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opening extract from

The Looking Glass Wars 2: Seeing Redd

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published by

Egmont Books Ltd.

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PROLOGUE

She should have been disoriented, her image sneering back at her from the countless dust-filmed looking glasses that surrounded her, but she was too consumed with the quest that had brought her to this maze whose time had passed, its purpose unfulfilled.

'I've come!' she yelled, the words ricocheting off the cloudy looking glasses without cease or loss of volume. The noise pained Redd's ears, but what did she care? She would endure anything. She had made it this far. She would not leave until she had found what she'd come for.

In every direction, mirrored corridors branched off into the dusky reaches of the maze. She tried to locate the sceptre in her imagination's eye, but her powers were apparently useless. She would have to find it the old-fashioned way, by systematically walking every corridor, seeking the sceptre as might a blind, rudderless fool.

'Not much of a maze, are you?' she muttered, because she discovered that she could pass from one corridor to another merely by walking through the looking glass walls. Hers was a phantom maze, the ghostly residue of what it had once been.

A sudden, hissing sound at her back.

She spun, ready for anything. The dust of a looking glass had lifted and formed into the figure of a female: the teenage girl she used to be, before she had allowed corruption to gnarl and ravage her features, before her transformative passage through The Heart

Crystal: bratty, intractable and vindictive Rose Heart.

'How dare you show your face, when I'm smarter and more imaginative than you,' the dust-figure whispered, then faded into nothing.

Redd continued on, and half-formed images flitted past the periphery of her vision: apparitions pointing and ogling in disbelief that the maze's intended had arrived so long after she'd been expected. Whenever she turned to look directly at them, they shifted and remained at the edge of her sight.

Only one image let itself be seen, and it gave Redd pause: that of her slinking into her mother's bedroom, so soon after being removed from succession to the throne, to place the fatal mushroom on Queen Theodora's tongue. She felt no remorse – her mother had deserved an untimely end – but that night had been the last time she'd

employed a lethal mushroom in her nasty doings.

The sceptre lay on the floor up ahead as if it were nothing, a useless stick someone had dropped in her hurry to leave. No doubt it had once been vibrant with colour, a gleaming, crystalline staff with elaborate, gem-encrusted filigree awaiting the first touch of its intended's hands. But now, the heart at its top was shrivelled and grey. What gems still remained had turned black. The filigree was rusted and, in parts, had completely flaked off. But had it been otherwise, had she found a sceptre as glorious and pulsating as her niece's, Alyss Heart's, she would have thought it a trick, a set-up. The sceptre at her feet, so elaborate in its decay – this was beauty. Yet here it lay, abandoned, discarded, just as she had been by her family.

'And they had the impudence to blame me!' she yelled.

Again, her words reverberated until they became noise.

'It's your own fault, Rose,' Theodora had said. 'I cannot allow you to become Queen. You refuse to listen to anyone's counsel but your own, and you insist on being so undisciplined, disregarding the most basic principles of White Imagination.'

'Perhaps I have discipline in other things!' she had spat.

'That's what I'm afraid of. You've already scared a number of important Wonderlanders.'

Redd had made it her life's work to scare so-called important Wonderlanders. She had scared a great many of them during her all-too-brief time on the throne. But whatever fears she had instilled, whatever terrors inflicted, were nothing compared to what she would accomplish now that she had navigated her own Looking Glass Maze.

Her fingers closed around the sceptre,

giving her access to the full potential of her imaginative powers. She was the strongest Heart alive. She would recapture The Heart Crystal, and no one, not even prissy Alyss Heart, would be able to wrench it away from her. Ever.

PART ONE



CHAPTER 1

Wonderland's finest architects had designed it and overseen its fabrication. The most skilled glaziers, carpenters, masons and gemologists had worked tirelessly to ensure that even its smallest details were built according to plan: Heart Palace, imagined anew on the site of the former palace, which had stood for generations until being cruelly decimated by Redd.

'The artisans laboured with such great effort in tribute to you, Alyss,' said Bibwit Harte as he escorted the Queen and her personal bodyguard, Homburg Molly, through the palace for the first time.

The tips of Bibwit's oversized ears crimped forward. The blue-green veins beneath the translucent skin of his bald head seemed to swell. He was amused by something.

'I need no tribute,' Alyss said.

Bibwit's eyebrows leapt up and his eyes widened in pleasure.

So that was it. He had just wanted to hear her say it aloud. Why he never tired of hearing her expressions of selflessness, Alyss

couldn't understand. It was as if he thought they proved the kind of Queen she was and always would be. *But if he only knew, I am far from selfless*.

'You might not need a tribute, my dear Alyss,' Bibwit went on, 'but the citizenry does, and those responsible for this magnificent palace –'

'Hmmph!' Molly said, shrugging open her Millinery backpack, its various blades and corkscrews snapping to the ready.

'– have vowed that it should serve as a monument to White Imagination, a declaration of your ascendancy over the – how shall we say? – more sooty machinations of Black Imagination. The palace is an emblem of hope that you will –'

'Yenh!' Molly grunted, retracting the weapons of her backpack with a shrug.

'– return our nation to the peace and contentment of your great-grandmother's reign, when it is supposed the Queendom had never heard of dissension. Here we have the ancestral chamber.'

Bibwit guided Alyss and her bodyguard into a room whose vaulted, bejewelled ceiling twinkled purple and gold. In marbled crystal frames around the room hung screens of Alyss's parents, grandparents and great-grandparents – the generations of Hearts who had ruled in the service of White Imagination.

'Hyah!'

'Molly, please,' Alyss said.

'Sorry.' Molly shrugged a last time, the knives of her backpack folding shut.

The Millinery, Wonderland's elite security force, had been officially re-established, and Molly had taken to dressing in the uniform of its former leader, Hatter Madigan: the long coat that flared out behind her like a cape when she ran; the deadly belt that, with a punch of its buckle, sprouted a series of sabres along its surface; the bracelets that could snap open and become propeller blades on the outward side of her wrists; the backpack.

'I haven't seen this much optimism since I was a young albino graduating from the Tutor Corps,' Bibwit sighed as they left the ancestral chamber and continued down the passage. 'But it's best to tell you now, Alyss, that Queen Issa's reign was not as peaceful as Wonderlanders believe. There will always be those who unfavourably compare the present with a past they suppose happier than it was – not having lived through it, as I have.'

'I can't imagine you as young, Bibwit,' Alyss said.

He was being quite the chatterbox today. She would have thought her tutor had attended too many royal festivities to get excited by them any longer. But didn't she know better? It wasn't the gala itself that had raised his spirits so much as it was her first official function as Wonderland's Queen.

'This is one of the libraries,' Bibwit said, showing them into a panelled room crowded with books, scrolls, reading crystals.

Only three lunar cycles had passed since Redd's defeat and yet the pressures of Alyss's position were wearing on her. She didn't want to let anyone down, least of all Bibwit. He was the closest thing she had to a father since her Aunt Redd had murdered her parents.

'Don't you agree, Alyss?' he asked, interrupting her thoughts.

'About what?'

'I was just telling young Molly –'

'I'm not young,' Molly blurted.

The tutor paused. In the short time since Redd's defeat, the girl had grown at least a gwormmy length and the cute slope of her nose had straightened somewhat, as if in anticipation of the handsome woman she would soon be. But her unlined face, her pillowy cheeks and her strong, clear eyes turned defiantly upon him – she was nothing if not a child.

'No,' Bibwit said. 'After what we've been through, I don't suppose any of us could be called young, although as Alyss has kindly pointed out, it's unlikely anyone would have dared to think me so. My apologies, Molly. But I was saying that although the principles of White Imagination do not concern themselves with the luxuries so plentiful in the new palace, its opulence might be said to represent a

time when beauty could exist in Wonderland unmolested by greed or other ill-intent.'

Hard to believe this is where I'm to live.

The crystal-shimmering spires and agate-mosaic artworks, floors inlaid with jasper and pearl, walls of quartz and stone and glittering mortar: it was all so unfamiliar and much grander than the former palace.

'Alyss might not care overly much for such things,' Bibwit was saying to Molly as they again continued down the passage, 'but on occasion a Queen must follow instead of lead. The wisdom comes in knowing when to do so and, in this instance, Alyss has wisely chosen to follow the will of the people.' Bibwit's ears twitched. 'We have company.'

Alyss soon heard footsteps approaching. General Doppelgänger appeared at the end of the hall, his military boots clicking on the polished floor. He bowed repeatedly and began talking before he reached her.

'My Queen, three decks of card soldiers have been dispatched to guard the perimeter of the grounds. The white knight and his chessmen will be stationed inside the palace and its gardens. They have promised to be as inconspicuous as they can, so as not to worry your guests, but –'

Alyss laughed. 'They *are* chessmen, General; they will always be a trifle conspicuous.'

'That's so, that's so.' The General ran a fretful hand through his hair and split into the twin figures of Doppel and Gänger.

'We urge you to reconsider,' said General Doppel.

'It's a risk to have invited so many to the palace all at once,' agreed General Gänger.

'We don't wish to cause needless alarm –'

'– but we'll be vulnerable to disruptions from any enemies we still have among the populace.'

'To say nothing of the risk to you personally.'

'Queen Alyss can take care of herself,' said Homburg Molly. 'And besides, she has me.'

In one swift motion, Molly took the homburg from her head, snapped it into a flat, knife-edged disk and sent it zinging down the hall and back. She caught it, with a flick of the wrist returned it to its innocent homburg shape, and plonked it on top of her head.

Always wanting to prove her worth even though she's proved it tenfold in battles.

Homburg Molly was still too inexperienced to have mastered the Millinery ethic of keeping her emotions hidden, an ethic Hatter Madigan had epitomized to perfection.

'Your diligence and concern are appreciated, as always,' Alyss told the Generals, 'but the memorial is for all of Wonderland. And to bring out the best in Wonderlanders, I must assume the best *of them*.'

'You're starting to sound like Bibwit!' Doppel and Gänger moaned at once, and turned to leave.

'I'll walk with you, Generals,' the tutor said. 'I must powder my head and poof out my scholarly robes for the party and so will take my leave of the Queen.'

Once Bibwit and the Generals had gone, Molly said, 'I don't get it. He's an *albino*. Why does he put white powder on his head?'

Alyss smiled. 'When we're as clever and educated as Bibwit, I'm sure we'll know the answer, Molly. But I think it's time we joined the guests.'

The royal garden, a courtyard at the centre of the palace grounds, was crowded with happy Wonderlanders, their ticklish eruptions of laughter competing with the singing of the sunflowers planted alongside the war memorial.

Alyss had made only one request of the palace architects: that at the gravesite of Sir Justice Anders, former head of the palace guard and Dodge Anders' father, they create a memorial honouring all who had lost their lives during Redd's thirteen-year reign – royals, civilians, card soldiers, chessmen, palace guardsmen and members of the Millinery. The bodies of her parents, Queen Genevieve and King Nolan, hadn't been recovered, of course, but Bibwit had surprised Alyss with two of their most intimate keepsakes: a toy spirit-dane

invented by her father, and one of her mother's charm bracelets, both of which he'd kept tucked deep within his robes throughout Redd's tyranny. These had been enough for the Hereafter Seeds to do their work. Just as a bouquet forming the likeness of Sir Justice watched over his grave, bouquets of camellias, gardenias and lilies resembling Wonderland's former King and Queen now kept vigil over theirs. On either side of the graves rose a simple stone etched with the names of those known to have lost their lives in battles against Redd. Behind all was an obelisk of emerald green, in recognition of those who had gone missing during Redd's occupation and were now, to their families' grief, presumed dead.

'I've never seen anything like *this*,' Molly said, looking around at the variety of people and creatures in the courtyard. 'You've got street vendors mingling with suit families as if no one's blood is purer than another's.'

Alyss knew this to be a constant theme with Homburg Molly. Half-civilian, half-Milliner, the girl was particularly sensitive to matters of race and class.

'I don't know, Molly. Judging by the look on Lady Diamond's face, I'd say you overestimated things a bit.' Alyss called out to the ranking Lady as the walrus-butler passed by with a tray of wondercrumpets: 'Have a wondercrumpet, Lady Diamond?'

'Ah. A wondercrumpet. Yes,' said the Lady, taking one but

holding it far from her mouth with no apparent intention of bringing it closer. 'You *do* know how to throw a party, Queen Alyss.'

'You think so? I wouldn't have supposed you enjoyed brushing against so many Wonderlanders of lesser rank.'

'I don't know what you mean,' the Lady of Diamonds huffed.

Alyss didn't trust the suit families, but there had been no proof of their conspiring with Redd, either before or after her overthrow of Queen Genevieve. Nor had there been any proof of their engaging in outlawed activities that could have secured a conviction in Wondertropolis's courts. As much as Alyss would have liked the suit families gone, there was politics to consider. Redd had kept them around after her coup for similar reasons: their relationships with business leaders, government officials and the Arbiters who decided the guilt or innocence of the ill-fated brought before them in the name of jurisprudence. Only Jack of Diamonds had been prosecuted – Bibwit's and the walrus-butler's evidence against him too overwhelming to ignore; found guilty of treason and racketeering, he'd been punished accordingly.

But why poison my brain with thoughts of Jack of Diamonds?

Why, indeed, when Dodge Anders had caught her eye from across the courtyard? It was the first time she was seeing him in his uniform as head of the palace guard. She'd almost forgotten how handsome he could be when dressed in formal attire.

As if it were possible to forget.

She had always thought his was a rough-hewn handsomeness, the four parallel scars on his cheek adding to his looks rather than diminishing them. She'd been thrilled when he requested his father's former post, and interpreted it as meaning that he would abide by a guardsman's code instead of avenging Sir Justice's death. She only hoped that he didn't become too much like the Dodge of her youth who had shown an almost religious devotion to propriety – a guardsman's place in relation to the Queen, because now that there was no threat of her having to marry Jack of Diamonds . . .

She glanced away, afraid she would reveal too much of herself in her eyes.

'Molly, there are enough guards and chessmen here to protect a flock of Queens. I want you to go off and enjoy yourself.'

'But I *am* enjoying myself.'

It was Molly's job to shadow her everywhere, Alyss knew. But it could be so bothersome. How was she supposed to have any time alone with Dodge, who was that moment making his way towards her though she pretended not to notice?

'Molly, I order you to enjoy yourself *somewhere else*.'

'Fine,' the girl pouted, and stomped off.

Alyss kept her eyes to the ground. She tried to think of something clever to say to Dodge, but her mind filled with the sort

of things she might murmur to any old stranger: how are you, lovely weather we're enjoying, at least we have our health. She felt him standing next to her. Her quickened pulse loud in her ears, she looked up and –

It was only Bibwit, with official pardons to sign.

'Must I, Bibwit, even during the party?'

She watched Dodge veer off to confer with one of his guardsmen; he would never interrupt her when engaged in the nation's business.

'I'm sorry you find it inconvenient, Alyss. But these are Wonderlanders who have been punished by Redd's regime for committing no crimes.'

He was chastising her, in his gentle way. Why should those who have innocently suffered be made to suffer another moment? Wonderlanders imprisoned during Redd's reign were being interviewed, their cases reviewed to determine if they were legitimate criminals or merely people who had fallen afoul of Redd's temper. For the latter, proper legal channels had to be employed, pardons issued and signed.

'It seems that being a Queen involves nothing but paperwork,' Alyss sighed, scratching her name first on one pardon, then another.

'Mastering the combat aspects of a Warrior Queen is the easy part,' said Bibwit. 'The administrative responsibilites of ruling from day to day, of contending with the bureaucratic procedures that keep

Wonderland society functioning – these are more subtle to master and therefore more difficult.'

The walrus-butler waddled up as Alyss was signing the last of the pardons. 'Queen Alyss, King Arch of Boarderland is here.'

Bibwit's ears stood erect in surprise.

'He must have come to wish me well,' Alyss said, not quite believing it herself. 'Please show him into the garden, walrus.'

'Yes, but . . . yes, I tried, Queen Alyss. But he says he prefers to visit with you in a more masculine environment.'

'And where would *that* be?'

'In the briefing room.'

She saw the King in her imagination's eye, in the company of his intel ministers and bodyguards, a disdainful expression on his face. She flicked a look towards Dodge. He shrugged in good-natured understanding: he would have to wait.

'I'll attend you, Alyss,' Bibwit said.

Wonderland's Queen shook her head. 'No. It's more important that you end the suffering of the falsely imprisoned as soon as possible. Deliver the pardons to the Arbiters, as you'd intended. And please arrange for me to inspect the conditions at the mines. The reports I've heard are disturbing.'

The tutor appeared uncertain.

'Don't worry, Bibwit. Arch can do nothing to me.'

On her way out of the gardens, Alyss passed the Lord and Lady of Diamonds, who were talking with Homburg Molly. The Lady suddenly raised her voice as if to make sure Alyss heard what she was saying:

'Jack was forever bending rules to suit his own interest, though we *never* thought he'd go so far as to conspire with Redd. *Of course* we had to disown him, our only son and heir, after his treasonous behaviour.'

But as inexperienced a sovereign as she was, even Alyss knew: in the garden of state, treason was a weed; just when you thought you'd rooted it out for good, it returned more virulent than before.