

# 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 baseboard 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, pushing deadly sawteeth 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 toward 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 toward the Liddells.

Where he’d touched her, there was blood.

Ripkins’ hands became a blur in front of him, churning air and moving in toward 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 toward the family.

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

The wall pushed out a score of daggers. Ripkins, knocked backward 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’ 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, toward the portal that would return her to Wonderland: a puddle where no puddle should be, in the middle of 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.*

