

## THE HAND YOU'RE DEALT

Thomas Caard knew that he was special at six years old, when his mother repeated such a thing to him day and night, reassuring him that some day he would be someone important.

This was, of course, ironic, as Thomas thought of her as being remarkably unimportant, and worth little note.

If someone were to bring her up years down the line and ask Thomas, "Aren't you related to that scullery maid who worked in the Palace of Spades and chopped up slop for the pigs and horses, the one that could not read or write?" Thomas would scoff. He did not think of her as his mother, nor any relative of note, but rather just a woman beneath him, one who had promised him the world and failed to understand that the world did not lie in hand-me-down clothes or extra portions of meat, but rather in the hands of those who lived in fancy palaces and sat on great big thrones.

She would cry when he informed her of this at fifteen, then again when, at sixteen, Thomas informed her that while other

people could indeed be special, he himself was more special than most.

This was because Thomas was great at anticipating a need.

Take, for example, the sad, dumpy little house cat who was known as the Prince of Spades.

Claude spent day and night alone or trailing after his older brothers, and while he was overjoyed when news came that there would be a Prince of Hearts whom Claude's mother Queen Nephel expected him to look after, a younger brother was far from a friend.

And so Thomas became his friend. Even though he did find the mangy little cat to be nothing more than an annoyance; at the very least, being Claude's friend meant nicer clothing and better food. It meant horseback riding and reading lessons spent with the prince, lessons in political strategy and indulgences that came from another world, the great, glorious Oxford where the King of Cards used to disappear to.

Being Claude's friend also meant that he was able to anticipate when a new Joker was needed by the King of Cards, the old one having been bit in two, and then position himself for such a title. "We could be equals, Claude," Thomas said one night, and thus began the Prince of Spades' endless quest to see Thomas announced Joker.

It worked.

And yet again, with his new position came opportunity.

Only this time, opportunity came in the form of the photo of a girl. "That is Alice," Claude said with a roll of his eyes, "and Fitzgerald is obsessed with her." Thomas made note to remember her face, just as he made note to become closer with her father, the Master of Time; if only so that someday, he could somehow become more special.

But then Reginald Grey rejected him, shaking his head at the young man and telling him he was too rough when Claude

and him played. And then again, that he was too brash when dismissing Claude's annoyingly incapable younger brother. And that the way that he talked about others wasn't all that nice, and that Claude was not a pet, and that he, Reginald Grey, would not be teaching Thomas a thing about clocks and how they worked, as he knew a bad idea when he saw one.

And all of that wrapped up together and slapped with a bow is how Thomas Caard ended up where he was, standing outside the Clocktower on a seemingly average day, with the hour hand of a clock in his fist and hatred in his eyes.

Actually, it was not quite how he ended up there, but it was, notably, part of it.

The largest reason why Thomas had ended up outside of the Clock Tower that fateful day was a conversation held two years prior, in which Cornelius Thames had drunkenly informed him that he should like to die with his best friend Reginald, and if he was gone, Thomas should be sure that the two would end up in the same place.

Of course, once sober and of sound mind, Cornelius had always behave tensely around Thomas following that, eventually relenting two days before the stroke that led to his death and requesting that Thomas come visit him at his sick bed. But Thomas had denied him, knowing exactly the reason why Cornelius requested what he did, not wishing to hear the man recant his wish.

Largely because if Cornelius didn't recant his wish, then Thomas did not have to be at fault for it all, and he could give the old man what he had coming to him without a second thought.

Which was exactly what he was doing then.

It was perfect, everything about it. It was raining heavily, the door was unlocked, and William was drunk. Thomas knew those final two facts without even having to check, because

William was always drunk, and the door was always unlocked, largely because William always forgot to lock it, which was good, because that meant that William would blame himself, and if William blamed himself, then others would as well.

No one would suspect Thomas in the end, he assumed, as Thomas had never stated his opinions on much of anything to much of anyone.

When Thomas entered the door, the light in the fireplace went out, the eyes of the paintings dulled, and all that was the being once known as Hovel ceased to be. This was the power of the Joker, a power which the King of Cards had given to him only two years prior when entrusting him with both the role and his request. Thomas would put it to good use.

Everything about the act went perfectly, or at least, mostly perfectly, and even though Thomas did consider for a moment the possibility of doing William in as he passed him by, he was able to restrain himself and keep on going, grinning wider and wider with every frozen painting that he passed by.

In time, the Princes of Cards would pass as well. Thomas had plans to set the whole thing in motion, and they all began there, on the staircase to the Clock Tower atop of which a single light glowed, indicating that Reginald was home.

With every single step, Thomas thought less of Reginald Grey and the family the man would be leaving behind, and more of himself and the crown he would soon wear.

He thought of the young Alice's books and how he would steal one from Prince Fitzgerald, hide it in the walls of Hearts and subsequently drive the calm, reserved, and orderly man insane as the thoughts of a love that he had never met lingered along with the strange, itching notion that something was missing from his bookshelf.

He thought of the Kingdom of Chess and the trouble he would cause by starting a rumor in a bar one night that Cards

had reclaimed the Jabberwock to start a war, and how the return of Manon, a woman who he already knew to think him quite charming, would drive a rift in the Cards' noble family.

He thought of the Duchess and how he would go to her door to remind her of the brother she'd lost while insisting that a new King of Cards would make it easier for everyone to move on.

He thought of Erwic and his claim to be a queen maker, and how he would one night ask Erwic how he had failed with the new generation of Cards.

But most of all, as Thomas stepped over the final stair and reached the landing of the Clock Tower, he thought of a girl named Alice and how he would use her to his own gain. The youngest daughter of the Master of Time, the girl whose name still lived on everyone's lips, and the only hope a sad, fatherless bastard like Thomas had of obtaining the throne, because surely if she were to endorse him, to stand at his side and love him, then that meant that the things that he said were true.

Reginald Grey was, after all, brilliant; but his daughter?

Thomas couldn't help but grin as he reached the doorway to the work room, noting the way that Reginald Grey stood with a mug in his hand and not an ounce of surprise in his eyes.

"It's time, isn't it?" Reginald said, fitting last words for the right hand of a King, and Thomas had to laugh, knowing that it was true.

And when it was all done and the clock hand had stabbed Reginald clean through, Thomas made sure that Reginald could never come back, gripping his stone fingers, waiting to hear the crack.

He had won, and with luck on his side, he would continue to claim victory after victory, until he eventually became the King of Cards. He was unstoppable.

