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The Looking Glass Wars®

ArchEnemy

www.egmont.co.uk

Frank Beddor

EGMONT

For my little princess, Ava

EGMONT
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A word of warning to my readers:

A number of years ago, while on a business trip to London, I went to the British Museum and came across an exhibition of ancient playing cards. At the very end of the exhibition was an incomplete deck of cards, illuminated by an unusual glow. The cards showed *Alice in Wonderland* as I had never seen it before.

On the way to the airport the next morning, I went to an antiques shop specialising in playing cards. When I told the dealer about the unusual exhibit, he revealed that he in fact owned the other cards missing from the deck. He then proceeded to tell me the story of *The Looking Glass Wars*®. That story is the one you now hold . . .

But one word of warning: the true story of Wonderland involves bloodshed, murder, revenge and war. I apologise in advance to those of you who might find some of the scenes in this book distressing, but I feel it's important that the facts are set down as they actually happened. Those of you of a more sensitive disposition might prefer reading Lewis Carroll's classic fairytale.

Frank Beddor


Wondernations
Snark Mountain
Valley of Mushrooms
Snark Mountain
Wondronia Grounds
Mount Isolation
Redds Fortress
Whispering Woods
Wondertropolis
House Of Cards
The Milkery
Heart Palace
The Bowels
Chessboard Desert
Volcanic Plains
Pool of Tears
Wall of Deflection
Talon Pod
Blawk
Everlasting Forest
Wall of Deflection
Crystal Mines
Alyssian Headquarters


MORGAVIA
BOARDERLAND
WILDERBEASTIA
UNTERLAND
ASTAGAN'S TRIBE
KALAMAN TRIBE
AWR TRIBE
ONU TRIBE
CATABRAC TRIBE
SCRABBLER TRIBE
GLYPH CLIFFS
DOOMSINE TRIBE
Shy Boy Gaming Club
BOARDERTON
SHIFOG TRIBE
FEL CREEL TRIBE
TEELTOUR TRIBE
GLEBOG TRIBE
Swampy Woods Of Chanke
FORTUNE BAY
THUDGARS TRIBE
GNØBI TRIBE
Bookoe River
MOONPLOX TRIBE
GANMEDE PROVINCE
ROLLINGDOUBLES MOUND
GAROTTES TRIBE
CUEL TRIBE
BOGIN TRIBE
SIRE TRIBE
MALDOID TRIBE
DUNERARIA
SNEET TRIBE
MINDMASTER TRIBE



PROLOGUE

Oxford, England. 1875.

Alyss of Wonderland raced up the front walk, using her imagination to unlock the door and turn the latch. Inside the house, nothing had changed. The umbrella stand and hat rack, the family pictures hanging in the hall, even the gouge in the skirting board marking where she'd thrown her ice skates one winter afternoon: everything was exactly as it had been when she'd lived there … so long ago, it seemed.

'Please, what do you want?' the dean's voice reached her from the back of the house.

She sighted them in her imagination's eye: the dean and Mrs Liddell, Edith and Lorina. Their clothes a good deal ripped, they huddled together on the drawing-room sofa in fearful silence while Ripkins – one of King Arch's bodyguards, and a deadly assassin – stood ominously before them. Ripkins: the only Boarderlander who could flex his fingertips – deadly sawteeth

pushing up out of the skin in the pattern of his fingerprints.

'Please,' the dean said again.

Fingerprint blades flexed, Ripkins moved his hands fast in front of him, shredding air. Mrs Liddell flinched. The assassin took a step towards the dean, the sisters each let out a sob and –

'Hello?' Alyss called, walking directly into the room. She had imagined herself into Alice Liddell's long skirt and blouse, her hair in a tight bun. 'Excuse me, I didn't know there was company.'

She tried to look startled – eyes wide, mouth half open, head tilted apologetically – as she thought her double would. Wanting to catch Ripkins off guard, she pretended to be meek, cowed, and let him grab her and push her towards the Liddells.

Where he'd touched her, there was blood.

Ripkins's hands became a blur in front of him, churning air and moving in towards the dean's chest. Alyss had no choice but to expose her imaginative powers in front of the Liddells. With the slightest of movements, she conjured a deck of razor-cards and sent them cutting through the air.

Fiss! Fiss, fiss, fiss!

In a single swift motion, Ripkins spun clear and unholstered a crystal shooter, firing a retaliatory cannonade.

Alyss gestured as if wiping condensation off a looking glass and the shrapnel-like bullets of wulfenite and barite

crystal clattered to the floor.

The Liddells sat dumbfounded, their fear muted in the shock of seeing their adopted daughter engage in combat, producing otherworldly missiles out of the air – flat blade-edged rectangles resembling playing cards, bursts of gleaming bullets. She conjured them as fast as she defended herself against them, what with the intruder making expert use of the strange guns and knives strapped to his belt, thighs, biceps and forearms.

'Father!'

A fistful of mind-riders – ordinary-looking darts infused with poison that turned victims one upon the other in rage – rocketed towards the family.

Alyss threw out her hand and the weapons changed trajectory, shooting towards her. She annihilated them in midair with a pinch of her fingers, becoming like gravity itself, pulling whatever Ripkins hurled at the Liddells towards her until –

The wall pushed out a score of daggers. Ripkins, knocked backwards by a steel playing card as big as a man, slammed against them and slumped to the floor.

Silence, except for the ticking of a grandfather clock.

'Oh!'

In the doorway stood Alyss's double, the woman she had, with utmost effort, imagined into being to take her place in this

world: Alice Liddell who, with her gentleman friend, Reginald Hargreaves, stared at the dead assassin and Wonderland's Queen. The dean, his wife and his daughters looked from Alyss Heart to Alice Liddell and back again.

'I –?' the dean started.

But that was all he managed before Alyss bolted from the room and out of the house, sprinting until she was well along St Aldate's Street. Certain the Liddells weren't following her, she walked briskly in the direction of Carfax Tower, towards the portal that would return her to Wonderland: a puddle where no puddle should be, in the middle of a sun-drenched pavement behind the tower. But even from this distance she could see that something wasn't right. The portal was shrinking, its edges drying up fast. She started to run, her imagination's eye scanning the town.

'How can it be?' she breathed, because all of the portals were shrinking, the tower puddle already half its former size when she leapt for it, closing her eyes and sucking in her breath, anticipating the swift watery descent through portal waters, the reverse pull of The Pool of Tears, the –

Knees jarring, she landed on pavement. The portal had evaporated.

Alyss Heart, the rightful Queen of Wonderland, was stranded on Earth.

PART ONE





CHAPTER 1

Bibwit Harte, most learned albino in the land, tutor and advisor to four generations of Heart Queens, bustled along a path in the grounds of Heart Palace. The flowers and shrubs he passed riffled their blooms and called out in respectful greeting.

'Good evening, Mr Harte!' said a purple sunflower.

'We trust you're well, Mr Harte!' cried the blossoms of a hollizalea shrub.

The tutor returned their well-wishes, though more than a few tulips found it strange he didn't say more; Mr Harte rarely missed an opportunity to chat. Stranger still, the royal tutor didn't even chat with himself as he approached a hedge indistinguishable from those around it. His bald head glistening like a second moon in the evening's light, his large ears – twice the size of an ordinary Wonderlander's – pivoting to catch any sound that might indicate the return of

expected friends, he stepped into the hedge. Its roots shifted, unlocking a hatch, and he descended through the opening.

On a platform halfway to the floor of the subterranean chamber stood Queen Alyss, dressed in an ankle-length dress of shimmering, opalescent white. Her long, black hair elegantly dusting her shoulders, she held her bejewelled royal sceptre in one hand while her other was extended towards The Heart Crystal's unsteady pulse as if trying to physically draw inspiration from it.

A new moon had come and gone since a web of caterpillar thread spanning the sky over Wonderland – WILMA, King Arch's Weapon of Inconceivable Loss and Massive Annihilation – had reduced The Heart Crystal to what it was now: a sputtering, blinking, useless thing. The imaginative source for all creation, the means through which Wonderland's most ingenious inventions passed to Earth and other worlds, had become little more than a font of frustration.

'Shouldn't the effects be wearing off by now?' Alyss asked as Bibwit stepped down beside her. 'I can't conjure so much as a tiny opal.'

'You could enlist the help of an imagination enabler, Queen Alyss,' said General Doppelgänger, who sat

monitoring the viewing screens at a control desk. 'Someone residing outside Wondertropolis and not so affected by King Arch's Weapon.'

Bibwit's ears quivered, his scholar's robe swished at his bare feet. 'It is indeed horrible for all imaginationists within Wondertropolis to have lost their imaginations on account of King Arch. And although we may find some relief in the fact that those in rural quadrants, while weaker in imagination than before, have not been left completely bereft – a circumstance I ascribe to the web of caterpillar thread having been more tightly knit over our capital city; what I mean to say, in short –'

Alyss laughed. When had Bibwit ever given a short speech instead of a long one?

'– in *sum*,' the tutor continued, 'while it is possible for us to send for an imagination enabler, I don't think we should let more Wonderlanders know of the Queen's loss than is absolutely necessary. An imagination enabler cannot help matters. The Queen's powers *will* return.'

'I'm glad *someone* is sure of it,' Alyss said.

'My dear Alyss,' Bibwit bowed, 'in this world I can be sure of nothing so much as my own wisdom.'

It was strange, Alyss thought, that she should seem more

concerned about her loss than Bibwit and the general. True, it was *her* imagination, but hadn't they always urged her to exploit it for the Queendom's benefit and for the glory of White Imagination? She had felt such freedom upon first discovering the absence of her gift and already, here she was, worrying enough for the three of them.

Because my responsibilities as Queen haven't disappeared along with my imagination.

Whatever freedom she'd felt had been illusory. It wasn't just *her* imagination, after all. Being sovereign of the people, she was not at leisure to be sovereign of her own actions, doing what she liked whenever she pleased, no matter how much she might wish for it. Love, justice, duty to the populace – the guiding principles of the Heart dynasty and of White Imagination were a part of her. She would defend what she thought best for the Queendom as long as she occupied the throne.

'Club soldiers are amassing in Rocking Horse Lane,' General Doppelgänger reported into his desk's talkback module. 'Repeat: Club soldiers in Rocking Horse Lane. Decks one and three converge.'

Lack of imagination throughout the realm had given rise to new problems. These in turn had brought her here, to The

Heart Chamber, to try and coax a hint of her former power from the Crystal.

'We'd do well to remember, Alyss,' Bibwit said, 'that when The Crystal Continuum was contaminated by – what shall I call it? – by Homburg Molly's mishap, yes, any imaginationist travelling inside of it at the time found herself without her abilities. Much as imaginationists now suffer as a result of King Arch's attack on Wondertropolis and The Heart Crystal. In the case of Molly's mishap, the effects wore off, and the continuum is now perfectly functioning. I therefore assume the effects of WILMA will similarly wear off.'

'Unless, of course, they don't,' Alyss said. 'I'm no stronger now than when the weapon first detonated.'

Bibwit shared a quick glance with General Doppelgänger. 'We obviously have longer to wait than we did with the continuum incident, the power of WILMA being much greater.'

Alyss again turned her energies towards The Heart Crystal, envisioning a smooth polished rock of clear agate at her feet. The Crystal fizzed and crackled, but no agate materialised.

'It's not as if Arch's caterpillar thread is still radiating its power!' she cried. 'It disintegrated!'

Nor had it ever unleashed the full extent of its paralysing energy. She and Hatter Madigan had seen to that.

'By now,' General Doppelgänger said, his eyes on the control desk, monitoring the movement of his card soldiers, 'Redd might know that Queen Alyss is without imagination.'

'And the only reason she continues to retreat is because she's lost *hers*,' Bibwit agreed. 'A confrontation at this juncture would be nothing more than brute force against brute force. Redd cannot be so sure of victory without her imagination. We should start incorporating into our military the new weapons made before WILMA's detonation, in case we find ourselves having to cope with both Redd's army and the Clubs.'

Alyss lowered her sceptre and turned from The Heart Crystal. 'During her attack, Redd couldn't have known about WILMA or its effect on imagination. If she had, she never would have entered Wondertropolis and made herself vulnerable to it.'

Bibwit nodded. The veins visible beneath his head's translucent skin pulsed, keeping time to his thoughts. 'There's a question I've much been puzzling over,' he admitted at last. 'Where did Arch get so much caterpillar

thread and the knowledge of how to use it to create WILMA? As aged as I am, Alyss, I have never before seen the thread of all six caterpillar-oracles together in one place.' Then, with a flourish of his robe, as if this could wipe away all stress and uncertainty from the land, he added, 'But enough of unsettling topics. I originally came here to tell you, my dear, that I've received word we should expect Hatter and Molly before the next eclipse.'

'That *is* good news!'

'Yes,' General Doppelgänger brooded, 'because we'll need all the bodies we can get. The Clubs are growing –'

The General's desk rattled with the sound of a distant explosion, he split into the twin figures of Doppel and Gänger, and both of them shouted to the card soldiers converging on Rocking Horse Lane, to the chessmen patrolling the outskirts of Wondertropolis, to anyone anywhere who could help:

'Attack!'