

CHAPTER 3

THE BRIEFING room hadn't yet been used in its official capacity: thrice-daily meetings during which Bibwit, Dodge, General Doppelgänger, and Alyss' other advisers would apprise the queen of pressing Wonderland business, be it financial, political, or militaristic.

"What's this I hear about you refusing to come to my party?" Alyss teased, forcing a professional smile on to her face as she glided into the room—hexagonal in shape, with holographic viewing screens lining the walls and, at its center, a thick, heavy conference table carved from a single slab of soapstone.

King Arch was not one for teasing. He turned from his intel ministers, with whom he'd been conferring in a lowered voice. "Queen Alyss," he said, "I make no secret of my preju-

dices. I don't believe the turmoil Wonderland has recently endured would have happened were it a kingdom instead of a queendom. But I have come to pay what respects I can to you, for between you and your aunt Redd, I much prefer having you as a neighbor."

"Thank you, I think," said Alyss. "Shall we sit?"

The holo-screens were displaying real-time scenes from Wondertropolis' major thoroughfares and intersections. Arch lowered himself into a chair before the screen showing the newly-named Genevieve Square. The intel ministers removed themselves to a corner of the room and remained standing while two fellows with faces as inscrutable as masks took up positions on either side of their king.

"I feel safe when I travel with them," Arch said, noticing Alyss' interest in his bodyguards. "Their names are Ripkins and Blister, and their combat skills, I think, would rival those of even the famed Hatter Madigan, though I've been informed that *he* has taken a sabbatical."

Alyss nodded. "He needed some time to attend to personal matters. But he's available to us if we need him."

The truth was, neither she nor anyone else knew where Hatter had gone or when he'd return. On several occasions, she had stood next to the Heart Crystal to maximize her remote viewing ability, searching for him with her imagination's eye. The Everlasting Forest, the Chessboard Desert, the Valley of Mushrooms, Outerwilderbeastia, even the Volcanic Plains: No matter where she looked, she failed to locate him.



He seemed to have vanished from Wonderland altogether.

From out in the passage came a skiffing sound; Homburg Molly ran into the room and took up position at Alyss' right flank.

"King Arch," she said, "I'd like you to meet *my* bodyguard, Homburg Molly."

Homburg Molly bowed, but at the sight of her—what with her coat a trifle too large and the heavy backpack that she wore awkwardly—the king laughed.

"What's so funny?" Molly scowled.

Alyss placed a calming hand on the girl's arm as King Arch struggled to control his laughter. The walrus-butler toddled into the room with a pitcher of flugelberry wine, two goblets, and a platter of tarty tarts. After the wine had been poured and the walrus dismissed, Arch cleared his throat and reluctantly begged the queen's pardon—her bodyguard's too, of course. He did his best to look serious, but his amused glance kept returning to Molly.

"So, where's the Heart Crystal?" he asked. "I was hoping to have a hologram made of me basking in its glow."

"I wouldn't have thought the crystal was of interest to you," Alyss answered. "Possession of it means little to those not gifted in imagination."

Arch waved a hand, dismissive. "Just like a woman not to listen. I didn't say I wanted to possess it, Your Highness. Personally, I find whatever it is you do with your oh-so-powerful imagination to be overrated. Consider me a tourist who has



come to see Wondertropolis' main attractions. I'm sure you'll grant that the Heart Crystal, as the source of creative inspiration for the cosmos, is among those?"

"We no longer keep it in the open."

"But I thought Redd had been disposed of. What is the harm in keeping it somewhere for the public to enjoy?"

Disposed of. We can only hope.

Alyss and her advisers had discussed sending a small force into the Heart Crystal in pursuit of Redd and The Cat, which Dodge had volunteered to command. But the risks involved and the unlikelihood of the mission meeting with success had argued against it. No living thing had ever passed through the crystal and there was no guarantee that a physical body survived. Alyss had come up with an alternate plan.

"Bibwit," she had said, "you've claimed that because Redd passed through the Heart Crystal, my aunt in the form we knew her might no longer exist?"

"I *have* claimed that," Bibwit had admitted, "and a great many other things too."

"And whatever passes into the crystal goes out into the universe to inspire imaginations in other worlds—most specifically, Earth, the world that has the most direct link to ours?"

"Sounds familiar."

So she had suggested that Hatters Rohin and Tock, two of the most gifted among the new Millinery class, travel to Earth through the Pool of Tears, to keep watch for signs of Redd, The Cat, or the influence of either.



“Hunh,” Arch said when he heard Redd’s death had not been assured. He reached for a tarty tart and tossed it to one of his bodyguards.

The guard made a show of flexing his *fingertips*: Glinting sawteeth pushed out of the skin in the exact whorling patterns of his fingerprints. Without a wince of emotion, with hands moving as fast as the spinning blades of Hatter Madigan’s top hat, he reduced the tarty tart to a pile of crumbs, then nodded to Arch: The food was safe to eat. The sawteeth sunk back into the skin of his fingers, and Arch helped himself to a tarty tart and finished it off in one and a half manly bites.

“I see that Mr. Ripkins deserves his name,” Alyss said, for as she used her imagination to fuse the tarty tart crumbs back together, she noted that they weren’t crumbs at all, but shreds. He had *ripped* the treat apart.

The king pretended not to notice the tart settling on the platter, again in one piece and ready to be properly consumed. “My guards are prodigies when it comes to more traditional modes of combat,” he said, looking at Homburg Molly. “Blades, orbs, crystal shooters, what have you. But why should I limit them to traditional modes when they can do so much more?”

He snapped his fingers. One of his intel ministers stepped forward and pushed up his sleeve. Blister lowered an index finger toward the minister’s forearm.

“Ah, ah,” Arch said, and wagged a pinkie. “We don’t want him permanently scarred, do we?”



Blister pressed the tip of his pinkie against the minister's exposed skin. The minister clenched and began to sweat. His entire forearm blistered.

"It's best to have it drained as soon as possible," Arch explained, "otherwise complications arise."

As the blistered fellow was taken into the fold of the other ministers, Molly reached for her hat, which was vibrating in anticipation of action. She would show Ripkins, Blister, and their smug king who the prodigy was.

"Molly!" Alyss warned.

It required all the discipline the girl had to restrain herself. Did the queen doubt that her bodyguard's abilities would impress these men?

"It's been brought to my attention, Arch," Alyss said, troubled by the groans coming from the intel ministers' huddle, "that you're developing a weapon capable of destroying not only all of Wonderland but Boarderland as well."

"How do you know that?"

Alyss shrugged. "My people hear things."

"Bibwit Harte hears things, you mean," said Arch, impressed. "But so what if I'm building such a weapon? Surely you believe in scientific progress?"

"I see no 'progress' in creating a weapon capable of producing massive devastation."

"Don't you? I'm sure a *man* would."

Alyss sighed. On the viewing screen behind him, Genevieve Square was the picture of activity. Merchants





who'd chosen to keep their shops open instead of attending the gala stood outside their groceries, gemstone ateliers, bakeries, and clothing stores, greeting passersby. Not long ago, as Redd Square, the area would have been nearly deserted, a slum of abandoned apartment buildings and boarded-up storefronts that even her card soldiers had been reluctant to patrol.

"You don't think the overriding need for our citizens is peace and security?" Alyss asked. "And perhaps for a—"

"The threat of total annihilation faced by those who'd attack us is a deterrent that provides Boarderland with all the security it needs. But I wonder, Miss Majesty, how aware you can be of Morgavia's military stockpiling if you question the need for such potent weapons."

"Aware enough," she said, though it was the first she had heard of it.

"Then perhaps you don't have the latest intelligence regarding the failed negotiations between Unterlan and its breakaway province, Ganmede, because if you did, surely you wouldn't doubt the need for whatever weaponry our scientists can devise."

Failed negotiations? "I have been briefed on the latest intelligence," Alyss lied. "But I wonder if there isn't a way to secure Boarderland without the threat of severe destruction or the loss of innocent lives or—"

Innocent lives?! Oh, wise queen, is anyone really as 'innocent' as you suppose? If I weren't dealing with threats from

outside Boarderland, I would yet be forever stamping out the ones from *within*. After your battles with Redd, I can hardly believe it, but you seem to retain a touch of naiveté. Citizens are not innocent, Your Highness. If the reins of government are not manfully applied, their aggressive, self-seeking nature will always upset peace and security. True peace is only possible through the absolute power of a single sovereign.”

“And what if this absolute ruler were as self-seeking and aggressive as the most restless citizen, out for his own glory instead of the common good?”

“And what if women devoted themselves to domestic chores as they should?”

She would not allow herself to get angry, especially in front of Molly, whom she could feel bristling beside her. The difference between Redd and King Arch might only be one of degree. She would have to be more circumspect around him.

“I apologize,” said Arch. “You are my host as Wonderland’s queen and I should behave accordingly.”

Alyss stood. “It’s time I returned to my party, Arch. You’re welcome to join the festivities or not, as you choose, but I thank you for offering your respects.”

Alyss and Homburg Molly started for the door.

“You know that I was one of the last people to see your father alive?” Arch asked.

Alyss paused, not turning to face him.

“I’ve never met a finer king than Nolan,” Arch went on. “He was a brilliant politician and a brave soldier. The loss



of such a king is itself cause to mourn. But when I consider that he and I were on the verge of securing greater cooperation between our nations, to create a united front against the unknown threats of the future, ah well . . . ”

Even if Alyss had been looking directly at Arch, she couldn't have known that he was lying, that he had in fact thought Nolan a weak and ineffective king who was forever at his wife's skirts, and that he'd sooner have had his head lopped off than ever entangle his government with Wonderland's. She swept out of the room, Molly following, careful not to step on the train of her dress.

A minister approached the Boarderland ruler. “Will we be joining the celebrations, my liege?”

Arch bent down, picked up a cracked button that had fallen unnoticed off Molly's coat. “I think not,” he said. “I've found what I needed.”

