

PROLOGUE

Oxford England. July 1863.

Everyone thought she had made it up, and she had tolerated more taunting and teasing from other children, more lectures and punishments from grown-ups, than any eleven-year-old should have to bear. But now, after four years, it had arrived: her last, best chance to prove to them all that she had been telling the truth. A college scholar had thought enough of her history to write it up as a book.

She sat on a blanket on the banks of the river Cherwell, the remains of a picnic lunch in a basket at the Reverend Charles Dodgson's elbow. She held the book in her hands. He had written and illustrated it himself, he said. It had a nice

weight and heft, felt substantial. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with a black ribbon. Dodgson was watching her, anxious. Her sisters Edith and Lorina were hunting minnows at the river's edge. She untied the ribbon, carefully undid the wrapping.

“Oh!” Alice’s Adventures Underground? What sort of title was that? And why was her name misspelled? She had told Dodgson how to correctly spell her name, had even written it out for him. “By Lewis Carroll?” she read with growing concern.

“I thought it would be more festive than saying it was by a reverend.”

Festive? She had told him little that was festive. Concern was fast turning to alarm, but she swallowed it. What mattered was that he had faithfully recorded her history in Wonderland as she remembered it.

She opened the book and admired its rough-cut pages, the neatness of the handwriting. But the dedication took the form of a poem, in which her name was again misspelled, and she didn’t think the lighthearted rhyme scheme appropriate, considering the material it was supposed to introduce. Her gaze caught on one of the stanzas:

The dream-child moving through a land
Of wonders, wild and new,
In friendly chat with bird or beast—
And half believed it true.





Dream-child? And what did he mean by half believed?

She turned to the first chapter and immediately felt as if her insides had been scooped out, like the half grapefruits Dean Liddell ate for breakfast every morning, after which only raw, pulpy hollows remained. Down a rabbit hole? Where had the worrisome White Rabbit come from?

“Alice, is something wrong?”

She skipped ahead, turned page after page. The Pool of Tears, the caterpillar, her aunt Redd: It had all been twisted into nonsense.

“I admit that I took a few liberties with your story,” Dodgson explained, “to make it ours, as I said I would. Do you recognize the tutor fellow you once described to me? He’s the White Rabbit character. I got the idea for him upon discovering that the letters of the tutor’s name could be made to spell ‘white rabbit.’ Here, let me show you.”

Dodgson took a pencil and small notebook from the inside pocket of his coat, but she didn’t want to look. He had indeed said it would be their book, his and hers, and she had found strength in that—strength to suffer the indignities that came from insisting on truths no one else believed. But what she held in her hands had nothing to do with her.

“You mean you did it on purpose?” she asked.

The grinning Cheshire cat. The mad tea party. He’d transformed her memories of a world alive with hope and possibility and danger into make-believe, the foolish stuff of children. He was just another in a long line of unbelievers and

this—this stupid, nonsensical book—was how he made fun of her. She had never felt more betrayed in all her life.

“No one is ever going to believe me now!” she screamed. “You’ve ruined everything! You’re the cruelest man I’ve ever met, Mr. Dodgson, and if you had believed a single word I told you, you’d know how very cruel that is! I never want to see you again! Never, never, never!”

She ran, leaving Edith and Lorina to make their own way home, leaving the Reverend Dodgson—who considered children to be spirits fresh from God’s hands, their smiles divine, and who thought there could be no greater endeavor than devoting all of his powers to a task for which the only reward was a child’s whispered thanks and the airy touch of her pure lips—shaken, unsure of what had just happened.

He picked up the book, still warm from Alice Liddell’s touch, not knowing that it was as close to her as he’d ever be again.



CHAPTER 10

THE FORCE of the blast knocked Alyss over in her chair and she was still on the ground, coughing from dust and debris, when she saw innocent courtiers and civilians attacked by a mob of Redd's card soldiers and fierce ex-Wonderlanders.

"No!"

A hand clamped over Alyss' mouth. It was Dodge. He pulled her under the table with him.

"Keep quiet or they'll get you too. Stay here and don't move."

Alyss wasn't planning on moving, not out from under the table at any rate. Too much was happening and none of it good. But Dodge was with her. She had him. *As long as Dodge and I stay together . . .*

In the quarter-moment after the explosion, General Doppelgänger ran behind a thick curtain and pulled a lever attached to a crank half buried in the floor. The black floor tiles of the room flipped over to reveal an army of white chessmen—knights, rooks, bishops, pawns. The chessmen battled the invading card soldiers, blades swinging and bodies falling. General Doppelgänger split into the twin figures of Generals Doppel and Gänger, and each of *them* split in two, so that now there were two General Doppels and two General Gängers battling Redd's soldiers. Not that Alyss realized that the poisonous-looking woman who'd shouted "Off with their heads!" was her aunt Redd. She hadn't made the connection yet because . . . where was her mother? There, fending off Redd's soldiers two and three at a time. Alyss never knew her mother could fight. She flinched with each near hit Genevieve suffered, watching as the queen imagined new weapons for herself—swords, sabers, spiked clubs—whenever one was knocked from her grip. She was always armed with four weapons at once, her imagination swinging two of them, to fend off attacks from behind.

But why didn't she imagine the card soldiers dead? Alyss tried doing it herself; she closed her eyes and pictured the soldiers piled in a lifeless heap in the center of the room. Bibwit was not there to explain that, by the power of imagination alone, nobody could kill a creature that had the will to live. When Alyss opened her eyes, the room was still in chaos, white pawns and rooks and the occasional knight falling at



the hands of the enemy. The cries of pain and defeat still filled her ears.

A body slammed against the tabletop. Dodge put his arm around her, as if that could keep her from harm.

“Don’t move, don’t move,” he whispered.

She huddled against him. She didn’t want to watch any more, wanted to bury her face in Dodge’s shoulder and lift it up again to find the horrid scene over, everything as it used to be.

Hatter Madigan removed his top hat. Holding it by the brim, he flicked his wrist hard and fast; the hat flattened and divided into a series of S-shaped rotary blades held together at the center. He winged the weapon across the room, the blades spinning and slicing through the enemy before embedding themselves in the mortar of the far wall.

One of Redd’s Four Cards pulled the weapon out of the wall. But throwing Hatter’s top hat required a technique not easily mastered, and every time the soldier tried employing the quick wrist-flick he’d seen Hatter use, the weapon only clattered to the floor.

Hatter fought his way toward the top hat, flipping and tumbling through the air, his long Millinery coat flaring like a cape. His steel bracelets snapped open and became propeller-blades on the outward side of his wrists. His backpack sprouted blades and corkscrews of various lengths and thicknesses, like an open Swiss Army knife.

The Four Card was growing more desperate as Hatter



approached. The top hat clanged on the floor one last time. Hatter picked up the weapon, examining it to make sure it hadn't been damaged.

"One must learn how to use it," he said. "Here, let me show you the proper way."

These were the last words the soldier ever heard.



Redd strolled through the mayhem of the battle unharmed. Whenever a white pawn made the mistake of attacking her, she flicked him with a long, bony finger and sent him hurling into the stone walls or the pointed end of someone's spear. It gave her no small pride to see The Cat performing so well in combat, poking fatal holes in chessmen with his claws, easily taking out as many of them as Hatter did card soldiers. She was also pleased to note the speed with which the suit families had fallen into obedience. No sooner had she ordered the removal of everyone's head than the Lord of Diamonds bravely stepped forward, bowed, and said, "Your Majesty, we regret that we've been deprived of your presence for so long and rejoice that you've returned." The Spades and Clubs echoed him with bows and fond regards of their own. So she would let them live. For the moment. Besides, there was something intriguing about the young Diamond boy. He stood under the protective arm of his father, seeming more interested than scared, as if learning all he could from the violence around him. Who knew? He might grow up to be useful.



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Sir Justice Anders cut and slashed at the invading card soldiers. He rescued several chessmen momentarily overpowered by a band of Two Cards, and when he spotted an opening toward The Cat, he made a run at the creature, sword poised to strike.

Dodge saw what was about to happen. “Watch this,” he said to Alyss, proud of his father’s skills and bravery.

But The Cat had no trouble dealing with the leader of the palace guard. With the back of his hand, he knocked Sir Justice to the ground, sent the man’s sword skittering across the floor and out of reach. The Cat picked up Sir Justice and swiped him with a claw.

“Noooo!” Before Alyss could stop him, Dodge bolted out from under the table, snatched up his father’s sword, and attacked The Cat. “Yaah!”

The assassin merely grinned, knocking him to the ground with a light blow. Six white chessmen converged on him and kept him from finishing off the boy.

His right cheek bleeding from the four parallel cuts left by The Cat’s claws, Dodge hunched over his dead father, sobbing.

Alyss, alone under the table, also started to cry. Tears had been wetting her cheeks from the beginning, but they’d seemed to belong to somebody else, not a part of her, as if her body were responding to the horrific scene before her brain could comprehend it. Now she entered into grief, shaking with



the force of her sobs. *Sir Justice dead. Dodge abandoning me. Why did Father ever leave? And where's Mother? Where's—*

A face appeared before her: colorless, sunken eyes, ravaged and diseased-looking skin, matted hair.

“Hello, niece.”

Alyss felt herself lifted out from under the table, held aloft by her long, black hair.

“So you were to be queen, were you?” the woman snorted, unimpressed.

“Aunt Redd?”

“None other.”

“Let her go, Redd.” It was Genevieve.

“Are you telling me what to do?” Redd sneered. “Look around. The time for giving orders is over.”

“Please. Let her go.”

Redd became impatient. “You know I won’t. You brought this on yourself, *Queen Genevieve*. I can’t afford to leave any Hearts alive—except myself, obviously.”

“You can have me instead.”

“Stupid sister. I already *have* you. And by the way, if you’re still expecting your king, I regret to inform you that he won’t be returning home. Ever.”

Redd’s scepter issued forth a cloud of red smoke, in the middle of which flickered a series of images: King Nolan and his men ambushed as they approached Heart Palace, Redd marching up to the king and killing him with her sharp, knobbly scepter.



“Father!” Alyss cried.

“Oh, my sweet king,” Genevieve gasped and sent eighteen steel-tipped cones, each with a point as sharp as a dagger, zooming toward Redd, who lazily raised a hand; the cones froze in midair, then clumped on the floor. The heavy chandelier above Redd’s head came loose and fell toward her. Redd made as if to brush a gnat from in front of her face and the chandelier crumbled to dust.

“Is that the best you can do, sister?” Redd scoffed.

A series of double-edged spears cartwheeled toward her. She knocked them aside one by one, bored with her own strength, tired of Genevieve’s pestering.

“Playtime’s over,” she hissed.

Redd pressed her index finger against the ball of her thumb and Alyss started to choke; it felt as if her throat had swollen shut. It didn’t matter that her mother had failed, she herself had to think of something, to *imagine* something. But she couldn’t focus. A wheel of cheese rolled against Redd’s foot. A pair of slippers danced in the air.

Redd laughed. “You were to be queen with an imagination like *that?*”

Alyss thought she was going to explode from lack of air. She fumbled with the jabberwock tooth hanging on her necklace and jabbed the pointed end into Redd’s forearm as hard as she could. It stuck.

“Ah!”



Redd released her grip and Alyss dropped to the floor. Before she'd even sucked in one lungful of air, she and her mother were racing down a hall, their feet barely touching the ground. They charged into the queen's private rooms, past the couches and overstuffed chairs, past the royal outfits hanging in the wardrobe, and headed for the bathroom, where—

The Cat stepped in front of them, lunged. It looked like the end for both of them, but something whirred past the princess' head and—thomp!—into The Cat's chest. The Cat fell at their feet. Hatter stepped over the beast and removed his top hat from the fatal wound.

"Take Alyss and go," Queen Genevieve said, pointing at the looking glass. "As far away as possible."

"But, Your Majesty—"

"I'll follow you, if and when I can. You have to keep the princess safe until she's old enough to rule. She's the only chance Wonderland has to survive. Promise me."

Hatter bowed his head. His life's mission was to protect the queen. So long as Genevieve lived, he should remain and fight the enemy. But he understood that Wonderland's future depended on Alyss' survival. The queendom was more important than any single queen. He lifted his eyes to Genevieve's. "I promise," he said.

Genevieve knelt down in front of her daughter. "No matter what happens, I will always be near you, sweetheart. On the other side of the looking glass. And never ever forget who you are. Do you understand?"



“I want to stay with you.”

“I know, Alyss. I love you.”

“No! I’m staying!” Alyss threw her arms around her mother.

A wall crashed down and there stood Redd with a platoon of card soldiers behind her. “Aw, how sweet. Let’s have a group hug,” she said, moving toward them, hardly looking like the hugging type.

Hatter grabbed Alyss and jumped into the looking glass. Genevieve smashed the glass with her scepter and turned to face Redd, unable to believe it when, in her peripheral vision, she saw The Cat, on the floor with a gaping hole in his chest, open his eyes. His wound healed and he jumped at her. It all happened in an instant: Genevieve conjured a white bolt of energy from her imagination and thrust it into The Cat, killing him a second time. The card soldiers stepped forward to attack the queen, but Redd stopped them. She yanked the jagged bolt out of The Cat and twirled it like a baton. It turned red in her hand.

“Well, sister, what can I say? I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I’m tickled to death to see you go.”

She slammed the bolt into the floor. Dozens of black roses sprouted from the point of impact, their thorny stems wrapping themselves around Genevieve, pricking her skin and binding her fast. The rose petals opened and closed, toothy mouths eager for a bite of royal flesh.

“Off with your head,” Redd ordered, pulling the energy bolt out of the floor.



“No!” Genevieve struggled against the stems of the roses. Her people would be abandoned to Redd. And Alyss . . . just a child.

Redd swung the bolt hard. Genevieve’s head went one way, her body another, and her crown rolled along the floor like a dropped coin. Redd picked up the crown and put it on her own head.

“The queen is dead. Long live the queen . . . me.”

The platoon of renegade soldiers cheered.

Redd kicked The Cat where he lay on the floor, tongue lolling in his mouth, the picture of death. “Get up! You still have seven more lives.”

The Cat’s eyes fluttered open.

“Find Alyss and kill her.”

With a wave of her hand, the looking glass was once again whole. The Cat jumped through, in pursuit of the only living Heart besides Redd.

