pay to learn something forbidden – that they were essentially killed in an elaborate cover-up. Gio wouldn't put it past anyone to do such a thing, but it seemed farfetched to have a discovery on Espers covered up by killing off an entire research team.

It was so over the top that it was impossible.

Gio would have said something but his voice was gone. It was a miracle he still remained conscious after all this time. Naga realized it and rushed to continue his story. Time seemed to be against him.

“*Dearest Giotto, power to change the world – that is what the truth grants. A truth that you yourself set this world down. The proof of which I hold now. This is the fruit of our labor I want to share with you! Together, dearest Giotto, we can undo a century of lies – the world that is waiting for us is just beyond the shadows!*”

Naga shouted out for the first time, his voice carrying across the rooftops all around them.

“But we must have *the tree*, not simply a single piece of *fruit*.” He then laughed, bellowing out into the world without any care for keeping quiet. To finally tell Gio those words appeared to drive him into a feeling of euphoria.

In a wild frenzy he reached out, palming Gio's head and forcefully lifting him up off the ground.

Underneath that cloak of shadows was surely a smile that stretched from cheek to cheek as his sadistic acts excited him further.

“This is something I— no, *we*, have waited years for! A *dawning* of the new age has *finally* come! With your knowledge to lead us and the power of the Wild Card, we can change the world *together*—”

Gio's body mustered a single response; sending a thick wad of spit into Naga's hood and the void beneath it. His own smile, bloody and crooked, then grew.

Even in his physical state he was admiring his own defiant attitude despite his body being broken.

Naga remained silent, not yet moving or speaking. He was taken aback by the spit. For the first time since the last time, he was surprised.

“.. *I must say, you remain difficult to the very end.*”

Naga's free hand emerged and blackened lights expanded outwards in the shape of a familiar blade. He then pulled back the sword, pointing the tip towards Gio's neck. It looked like he was prepared to kill in retaliation.

After a momentary pause the blade then shifted targets, instead piercing through the air and slamming viciously into Gio's one good shoulder. The impact easily splintered bone.

The Wild Card was already severely wounded on his right shoulder, being close to unconsciousness for a number of minutes now, and with the new wound he couldn't even scream. A grimace washed over his face as the rosy color left his cheeks.

The blade of light vanished, and in its absence blood flowed unhindered.

“Perhaps... *dearest, dearest Giotto*, you will learn. Perhaps now is not the time – *but that time will come*. This world will be *liberated*, freed to walk into the new age, and *you* will be there at my side. *No*, not at my side. *You* shall lead *us both* to the end.”

Naga released his grip on Gio's head and watched his body flop to the ground. He was out cold.

“Do your best to *survive* until then, *dearest Giotto*, and know that I will *always* be right here... *pushing you ever forward.*”

“Gio!!” Sera's voice called out from the floors below as she crawled frantically up through debris to try and reach the rooftop.

“Gio, hey, Gio!” Ken muscled his way through the wreckage alongside Leon, both trailing just behind Sera.

The three had finally arrive on the scene and rushed to the top of the building on foot. Other Espers from Diamonds and Hearts were also beginning to make it through, hoping to reach their Kings.

Battle scars took the shape of metal beams and collapsed stone blocking most entry ways to the top. The elevator was without a doubt out of order. The only way to the penthouse was through the wreckage or around it, the latter of which required either flight or a parkour extremist.

The feisty young girl leading the charge would be as extreme as need be.

Sera took hold of some exposed wiring cleared from the power grid and quickly began pulling herself upwards. The makeshift rope took her through

exposed holes in the corridors leading upwards, but they also saw her dangling from sixty floors off the ground with open air beneath her once or twice.

Luckily she was just a few feet from the sight of the defeated Kings and Gio.

Even with her rush, that quickened pace came to a screeching halt when she noticed the crimson liquid running along the building's remains from above her. The sight of blood in such a quantity was temporarily paralyzing. It may or may not have been Gio's, but her mind saw it as his.

That idiot, that idiot, that idiot!!

She pulled harder amid her hesitation, climbing to the top of the last set of cables as fast as her body was able. She knew that whatever the situation up top they needed to get help there immediately.

Finally, she pulled herself to the top floor, scrapping her elbows across glass and stone.

“You guys, over here, *now!* Gio's, Gio is—”

Sera's deep blue eyes rested on the sight of her partner's slumped over body and the blood flowing from his open wounds – but she also saw the shadowy figure, Naga, standing above him.

“Who the hell are you!”

Sera's arms launched her entire body onto the top floor where her feet dug in once she touched solid ground, propelling her in a mad sprint to take out Naga with a mighty fist. She knew that whoever this guy was, he was the enemy. Her question to him was more rhetorical.

That battle instinct of hers was scary.

So scary, in fact, that she seemed completely immune to whatever fear this Naga was capable of driving those around him mad with.

“You can move *freely?* — Ahhh, Sera... Noel? *That's* your name, right? Take good care of my *dearest Giotto* for me, okay?”

Naga's body dissipated into black smoke just as Sera's fist slammed through him. There was no doubt she missed, but she didn't even stop to pout. She stopped sprinting, nearly slipping on the puddle of blood beneath her feet, and she dropped to her knees to try and apply pressure to Gio's wound.

The blood flow slowed, but it wasn't just because of the pressure she applied. His blood levels were beyond critical. The fact Gio was still alive was a supernatural occurrence, as a normal human would have died long ago.

“Miss Sera! Where is—”

Leon had his answer as he and Ken emerged atop the roof, rushing to their friend's side.

Espers from the Houses had arrived as well, spread out atop the roof and damaged floors. It looked like a number of them were going to the aid of Victor

and Rose, but some were hesitant to go near Giotto. Perhaps out of their own fear for what Wild Card was capable, even if he was bleeding out before them.

Both Kings were severely wounded but neither appeared to be in critical condition based on injuries alone.

It even appeared after a closer look that Victor's consciousness had at some point returned.

Gio, on the other hand, was barely alive.

"We have to do something, *damnit!!* The hospital, somewhere, anywhere – *hell*, aren't one of you able to heal or something?!"

Sera frantically continued to cover Gio's wound, her own hands and body stained with his blood.

"Get back Sera, quickly—" Ken's mark of the House as King of Clubs appeared, a dark green glow pulsating. Reaching out with his right hand he amassed swirling shadows that encased the ground just below Gio. "—Leon, Spades is closer, right?"

Leon quickly nodded, grabbing Sera by the shoulder and pulling her beside Ken.

"Are you sure about this, Ken? You've rarely ever used—"

Kenny's frantic nod was all the assurance Leon needed.

"*What are you doing?! Let me go, I have to stop the bleeding—!!*"

"Trust us, Miss Sera! Ken, *now!*"

"Right, hang on you two – this isn't normally done like this!"

The shadows then spread further upwards to nearly twelve-foot high. They expanded, encasing Leon, Ken, Sera, and of course the body of Gio.

A brief surge of energy shot outwards from the mass of shadows and then the group of four was gone. The power of King Kenny Blume, *The Reaper*, had warped the group through shadow. Even if he wasn't the kind of person to use his power for teleportation, it seemed to be something that was possible.

In a rush to save Gio's fading life they had no choice but to hope they were quick enough, but it was more likely than not that he would be too far gone to save. How many second chances could one person get?

Meanwhile, Espers tending to their Kings were quick to get Rose on a makeshift stretcher, but Victor was somehow able to motion away his House. He wished to stand under his own power, ignoring the help that came to him. There was a look upon his face that didn't seem to match his situation.

You see, Victor had overheard most of the conversation between Gio and Naga. He even witnessed the prelude to Gio's own collapse in which Victor was protected by that same man he was trying to kill shortly before.

The words that his so-called partner had spoken, the actions he had taken, they were all fresh in his mind. Naga's plan was to dupe even the mightiest of the Kings.

“There's no... *There's no way that I was fooled by such a simpleton.*”

“Sire! Please, you need medical he—”

A lone Duo rank, trying to aide his King, was forcefully grabbed by the collar and tossed aside.

“What I *need*, Duo, is my home repaired... But before that, I must pay a visit to Central. Then, to Spades. There is much that must be done...” Victor's knees began to shake and his vision suddenly waivered.

His body instinctively took hold of the remnants of a nearby wall. His own blood was beginning to flow a bit excessively. Not only did the battle take a rather ludicrous toll, but it felt like there was something else weighing him down. Perhaps he wasn't as young as he used to be.

“Damn this body...”

“*King Ferris!!*”

Victor's own frame finally gave way as his brief spout of consciousness lost the fight to go on. Like the others around him, his physical condition was indeed dire.

What was done, however, was done.

There was no question of the coming storm.

The Aces, The Kings, they all needed to be alert – Naga, whomever or whatever he was, had slithered his way into their garden. In doing so he achieved what no other force had ever done – two Kings were out of commission. This being had manipulated events to their liking. New Eden itself was now in a state of emergency.

That wasn't the only problem, either. While Rose and Victor were both out, so was Giotto.

Despite having reawakened his own powers of four years ago, despite growing in strength, he was now hanging on to life by an unraveling thread.

He had also, in some way, remembered what happened to cause his change. The fact that his fall was not a fall at all. These last few years that were spent at odds with the Houses, filled with misconceptions and false assumptions, were all for naught.

Now was a time that the two sides could rebuild their relationship, to work together, and to find out the motives of the mysterious foe calling himself Naga. Luckily they had a lead and a number of clues – but the biggest lie in a hospital bed, fighting to survive alongside two Kings.

Giotto, according to Naga's perhaps deranged speech, had a secret to what happened in District Thirteen tucked away in his memories. He even perhaps had the knowledge of what happened to his parents, an event that he never even thought to question once in the fifteen years' since.

The mystery of Gio's fall had perhaps been solved to an extent, but countless more questions were now raining down.

Change, perhaps both good and bad, was on the horizon – but in order to reach it, New Eden would have to face its toughest turmoil yet. The coming storm was far from passing. It would take more than the might of a lone hero to see things through to the end.

The serpent who bore the forbidden fruit had finally revealed himself within the garden.

Only together could the Espers of Eden hope to survive what lay ahead.

Afterword —

It took a lot longer than I ever intended, but Wild Card was finally released. There's still a lot of improvements to be had a long road ahead, but I hope that the work can be enjoyed. I have a lot of growing to do as a writer and this has been a very difficult project to even get to this point – one which I am not satisfied with.

Updates will continue for Volume One, and Volume Two will be on the way sooner rather than later. I hope that everyone can look forward to it!

~ Volume One End ~