



# Alice and the Cards

**O**nce upon a time there was a world, and into this world stumbled a girl, simple and childlike, full of faith and wonder. It was a strange world, where few things seemed to make sense or have any meaning; a world of cabbages and kings, of creatures and things.

**O**nce upon a time there was a large estate, where lived a girl and her family. It was a time of sadness and joy, of jealousy and reconciliation, of woodchoppers and giants, sorcerers and seeds, and many hidden meanings.

**N**ow, many years later, the fate of these worlds has become bound together, and the future of its inhabitants rests in the hands of one who has come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

A

Alice  
and the  
Cards

H

Recommended age: 12 years and up.  
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

Cover by Jeremy

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# J

## Foreword by Jesus

Behold, many are the mysteries and wonders of the spirit. Many are the dreams and characters that I have shown to your Father David. Many are the truths and riddles of realities unseen.

This is one such a mystery or riddle. It is an adventure in this world, but not of this world. It is a tale of truths and realities of life. It is a tale of secrets and mysteries of the spirit. It is a tale with meanings obvious and meanings hidden.

It is a tale of good and evil, of right and wrong. It is a tale of how, in spite of human weaknesses and mistakes, I can use you, My children, to reach those who are trapped in their flatlander existence, and to accomplish My will.

So enjoy this tale and gift of My Spirit, filled with treasures new and old, and then go out and play your part in the Great Commission that I have entrusted into your hands.

# L







- 1 -

## The Ball

Okay! I call!”  
“Wow! A straight flush! No way am I going to beat that!”

Alice yawned. She was getting sleepy, but she was determined to stay awake and make this time count. Saturday night came but once a week when she was allowed to stay up later than usual, sometimes until after midnight, and that was special for a twelve-year-old girl. She wasn't too excited about card games, which she only attended in order to sit next to her older brother, Brandon, whom she adored. He was four years her senior, and no other boy in the world would ever be as smart, clever, funny, good-looking, or possess any of the other qualities that Alice saw in him.

“That leaves me with ten chocolate-covered peanuts!” said Brandon. “It's like I've been playing for peanuts, *literally!*”

He laughed and looked down at Alice, who laughed also. His jokes were always the funniest to her, and he knew that even if no one else laughed at them he was guaranteed a giggle from his younger sister.

Alice yawned again, and being unable to fight off the drowsiness any longer, she rested her head

against Brandon's arm and nodded off to sleep. ...

"Wake up! Wake up!"

Alice was woken by an insistent shaking of her shoulder.

"It's eleven thirty, child, and we need to leave promptly for the midnight ball!"

"Er ... what ... midnight ball?" Alice rubbed her eyes. Brandon and the others were gone, the card game apparently being over, and there standing as large as life was a playing card of a woman with arms and legs, wearing a crown and an evening gown with a pattern of red diamonds.

*Funny!* thought Alice. *A talking playing card, like the Queen of Diamonds, but it seems like the most natural thing in the world. I'm not freaked out or anything.*

Alice had great difficulty describing the card's appearance, even to herself, but it seemed that although only the woman's arms and legs were three dimensional, at times her head and body would also appear that way within the card, almost like a three-dimensional picture. She didn't go quite so far as to imagine how a flattened card like that might eat or drink. The fact that this card-woman spoke and acted like an ordinary person made it seem natural that she could do anything else a normal human being could do.

"You don't know about the Christmas Eve midnight ball, young lady? Oh, tsk tsk tsk! Jack was supposed to let everyone involved know. He's sometimes so forgetful."

*Christmas Eve? Already?* thought Alice.

The Queen stopped and appraised Alice thoughtfully. "I don't know if you can go dressed like that. T-shirt and jeans indeed!"

"I can see if I have a nice dress I can change into."

"We don't have time, the carriage is outside and

if we don't make haste we will be in unfathomable trouble with the King. By the way, as you are well aware, my name is Britannica."

*How could I be aware?* thought Alice. *I've never heard of her in my life.*

"But I would appreciate it if you would address me as 'ma'am.' I'm not expecting you to say 'your Majesty,' although that would be a welcome change nowadays. Children are not what they used to be, you know. They don't have the same graces."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'll call you 'your Majesty' instead if it makes you feel any better."

"How remarkably considerate of you, child. Very well, let us depart."

"Oh, no!" said Alice with alarm. "I need to let my parents know! I'm not sure they will approve of me disappearing like this. They'll be worried, your Majesty," she added.

"Goodness, child!" said Britannica impatiently. "You really should have thought about this before. We sent out the formal invitations and by all accounts any underage guests should by now have been granted permission from parents, guardians, or those concerned. Be quick!"

Alice ran upstairs. Her parents were still up chatting with a group of friends.

"Alice! What are you doing still here?" said her mother. "You should be gone by now."

"Gone, Mum? Where?"

"To the Christmas Eve Ball! Those playing cards like to make it snappy, you know. But if you're quick, you'll have time to put on a party dress. Maybe borrow one from your older sister that's too small for her now."

*Older sister? What older sister?* Alice shook her head, bewildered, and ran to her wardrobe where to her surprise she found only a row of Victorian-style dresses, hose, and footwear similar to those she'd

seen in some movies.

*Whatever happened to my clothes? Mum must have changed them all for this dress-up stuff from centuries ago!* She scrambled into one of the dresses as she heard the Queen's voice calling her from downstairs.

"Coming!" called Alice.

"Now that looks much more appropriate," said Britannica, looking at Alice approvingly. "A darn sight more comely than the attire I see most of the youngsters wearing nowadays."

With that she hurried out of the front door and down the steps that led to the street, with Alice behind her. To Alice's delight, a thick white carpet of snow had fallen and, there, parked by the pavement, stood a magnificent ivory-coloured carriage trimmed with gold and harnessed to six stately white horses. The coachman was a liveried white rabbit, and waiting to escort them was a motorcade of six motorcycles, each one mounted by a leather-jacketed Dalmatian.

Another playing card looking similar to the Queen in that he wore extravagant attire along with his diamonds, stood holding open the door of the carriage, bowing as Britannica and Alice climbed in.

"Hello, sir," said Alice politely as the playing card entered the carriage and placed himself on the seat facing them.

"Good evening, Miss, I'm Jack Rhombus. You must be Alice. I've read so much about you, and I've long been desirous to make your acquaintance."

*Alice? Read about me? thought Alice. How odd. Maybe he's talking about the Alice from the "Alice in the Magic Garden" story in the TK. But where would he have gotten a TK from?*

"Actually, that wasn't really me in that story!" said Alice. "But my name is the same as the girl in

the dream.”

“Dream?” said Jack. “I suppose you could call it that. But you look awfully like her, the long blonde hair, the dress and all. I loved the story as a child. It was so real to me, the characters and such.”

“Yes, me too. When I was younger I didn’t like the part of the drama when the giants came out of the sky. It would get me so scared before I’d go to sleep at night!”

“Giants from the sky? I don’t remember that,” replied Jack, thoughtfully scratching his head. “What page was—”

“Jack,” said Britannica. “I think the poor child has enough to think about between the ball, the trip, and the Commission, that I think it would be appropriate if you didn’t bother her mind with these trifles right now.”

*The Commission?* wondered Alice.

“We’re here!” announced Britannica, twisting her oddly shaped body to look out of the window.

They had arrived at what looked to Alice like an enormous fairytale palace with four giant turrets, each one flying a white banner decorated with red diamonds.

“Come on, Jack!” barked the Queen, once they had alighted from the carriage. “Don’t stand there like an imbecile.” Jack had been staring at Alice in awe.

Alice followed Britannica as she strode up the floodlit steps, and on impulse turned to address Jack who was forlornly ambling behind. “It’s been so nice to meet you, sir. I hope we get to talk more about Alice and the TK!”

“TK? The tea party, you mean? Oh, I’d like that very much!” His face lit up. “Though you *are* Alice, aren’t you?”

Alice looked at Jack’s hopeful expression and didn’t have the heart to disillusion him.

“Why ... yes, of course!” said Alice. *After all, she thought, my name is Alice, so I AM telling him the truth.*

“I should probably advise you at this point, my dear child,” whispered Britannica, “that it doesn’t do for someone of your standing to be fraternising too freely with a knave.”

“Mr. Rhombus, ma’am? A knave? I think, if you will please pardon my seeming impertinence, your Majesty, that he seems a very nice card, um ... man.”

*“My seeming impertinence?”* thought Alice. *I’m really sounding like one of those posh girls in those old movies.*

“A knave! According to the Oxford Dictionary, that’s the name he’s been given, and that’s what he’ll always be.”

Alice was puzzled. She had never heard of that particular playing card being called a knave before and thought it was entirely unfair.

They had entered an enormous ballroom and were walking on a shimmering mosaic floor set in a delicate red and white diamond pattern. Alice looked up in awe at the tall, ornate marble columns that swept up to four large crystal domes through which the starry night sky was clearly visible.

“Now, Alice, I will let you mingle with the guests,” said Britannica, and she breezed off into the crowd.

*That’s odd, thought Alice. They’re all cards, and just the red diamond kind ... wait a minute! Here I am wondering about why the cards are just red diamond ones, and what the ‘Commission’ is the Queen mentioned, and...*

Things had been happening so fast in the last half an hour or so that Alice, being swept along with them, had not had time to collect her thoughts and hadn’t even considered the absurdity of the circumstances as a whole.

“Hee hee hee! Ha ha ha!”

Alice’s thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in the gathering, and she turned to see two cards madly dashing in and out of the great hall, laughing hysterically as they went. Alice’s eyes followed their antics until she felt herself getting quite dizzy.

“Jokers Wild, Miss. They can show up anywhere without notice. Sometimes it’s not convenient and extremely inappropriate.”

Alice turned and standing by her side was another rich but morose-looking female playing card.

“Hello! What’s your name?” Alice asked.

*She looks so sad, she thought. But come to think of it, everyone here at this ball looks sad.*

“Madame de Deuce.”

“Pleased to meet you, Madame de Deuce. My name is Alice.”

She smiled, and feeling that it would be appropriate at such a fancy do, attempted a curtsy.

“That’s very charming, Miss. But you should save that for the royalty, I’m just at the bottom of the heap. Of course, Ace sometimes ends up at the bottom, but not often. Depends on the rules of the game. At least he gets a chance to be top dog most of the time—even over the King. When he was at the bottom we were the best of friends, lovers actually, and he was a wonderful card. But as is so often the case, when he was at the top ... excuse me saying so, he was a pain in the you know what.”

“How unfortunate. May I ask you a couple of questions, ma’am?” asked Alice timidly.

“Certainly. I don’t know if I’ll be able to answer them, though.”

“Well, it just seems odd to me that there are so few cards at this event and they are just the Diamond ... er ... type.”

“Suit.”

“Yes, suit. And even though this is such a special occasion and it’s a beautiful palace, everyone looks so sad. The only time some of them laughed was when the Jokers Wild ran in.”

“That’s just it, miss. We Diamonds are rich, but we’re sad because we’re just too dobbm exclusive. Snobbish, I should say. A Club or a Spade is looked down on and a Heart, well if one were to ever show up, they wouldn’t even get past the check in. But because of this, we bore each other to death with the same type of company.”

“That is unfortunate, Madame de Deuce. I wish I could help. Maybe you could all get together and play some games!”

“But that is just the problem! Have you ever tried to play a game with cards that are all just Diamonds? Gets a bit one-sided.”

“What I mean, ma’am, is if we could get all the cards together from all the different um ... suits, then we can enjoy some fun games. I wish you could meet my big brother Brandon. He knows every card game there is and is really so good he nearly always wins.”

“That’s odd, Miss,” said Madame de Deuce. “But I could’ve sworn in the story that you only had an older sister. The one who was reading to you under the tree.”

*This is really curious!* thought Alice. *These cards seem to know some things about the Alice TK, but they do get their facts a bit wrong.*

“I really don’t mean to contradict, ma’am. But in the story I only had a *younger* sister who I was jealous of. You see, I’ve read the story a zillion times and I even used to listen to a drama of it at night. But in reality I only have an older brother. He’s sixteen. His name is Brandon, and you really ought to meet him.”



Just then Britannica bustled up and hurriedly drew Alice aside.

“Alice, my dear. The guests are waiting.”

“Waiting, your Majesty? For what?”

“For what? The *speech*, of course!”

“Speech?”

“You absolutely are a most delightful and charming child, but you really ought to get a head on those shoulders. I gave you ample warning to prepare.”

“I am so sorry, ma’am, but I don’t know anything about it.”

“Dear, dear, dear!” fussed the Queen. “What are we going to do now, for heaven’s sake?” At this she pulled out a delicate lace handkerchief from her ample bosom and started mopping her brow, gasping so hard that Alice thought the poor dear was going to faint.

“Of course, your Majesty,” said Alice. “I remember now. Yes, the speech!”

*A speech?* thought Alice. *I have the hardest time giving a testimony or talking at fellowships or birthdays and stuff, I get so scared. How am I ever going to give a speech, and whatever about?*

“Ladies and gentleman,” came an announcement from the stage, accompanied by some light waltz music played by a small orchestra made up of white mice dressed in tuxedos. “We welcome Miss Alice Pleasance!”

*Alice Pleasance? That’s not my name! My name is Alice Godley. This is just so weird!*



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## Speech!

Alice stood frozen for a moment, seriously debating whether she should just make a quick exit and be done with this whole state of affairs, when she caught sight of Jack Rhombus beaming at her from the expectant onlookers.

“Attagirl, Alice,” he said in a loud whisper, giving her a thumbs up.

Alice returned him a kindly smile, then bracing herself she walked, or more like marched, resolutely towards the stage.

*The Commission! Talk about the Commission!*

These words came to her mind like a flash from ... “out there somewhere” was the only way Alice could describe it.

*The Commission? What is the Commission?* Alice wondered frantically as the stage loomed closer. *Oh wait! I remember Uncle Jerry using that word during his Word class on Mark 16:15.*

*Just start talking,* the voice urged her.

“Thank you very much,” said Alice into the microphone as the ripple of applause died down.

“My good friends and noble diamond wearers, I’m here tonight to talk about the Commission, which I’m sure most of you have heard something about. It is something that was entrusted to my parents

and now has been passed down to me also. This Commission has been with us for a long time, and tonight we are all here together because the time has come to fulfil it.”

*This doesn't feel like me talking at all!* thought Alice as she momentarily froze in fright. *It's all coming out so "speechy."*

*Keep talking. You're doing splendidly!* the voice answered.

“Each one of you here has been blessed with the riches of this world and its bounty, and the Commission is in dire need of people such as yourselves who can be of tremendous assistance in the furtherance of what I'm sure that most of you agree is the most worthy of causes.”

The audience nodded and murmured its assent.

“But it cannot be accomplished without your help. Verbal encouragement and support is most welcome, and will be much appreciated—but as you all know, true support is shown with tangible fruit, and manifested in ‘putting your lucre where your mouth is’ as the saying goes!”

This was met with a round of chuckles, and as Alice paused to try to make sense of everything she had just said, the room abruptly broke out into applause.

“I gather that it is not necessary for me to stress my point, as it seems all of you here are aware of my intimations!”

More chuckles.

“Therefore if you so desire and feel you can be of financial service to this Commission, knowing that you shall reap many times over what you have sown, I shall be available after the proceedings. Thank you.”

Alice attempted her second curtsy, this time with perfect aplomb, which so further charmed the crowd, that as she stepped off the stage she

was surrounded by enthusiastic supporters, many waving already signed cheques and greeting her with heartfelt thanks and comments on her speech.

“That was absolutely marvellous, my dear girl,” gushed Britannica as she made her way through the pressing throng. “A wonderful speech! I do believe you’ve tugged at their heartstrings as well as their purse strings.”

“And it seems as though you’ve caused most of them to review their hideously snobbish attitude toward members of other suits,” added Jack, with a sideways glance at Britannica.

The Queen slipped her arm into Alice’s and drew her aside before continuing in a confidential whisper.

“My husband has been trying for so long to do this. He will be ever so thrilled at the response. He has been called away on some urgent business, but he should be back shortly. He desperately wanted to speak to you.”

“Your husband the King, your Majesty?” asked Alice, feeling very nervous after these unusual events, with her head spinning from the speech and the overwhelming reaction it received. “Oh, I don’t think I am ready to—”

“Clobyosh, girl. Just be your own dear self. Smile that charming smile, curtsey that charming curtsey, and you have nothing to fear. Be sure you thank him for the tickets.”

“Tickets?”

“Tickets for your expedition, of course! Why, didn’t you know? Your flight leaves tomorrow morning!” said Britannica impatiently, as she adjusted her crown. “He would have sent you on his private jet, but unfortunately it developed an unexpected problem at the last minute and had to go in for maintenance. But don’t worry. You’re booked first class, and it doesn’t get much more comfortable

than that.”

*This is like being on a roller coaster that you can't get off!* Alice thought, feeling as though she was being swept up in something she had no control over.

“Excuse me, your Majesty. But do you think I could use the phone?”

“A phone? Whatever for?”

The Queen's overbearing and fussy manner was straining Alice's patience and she found great difficulty mustering up a smile and a civil tongue.

“I would like to call my parents,” she said tersely. “They will be expecting me back, and they'll be worried sick if I suddenly take off all by myself on a plane to I don't know where, your Majesty.”

“Jack Rhombus!” Britannica bellowed into the crowd. “Can you take Alice to the cell phone?”

Jack was there in a flash. “Certainly, ma'am. Come this way, Miss.”

He grabbed a giant lantern and Alice followed him down several flights of narrow stone steps that led underground.

*How curious,* thought Alice. *If they had cell phones I should think that they would have them easier to get to than this. My dad always carries his with him!*

“Here you are, young lady,” said Jack, pointing into a room that looked somewhat like a prison with bars. An old-fashioned phone hung on the wall inside the cell.

Thankfully, Alice pulled the receiver from its hook. However, when she took a closer look at the big, bronze dial, she was dismayed.

“There are no numbers!” exclaimed Alice.

“Of course not. You can't spell a name with numbers,” answered Jack.

“So I'm supposed to dial a name?” asked Alice.

“What else would you dial?” answered Jack.

*I suppose that's just the way things are here,* thought Alice as she placed her forefinger in the little hole that showed the letter G, and followed it with the other letters, O-D-L-E-Y.

A crispy and mechanical voice came to life on the other end of the line. "That name is not available. Please try again." Then, with a click, the line went dead.

Alice furrowed her brow. *I'm sure I spelt it right,* Alice thought. She was just about to turn to Jack when she suddenly remembered that she had been introduced as Alice Pleasance, not Alice Godley.

*Worth a try, at least,* Alice thought as she dialled the letters P-L-E-A-S-A-N-C-E.

"Yes?" came her father's voice at the other end of the line. "This is the Pleasance residence. With whom am I speaking?"

"Daddy? This is Alice. I'm at this ball, and they're talking about putting me on a plane tomorrow."

"Yes, I know. To Mayhem City—the capital of the Useless Status. We'll be praying for you."

"The *Useless Status!* Where on earth is that? Does it have anything to do with this Commission thing I'm supposed to be involved with?"

"But of course, Sweetheart. Don't you remember?" said her father excitedly. "You've been looking forward to this for weeks."

"I have?"

"Yes, and now it's finally come to pass. Don't worry, we know you are going to be just fine. You will be so well protected that you'll walk where angels fear to tread. Just put one foot in front of the other and trust, Darling."

"But what am I supposed to do? I don't know anything about..."

"Alice! Alice! Where on earth is that child?"

Alice heard the Queen's voice bellowing upstairs.

## ALICE AND THE CARDS

“You have to go, Sweetheart,” her father answered over the phone. “Your mother and I will see you again soon! I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy,” said Alice, and with a click, the conversation was over.

“She’s coming, ma’am!” Jack called back. “We’ll be right there.”

Alice scrambled up the stone steps to be met by the red-faced Queen.

“The King is here and wishes to see you promptly about the Commission! Come this way!”



- 3 -

## The King of Diamonds

Alice followed Britannica through the ballroom, up the giant staircase and along a wide, crimson velvet-carpeted corridor until they arrived at a pair of enormous ivory white, gold-trimmed portals that loomed at the end. Another liveried white rabbit wearing a white powdered wig bowed before them and opened the doors. Alice entered the room to see the back of a large ornate, crimson velvet chair, from behind which she heard a deep clearing of the throat.

“Ahem! Is that you, young Alice?”

“Er ... y-y-yes, your Majesty.”

“What do you mean ‘er, yes’? You’re not sure?”

“Yes ... I’m sure. At least I’m sure now.”

“Come here, girl. Let me look at you.”

Alice curtsied as she stepped shyly in front of the chair on which sat the King, a playing card of course, but no doubt a King—wearing a cumbersome gold crown adorned with red diamonds, and a long, gilt-edged robe. Most of his rosy red face was obscured by a luxurious white, wavy beard, from out of which jutted a pipe.

“Yes, yes, yes! That’s the Alice I know,” he said approvingly, as he puffed on his pipe. “Complete with the striped hose! Charming as usual!”



“You know,” he whispered, leaning forward in his chair as if to take her into his confidence. “They never did catch the dastardly blighter who stole the tarts. But from my extensive historical research into the whole affair I have a pretty good idea who it was.”

Alice was perplexed, but took great care not to show it.

“Now onto the business at hand. ‘All’s well that ends well,’ I always say. It turned out that the cook took great pains to replace the tarts and everything continued without a hitch.

“So let’s discuss your Commission. I believe in letting bygones be bygones, and what are a few silly tarts anyway? We have more important matters to attend to.”

The King tapped out his pipe on the bowl and called for a refill of tobacco.

“Of course, the problem was that apparently the dear cook, bless her heart, couldn’t acquire the correct variety of grape jam, which unfortunately became a source of dismay to all concerned. Anyway, I believe in striving forward, keeping a stiff upper lip and all that, letting nothing deter one from the important. Am I right?”

“Oh yes, your Majesty,” said Alice. “The ... er ... Commission?”

“The Commission, yes. It turned out that the jam used in the stolen tarts was rather rancid anyway, so I would say in total confidence that it was all for the best. Although documents have been discovered in recent years that seem to indicate that many folks present at the time took on a rather ‘sour grapes’ attitude towards the matter due to the fact that they themselves were unable to savour the tarts.”

“Um ... your Majesty ... the Commission?”

“‘All’s well that ends well’ I always say. So what did you wish to see me about?”

"If it's okay to say so your Majesty, I ... er ... do believe you wished to see *me*."

"What about?"

"The Queen said it was about the Commission."

"Goodness gracious, why didn't you say so, child? The Commission, yes, the Commission!" The King cleared his throat again and puffed a little on his pipe. "Very important. I am quite old as you can see, that's why they call me old King Coal. That's my first name, it was given to me as a child, before I became a Diamond through the pressures of hard experience and life and all of that, but the name has somehow stuck. Excuse me a moment ... fiddlers! *Fiddlers!*"

Immediately, three blind white mice wearing tuxedos hustled into the room, each carrying a violin and a music stand.

"Play that lovely melody from the fifth movement of the "Commission Rhapsody" by Durak, while I talk to my delightful guest."

The three musicians launched into a stirring melody that brought tears to the eyes of the King.

"As I was saying, I am quite old and do not have much longer before this fraying piece of cardboard becomes dust. I have looked back over my life, taken stack, and have decided to devote my remaining years to helping a cause which I had disregarded in the indifference and vanity of my youth.

"You see, when I was a young and carefree playing card, I was visited in a dream by a Woodchopper and he told me of a treasured deck of cards that belonged to his son, which got lost and scattered. It had been a source of great delight to himself and especially his son. Myself being one of the cards of that particular deck, and the richest of its Kings in regards to the material wealth of this world, he asked me to use my power and influence to help locate and retrieve the rest of them. To which I responded with an 'I'm all

right, knave' type of attitude and went on my merry way.

"All that to say, for most of my self-indulgent life I have ignored the plight of my fellow cards, many of whom are scattered in the highways and hedges and goodness knows where else in the world. Now the dream has returned, and it has been made clear to me that my duty is to bring the deck together again, as it once was. The Woodchopper now wishes to present the complete deck to his son on his birthday at midnight of Christmas Eve next year. It is meant to be a surprise for the boy."

The King turned to the fiddlers and requested another movement from the rhapsody.

"You are probably wondering where you come into this, Alice. The Woodchopper told me that if anybody could help bring these cards together, it would be you. So I was extremely excited when I heard that you had agreed to come."

"But what am I to do?" asked Alice.

"Find the other cards, of course," answered the King, "and give them these invitations."

The King handed Alice a small stack of attractive golden cards carefully inscribed with royal blue text.

"Count them. There should be fifty-four exactly—one for each card. And you have exactly fifty-two weeks to complete the mission. There was something about finding the Queen of Hearts, one of the most beloved of all cards, and that it could prove difficult. Of course, locating *any* of the cards could be a challenge, especially in Mayhem, a virtual card metropolis. But this problem has been alleviated by the fact that they will be magnetically drawn to you, as they have been to each other, and you'll be able to recognize them by the same pattern that's on the back of

the invitations.”

Alice turned over one of the cards in her hand to see an embossed paisley<sup>1</sup> pattern of royal blue and gold, and recognized that it was identical to the designs and colours of the King’s lavish robe. “Your Majesty, I do not wish to appear ungrateful and I know it’s important, but a whole year on this Commission seems to be such a long time. My family will be ever so worried and I shall miss them terribly.”

“Understandably so, my dear girl. Understandably so,” said the King as he again tapped out the ashes of his pipe into the bowl and called for another refill of tobacco. “But you shall find that it may pass much quicker than you expect. Time sometimes does strange things, you know? Oh, and there is one more thing I was told to tell you,” said the King, scratching his beard as if he was trying to remember something.

“Ah, that’s it!

*“Mysteries of the hearts unfold  
In ruby red and ring of gold.”*

“Is that a riddle? I love riddles. Brandon’s really into them,” said Alice.

The King chuckled. “Yes, child. I’ve no idea what it means, as it’s specifically for you to solve. All I know is it contains the key to the completion of your assignment. Do you have any other questions?”

“I don’t think so, your Majesty,” replied Alice. “But I do want to thank you for the tickets.”

“The tickets? Oh, of course! I have booked you first class on Air Rhombus, my airline. The plane to the Useless Status leaves from Bezique airport at half-past eleven tomorrow morning. Arrangements

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<sup>1</sup> **paisley**: a distinctive bold design consisting of multicoloured curving shapes, stylised cones, and feathers

have been made for you to stay at the palace tonight. As far as luggage is concerned, you need not carry anything but a small purse containing a toothbrush and a comb and this flash card. You merely flash it by pressing the small button in the corner and any expenses incurred along the way will be automatically deducted from the Commission account in which is deposited the many funds you solicited tonight. I wish you well, dear Alice. Happy Christmas. My prayers are with you. You are dismissed.”

“Happy Christmas, your Majesty,” said Alice as she bowed and curtseyed. “Thank you. Oh, and here’s your invitation.”

The King took it and looked at it as if he was seeing it for the first time.

“Why, thank you, Alice!”

With a satisfied smile, Alice turned and left the room.



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## Airport Encounters

Leaving Alice to wait in line at Bezique Airport's baggage check-in, Jack Rhombus busied himself with what he called "browsing and dousing," this meant browsing at the magazine shop and dousing himself with various samples of free cologne at the Duty Free. Alice was a little perturbed because she didn't see any point in standing at the baggage check-in when she wasn't carrying any baggage.

*I may be young, but I am intelligent enough to see that,* she thought, and had told Jack so, who was insistent that this was the correct procedure to follow, and would have to inform the Queen that he had dropped her off there whether there was any need to or not.

Resigning herself to a long wait as the queue moved slowly forward, Alice took to studying the creatures that were lined up in front of her as well as those that milled about the airport. She looked diligently to see if any of the cards among them carried the required blue and gold pattern.

There were also other types of cards, and a variety of other characters. These ranged from slickly suited lizards to elegantly dressed poodles, impatient hares to plodding turtles, and clucking, chattering hens to sombre, grunting toads.

Some strolled leisurely as they chatted with friends; some paced this way and that, unsure of everything, glancing nervously at their watches and up at the various timetables and itineraries that flashed on big boards. Others clicked hurriedly by, oblivious to all, engrossed in their world of "important" business.

"Cough! Cough! Excuse me. May I do my check-in in front of you?" came a weak, raspy voice from behind Alice. She turned and there stood a dowdy and dog-eared woman playing card, heavily made-up and reeking of cheap perfume, wearing two black clover earrings, black laddered tights and white stiletto heeled shoes, and—to Alice's delight—a very short dirty dress with the blue and gold paisley pattern.

"I'm sorry," she continued between deep coughs, "but I noticed you didn't have anything to check in and I have these four big bags. If I go and wait at the end of the line, I'll never make the plane because I am so weak. It takes a great deal of effort to walk."

"Certainly," said Alice. "Here, I'll help you with them."

"That's so kind of you, dearie. What's your name?"

"Alice, ma'am."

"Alice! I thought so. I knew there was something familiar about you. What a nice surprise."

*How could this woman know me?* thought Alice.

"My, I'm sorry," said the woman, lighting a cigarette. "I didn't introduce myself. My name is Trixie Barr."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. ... um, Miss Barr. Do I know you from somewhere?" she asked.

"Ooh no, Luv. You wouldn't know me, but I sure as shooting know you. Beautiful story. Used to read it to my son, Mandrake, when he was a little 'un. He just loved it. 'Course 'e's grown up now and long

gone. 'Aven't seen 'im for years, and he hasn't even written me a letter."

"How sad," said Alice. "That must be so lonely for you. I know when I grow up, if I couldn't see my parents, I would at least try to write them as often as I can."

"That's lovely dear. 'Course I wasn't too sweet on my folks when I was your age. I ran away at fifteen. Took to the streets." Trixie broke off into a coughing spasm. "Then I worked the clubs. Still do. It doesn't pay like it used to when I was in better shape, now I'm a little worse for wear. But I'm still good for a few tricks to make ends meet."

Alice didn't understand all that Trixie was saying, and didn't want to appear ignorant so she just nodded in sympathy, feeling very sorry for the poor lady.

"My brother Brandon does tricks for free."

Trixie raised a quizzical painted eyebrow.

"He doesn't just do them with cards, he does all kinds of other magic tricks with coins and different things. He's just so good. You really should meet him."

"May I ask what brings a little girl like you to travel alone? And first class I notice," asked Trixie, taking a drag at her cigarette.

"I am on a Commission. I got tickets from the King of Diamonds. Air Rhombus is his airline company."

"The King of Diamonds? Ooh, that's impressive. Must be an important Commission."

"Yes, ma'am. The most important there is."

"I can imagine, working for a bunch of snobs like the Diamond crowd."

"Yes, ma'am, I know they are a little bit snobby."

"That's an understatement."

"But they are so sad. They can't have any interesting games with each other because they don't



ever get the other suits of cards to play with them. They just want to be around other Diamonds.”

“Well, you won’t see me getting together and playing no games wi’ that lot,” said Trixie.

“But that’s the problem, Miss Barr, none of the suits want to mix with the others, so they all end up sad and bored when they could be having fun together. That is what the Commission is about. I’m supposed to find the Woodchopper’s son’s deck of playing cards that was lost and invite them to the Christmas Ball next year. That’s why I think it’s so wonderful that I’ve already met you.”

“Sorry, but you can count me out.”

“But you *have* to come! You see, if you don’t, then in the end the deck won’t be complete. And can you imagine the Woodchopper’s son playing ‘Patience’ with one card short?”

“Look, Dearie, they’re calling me to check in my baggage,” said Trixie, dropping her lipstick-smothered cigarette end and stepping on it with her stiletto-heeled shoe. “Been nice talking to ya. You’re a lovely child, and I hope you have success with your um ... cause.”

“Wait!” Alice called as Trixie shuffled forward towards the check-in counter. “At least take this invitation. This is meant to be a surprise for the Woodchopper’s son. He’ll be so disappointed if you’re missing!”

Trixie looked at the card Alice held in her hand. It had a captivating shine to it, and Trixie couldn’t stop herself from staring at it for several moments.

“Nah, dear,” she said, handing the card back to Alice. “Save it for someone else. I’m sure there’s another Two of Clubs in this world somewhere who will do just as well as me.”

At that point Jack strolled up, smelling like a cologne factory and a little soggy from the dousing.

“Your flight is leaving from gate fourteen in

twenty minutes, Miss Alice. Here's your boarding pass. They'll be feeding you on the plane but I bought you a bag of Krunchits in case you're hungry."

"I feel frightfully bad about Miss Trixie," said Alice.

"Miss who?" answered Jack.

Alice turned around to point, but Trixie seemed to have finished checking in her bags and was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, she's gone," answered Alice. "But she's getting on the same flight anyway. I'll get another chance."

Jack shrugged.

"Do I really have to go on this journey by myself?" asked Alice. "Can't you come with me?"

"It wouldn't do, Miss. Queen Britannica wants me back at the palace. Besides, us Diamonds don't have too good a reputation. Might be a bit off-putting. Don't worry though, Miss Alice, you'll always have company."

"Thank you, Mr. Rhombus," said Alice, shaking his hand.

"See you in fifty-two weeks' time." Jack's eyes started to water. "I shall miss you terribly."

*"Flight to Mayhem now boarding at gate fourteen. All passengers to Mayhem, please proceed to gate fourteen."*

Jack pulled himself together again.

"That way, Miss," he said, pointing in front of him.

Alice turned and waved goodbye as she walked briskly down the long passage towards the departure lounge, still disappointed that Trixie hadn't taken one of her invitations.

Arriving at gate fourteen, having been on her feet for the last forty-five minutes, Alice thankfully plopped herself down in an empty seat of the first-class waiting section. She was just about to open

her bag of Krunchits, when she noticed that sitting across from her was another Club playing card reading a newspaper. It looked somewhat well-to-do, but was wearing a tie with the same pattern as Trixie Barr's dress.

"Going to Mayhem, kid?" he asked, peering over the newspaper.

"Yes I am."

"Got folks there?"

"No, sir," replied Alice, "I have a ... er ... job to do there."

"Bit young to be travelling alone, if I may say so, kid. Mayhem is a rough place."

Alice was a little unsettled at this remark, but tried to appear as brave as she could.

"I have been reassured that I will be well protected and that I will walk into places 'where angels fear to tread'—I think that is how my father put it."

"Sorry, I didn't give you my name," said the card, putting down his newspaper and reaching out his hand. "I'm Don Casino. And if I'm not mistaken, you're Alice, right?"

Alice nodded her head in bewilderment.

"Yes I am. How did you know?"

"I wondered when you walked in, but I didn't think it would be possible. I mean, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, the way Time acts around here. But my son will be green with envy when he hears I actually met you. He is a great fan of yours."

"A fan of the comic, I suppose."

"Comic? No, he never reads—not even comics. But he's just *hooked* on your new movie."

"Movie?" said Alice. "I didn't know that there was a movie of it. I should ask my parents to get it."

"Yeah. Pretty trump, I must say I've enjoyed it myself. A new twist to the old story, modernised. The insane Alice and the twisted Queen of Hearts and stuff. Quite ingenious."

“Queen of Hearts? I don’t remember a Queen in the story, but I do know that I’m supposed to try to find the Queen of Hearts. Do you know where she lives?”

“No I don’t, and after seeing this movie, I don’t think you’d *want* to have anything to do with her kind! That lady was bad news.”

“But, Mr. Casino, she’s not bad! I understand she’s good, loving, and kind, and I can’t complete the lost deck without her.”

“Lost deck?”

“Yes!” said Alice, enthusiastically. “The deck that belonged to the Woodchopper’s son! They were lost and scattered. I mean, come to think of it, I think it’s amazing that I’ve found *you* already.”

“Listen, kiddo, I hate to put a pin in your balloon, but I’m not *lost*! So what’s the need for me to get found?”

“To make up a complete deck! So the Woodchopper’s son and his deck can play fun games with each other, and not be so lonely and sad!”

“I have plenty of fun games with my friends,” said Casino. “I don’t consider myself sad or lonely.”

*“Ladies and gentlemen, you are now requested to board the plane. First-class passengers, please go through first and present your boarding passes.”*

Alice stood up from her seat as the people in the lounge started to move towards the exit to board the plane.

“I have to board now, Mr. Casino,” she said, reaching out her hand to say goodbye. “But I must give you an invitation to the birthday celebration for the Woodchopper’s son next Christmas Eve. Please come, it’s important for every card to be there.”

With a shrug, Don took the card and stuffed it inside his shirt pocket without giving it another glance.

Alice made her way down the gangway and was

kindly escorted to her seat by a friendly hostess named Twinkie, who Alice noticed was a Diamond card, but without the required pattern. She had been assigned to personally take care of Alice as was the airline's custom with unaccompanied children, although Alice was becoming rather used to the idea of being like an independent adult on this assignment and disliked the idea of being referred to as a child, and especially being treated as one.

"I would like to know something, ma'am," inquired Alice in an off-handed way. "I've heard that Mayhem is a rough city. Is that true? Not that I'm *scared* or anything."

"Oh yes, young lady," answered Miss Twinkie, lowering her voice. "I myself wouldn't even think of going anywhere there alone after dark. Lots of crime and gangs. Hardly anyplace safe. But I'm sure you'll be picked up at the other end, right? Relative or someone?"

Alice gulped. "Well, not exactly. I was told to just go there and from there I will be shown what to do and where to go. My daddy said I should just put one foot in front of the other, kind of, and not worry."

"You must be used to that a little bit," said the hostess. "After all that experience you had of going down the rabbit hole."

"Actually that wasn't me, that was my uncle's oldest daughter. She's the one who went *selah*, and no one knows where in the world she lives. She's very careful with her mail, what she says and all about the weather and stuff."

The hostess looked puzzled. "Well Alice, it's certainly a different world out there in this day and age. Definitely no tea party! But now I must ask you to fasten your seat belt and prepare for your flight," she added with a sparkling smile. "Excuse me as I take care of the other passengers."



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## The Queen of Clubs

This wasn't the first time that Alice had travelled on a plane, but this was the first journey she had travelled alone, as she had usually been accompanied by her parents and family. She felt a few butterflies of excitement at this new experience, but she could honestly say that it was not a feeling of nervousness or fear, and for this she was thankful.

She leafed through the in-flight magazine but found nothing that suited her interest, except for the section on in-flight entertainment which she studied for awhile as the rest of the passengers started to come on board.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, we will be taking off shortly,"* announced Twinkie. *"You are kindly requested to fasten your seat belts until the seat belt sign is turned off. Our flight time to Mayhem Airport will be eight and a half hours. The in-flight movie is 'The Last Laugh' with Jokers Wild: Hee Hee and Ha Ha."*

"Excuse me, but I think I'm taking the window seat."

Alice looked up and there stood another card, this time a woman wearing a silver crown gaudily decorated with black clovers, and wrapped in a blue silk stole embroidered with a gold paisley pattern.

“Can I check your boarding pass?” she continued.

Alice wondered why a passenger would require this, but obliged.

“Oh cribbage!” fumed the woman. “There must have been some mistake. I told those jackanapes at the check-in that I was to have a window seat.”

“That’s all right, ma’am,” said Alice. “You can have my seat if you want to look out of the window.”

“It’s not that I *want* to look out of the window. I sleep most of the journey and there’s nothing to see anyway but sky and clouds. It’s just the principle of the whole thing. I said I wanted a window seat and that’s what I expect to get. This airline just doesn’t have its deck together. Let me call the stewardess!”

“But I really don’t mind,” said Alice. “You don’t need to call the stewardess. You can have *my* seat.”

“That’s really not the point, child. It’s the principle of the whole thing.”

Twinkie hurried up with a look of concern, and asked what the problem was, to which the lady replied by going into a long and detailed account of her request for a window seat.

“We are preparing to take off, ma’am,” said Twinkie calmly, “so if you would kindly sit down, we can take care of this during the flight.”

By now Alice had moved to the aisle seat.

“What are you doing, child?” said the lady. “You are sitting in my seat.”

“I thought you wanted the window seat, so I moved.”

“I didn’t *want* the window seat, it’s just that I had requested it and my request was obviously not officially granted. It’s the principle of the whole thing.”

Alice, getting weary of this matter, stood up to move back to the window seat.

“No, no, no, my dear,” fussed the woman. “You

might as well stay where you are. What's done is done, and there's nothing we can do about it now, and I don't believe in making an issue of such a trifle. Far be it from me to make a mountain out of a molehill. It just boils down to the principle of the whole thing."

"I see. So you're travelling to Mayhem too?" asked Alice, hoping to change the subject.

"Yes. Have business interests there. Clubs."

"Clubs? What sort of clubs?"

"All of 'em. Dance clubs, gambling clubs, disco clubs, strip clubs—you name 'em."

"I don't think I can, ma'am. I don't know any names of clubs. Oh, I do contribute to a kids photo club sometimes."

"It's just as well you don't know them, child. They aren't places for a little girl like you."

"If it's okay, ma'am, can I ask why you wear a crown?" said Alice, gingerly. "Are you a Queen?"

"When I was your age I used to dream of being a Queen, but it never happened," she said, her sad and heavily made-up eyes looking wistfully out of the airplane window. "Used to read everything I could get my hands on about famous Kings and Queens. Wasn't born into royalty and all that, so I gave up on the idea; although people do call me the 'Queen of Clubs,' kidding like. But I don't think of myself as such, with a palace and all that, like the Queen of Diamonds. My name is Helvetica, by the way," she added, shaking Alice's hand.

"So you don't have a palace and a throne?"

"Of course not, child! But wait. Come to think of it, my mansion in the country is a pretty fancy residence, so maybe you could say it's a palace of sorts—but I don't have a *throne* ... well ... unless you call my fancy office chair a throne, in which I sit when I'm givin' orders in meetings and over the phone and all that business."



“Servants?”

“Really, now, that’s stretching it.” Helvetica laughed again, then paused thoughtfully. “No, wait—unless you could say my chauffeur is a servant, along with my maids, my cooks, my hairdresser, and even my business manager.”

“Let’s think of all the other things that a Queen has to have to be a real Queen, and we’ll see if you have them,” said Alice excitedly.

The lady was starting to laugh quite a bit, obviously enjoying Alice’s company and this little game.

“Soldiers!” said Alice.

“Um ... I don’t think ... yes! I have a well-trained team of security guards!”

“A carriage!”

“My chauffeur-driven limo!”

“A King?”

Helvetica’s face fell and she turned her head to look out of the window.

“Oh, I am so sorry, your Majesty!” said Alice quickly. “I really didn’t mean to pry. We can stop the game right now if you wish.”

“It’s perfectly all right, sweet child,” said the lady gently. “There is a King, you might say, and I love him very much. He’s in the same business and had a lot to do with what I am today, and that’s very successful. But then we became rivals and he grew jealous ’cause I was becoming more powerful than he was, so he got into crime and we parted ways. It broke my heart. Oh, but I shouldn’t be burdening a girl of your age with telling you all that. Let’s continue the game.”

“That’s all right, ma’am,” said Alice. “But what else? I’m *stuck!* Anyway, at least we know that you do have everything you need to be a Queen!”

“Okay then. But one more thing, Honey. You tell me what *else* a Queen needs, personality wise, to be a *real* Queen.”

Alice pursed her lips for awhile in thought.

“Well, my mum said that a true Queen has *poise*—I don’t know what that is—and she also has to be *gracious*.”

“Gracious,” said the lady, reflectively. “That’s a lovely word. Gracious.”

“Yes, loving and kind to all. Doesn’t matter whether they are rich or poor and stuff. That’s what my mum said.”

The lady fell silent for awhile, then pressed the button to request the stewardess, who hurried up a little nervous at what it could be this time.

“Yes ma’am, may I help you?”

“I wish to commend you on your courtesy and patience with some of us passengers who can be a little overbearing, like myself,” said the lady, reaching for Twinkie’s hand. “I want to apologise. You have a difficult job, but you handle it admirably, with remarkable um ... *poise*.”

“Oh, that’s p-perfectly all right, your Majesty,” said Twinkie, with a look of astonishment. “By the way, may I ask what country you are ruler over?”

“Clubland.”

“Forgive my ignorance, your Majesty, but I don’t remember hearing of that particular country, but I must say they are a fortunate country to be blessed with a Queen as gracious as yourself.”

“Why, thank you. I’m touched.”

“So you see, ma’am,” whispered Alice. “You really *are* a Queen!”

“By the way,” said Twinkie, as she turned to go, “what is *poise*?”

Helvetica stared blankly at Alice.

“It’s what all true Queens have,” said Alice.



For the remainder of the trip Twinkie hovered over Alice and the Queen, lavishing them with extra attention and concern for their comfort, along with additional snacks and treats.

"I feel like such a self-centred louse," said Helvetica suddenly. "I've told you all about me and my worries and all, and I haven't even asked you your name or anything about yourself."

"My name is Alice."

"I *knew* it! By Pinochle, I knew it!" exclaimed Helvetica. "I just didn't want to come right out and ask you! Not sure if you'd think I was batty or something. But what brings you to Mayhem? It's a far cry from Wonderland!"

Alice reached into her pocket and pulled out an invitation for the Queen, who listened enthralled as Alice proceeded to tell of her Commission.

"This is so wonderful, Alice," she said, wiping her moistening eyes. "Do you need any help financially or otherwise for this venture? I'd be so happy to—"

"Oh, no," said Alice confidently. "I have a flash card, and the Queen of—"

She stopped as a sudden thought came to her: *Oh dear. I can't tell her about that! This poor lady would feel awfully bad, especially as she considers the King and Queen of Diamonds a real King and Queen.*

"I mean to say, if you would like to—I don't know exactly what, but any help towards this would be wonderful."

"Tell you what, honey," said Helvetica. "Seeing as you have nobody to pick you up in Mayhem, you can stay with me at my apartment in town. You'll be safe there."



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## Mayhem Touchdown

The plane landed in Mayhem as scheduled, awakening Alice from a light nap as it landed on the runway.

“You don’t have any luggage, honey?” asked Helvetica as she pulled what seemed to Alice to be at least half a dozen bags from the overhead compartment.

“No, I was instructed to just go with this purse and the clothes I have on, and everything else will be supplied along the way.”

“Pretty odd, I might say,” said Helvetica, huffing and puffing with her baggage, which Alice obligingly helped her to carry as they walked off the plane. “But I suppose you’re used to that from your experiences through the looking glass.”

“Looking glass? Well, I don’t know how you heard about that, unless you talked to my mum, but I think I’ve got a vic over being so vain. I used to always be checking myself in the mirror.”

“We’re coming up to passport control, sweetie,” said Helvetica. “Should have it ready to show.”

Alice’s heart sank. *Passport? Nobody said anything about passports!*

The Queen of Clubs breezed through with no questions asked.

"See you at baggage claim!" she called back to Alice.

"May I see your passport, little girl?" snapped an authoritative voice.

Behind a glass-protected counter sat an official-looking question card wearing a well-pressed white shirt with three golden question marks on each shoulder.

"I don't have a passport with me. Nobody said I would be needing one," said Alice.

"No visa?"

"No."

"Then you cannot enter the Useless Status."

"But sir, I *have* to! I'm on a very important Commission!"

"That's all very well, young lady. But I cannot let you enter without a passport and a visa."

"What do I do now? Do I have to go back and get all that?"

"Do you have an exit visa?"

"No."

"Then you cannot leave the Useless Status."

"What does that mean, sir?"

"You cannot enter and you cannot leave."

Alice was now at the point of tears.

"But how can I leave if I never entered?"

"Precisely. You will have to fill out the necessary forms in order for us to be able to make arrangements that will enable you to enter so that you can be granted permission to leave."

"So that means I can leave now and get my passport and visa?"

"Of course not, young lady. The process could take up to a year, and during that given time you will not be allowed to enter or leave the country, because it would be necessary for me to deny you both an entry and an exit visa. Here are the forms for you to fill out."

Dazedly she took the pile of documents and sat down at a nearby desk. Gazing blankly at the innumerable questions, many of which she did not understand, she started to cry.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves!” came a voice from behind the wall beside the desk. “You’re traumatising the girl when she has an important Commission to fulfil. Just wait until the King gets to hear about this.”

“The King?”

“Yes, you see...” The voice dropped to a whisper. There was a period of silence followed by the sound of chairs shuffling, papers rustling, doors closing, and finally the clicking of footsteps approaching Alice. She looked up to see two other official-looking cards approaching her. One was a Club, the other a Spade, and both wore beaming broad smiles and, to Alice’s delight, blue and gold paisley-patterned ties!

“Sorry for the misunderstanding, Miss,” said the Club, who Alice noticed wore a motif of three black clover shapes on the epaulets<sup>1</sup> of his well-pressed white shirt.

“A slight oversight on the part of one of our staff,” said the other, whose shoulders carried similar decorations of three black spades.

“Does that mean I can enter the Useless Status?” said Alice.

“By all means, Miss,” said one.

“No problem,” said the other.

“That’s wonderful!” said Alice. “How do I find the exit?”

“If you go through that door on the right, turn left and take the elevator to the ground floor, turn right at the left luggage counter, then go down the escalator, turn right and keep walking, you’ll get to the car park. But you don’t want to go there,” said one.

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<sup>1</sup>**epaulet:** a decoration worn on the shoulders of a uniform jacket or shirt

“But if you go through that door on the left, turn right and take the elevator to the first floor, turn left at the right luggage counter, then go up the escalator, turn left and keep walkin’, you’ll get to the taxi stand. I believe there’ll be a limo waitin’ for you,” said the other.

With great relief, Alice fumbled in her pockets for invitations.

“Here, I must leave these with you,” she said, handing them to the charmed officials. “It’s a special message for you from the Woodchopper. Please read it. It’s ever so important to me that you do.”

“It will be our pleasure, Miss,” said one.

“Yo’ have a nice stay in Mayhem,” said the other.

Alice managed to remember the order of the left and right directions and found herself at the taxi stand.

“Ah guess yo’ mus’ be Alice!” said a cheery playing card wearing a peaked cap and a uniform with black spades on the sleeves. “Don’t have no bags?”

“No sir.”

“I’s supposed to pick you up and drive you to the Queen of Clubs’ residence in Mayhem Park Central. The name’s Blackjack Spade. I’m the boss lady’s chauffeur.”

He held open the back door of a long, maroon Tysiac limousine, and as Alice climbed in she suddenly noticed he was wearing a blue and gold paisley vest underneath his jacket.

*My! It seems I’m meeting these playing cards all over the place. I might be done with the Woodchopper’s invitations sooner than I thought.*

“Jus’ make yourself comfortable, Miss Alice,” said Blackjack as he revved up the engine. “The boss lady said she’s sorry she couldn’t come wit’ you. She had to hire a special convoy of taxis to carry all her luggage.”

The car cruised leisurely out of the airport

and onto the freeway that led in the direction of downtown Mayhem. Night had fallen, and Alice, having never been to the Useless Status before, was fascinated by the bright lights and gaudy, floodlit billboards that lined the way.

“If you’re hungry, we can stop at Junkin’s fo’ chiblets and fries.”

“Actually, Mr. Spade,” said Alice, “I am rather hungry, and that sounds like a super idea.”

“The boss lady says that yo’ is quite a celebrity, Miss Alice,” said Blackjack looking at her through the rear-view mirror. “But if yo’ pardon me sayin’ so, I personally have never heard of you. I ain’t familiar with the story she talked about.”

“That’s okay, Mr. Spade. In fact it makes a pleasant change to meet someone who doesn’t know me or at least *thinks* they know me! They always get these funny details wrong about me and the story!”

“I don’t know about no ‘Alice in Wonderland’ like the boss lady talks about,” continued Blackjack. “But I do know a trump musical, a rock-opera-type thing I saw just last week, ‘Alice in Funkyland,’ starring Celia Spade. The li’l girl’s fantastic, ’bout yo’ age, but she don’t look like you!”

“Sounds fun!” said Alice. “I like plays.”

“Hey! I wouldn’t mind seein’ it again. I’m sure the boss lady would get us tickets. She may even wanna come too. And if I’m not mistaken, tonight is the last night for the show.”

About a forty-five-minute drive brought them into the outskirts of the city of Mayhem, where Alice and Blackjack stopped for chiblets and fries and a fizzola, then a further twenty minutes and they were downtown in the Park Central area where Helvetica had her apartment suite.



“Alice! Do come in! Make yourself at home! Excuse the mess.” Helvetica gushed excitedly as



she led Alice past a mountain of luggage in the entry hall into the living room of a lavishly furnished apartment that must have taken a whole floor of the block.

“I had your room fixed up. It’s this way.”

Alice followed her down a wide, soft, white-carpeted corridor to a large bedroom, in the centre of which was a giant four-poster bed with black satin drapes.

“You may want to take a bath, so here are towels, fresh linens, bath salts, oils and scents. And all the changes of clothes you’ll need are in here,” said Helvetica as she stepped into a walk-in closet.

Alice was secretly hoping she could change out of her apparel into something a little trendier, but to her dismay she saw that the racks displayed only rows of young girls’ dresses in the very same style she was wearing, along with Victorian-style petticoats, bonnets, bloomers and boots.

“That’s odd,” said Helvetica. “I looked in here just last week and never saw any clothes like this! Still, seems like somebody somewhere uncannily knew what you liked. Here’s the whole kit and caboodle.”

“To be honest, it’s not that I...” Alice stopped, not wanting to appear ungrateful.

“I must say, though,” Helvetica continued, “that your choice of attire is quite becoming! It turns the heads, that’s for sure. Could start a new fashion! By the way, are you hungry?”

“No thank you, your Majesty,” said Alice. “Mr. Spade and I had chiblets and fries at a place called Junkin’s on the way.”

“Goodness, girl. That’s no meal! I’m going to have to talk to that Blackjack Spade. Junkin’s indeed.”

Whereupon Helvetica picked up the in-house phone and proceeded to berate Blackjack for his irresponsibility in making sure that their newly arrived guest was being adequately fed.

“Well, dear,” said Helvetica at long last, turning to Alice, “the night is young! Anything special you would like to do?”

“There is...” Alice unsuccessfully tried to stifle a yawn.

“You poor thing, you must be tired! I’ll let you take your bath and then you can go to bed!”

“No, I’m not tired, *really*,” said Alice, opening her eyes wide. “There *is* something I would like to do, your Majesty. Mr. Spade said that a super fun musical is on called ‘Alice in Finkyland’ or ‘Funkyland’ or something like that. He said that tonight is the last night and you would probably want to see it too.”

“That sounds like a great idea. Let me talk to Blackjack!” said Helvetica excitedly as she picked up the phone again and began asking Blackjack for the details.

“What?? It’s on in Lower East Bedlam? No way, Blackjack!”

Alice couldn’t hear the voice on the other end of the phone, but she gathered that Mr. Spade was trying his best to persuade the Queen that it was perfectly safe.

“Yes, I know that, Blackjack,” said Helvetica. “She does have an aura of protection, I can see it myself, but I just don’t think that taking her to a—”

Blackjack continued to plead.

*Please help the Queen to say it’s okay!* thought Alice.

“Okay then. But if anything happens, it’s your neck, Blackjack,” said Helvetica, and then hung up. “Get ready, Honey. We’re leaving in fifteen minutes.”



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## Alice in Funkyland

**B**lackjack Spade had wisely suggested they not draw unnecessary attention by taking the Tysiac limo, and requested driving the less conspicuous Holtz bug, to which Helvetica readily agreed. After about forty minutes, Alice, Helvetica, and Blackjack pulled into the Lower East Bedlam area of Mayhem in time to catch the late show of “Alice in Funkyland,” which was to be the troupe’s last performance of the musical in that city.

“Best time to get it,” said Blackjack with an air of authority. “Gonna be guaranteed that they’ll give it their best shot, so they can go out with a bang for the final reviews.”

Lower East Bedlam at night had a sinister air; its garbage-strewn streets teemed with people determined to enjoy the nightlife, but whose eyes darted fearfully from side to side in dread of potential attack or robbery, especially as they passed the lurking shadows of the empty dark alleys. Alice for the first time on her journey felt danger.

*Remember the Commission!*

Alice heard these words ringing in her mind like the time at the Christmas Eve Ball. *This night is to be of great significance regarding it. You have nothing to fear!*

Parking the car as close to the theatre as possible, they soon found themselves in the busy foyer clutching tickets.

“It’s a full house!” said Blackjack, walking up with bags of Krunchits and cups of Cherry Fizzola. “But we still got front row seats!”

“This is so much fun,” whispered Helvetica, giggling like an excited little girl as they made their way to the front row.

*Bom chaka naka naka! Bom chaka naka naka!*  
The music started as the curtain went up on a stage set resembling a disused, graffiti-covered parking lot of a Lower East Bedlam slum. Alice gave a start as the character who emerged was a lone playing card, who appeared to be about the same age as Alice. The card was wearing a torn, dirty, paisley-patterned dress, and she walked slowly into the spotlight.

“That’s her!” exclaimed Blackjack in an excited whisper to Alice. “Celia Spade!”

She grabbed a microphone, spun around and started rhythmically cavorting and bending as she launched into song. Her vibrant, high-pitched voice took the lyrics and cut them through the churning beat.

*Lost in the shuffle,  
Just another card in the deck.  
They’re all out to muffle,  
My broken-hearted cry  
For revival.*

*Lost in the shuffle,  
Like a twisted car in a wreck.  
Caught in the scuffle  
Of a never-ending fight  
For survival.*

*Caught in the rat race, losing every trace*

*Of resistance.  
Caught in a rat race, can't bring myself to  
face  
My existence.*

*Lost in the shuffle  
Of all the kafuffle.  
Lost in the shuffle  
Lost in the shuffle  
Lost in the shuffle.*

Alice watched enthralled, but then tears came to her eyes as she saw the singer's anguished face chanting the phrase over the hypnotic rhythm. Alice caught her eye and in that split-second communicated an encouraging look that spoke right to the singer:

*It's going to be all right!*

Immediately Alice could hear her response in her own mind as the little Spade card gratefully returned the look,

*I know. I know.*

"She's *great*, isn't she?" whispered Helvetica, leaning over to Alice.

Alice nodded with a tearful smile.

The song then led into the show which turned out to be an allegorical musical fantasy with very little rhyme and even less reason, most which went over Alice's head, but she enjoyed it just the same. The lively production went by rapidly, introducing a colourful cast of characters starting with Blackrabbit who led Celia Spade down the manhole through the sewers and out to a city park where she received off-colour advice from Crackerpillar, a debit card covered with pin pricks, and from there she was led to a derelict building where she met the Cheddar Cat, Crazy Rapper T and his T-party, and finally to the Blue Palace Club. Here another playing card, appro-

priately playing the role of the Queen of Spades, bel-  
lowed orders in song to her subjects, including the  
King of Spades, also played by the card of that suit,  
who answered with protests and laments together  
with strategically placed poignant wails on his giant  
red electric guitar.

Finally, after a show-stopping, up-tempo num-  
ber called “You Wanna Know Who’s Boss?” which  
further showcased the Queen of Spades asserting  
her dominance with her vocal acrobatics; the stage  
went dark but for a single spotlight on Celia Spade.

*As painted harlequins  
We dance like mannequins.  
But when the last note rings  
Sometimes I wonder just who pulls the  
strings?*

*I’ll watch the curtain fall,  
And this once enchanted ball  
Becomes another empty hall,  
Like nothing ever happened here at all.*

*Where, where are you my King?  
Where are you my Majesty?  
Critic’s pen may praise my art  
Of playing each and every part.  
But I need you, my one true King of  
Hearts.*

*Where, where are you, my King?  
Where are you my Majesty?  
What good’s the taste of sweet success  
In my bitter cup of loneliness,  
Without you, my one true King of Hearts?*

Alice became embarrassed as she couldn’t stop  
the tears that welled up and flowed as she watched  
and listened to the lonely figure singing her impas-

sioned plea. Helvetica discreetly handed her a handkerchief as she gently patted her shoulder.

“You’d like to meet her, wouldn’t you?” she whispered.

Alice nodded.

Amid the backstage hustle and bustle of excited fans clamouring for autographs and a glimpse of the members of the troupe, Alice, Helvetica and Blackjack stood like lost babes in the woods as they waited for an opportune moment to meet the little star.

“I’m sorry, ladies and gentlemen,” said a burly bodycard standing outside Celia Spade’s dressing room. “But Miss Spade is otherwise disposed, so if you leave your playbills with me she will sign them, and you can pick them up in the foyer.”

Suddenly the dressing room door opened slightly and Alice caught a glance of recognition from the reflection in the mirror of the young playing card as she was removing her makeup. Promptly Miss Spade was at the door.

“It’s okay, Sam. She’s my friend,” she said as the bodycard began to protest. “Come in!”

“And my friends too?” asked Alice, beckoning to Helvetica and Blackjack.

“Sure! I...” All of a sudden the playing card burst into tears and threw her arms around Alice, who responded in kind.

“You’re Alice, no?” she said finally. “I knew someday I’d ... oh, this is some heavy-duty jass, know what I’m sayin’? No, you don’t!”

“I think I do,” said Alice.

“Look at me, I’m a blubbery mess!” said Miss Spade, thankfully taking a handkerchief from Helvetica. “Hey, what are you guys doin’ now? Any plans?”

“Um, no, I...” Alice looked questioningly over at Helvetica and Blackjack.

“Chaperoned, huh? That’s good!” said Celia. “I cain’t make a move without the Queen of Spades and Sam here neither. Drives me nuts sometimes, but I’d be in a deckful of a mess without them.”

“That’s okay, Miss Spade,” said Helvetica. “Miss Alice can decide for herself. But we don’t have any plans.”

“Wanna come over to my place? It’s jus’ a little pad in Upper West Bedlam. A fifteen- to twenty-minute ride. We can get some take out chiblet fried rice.”





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## Celia Spade

**T**hough Upper West Bedlam was a few more steps up in class than its Lower East neighbour, Alice and her companions were still uncertain of their safety; so Celia Spade attempted to allay their fears while giving directions to Blackjack as they tailed Sam's sedan.

"It's actually come a long way since I was a little kid," she said with a tone of maturity. "They're zazzin' it up quite a bit, so it's kind of the trump place to be ... clubs an' boutiques an' the like. There, Blackjack, just up here on yo' right. The brick buildin'."

"It isn't much," she said, looking at them apologetically as she fumbled with the keys for what must have been a half a dozen locks on her apartment door. "Especially for the rent which is like, *astromical*."

Alice looked sadly around at the meagre room that served as a living room and kitchen, where a mound of dirty laundry, a sink full of unwashed dishes and an overflowing garbage can greeted them.

"I feel terrible about the mess, you guys," said Miss Spade. "This show-biz life don't leave much time for nothin'. I gets in here after a day's rehearsal and a night of work and jus' crash! I'm supposed to

have a maid, but the agency says they can't afford Sam *and* a maid; so I figured my safety is more important than my housework. But I'm doin' those dishes right now!"

"And I'm going to help you!" said Alice as she rolled up her sleeves.

"An' I'm takin' out that trash!" said Blackjack.

"And I'm going to do a load of laundry!" said Helvetica.

The doorbell rang. It was Sam with take-out chiblets and fries and strawberry fizzolas.

Domestic chores done, they plopped down on scattered cushions to enjoy their meal. Celia Spade did most of the talking in her animated way through a mouthful of food, while waving her white plastic fork. Alice sat silently admiring her and her "street savvy" ways, yet at the same time she felt so sorry for her it made her heart ache.

*She's the same age as me, Alice thought, but it's like she never had a childhood. I wish I could take her home and she could live with us. She'd really like Brandon.*

"Is it okay with you two guys if I talk to Alice alone?" said Celia at length, lowering her voice. "I hate to be rude, it's just that I have somethin' to ask her that's real personal kind of and ... well, you can put on a video or somethin'. I've got the new Jokers Wild movie, 'Snigger'—Flip Chortle is in it. It's a *crease* up! I've also got 'House of Cards' with Snap Canasta, but that's a bit scary."

"House of Cards!" said Blackjack. "I've been wantin' to see that!"

"Oh, no!" said Helvetica. "I won't be able to sleep for *weeks* if it's anything like Snap Canasta's last one. But I love Jokers Wild movies."

Leaving Helvetica and Blackjack to their debate, Celia and Alice moved into the bedroom on the side.

"You promise me you won't think I'm nuts or

anything, okay?" asked Celia as she turned on the bedside lamp and looked intently into Alice's eyes. Suddenly she again burst into tears as she impulsively threw her arms around Alice's neck.

"This is so unlike me," she continued as she dried her eyes. "I'm not a ... you know ... 'touchy-feely'-type person. It's just that ... you've got to promise me you won't think I'm nuts or somethin'."

"I promise, um ... Miss Spade."

"Look, call me Celia, okay?"

"Okay, Celia."

"Ah, well. Since I was a real little girl I've had this recurrin' dream, right? Where I was in with this special cosy little deck o' cards. We were all there happy together, it was like Heaven or somethin'. There was the Diamonds and the Spades and the Clubs and Hearts. Then came this evil Sorcerer dude, he took us deck in his hands, an' ripped out all the Hearts which made things real miserable an' mean, then after awhile he scattered all the rest of us into the garbage. This is a *dream*, mind you."

She paused for a few moments, studying Alice's reactions.

"Well here's where it gets freaky! So I'm cryin' and cryin' right? Like someone's ripped my own heart out, *literally*, and I look up and there *you* are, and you say: 'My name is Alice. It's going to be all right.' And I say: 'I know! I know!'

"That's why I was so blown away to see you there in the audience tonight and you communicatin' those very words!"

Celia rolled her eyes and shivered slightly.

"Oh, flush!" she continued. "I get the gooses just thinkin' about it ... anyway, then you an' me in the dream, we're like, floatin' and flyin' and pickin' up all these lost cards, and we're like, so *flipped over!*"

"Ooh," said Alice, rubbing her arms. "It gives me the gooses too! It's *incredible!*"

“Well, I kept havin’ the dream off an’ on, and I wondered who the girl was. Didn’t know if she was an angel or somethin’. Are you?”

Alice laughed, “No!”

“Well you sure look like one by the way. But when I was ’round six or seven, I read the story ’bout you in the orphanage library an’ I recognised the Alice in the book as the same one in the dream—*you*.”

“Wow!” said Alice. “That’s ever so heavy! I wonder if the evil sorcerer in the story is the same one who scattered the cards!”

“Well, I don’t remember a sorcerer in the book. But anyways, I got fascinated by the story an’ the girl in it, so I changed my name to Celia.”

“Celia? What’s that got to do with Alice?”

“It’s an anagram of Alice. I was afraid of bein’ ribbed! You see, my mom ditched me at the orphanage just after I was born. Talk about the school of hard knocks. I didn’t have no name, so the orphanage slapped a name on me which I hated.”

“What name was that?”

“‘Tonk.’ Dreadful, isn’t it? Soooo, I get into learnin’ to dance an’ I always loved singin’, so one day after I ran away from the orphanage I see an ad in *Kacophony* magazine for an audition for someone to play the lead role in a new musical, ‘Alice in Funkyland.’ I applies and I gets the job right on the spot.”

After sitting for a few minutes gazing at each other, reflecting and shaking their heads in wonder, they were snapped out of their contemplation by the sounds of laughter in the living room. Sam had joined them, lending his deep resonant guffaws to Blackjack’s snappy cackles and Helvetica’s high-pitched giggles. Jokers Wild had won the competition.

“Let’s go join ’em! Sounds like they’re getting off on that movie!” said Celia. “It is funny! Last time

I saw it I almost bent *double* with laughin'. Bein' a dancer I have to watch out for that though, it leaves creases."

"Wait a moment, Celia," said Alice suddenly, as they headed for the door. "Do you by any chance have that book with you?"

"The 'Alice' one?"

"Yes. If it's not too much trouble, could I see it?"

"Sure!" said Celia, reaching under the bed and dragging out a ragged canvas duffle bag. "It's in my sack of mementoes. Here!"

"Alice in Wonderland'?" said Alice, leafing through the pages.

"It's quite worn, I'm afraid. The cover's practically fallen off. Tried to repair it with Irish tape."

"The thing is," continued Alice, "the girl in these pictures looks like me, but this isn't the book I've been talking about all this time. I've never heard of this one."

"Is it 'Through the Looking Glass'? I have that one too."

"No, the story I'm talking about is 'Alice in the Magic Garden.' It's a MO Letter and a TK."

Celia shook her head. "Never heard of those, but I'm curious."

"It's a story—a dream, really—about a girl called Alice, and some seeds that she plants, and then bad things start to happen. There was also a colouring book and a drama made out of it. It's been ages since I read it though."

"Say, Alice, what are you doin' tomorrow?"

"I don't know, so far I don't have any plans. I've only been in the Useless Status a few hours, but things have been moving so fast I haven't really had time to think about *anything*. Haven't even brushed my teeth!" Alice laughed as she flashed a cheesy grin.

"I think we're both pretty wiped. You should get

a good night's sleep," Celia continued. "But I'd like to get this book you're talkin' about. Are you into books?"

"Yes, I like *Heaven's Library* books, and different things like some mysteries ... classics, and things like that. My brother Brandon's more of an avid reader than I am, though."

"See, I know this trump second-hand bookstore up in Old Cardstock, a village about a five-hour drive out of Mayhem. The guy that owns it is a sweet old Diamond card, an Ace, an' from my deck by the way, but at the bottom. He just loves it when I go there an' we talk books and stuff. I was thinkin' we could go there tomorrow, get out of the smog. Take a picnic basket with chiblets an' fries, lemon fizzolas an' stuff."

"That sounds like fun," said Alice. "I would have to check it out with the Queen of Clubs, seeing as I am a guest in her apartment. Maybe she'll want to come with us."

"Well she *could* come," said Celia, "but I was thinkin' of askin' Ophelia, our Queen of Spades along. You wouldn't think so, but she's a real book-worm. I just wonder if two Queens on the trip would be a bit *overkill*, know what I'm sayin'?"

Alice didn't, but acknowledged her with an "if you say so" shrug.

The two girls joined the other three for the rest of "Snigger" while polishing off the remaining bottles of fizzola. Then they drove back to Helvetica's apartment where Celia and Sam stayed overnight at the Queen's insistence.



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## Old Cardstock and Mr. Sage

As it turned out, the Queen of Clubs had urgent paperwork to take care of the following day so was unavailable to accompany them, much to Celia Spade's relief, and despite Sam's objections, Blackjack was elected to drive the two girls in the Holtz. After dropping Sam off at Celia's lodging, they cruised about four blocks into an especially chic area of Upper West Bedlam where they picked up Ophelia surrounded by bags of shopping, standing in front of Sharx and Spendthrift, an expensive department store on the corner of 54th and Broadley.

Blackjack was promptly out of the car and holding open the door before trying to cram the shopping into the tiny trunk.

"Well scooby dooby doo, child!" said Ophelia as she clambered into the front seat, decked in flashing diamond necklaces, gold chains, and a blue-gold paisley scarf. "Yo' mus' be the Alice girl that Celia wuz ravin' about on the phone this mornin'. Pheweee, honey child, yo' is as pretty as an angel!"

"Why thank you, your Majesty," said Alice, blushing.

"Yo' Majesty! Whut's this? Yo' puttin' me on, child?"

"No ma'am," answered Alice. "It's just that I know

that Queens appreciate and deserve respect.”

“That they do, honey. That they do.”

Once out of Mayhem, it was a beautiful scenic drive to Old Cardstock along the narrow roads winding through green rolling hills and countryside, drawing loud exclamations of delight from Celia at the slightest glimpse of a farm animal, rabbit, squirrel, and any furry creature. Ophelia, however, kept conversation going at full steam by doing most of the talking, which helped Alice to understand Celia’s foresight in wishing to avoid the potential ‘overkill’ of the presence of two Queens.

It was late afternoon when they arrived at Old Cardstock, a quaint village, whose Tudor-style buildings, cobblestone streets, and horse-drawn carriages gave it a storybook appearance.

“They have some trump music concerts here, too,” said Celia.

“Man, oh man!” said Ophelia. “Yo’ style sho’ fits in around here, Alice baby.”

“It’s lovely,” said Alice getting out of the vehicle which they had parked in the town square. “We must have the only car around. It’s hard to imagine that places like this still exist!”

“I know,” said Celia wistfully, as she led them down a narrow side street. “It’s like in a time warp or something. I don’t get to come here that often, but when I do, I jus’ daydream and wish I was living back in those old days. Sometimes I jus’ cry.”

“Here it is!” said Celia, pointing to a wooden sign that creaked above a tiny doorway:





They entered a small, dimly lit shop and were greeted by a bespectacled little old playing card who was bent over in a permanent curve.

"Little Miss Celia Spade! This is such a welcome surprise," he exclaimed, hugging her warmly. "I was just thinking earlier today that it's been awhile since you came by."

"Well, I had a good excuse to come, 'cuz my friend here wanted to find a rare book."

"I see! I must confess I miss our stimulating conversations together about books and life," he said as he turned to the others. "Miss Spade has such a fresh and revitalizing way of perceiving things, compared to all the intellectual snobs that usually come—what in the..."

His eyes fell on Alice and his spectacles dropped from his nose as he promptly sat down on a little wooden stool, staring at her in disbelief.

"Alice Pleasance ... it *can't* be! This is an answer to a prayer. You remember, little Miss Spade, what we talked about last time? About us lost cards?"

"Yes I do, Mr. Sage," she answered, rubbing her arms. "Get ready for the geoses, Alice!"

"Oh, goodness gracious!" he said as he jumped up suddenly. "I'm so carried away, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Mr. Sage, owner of this sorry excuse for a second-hand bookstore."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Sage," said Alice as she delighted everyone with an instinctive curtsy. "But this is a *lovely* place, I can imagine myself getting super *tripped off* in here!"

Mr. Sage chuckled. "Tripped off? How quaint, how quaint! What a charming incongruity of Victorian decorum and modern-day colloquialism. Anyway, my dilemma is such that people refer to me as the 'second-hand bookstore man'—never by my name. It's always: 'Oh, that's just the second-hand bookstore man.' What do they mean? I'm a second-hand man

who owns a bookstore? A man who owns a bookstore that's second hand? Or a man who owns a store of second-hand books? I mean it does present a conundrum."

"Man, oh, man," said Ophelia, mopping her brow in mock exasperation, "some people do have problems."

"Poor Mr. Sage," said Alice. "It must be so lonely for you to be so misunderstood."

"Yes, but I do take solace in the company of the Bronte sisters and Jane Austen at my bedside most nights. That's about all the female company I have these days ... on paper only.

"If you don't mind," he said, turning to Ophelia and Celia, "I know that you both have that unique flair for rhythmical syncopation. Would one of you mind slapping out a beat on this leather-bound dictionary while the others clap their hands?"

"Certainly!" said Ophelia, taking the book in her hands and slapping it with a back beat. "Music! That's more like it! Now things are hottin' up."

"Yay, yay yay!" Celia exclaimed as she jumped up on the desk, bending and shaking her tiny rectangular frame as she clapped her hands.

"Splendid, splendid," said Mr. Sage, as he arose from his stool and walked into the stream of late afternoon sunlight that shone through the shop door window.

"Keep that beat steady now, a trifle slower if you don't mind. Perfect. Thank you."

Looking intently at Alice, he began to earnestly croak out in song:

*You've taken a stroll down this  
cobblestone street,  
To a quaint little hole where the erudite  
meet.  
As you walk through the door it rings a  
tiny bell,*

*And you look around in awe at all the  
books I have to sell.  
Considering I've been working here since  
I was ten years old,  
It's paltry the amount of publications I've  
sold.  
I've mint condition first editions, for which  
few can pay,  
And stacks of paperbacks that I can  
hardly give away.  
Outdated periodicals in piles across the  
floor,  
Newsweek, Time and National  
Geographics by the score.  
When I look at all this clobyosh, I often  
stop and think  
Of all the wasted labour, paper, printing,  
time, and ink.*

*I'm a bookstore man,  
A second-hand  
Bookstore man.  
That's all I am,  
Just a bookstore man.  
No one understands  
This musty, dusty,  
Second-hand bookstore man.*

Mr. Sage paused, cleared his throat and looked over his glasses at Alice,

“So, my dear girl, what is the rare book that you're looking for?”

“It's a story called 'Alice and the Magic Garden,' sir,” she replied. “But I don't know if you'd call it a book. Well, it's *in* a book but with other stories, well not really stories, they're called letters.”

At this, Sage went back into song.

ALICE AND THE CARDS

*Certain literary questions always make  
me roll my eyes,  
Is it the 'Lord of the Rings' they want or  
'Lord of the Flies'?*  
*If you're 'into' Thomas Hardy, then  
please, for crying out loud,  
Don't ask me why it's 'madding'—not the  
'maddening' crowd.*

*Please don't take offence as I inform you  
that I'm not  
A walking bibliography of every printed  
jot.  
I can find you a thesaurus, but I'd rather  
not discuss  
If the accent should be on the 'thes,' the  
'au' or on the 'us.'*

*For modern English usage, any tawdry  
mag will do,  
But if you need a dictionary, I have just  
the one for you.  
Though argument prevails as to which  
publisher's the best:  
If it's Oxford or the Cambridge University  
Press.*

*I'm a bookstore man,  
A second-hand  
Bookstore man.  
That's all I am  
Just a bookstore man.  
No one understands  
A musty, dusty,  
Second-hand bookstore man.*

*'Cyclopaedias? I have thousands; but a  
set that's complete?*

*To purchase one that's second-hand  
would be quite a feat.  
I've poetry by Wordsworth, Keats, and  
many a volume rare  
Of Browning, Bunyan, Tennyson, and  
Walter de la Mare.  
I have classics in profusion, you could  
say 'up to my ears':  
Such as 'Little Women,' 'Emma,' and 'The  
Three Musketeers.'  
'Treasure Island,' 'Lorna Doone' and  
'Wuthering Heights,'  
And a charming, quaint edition of  
'Arabian Nights.'*

*I've an uncensored tome of 'Lady  
Chatterley's Lover.'  
With an exquisite black, leather-jacketed  
cover.  
'Around the World in Eighty Days' and  
'Huckleberry Finn,'  
And countless books of fairy tales,  
including Brothers Grimm.  
'The Count of Monte Cristo' and 'The Mill  
on the Floss'  
(For a title that will rhyme with that, I'm  
at quite a loss.)  
'The Wind in the Willows' and 'The War of  
the Worlds,'  
And 'Jo's Boys' and 'Heidi' which appeal  
to the girls.*

*Authors such as Enid Blyton, Edgar Allen  
Poe,  
Robert Louis Stevenson and Daniel Defoe.  
William Shakespeare, Walter Scott, and  
Arthur Conan Doyle,  
H.G. Wells and other science fiction by*

*Hoyle.*

*I have everything by Dickens, you should  
look at the list,*

*I even have his signature on 'Oliver  
Twist.'*

*Contemporaries King and Grisham sell  
extremely well,*

*Due to literary merit, though, is rather  
hard to tell.*

*There's a big demand for fantasy, and  
Potter paves the way.*

*However, it's not Beatrix, but Harry, sad  
to say.*

*Agatha's whodunits? I've got all she ever  
penned.*

*King Solomon was right, of making books  
there is no end.*

*I'm a bookstore man,*

*A second-hand*

*Bookstore man.*

*That's all I am*

*Just a bookstore man.*

*No one understands*

*This musty, dusty,*

*Rusty, crusty*

*Second-hand bookstore man.*

*Goodness me! My ranting must be boring  
you to tears!*

*Let me get back to the reason as to why  
you came in here.*

*Your escapades in 'Wonderland' and  
'Through the Looking Glass,'*

*Are all that come to mind involving you,  
my little lass.*

*'Alice in the Magic Garden,' I don't believe  
I know!*

*But wait a minute...*

*Could it be in this red book by MO?*

While Ophelia, Blackjack, and Celia whooped and applauded for old Sage's performance, he walked over to his desk, reached into a wooden crate at his feet and pulled out a dusty red-covered volume; its pages edged with gold leaf.

"Yes!" exclaimed Alice. "It's in there!"

"I just had a feeling, young lass, that this book had something to do with you. Don't even know how it got in here, I just came in one morning and there it was on the desk. I've been meaning to read it, but something always came up."

"Mr. Sage," queried Alice, timidly, "would it be impertinent of me to ask why you said I am the answer to your prayer?"

"You see," he said, taking off his spectacles and laying them down on the open volume, "books have been my world since I was a wee bairn. I was the studious type, ostracised by the other children. They would ridicule me, so I retreated into a make-believe world of fantasy and books, of which Alice's Wonderland was my favourite. I had a beautiful copy of the book with the original engravings hand-tinted in colour, which I unfortunately sold to a rich Diamond couple who were willing to pay a high price for it. It's silly I know, but I prayed that somehow Wonderland could become a reality and I'd meet you one day. The only people I ever told about this was my wife, Onion. She's passed on now, bless her soul, and little Miss Spade here."

"Well, Mr. Sage," said Alice, "I know of at least one Wonderland that's real, and many of these writers that you love are there, and they are *still* writing!"

"They are? Well, I suppose you wouldn't be standing here as large as life if that were not so," said Sage

with a chuckle. "But how do I acquire their books?"

"From *Heaven's Library*, of course!" said Alice wide-eyed.

"*Heaven's Library*? I don't think I have anything from there. How do the authors get them published?"

"The writers come and sort of *dictate* stories to my friends and other people I know."

"Do they ... er ... dictate them to *you*?"

"Well, I haven't really had the faith yet, but my brother Brandon got one recently all about aliens and space and other planets and stuff. It's really cool. You ought to meet him. You'd just love him. But you know what?" Alice continued. "I've been thinking that these adventures that I'm having right now would make a super-neat *Heaven's Library* story. I'm going to send it in once I get time to write it."

"Send it in? Where to?"

"To the editors. They look it over and pray, make changes and corrections that they are shown are necessary, or drop things and ... I'm not really up on what all they do ... they're *selah*."

"You mean *I* would be in the book?" Sage asked excitedly. "Of course, the editors may want to cut my inane song," he added, as his face fell.

"Oh no, Mr. Sage! It's *cute*, I think they'd flip over it!"

"Don't mean to butt in," said Ophelia suddenly, "but speakin' of songs and singin', do ya sing, Alice?"

"Only when I'm by myself, like in the bath or in the bedroom alone. I look at myself in the mirror sometimes and imagine myself being a famous singer! Silly, isn't it?" Alice blushed.

"Nope!" said Celia. "Used to do it all the time. Still do! But *sing* for us."

"Er ... what do I sing?"



“Have ya ever written a song?”

“Well,” Alice answered, swaying from side to side and fidgeting nervously. “I have, and I just had a weird kind of premonition when I entered this shop that I was going to be singing it.”

“Please *do!*”

“Come on sister,” said Ophelia. “We’ll be wit’ ya on the chorus!”

“Oh, okay,” said Alice and she stepped forward. The moment she did so, the lush sounds of a bed of violin strings and a bass, together with a slow, gentle rhythm of drums and percussion filled the air.

“Whoa!” said Celia, rubbing her arms. “Where’d we get *this* backing track?”

“And check out this far-out invisible surround-sound system!” added Ophelia.

After the music had finished its haunting introduction, Alice started to sing, amazed at how her soft voice seemed to fill the store, even at the times when she would drop it to a whisper.

*Sometimes I stop and gaze around the  
thronging shopping mall,  
At all the people with no sense of why  
they’re here at all.  
Wrapped up in their biz or their like,  
‘nova moda’ style,*

That’s how my brother Brandon refers to it.

*They seem almost shocked if I should  
greet them with a smile.  
They think it’s odd that someone showed  
them just a little care,  
When I think it was the answer to  
somebody’s prayer.  
I think it was the answer to somebody’s  
prayer.*

*I don't mean to come on "spiritual"—then  
again, what's wrong with that?  
When what's considered "spiritual" could  
be just where it's at?  
We see darkly through the looking glass,  
but soon we'll understand  
When dreams become reality in our new  
Wonderland.  
I don't think it would be merely chance if I  
should meet you there,  
I think I've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer.  
I think I've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer.*

"You see, Mr. Sage," said Alice, as an instrument whose sound resembled a flute played a solo refrain, "A series of events that are beyond our control have led us all to be here in this bookstore at this time and place. It's a little freaky I know, and I don't even know what the end results of our adventures together will be, but all I know is I'm fulfilling my part in the Commission, and you, Mr. Sage, you, your Majesty, you, dear Blackjack, and you, my dear friend and namesake, can fulfil your parts too."

With tears in her eyes, Alice went back into the chorus as the music swelled.

*We see darkly through the looking glass,  
but soon we'll understand,  
When dreams become reality in the  
coming Wonderland.  
I don't believe it would be merely chance  
that I should meet you there,  
I think I've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer.*

The music dropped as Alice softly sang the final words.

*I don't believe it's merely chance we met  
together here,  
I think we've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer.  
I think we've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer.*

There was a period of silence with only the sound of sniffing as the little group sitting in the shop enjoyed the warm glow that enveloped them.

Ophelia was the first to break the silence. "Amen, sister. Prayer works! We all need the omnipotence of our Heavenly Father. I must say I've claimed many things in prayer."

"I wouldn't say I'm a religious card," mumbled Blackjack, "I don't go to church or nothin', but I do pray."

"Well, I don't know about me," said Celia as she dried her eyes. "I don't know if I consciously prayed *per se*. Hmmm, but all my life it's been like my heart's been kind of burstin' and expressin' *upwards* to God, know what I'm sayin'? Like I never could put it into words. I guess you could call it prayin' huh?"

"Yes, I would say so," said Alice. "God looks at the heart."

"Groanin's that cannot be uttered, child," said Ophelia.

Sage, remaining silent up to this point, had meanwhile flipped through the index of the red volume and found the story of Alice, opening to the picture of the evil magician.

Celia Spade curiously looked over his shoulder and gasped.

"It's *him!* It's *him!* Big black toreador hat and everythin'!"

“Who?” said Ophelia.

“The evil sorcerer in my dream—the one who stole the Hearts and threw the rest of us cards into the garbage!”

Finally Mr. Sage spoke. “I know this man.”

“You do?” said Alice.

“Freaky,” said Celia.

“His name is Truco. He’s been around a long time,” continued Mr. Sage. “I’ve seen him off and on since I was a little boy, and he goes way back before that. Some folks say thousands of years, but he doesn’t look a day older than twenty-five or thirty at the most. He *owns* Mayhem, if not all of the Useless Status itself.”

“Does he live near here?” asked Celia.

“In Krypkille, a village about six hours out of Mayhem in a dark estate. They say that strange goings on—”

“My, oh my!” interrupted Ophelia with a shiver. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk about this with such impressionable little ears present.”

“It’s all right, your Majesty,” said Alice. “It’s all part of my Commission, and Celia knows all about it, so don’t worry about us.”

“Yo’ Commission?” asked Ophelia.

“Look,” said Mr. Sage, “around the corner there’s a cosy little tavern with a delightful atmosphere, the Bower and Trump. I would like to invite you all for a round of malt fizzola and a bite to eat. They prepare a fine dish of sautéed chiblets and roast potatoes. You can then tell us about your Commission, Alice.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Sage?” asked Alice. “What with you not being able to sell your books and all that?”

“It’s the least I can do in repayment for such a lovely time. Oh, and don’t forget your red volume.”



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## The Bower and Trump

**T**he Bower and Trump with its Tudor-style décor lit up with oil lanterns was a novelty for the four visitors to Old Cardstock. It seemed to be the hub of much of the early evening nightlife, as coaches and carriages pulled into its small courtyard and passengers stepped off for drinks and socialising before going on to their various choices of entertainment and relaxation activities.

Gathered around a table inside a low-lit wooden cubicle in the corner of the tavern, Mr. Sage ordered the food and drinks, and as they drank the first round of fizzola, Alice explained to all her Commission.

“Hallelujah!” said Ophelia who had already downed her first malt fizzola. “Honey child, there couldn’t have been a better person fo’ the job. So sweet and personable.”

“Thank you, but I don’t feel capable, your Majesty,” said Alice. “All I’m doing is following along.”

“Lettin’ the chips fall where they may, right?”

“Well, sort of, your Majesty. Although I do have to tune in. It’s like I’m getting signals, you know? I can’t quite explain it.”

“I know exactly what yo’ mean, honey child. I get

it all the time. Gut feelin' like."

"Miss Alice certainly is a very preceptive li'l' girl," said Blackjack.

"The word is *perceptive*, I believe," said Sage.

"Mr. Sage," said Alice, hoping to direct the attention away from herself, "you say this Mr. Truco has his estate outside of Mayhem. If he's been around as long as you say he has, maybe he knows something about where the suit of Hearts is. You see, since I've been here I've met some Diamonds, of which you are one, sir. I've met some Clubs, and I've—"

"Yessiree, ya certainly met some Spades, honey child!" said Ophelia as she slapped Little Celia on the shoulder, who wearily rolled her eyes. "Three of us right here."

"Yes," continued Alice. "But I was thinking today on the way here how I haven't met any Hearts on my *whole journey*."

Mr. Sage grew quiet, and looked at Alice earnestly over his half-empty glass.

"If Mr. Truco knows the truth about what became of the Hearts, I doubt he would tell you. It's true that there are no Hearts of any deck living in Mayhem or Old Cardstock for that matter. The official story is that the Hearts chose to live in other places: up in the mountains and out in the deserts or at sea. I personally feel that that's a little far fetched. I believe the truth might be a little closer to Celia's dream than Truco wants anyone to find out."

"What do you mean?" asked Alice.

"Truco's estate is very carefully guarded, and the walls are well nigh impregnable. Few have ever seen the inside of it. And of the few who were known to have broken into his estate, none has ever come out. It is not entirely unlikely that he has all the Hearts imprisoned in dungeons and prisons on his estate for some reason or another."

"Is there any way to sneak onto his estate?"

asked Alice.

“Now hold yo’ horses, honey child,” interjected Ophelia.

“Maybe,” said Mr. Sage. “But like I said, of the few who were rumoured to have gotten in, none are believed to have gotten out. I tell you, there are some strange tales about that dark estate of his.

“Excuse me, Miss!” he said suddenly, raising his hand to a waitress card wearing a tiny blue and gold paisley apron. “Another round of fizzola!”

“Yessir. Oh, my deck!” she gasped as her mouth fell open. “Alice!”

“Trixie? Miss Trixie Barr? What a lovely surprise!”

“Luv’, ever since that time I met you at the airport I just kept thinkin’ about you and ... I just couldn’t forget all you said. I took a long hard look at my life and ... oh cribbage,” she said as she glanced up at the clock. “Can I see you after work? I’m off in half an hour.”

“Sho’, girl!” said Ophelia. “Hey! Hey! Hey! The night is young, and Alice is too.”

While flashing thankful smiles at Alice, the delighted Trixie Barr brought around the long awaited plates of chiblets and roast potatoes, and conversation was at a temporary lull as the four tucked hungrily into their food.

Finished with his plate, Mr. Sage ordered a final round of fizzola.

“To Alice and her Commission,” he said, raising his glass. “And back to your question about getting into the dark estate, young lady.”

“Wait a minute,” said Ophelia. “I don’t think we should be discussin’ this. We don’t want to give the po’ girl ideas now.”

“But your Majesty!” said Alice.

Mr. Sage shook his head. “It’s perfectly all right, Madam. I feel I may have overstepped myself in even

bringing this all up. I'm sorry."

Alice's disappointment was evident when at that moment Trixie Barr walked up.

"Ooh, dearie me," she said. "Is this a bad time?"

"Not at all, sugar!" said Ophelia. "We jus' had to remin' our li'l' guest that there are certain things we'd best not discuss."

*I've just got to get some time alone and get my signals clear,* thought Alice. *It's just been non-stop since I left home. I haven't had time to think!*

"Excuse me," said Alice, picking up the red volume. "Can you show me where the bathroom is?"

"Turn right, over there by the bar," said Trixie.

Ten minutes later Alice, looking brighter, returned to the group at the table who were happily engaged in becoming acquainted with Trixie Barr.

"I mean, I thought and thought about her Commission and all the dear girl wanted to do and—"

"Miss Barr here is telling us of her encounter with you at the airport. It's absolutely fascinating," said Sage.

"I'm sorry I took so long," said Alice. "I just had to have some time to—"

"Think things through," interjected Ophelia. "That's what it takes sometimes. Regroupin' those energy reserves."

"You see, Alice," said Trixie, "something just told me that I *had* to come to Old Cardstock! I couldn't shake it. So I quit the tricks game and came here and got this job as a waitress. You notice I don't hardly cough 'cuz I don't smoke near as many cigarettes and the air is much cleaner here."

"That's so wonderful, Miss Barr. You do look very well," said Alice. "Does that mean you will accept an invitation to the Woodchopper's Christmas Eve Ball?"

"Do you still have one? I was hoping you hadn't run out of them."



Alice happily passed Trixie her invitation, and the little group continued chatting gaily, until Mr. Sage addressed them all.

“How does everyone feel? Tired?”

This was met with unanimous denial.

“I have a proposal for us to do something that should make your little stay in Old Cardstock a memorable occasion. How would you like to go ice skating?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” said Alice, clapping her hands. “Now that is something I *do* think I have a talent for!”

“You like to skate?” asked Celia. “Well I do too. I ain’t done it too much, but it’s fun when I can. Maybe you can show me a few things.”

“Ain’t done it in years,” said Ophelia. “But I’d sho’ love to.”

“And you, Blackjack?”

“Ain’t so much m’ thing,” said Blackjack. “But I sho’ wouldn’t mind goin’, even if it’s jus’ to see Alice show her stuff!”

“Trixie?”

“Well I used to be pretty good at it. Won a few prizes as a matter of fact, but it’s been years.”

“It’s like ridin’ a bike, honey child,” said Ophelia. “It comes back to ya.”

“Without any further ado,” said Sage, pulling out his wallet, “I shall pay the bill and we’re on our way! The skating rink is within walking distance.”



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## Wonderland on Ice

Alice, clutching the red book, and the giddily excited little band of playing cards made their way through the busy cobblestone side streets lined with roast chiblet vendors, cafes, boutiques, tourist trinket shops, clubs, and other late night attractions. As Ophelia, Blackjack, Sage, and Trixie were engrossed in a mundane conversation about card straightening exercises, Alice fell back in step with Celia.

“Celia, what do you think about trying to get into the sorcerer’s dark estate?”

“Whoa! That could be freaky,” said Celia. “Me personally, *alone*, no way, but I do know some folks in lower East Bedlam who would get turned on to the idea. They’re like, *aces* at gettin’ into places.”

“You mean they’re *aces*? Playing cards?”

“No, I mean they’re experts. Some of ’em do have connections with the Ace of Spades though. He’s a big dude in town an’ you don’t see ’im around too often. Phew, he’ll be a tough cookie to get interested in your Commission.”

“Here we are! The ‘Golden Ten!’” announced Mr. Sage, as they approached the skating rink. “And it looks as though they’re having a competition!”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Sage, for being so

kind,” said Alice as she walked with him to the ticket booth. “What made you think of ice skating of all things, not even knowing it’s one of my favourite things to do?”

“Just one of those little ‘signals’ like you mentioned,” said Sage with a wink. “And besides that, I used to skate a little when I was younger. Not so hot at it anymore since I’ve been so bent. But I can still slip and slide around a little.”

Once inside the building, Blackjack settled himself at a strategic point at the edge of the rink clutching a malt fizzola while the others picked up their skates.

“Pretty hot nightlife for a podunk li'l village,” said Ophelia, tying on her skates as she looked around the crowd that was gathered at the spacious rink. “Old Cardstock *cooks*. And it’s only a Monday night.”

“Come, Celia!” said Alice, grabbing her hand and pulling her onto the ice. “I’ll show you some techniques.”

“Whoa!” said Celia as she wobbled a little trying to gain her balance.

“Keep moving, and don’t look down!” said Alice, skimming along effortlessly, still holding Celia’s hand. “Look ahead and let the momentum carry you, stay relaxed. If you tense up you’re finished! Kick, *push*, and glide. Kick, push, and glide!”

“Hey, I don’t think I can—”

“Yes you can, Celia. You’re doing terriff! Oh, hey—it’s that beautiful melody I heard once,” said Alice as the theme from the “Commission Rhapsody” came over the sound system.

“Yeah,” said Celia. “I know it. This is a trump version of it with a vocal by Tresillo. It’s great for interpretive dance. Go for it, Alice. I’ll be okay!”

Letting go of Celia’s hand, Alice skimmed into the milling crowd of skaters, her head turned upward

and her eyes closed, oblivious to all but the strains of the symphony. Her long blonde hair billowed like gentle waves as she veered and swerved in circles, figures of eight and two-foot turns in flawlessly controlled rotation, interjected with lifts and jumps; all in perfect synchronisation with the pulse of the music. After spinning in the air to perform a series of triple axels, she landed smoothly on her feet before the rest of the awe-struck skaters that, unbeknownst to Alice, had moved to the edge of the rink to watch her as cameras and spotlights traced her every move.

As Amanda Tresillo's vocal took over on the theme, Alice crouched and slid across the ice, her arms covering her bowed head which splayed her golden tresses along the ice until the music hit a crescendo and she sprung to her feet, kicked her flashing skates into a jump and another series of triple axels, before gliding into the centre of the rink, triumphantly lifting her arms heavenward while the music faded to a single plaintive note of a violin.

A roar of cheers and thunderous applause hit Alice's ears and she opened her eyes, stunned to see the audience and the remaining skaters who were standing around the rink watching her intently and noisily demonstrating their admiration. Amongst them she could make out the radiant faces of Mr. Sage, Celia, Trixie, Blackjack and the Queen of Spades, whooping, whistling, and jumping up and down.

*Oh my gosh! Everyone's been watching me and it's being filmed! I didn't realise!*

"By a unanimous vote, hitting six points on all ratings, the first prize goes to Alice Pleasance!" came a voice over the sound system.

*First prize!* thought Alice. *I didn't know I was in a competition! How did this happen?*

*We've engineered this. Here's your chance to*

*spread word about the Commission*, answered that still small voice she had heard at times before.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, Alice Pleasance!"*

"What do I do?" said Alice frantically to her friends as she unlaced and pulled off her skates.

"Go on up there and collect yo' prize, of course, honey child," said Ophelia.

"I'm so excited for you," said Celia.

Alice, gritting her teeth and fighting her nervousness, walked up to the stage and onto the platform where the judges sat. The compeer, a kindly looking clue card with a white walrus moustache and wearing a straw hat, handed her a microphone.

"That was a tremendous performance, Miss Pleasance," he said. "How long have you been skating?"

"Off and on since I was seven years old—five years now. But I've never skated like I did tonight. I don't know where it came from, honestly! It just came ... miraculously."

"Do you plan to go into this professionally?"

"No."

"What brings you to Old Cardstock?"

"The Commission," said Alice, and proceeded to fill the audience in on her assignment.

"But the question that still needs answering is, where are the Hearts?" she said. "If any of you out there can help with information as to how we can trace them, I would be so grateful and the Woodchopper and his son would be forever indebted to you. Thank you for your time."

As the audience applauded, Alice stepped down from the stage and was confronted by a playing card wearing a long, black satin cape, on the back of which was a large motif of a white clover.

"That was impressive, Miss Alice," he said, reaching out his hand. "I loved your speech by the way, there was only *one thing* I didn't like about it."

“Really? What was that?”

“The fact that you so emphatically stated that you had no desire to go into ice skating professionally. That would prove to be a sad loss to the world.”

“Well, you see, Mr. ... ?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t introduce myself. How forgetful of me. I suppose I’m still coming down from your emotionally captivating interpretation of Durak’s piece. A rare blend of technical artistry and passion, especially in one so young. My name is Ace Belote.”

Alice curtsied, to which Ace let out a laugh that made her feel a little uncomfortable.

“I believe, young lady, for you to seriously consider a career in ice skating would be of more significance than retrieving a Woodchopper’s lost pack of cards. Here is my business card, you can call me anytime.”

Alice thanked him and after making her way through the complimenting crowd, finally joined her five friends.

“Wow!” said Celia Spade. “I noticed you were talkin’ to Ace Belote. Did he offer you a job?”

“Sort of, why?”

“Show business entrepreneurs don’t come any bigger than Ace Belote,” said Trixie. “He doesn’t show that kind of interest in just anybody.”

“You should take him up on it, Alice,” said Celia excitedly. “Bein’ in the biz, I know some of us would give our right arm to land a deal with him.”

“I say don’t touch it with a ten-foot pole,” said Ophelia contemptuously. “Can’t quite put my finger on it, but if we wanna talk gut feelin’, I get a bad vibe offa him, always have. Evil dude.”

“How can you say that?” said Celia. “Is it jus’ ’cuz he hasn’t noticed *you* all these years?”

“Celia!” said Alice. “That’s so terribly unkind. I think that merits an apology to her Majesty.”

“That’s okay by me, Miss Alice,” said Ophelia, adjusting her jewellery and trying to look as nonchalant as she could. “I don’t think she’ll stoop to that. Little Miss High an’ Mighty Spade here thinks she’s the trump ever since she landed the lead in ‘Funkyland’—forgettin’ that *I* was the one who took her under my wing and groomed her for stardom. Don’t suppose she told you that.”

“Why you has-been ol’ flap!” screamed Celia. “You’re jus’ jealous!” With that she burst into tears and ran to the girls’ bathroom with Alice following her.

Standing over the sink and washing her face, Celia already looked remorseful as Alice put her arm about her.

“I’m sorry I lost it like that,” she said. “I do love the Queen a whole bunch. I owe a lot to her, not jus’ the success and all. She’s really like the mom I never had. That’s why it gets a bit like, *strained* sometimes. She don’t hardly ever give me some space. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“I know,” said Alice. “It’s like with my mom: I really love her, but we do have some clashes. I think I’m more understood by my dad. Like I don’t think I’d have gotten to go on this Commission if my dad hadn’t been behind it. My mom gets too worried. But does the Queen consider you as a daughter, kind of?”

“Well, her an’ me, we even talked once ’bout adoption. I’d love that. But that was awhile ago and she ain’t never brought it up again since.”

“Does she know?”

“Know what?”

“That you’d love to have her adopt you.”

“No,” said Celia. “And no way am I gonna tell her. She might jus’ freak an’ run the other way, an’ I don’t think I could bear that.”

“I don’t think she would,” said Alice. “I think

she's afraid to tell you how much you mean to her because she's afraid you might do the same thing. Especially after tonight."

"Oh, Alice. I feel like an old suit. What should I do?"

"Just apologise, Celia. I know it'd mean ever so much to her."





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## Rummy

**C**elia? Do you have a pair of jeans and a T-shirt I can borrow?”  
“No, I don’t think card clothes’ll fit you! But why? Didn’t you jus’ change over at the Queen of Clubs’ place?”

“Yes, but all she’s got is this Victorian stuff. I just don’t want to meet your gang friends looking like this.”

“Suit yourself. We can run down to High Five boutique on the corner. It’s open late. If you ask me, though, I kinda think it’s trump. There’s somethin’ a bit ‘other-worldly’ about your choice of clothes. Could catch on.”

“Actually, Celia,” said Alice, “it’s not really my choice. They were just there in my closet when I woke up. Oh, it’s a long story,” she added with a sigh.

Nevertheless, to Celia’s open-mouthed fascination, Alice proceeded to tell it as the two friends made their way down the street to the small yet trendy boutique.

“But you know what, Alice?” said Celia, as she rummaged through a few racks. “It’s not jus’ the clothes. There’s somethin’ else about you that’s well ... out of *time*. I can’t explain it. Here, try these on.” Celia threw Alice a red T-shirt and a pair of black

jeans.

Alice took off her dress and bloomers and was trying to pull on the jeans, when she let out a squeal as they started shrinking in her hands until they were no more than the length of her fingers.

Aghast, Celia screamed too, bringing a sales card scurrying into the dressing room.

Alice quickly threw them onto the floor and the jeans returned to their normal size.

“Do you dare to try on the T-shirt?” said Celia, with a shiver. “This is ultra freaky!”

Alice reached for the T-shirt and as she started to pull it over her head it enlarged until it was as big as a double bed sheet and did not shrink back to normal until Alice had let go of it. Celia then threw her a pair of red jeans which Alice held for a few moments and they remained as they were.

“So far so good, Alice. Now try puttin’ them on slowly.”

No sooner had Alice attempted to put one foot inside a leg of the jeans they shrunk down to the same tiny proportions and again remained that way until Alice threw them onto the floor in front of the petrified sales card.

“Cribbage!” said Celia. “I don’t know what’s goin’ on here, but all I knows is you ain’t goin’ no place in nothin’ but that there dress. Let’s go.”

In a few minutes the two girls were back out on the street hailing a taxi cab as Celia had avoided telling Sam about any of their plans, knowing that he would have considerably curbed their activities.

“Jus’ keep cool, and don’t look no one in the eye,” she said, as they climbed into a rundown cab. “Helps avoid confrontation of all kinds.”



Climbing down a short flight of iron steps to a basement door, Celia gave it two short raps, followed by three spaced further apart, then did the same

with the door bell.

“Who is it?” came a voice from behind the door.

“Celia Spade and friend.”

The door was unlocked and the cautious head of a young playing card wearing a blue and gold paisley bandana and a baseball jacket with a black club motif design peered around it. The menacing sounds of Sueca music spilled into the street.

“Hi, Rummy,” said Celia as she walked confidently into the hallway of the rundown tenement flat. “This is my friend Alice.”

Rummy mumbled something that Alice didn’t understand as he gave her a furtive sideways glance and she greeted him with a faint smile.

“Looks like the gang’s all here, including Nitty an’ Gritty. They’re trump, we’re the same deck,” said Celia, looking into the group of young Clubs and Spades who were apparently from the neighbouring area of lower East Bedlam that had gathered in one of the rooms. Some were bending to the music, some were aimlessly flipping through magazines while others chatted as they lounged on filthy mattresses, and a moth-eaten sofa that Alice was convinced must have been flea infested.

The apartment consisted of two rooms, a toilet and a small kitchen, all without doors although the toilet doorway was draped with a dirty sheet to afford some semblance of privacy. Graffiti covered the walls that were almost devoid of plaster, and the smell of urine and garbage mingled with smoke that filled the air turned Alice’s stomach.

Her disgust had not gone unnoticed, and one of the female cards, a Club, stepped forward and leaned into Alice’s face.

“Sumthin’ not to yo’ liking, Miss Priss?”

“Um, no. Everything’s fine,” replied Alice unconvincingly.

“And where did you step out of? Some kind of

'Pollyanna' ball?"

"That's enough, Gin!" said Celia. "She's a good friend. Her name is Alice."

"*Alice!*" said Gin with a laugh. "So that's what the fancy dress is all about, huh? Thinks she's 'Alice in Wunnerlan' or somethin'?"

"As a matter of fact, Gin," said Celia, "that's *exactly* who she is."

"Celia, please," said Alice.

"Too late, Celia!" said Gin. "Hey gang, listen up: Our distinguished guest tonight is none other than Alice of Wunnerlan!"

"That must make Celia the mad hatter!" said Nitty.

"And I'm the march hare," said Gritty.

"Well, come and join the tea party, madam," said Rummy, the smirk on his face belied by a look of tenderness that Alice detected in his eyes.

*He must be the same age as Brandon,* Alice thought.

"A throne for the princess," Rummy announced, bowing as he placed a wooden crate behind her.

"Thank you, Sir Rummy," said Alice. "Are you from around this part of Mayhem?"

"Yep, and I've lived here in the same Podunk slum all fifteen years of m' life. Cherry fizzola?"

Shrugging off the jeers of his friends, Rummy went to the rusty refrigerator and returned with two cans of the drink.

"You're not from the Useless Status, are you?" Rummy asked.

"No," said Alice. "I came from Bezique."

"So what brings you to Mayhem?"

"Love."

*What am I saying?* thought Alice. *As if the clothes weren't already bad enough.*

"Oh, a boyfriend?" said Rummy. "I'm already jealous."

"No, the love of the Woodchopper for his son and a lost deck of cards."

"Hey!" came a shout from the kitchen. It was Gin.

"Who took the last coupl'a cans of fizzola? I was savin' 'm for me an' Rummy."

Rummy jumped up.

"Sorry Gin, I—"

"Oh, I see, Prince Charmin' is winin' and dinin' Princess Priss?"

"Look, I can buzz on down to the drugstore and pick up a case," said Rummy. "If we all pitch in a couple of Lucres."

"Sorry, but we's all out," said Gin contemptuously, her hand on her hip. "We put it all towards the take-out chiblet pizza."

"It's all right," said Alice. "I have a Flash card you can use."

"Wanna come, Alice?" asked Rummy. "It's just down the street."

"I ... er ... guess so," mumbled Alice, very conscious of Gin's fierce stare. "Unless you would rather go with—"

"It's okay, Miss Fancy Dress," said Gin, throwing back her head with a laugh as she trotted away. "The walk'll do ya good. Looks like you could use the exercise to help ya get a taste of the real world!"

Walking down a street at night of what was obviously one of the most dangerous lower East Bedlam areas served to heighten Alice's sense of the presence that seemed to her like an invisible protective force field. When approaching the many groups of malevolent-looking Garbage Pail Kid cards, she knew that it was more than merely Rummy's authoritative bearing and respect that he commanded in the neighbourhood that would cause even the toughest-looking ones to make way for them in almost magical deference.

*It's like walking through the Red Sea,* thought Alice.

"That's a flip over!" said Rummy after fifteen minutes of strolling in thoughtful silence. "I usually get some kind of aggravation from *someone* on this trip down to the store and I was expectin' it *big time* walkin' with you. But tonight it's like *magic* is happenin'."

After about twenty minutes they were at the corner drugstore which turned out to be a fizzola fountain hang-out where, with the help of Alice's Flash card, they purchased a case of the drink.

"You *are* Alice, aren't you?" said Rummy as they started back to the door that led to the street.

"My *name* is Alice."

"No, I mean *the* Alice. Look, ... uh ... wanna sit down for a fizzola shake?" said Rummy, hesitantly.

"That'd be ever so lovely," said Alice, reaching for her Flash card. *Ever so lovely?* she thought. *This is just so unreal, me curtseying and talking like this and stuff, especially at a time like this!*

"I'm payin'," added Rummy, jutting his chin out confidently as he dumped the case of drink so forcefully onto the corner table that it caused one of the sides of the cardboard box to split open, scattering the contents all over the floor. Alice giggled as she and Rummy, red faced with embarrassment, scrambled to recover the displaced cans.

Finally they sat down, looking shyly across at each other over two giant fizzola shakes.

"So you *are*?" said Rummy.

"Who? Alice in Wonderland? What makes you think so?"

"No. Alice in the Magic Garden," he answered. "I knew it when you first walked in the door."

*Curiouser and curiouser!* thought Alice.

"See," Rummy continued, "when I was a kid I read the story in a sort of pamphlet. Somehow

my folks picked it up or I think someone gave it to 'em when they were first datin'. Anyway I found it one day in a drawer. It was just a short story an' I didn't really understand where it was comin' from, but it fascinated me—somethin' about you an' the Woodchopper got to me, kinda. That's why I almost flipped over when I saw you, then you said somethin' about the Woodchopper and his lost cards. Hey, promise me you won't say any of this to my friends, especially Gin. Okay?"

Alice nodded.

"I never told any of them, 'cuz I figured they'd think I was nuts or a sissy or both. Not that I give a snap what they think," he added, repeating the assertive motion of his chin and taking a loud slurp of his shake which bubbled up through his nose causing him to splutter and spurt, much to Alice's carefully hidden amusement.

"You're so much like my big brother," she said, handing him a napkin. "His name used to be Amos, he just recently changed it to Brandon. But things like that happen to him all the time. Like when playing sports for instance. He's usually incredibly good but when he tries to do something that he thinks is impressive, I don't know what it is, he always slips and falls down or misses the ball. Things like that."

"So you think I do things to try an' impress?" asked Rummy sheepishly, as he wiped off his baseball jacket.

Alice shrugged her shoulders, took a careful sip of her shake, and continued. "He's a wonderful guy, though. I wish you could meet him. You'd just love him. But Rummy, if it's okay to ask, are you like, the *leader* of the gang?"

"Yep, you can say that I am." He nodded sharply, as he stuck out his chin again and reached for his glass.

“Careful!” Alice giggled. “Don’t get lifted up. You don’t know what’s going to happen this time!”

“Hey! I’m not your brother Brandon, your Highness,” said Rummy with a grin. “But why do you ask?”

“I need your help. That’s why Celia Spade and I came to see the gang. It’s about an assignment that I’ve been given.”

Alice proceeded to explain her whole story to Rummy, who sat wide eyed, barely touching his drink.

“Whoa!” he said at last, rubbing his arms. “This is just so freaky! I’m getting’ the...”

“Gooses?”

“Yeah,” said Rummy, glancing up at the clock. “Oh *no!* Is that the time? We’ve been here a whole hour. Gin’s going to be so peeved. Let’s go.”

“Is Gin your girlfriend?” asked Alice, after about ten minutes of walking.

“Well, we knock around together a bit. She wants to be more serious, but I don’t need complications right now. An’ you’re a complication I wasn’t expectin’.”

“Me?” said Alice. “What do you mean—a complication? Oh, I am so terribly sorry.”

“No, it’s not bad,” said Rummy, pensively. “I don’t think you’d understand. We’re almost at the pad. Remember, we talked ‘Commission’ right?”

“Right.”



“Jass, Rummy!” said Gin as she opened the door. “We wuz gettin’ concerned that you and Miss Fancy Dress had attracted so much attention that somethin’ bad had happened. We were jus’ gettin’ ready to send out a search team.”

“I’m so sorry, Gin,” said Alice, reaching for the card’s hand which clasped hers for a moment before it hastily withdrew. “But we started discussing a



very important—”

“I know. The Commission,” said Gin, as Celia walked up. “Celia Spade here figured that to kill time while we waited for you guys, she’d fill us in on it. It’s some heavy brag yo’ talkin’ about—breakin’ into Truco’s estate to find the Hearts an’ all that.”

“The gang’s gettin’ turned on to it,” said Celia. “I have confidence that these guys could break into Fort Silver if they had to.”

“So,” said Rummy, “we need to get our ante together an’ come up with a plan of attack.”



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## Ace Belote's Offer

**A**lice! Wake up!" Only after repeated loud knocking on the bedroom door was Helvetica able to awaken Alice from a sound sleep. Alice finally staggered over to unlock the door and let her in.

"You'll never guess who's on the phone for you!"

"Who?" Alice murmured sleepily, rubbing her eyes and peering at the watch on her wrist.

"Take a guess!"

"Rummy?"

"No, whoever *that* is," said Helvetica. "It's Mr. Ace Belote himself! You can take the call on the extension right by your bed. I'm so excited." Helvetica hurriedly turned on the small telephone monitor speaker.

"Alice!" came the smooth voice at the other end of the line. "I've been literally *dreaming* of your performance the other night. It was absolutely enchanting. The stuff of professionals."

"Er ... thank you, sir."

"And it seems the media and critics are of the same opinion. You should see the headlines: 'Crowd dazzled by Mystery Skater from the Past!' 'Alice Pleasance—Reality or Apparition?' to name a couple, and there's a special TV showing of it: 'Wonderland

on Ice—A new Dimension!’ Many feel that you have taken ice skating to another level. Wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Um ... it is very unexpected.”

“Did you take some time to consider my offer?”

“I’m sorry, but not really, sir,” said Alice. “Actually I must admit I’m not aware of what sort of offer you are talking about. Maybe it slipped my mind.”

“Alice, how could you?” whispered Helvetica, who sat in anxious excitement on the edge of the bed. “Don’t you realise who you’re talking to?”

“My offer of putting you up there with the girls’ skating champions of the world,” continued Ace. “Like Jacqueline Darby, Yvonne Strovotzky and Petra Kurviklikov; not to mention Mai Li Kwan. I’m sure those names mean something to you.”

“I think so, maybe a couple of them.”

Unable to control herself any longer Helvetica snatched the phone out of Alice’s hand.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Belote sir, but I think it’d be better if I was to speak on the behalf of the poor child. She’s so awestruck with getting to meet you, she’s a little tongue-tied. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course, of course. By the way, who am I speaking to?”

“The Queen of Clubs, sir.”

“I’m overjoyed! Two celebrities at once.”

“Really, Mr. Belote, sir,” cooed Helvetica bashfully.

“Are you her manager?”

“You could say that. Nothing official. But Mr. Belote, sir, I just want to say that Alice is delighted with your offer, and the answer is yes, yes, *yes!* When can we talk?”

“What?” gasped Alice.

“Maybe we can have lunch together, the three of us, and discuss the contracts,” said Belote. “I know an exquisite little Calabresella restaurant. They

prepare a fine dish of Chiblets et pommes frites. I'll come by and pick you up. Fourteenth floor, Bid Whist Heights, Mayhem Park Central right?"

"Why, yessir. That's right, Mr. Belote, sir."

"Does two o'clock sound good?"

"Perfect."

"But your Majesty," pleaded Alice as Helvetica hung up the phone, "I can't do this! I'm supposed to meet the gang at four o'clock today. It's vital to the Commission."

"It might be to your advantage to forget about your cause for awhile and stop and think seriously about this. Do you realise what an opportunity this is?"

"I'm sure it's wonderful, your Majesty," said Alice, exasperated to the point of tears, "but what I have to do today is so important. I *can't* call it off."

"Clobyosh, child," said Helvetica. "I'm sure it can wait, but Mr. Ace Belote is not someone you can keep waiting. This is all for your best, honey. You're too young at this point to fully realise what this could mean for us ... for *you*, and one day you'll thank me. Besides, who knows, he might get interested in your little cause and sponsor it in some way."

Alice, feeling very out of sorts but not wanting to offend the Queen, excused herself to go to the bathroom.

"It's okay, baby. I understand," said Helvetica as she busied herself with straightening up the room. "You must have come home at goodness-knows-what hour of the night, and then you were woken up early with Mr. Belote's phone call, so I think you'd feel better if you got some more sleep so you're fresh and looking your best for his luncheon appointment. It'll help you get a realistic perspective on things."

"Yes, your Majesty," said Alice morosely, as she sat on the toilet thumbing through the red book and opened up to a letter entitled "Kings."

*What do I do now?* she prayed. *Please help me. Celia and Rummy will be waiting for me. I can't contact them. They'll think something's up.*

*Take more time to tune in and follow the signals,* said the familiar voice. *Take care not to offend the Queen. It'll work out.*

With renewed serenity, Alice lay down on the four-poster bed, drowsily read a few paragraphs from the book, and fell back into a deep sleep.



True to his word, Ace Belote was on time beeping the horn of his gleaming Conquian convertible and Helvetica was immediately at the door, gushing with excitement and glittering from head to toe, having spent most of the morning in preparation for this encounter.

"Alice is so thrilled, Mr. Belote," she said as they climbed into the car. "She's been on tenterhooks ever since the phone call, haven't you, Alice?"

"Um ... yes, your Majesty."

Her appetite being almost gone through being so preoccupied with her seemingly thwarted plans, dining at the plush Calabresella restaurant presented very little pleasure to Alice, but she managed to pick slowly at her food while keeping a cheerful smile.

"Not hungry?" said Ace.

"The child's nervous from all the excitement," said Helvetica. "On top of the fact that she, like so many serious ice skaters, is very mindful of her diet."

"That's perfectly understandable," said Belote, taking a sip of his grape fizzola. "I'm curious, Alice. You said for the success of your Commission, you need to find the suit of Hearts. That's going to be a tall order, am I right?"

"That's just it, sir," said Alice. "Nobody knows where any are, or if they even exist anymore. Some say that they live in far remote deserts or up in high

mountains or at sea.”

“That is a fact, but you seem unconvinced,” said Belote.

“Well, others say that they are held captive by Truco in a dungeon at his dark estate.”

“Truco? That’s an old bedtime story told to scare children—a story that, if I recall correctly, was actually banned many, many years ago, and is no longer told. Where did you hear it?”

“A very wise second-hand bookseller who lives in Old Cardstock named Mr. Sage for one.”

“Don’t tell me you actually believe this?”

“Actually I do, Mr. Belote.”

“Hmmm.” Belote stroked his chin and looked out of the window as he took another sip of fizzola. “I certainly would like to be of assistance to lay the matter at rest for you once and for all. One needs to be single minded when embarking on a career such as professional ice skating. Do you have any concrete plans on how you were going to attempt to prove this?”

“Yes! Actually that’s why I feel a bit unfocused right now,” Alice continued, “because I’d made arrangements with Celia and the gang to go to Truco’s estate tonight and investigate.”

“That’s extremely foolish, child,” said Helvetica.

“I was supposed to meet them at four o’clock and drive there. Apparently it’s about a six-hour drive out of Mayhem in the opposite direction to Old Cardstock.”

“Interesting. Oh, I forgot,” said Belote, looking at his watch. “I just remembered I have to make an important call. Would you excuse me?”

While he made his way to the phone, Helvetica reached across the table and grasped Alice’s hand.

“It’s quite wonderful how interested he seems to be in your cause,” she whispered.

“I suppose so, your Majesty,” said Alice. “I feel a

bit funny about a couple of things, though.”

“And what are they?”

“I notice he has a cell phone, so why is he having to go and use a public phone?”

“Maybe he wants to ... oh, Alice, really. You shouldn’t be so suspicious.”

“And our address, how did he find out where I was staying?”

“Uh oh! Speaking of cell phones—mine’s ringing,” said Helvetica, reaching into her purse. “It’s Celia ... yes! Nice to hear you. Oh, that settles that. Alice was just wondering ... yes, she’s right here!”

She handed the phone to Alice.

“Alice,” said Celia. “I just wanted to let you know that Ace Belote called my apartment early this mornin’ to find out where you were stayin’ so he could get in touch with you. Ophelia was here at the time an’ she carried on as usual that it was fishy and stuff.”

“Thanks, Celia,” said Alice. “Well I must say I’ve been getting a funny feeling about him. Can’t put my finger on it.”

“Well, whatever! Still on for the ‘rondee voo’? Sam’s drivin’ us in the Sedan. It was the only way the Queen would agree to let me go.”

“Hope so, Celia. If I can get away. Stay in touch, okay? Bye.”

Alice handed the phone back to Helvetica.

“So, sweet girl. Suspicions allayed?”

“Um not—”

Alice held her tongue when she saw Ace Belote coming back to the table.

“Well, Miss Pleasance, we don’t want you to miss your appointment with your friends,” he said as he sat down to finish his drink. “Did you say four o’clock? That’s in fifteen minutes—we’d better make it snappy.”

While Belote paid the bill, Alice and Helvetica

went out to the car. Suddenly Alice was tapped on the shoulder. She turned around to see a small hooded figure with its hand outstretched, and although it was completely draped in a brown cloak, Alice could make out it was a playing card.

"Alms." It was the voice of an older woman.

"Let's go, Alice!" yelled Belote as he beeped the car horn.

"I don't have any Lucres, ma'am," said Alice, as she pulled out her Flash card. "Is there anything in particular you need?"

"A good hot meal would be nice."

"Come," said Alice, and she led the poor creature into the Calabresella restaurant where she instructed the waiter to charge any expense to her Flash card.

As she turned to go, Alice felt the woman's hand clutch her arm in earnest gratitude and she noticed on her middle finger a small gold ring that flashed an exquisite heart-shaped red ruby.

"The secret that you're looking for," came a whisper from inside the hood, "you'll find upon the darkened floor."

Another beep from the horn distracted Alice, and when she turned around again, the woman was gone.





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## Krypkille

This town is creepy!” said Rummy, as he, Alice, Celia, Gin, and Nitty and Gritty pulled into Krypkille in the sedan with Sam at the wheel and the sounds of Sueca booming from the car stereo. Although on the surface it looked like any other rich antiquated hamlet, Alice quietly sensed the same foreboding, but she was hoping it could be attributed to the fact that it was night time and the streets were inadequately lit, and to the air of suspense that already pervaded them.

“It’s a full moon too,” said Nitty.

“Adds ta the ‘chiller thriller’ vibe,” said Gritty.

“Ain’t nobody got Truco’s address?” asked Gin.

“Nope. We’s gonna have to ask around,” said Celia.

“What about that bar over there?”

“Better have Alice do it,” said Rummy. “We’re goin’ to attract attention ’round here.”

“I’ll do it,” said Sam as he pulled over.

A few minutes later he was back, looking somewhat pale.

“Sure is weird in there,” he said, shaking his head as he revved up the engine. “There are cards in that place, but the likes of which I’ve never seen in all my born days. They’re all warped and got real

spooky designs and patterns and stuff on them. But I got the address.”

Following the directions led them down numerous dark and winding back roads until they approached a high hill where, looming against the night sky, was the silhouette of a large mansion surrounded by high walls.

“Turn off the music!” commanded Celia. “We need to be quiet as mousies.”

Sam parked a little way up the road past the mansion, and the team jumped out and crept up to the enormous wrought iron front gate.

“That wall is so high,” said Alice. “How on earth are we going to get over that?”

“Over?” said Rummy. “Who said anythin’ ’bout going over?” And he promptly slid his thin card frame under the narrow opening under the gate.

“The advantages of bein’ a playin’ card!” he said with a wink as he stuck his head back out.

“Yeah, Rummy,” said Gin. “But that don’t do Alice no good! She cain’t do that.”

“Keep your voices down, cards,” said Celia.

“Hey!” came Rummy’s loud whisper from the other side of the wall. “There’s a small gardener’s gate ’round the corner to your left. I think it opens from the inside. Meet ya there, Alice. Take the flashlight.”

While the others slid under the front gate, Alice tiptoed through the bushes and undergrowth and around to the gardener’s entrance, which loomed dark before her.

As Alice stood, waiting for Rummy to open it, the ground beneath her feet suddenly gave way, and she found herself sliding under the gate to the other side. Alice stood up, and although somewhat dazed, had the presence of mind to brush the dirt off her dress when she saw Rummy approaching.

“Well, what do you know, Princess!” he said

with a chuckle. "I guess you *can* slide under doors! Look, we're goin' on over to the house to see if we can get under the front door. If not, we'll check out the windows. Wait in the gazebo over there, okay? I'll come an' get ya."

Alice, with heart thumping, stole quietly across the moonlit lawn towards the dark structure and sat in its shadows on one of the wooden benches. Her movements had disturbed a number of bats that had been hanging on the high rafters who squeaked and flew around in circles before darting through the open windows into the night. To calm her fears, Alice silently prayed desperately and tuned in with quiet contemplation.

*"Pssst!"*

It was Rummy. About fifteen minutes had gone by before she heard this welcome signal of his return.

"Us cards can get in under the front door," he whispered breathlessly, "but we can't get it unlocked from the inside without a key. So we checked out all over an' there's a bathroom window that's open. You can climb up through it. Let's go."

Dressed in Victorian attire with petticoats and bloomers did not assist Alice in feeling at all agile as she clambered onto a dustbin to reach the small square window through which she pulled herself. She was about halfway through, when for support she placed her hands on the ceramic toilet cistern below her, the top of which gave way and crashed to pieces on the tiled floor.

Immediately there was a commotion in the corridors of the house, and Alice could hear footsteps coming toward the bathroom. She tried to pull herself back through the window the way she came, but it was too late. The door opened.

"Well, well, well! Who do we have here?" It was an odd-looking playing card, with strange designs

on it that Alice had never seen before. It reminded her of what Sam had described in the car.

“It’s okay, Hexus,” came a voice from the corridor. “I’ll handle this.”

Striding into the bathroom wearing a long flowing black cape and knee-length black leather boots, came a tall gentleman with jet black wavy hair, smooth olive skin and piercing dark eyes. He extended his hand to Alice who was indecorously hanging through the window with her arms dangling helplessly.

“Here, let me help you down.”

Alice shivered as he reached under her arms to pull her through.

“Alice, we meet again.”

“We do?”

“Yes, I’ve been expecting you,” he said as he set her on her feet.

“And you’re Mr. Truco?”

“The man himself,” he said with a cackle that echoed through the halls of the mansion.

“Why don’t you wait in here, while I send for some hot polignac?” he said genially, as he led her down the corridor.

Dress torn and hair dishevelled, Alice stood by the fireplace in the giant living room when Hexus entered with two cups of the hot drink. A few minutes later Truco himself walked in, helped himself to one of the drinks, and sat down on a large sofa.

“This is a meeting for which I’ve been waiting for a long, long time as our other interactions have been merely in the world of dreams. Remember the Magic Garden? It’s such a pity that to meet you in the flesh has to be under such unpleasant circumstances. What did you think you would achieve by gaining entrance to my property in such a fashion?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Truco, I just had to find out something.”

“You could have made an appointment. That’s the procedure that most people follow when wishing to conduct business, not in disgracing themselves by hanging halfway through a toilet window. I suggest you stick to ice skating.”

Alice was already feeling quite humiliated and did not like Truco’s sarcastic tone adding to the discomfort, so she decided to get straight to the point.

“I came here, Mr. Truco, because I believe that the truth of what happened to the suit of Hearts is safely locked away somewhere here on your estate. You might have even had them bound in your dungeons all this time. I had to find out for myself because it’s important to the Commission I’ve been given, and that is to—”

“You can save your breath, Miss Alice. I’ve heard all about your ... er ... Commission. And you can also save your time and energy on this useless quest of yours by seeing for yourself that there are no Hearts bound here in my dungeon or anywhere else for that matter. Come this way.”

With flashlights in their hands, Truco led Alice down three flights of stone steps to a large, musty, dank basement area which contained a number of cells divided by heavy iron bars. They were all empty. The stench was foul, and Alice held her hand over her mouth wishing she could get out of there as fast as possible.

“Satisfied?” said Truco, with a smirk.

“Yes,” mumbled Alice and started for the stairs, but as she did so she stopped as she caught a gleam of something on the stone floor that flashed momentarily under the wandering beam of her flashlight. Her memory was instantly jolted.

*The secret that you’re looking for  
You’ll find upon the darkened floor.*

“Coming?” said Truco impatiently from the top of the steps.

“Yes, I just have to straighten my hose,” she answered, as she bent down to pick up a small gold ring in which was embedded a tiny heart-shaped ruby. She quickly stuffed it into her pocket.

Back upstairs in the living room, Truco had just invited Alice to take a seat when the doorbell rang and Hexus ushered in a portly playing card with a large nose and a handlebar moustache wearing a black uniform with silver clubs on each lapel. He carried a thick wooden stick.

“Ah, Monsieur Truncheon. I have been awaiting your arrival.”

“Pardon, Monsieur Truco, but I was detained. I had to apprehend a group of playing cards that were loitering outside ze premises.”

“I see. Friends of yours, Alice?” said Truco, raising an eyebrow. “I gather you did not attempt this venture alone.”

Alice looked away and remained silent.

“Shall I book them, Monsieur Truco? They are at present being held in ze van.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I think we have what we want. Oh, I am sorry, I forgot. Alice, this is Monsieur Jacques Truncheon, chief gendarme of the Mayhem police force.”

Alice, weary and a little scared, nonetheless instinctively managed to perform a disarming curtsy and was relieved to see that as the gendarme extended his hand he was wearing a blue and gold paisley watchband.

“Pleased to meet you, Monsieur Truncheon.”

“Ah, so charmed, mademoiselle,” said Truncheon with a sudden smile that cracked through his stern exterior. “I am so sorry you had to be involved with this unpleasant business. I am sure that the criminal will be brought to justice.”

"You fool, Truncheon," sneered Truco. "This *is* the criminal. Don't be misled by the demure façade."

"Ah ... then I ... regret to inform you, mademoiselle, that it seems zat I have to take you into custody."

"Into custard what?" said Alice.

"I am afraid I ... er ... have to place you under arrest. And I must remind you that whatever you say will be—"

"Under arrest! What in heaven's name for?"

"I am not absolutely certain," said Truncheon, taken aback.

"Let me clarify, Alice," interjected Truco. "You are under arrest for breaking and entering, trespassing, disseminating false accusations, and above all treason!"

"*Treason?*" said Alice, dumfounded. "I didn't think that such a crime existed nowadays. And if it did, I certainly haven't said anything bad about any Kings or Queens that I know of. Maybe I have grumbled a little bit about the Queen of Spades and the Queen of Clubs, but those have just been about private little things and only when I'm alone."

"Bah!" said Truco. "Those pipsqueak small fries! You can say what you like about *them*. Slander them, malign them, ridicule them. It has no consequences and the general public delights in it. Those little Kings and Queens are not in control, although they like to think so—and for the time being I *like* to let them think so."

Truco again let out his hideous cackle that sent shivers down the backs of Alice and the police chief.

"You see, Mademoiselle Alice," said Truncheon softly, "maybe you were not aware, but the law strictly prohibits dissemination of slanderous accusations, or the speaking against or the questioning of Truco's character, personality, plans or programmes, and

even the criticism of his Tarot card associates.

“You have probably heard the crime of treason being referred to by other names, but no matter what you call it, it is still just as much a crime as it ever was to speak against those who are truly in control, even if they are unseen or unknown. This constitutes treason, the penalty of which, if not retracted or due apology made, is imprisonment and sometimes worse.”

For the first time on her whole adventure, Alice was horror stricken and burst into tears.

“Prison? But Mr. Truco, I only wanted to find out if you were keeping the Hearts from the Woodchopper’s deck in prison. That’s not treason, is it?”

“I am afraid so,” replied Truco. “You are guilty of hearing and telling an archaic and superstitious story of Woodchoppers and decks that has long been banned from text books, newspapers, television, music, the arts, and entertainment—all of which are under my absolute control and which have served to enlighten the public mindset as to my true nature. It has taken many years to eradicate the damaging effects of that old story, so I am not about to permit any seed of doubt to take root in the minds of the subjects of my kingdom.”

“If I may say so, monsieur,” said Truncheon, “it seems a little severe to castigate one so young, who as far as I can see, can do very little damage.”

“Ah!” said Truco, pointing his finger in the air. “That is where you are wrong! For example, it has been brought to my attention that Mr. Sage, an aged bent playing card who owns the second-hand bookstore in Old Cardstock, holds a similar belief, but it’s of no consequence as people regard him as a crackpot and would never want to associate with him by agreeing with his views. It would serve me well to even give him a platform occasionally on



which to voice his opinion.

“But such opinions in the mouth of this little girl here,” he continued, gesturing off-handedly towards Alice, “being young and attractive in an oddly time-warped sort of way, would make too many people sit up and listen seriously. That sort of power and influence I cannot allow. Handcuff her and take her away.”

Speechless and with tears running down her cheeks, Alice was led to the awaiting dark blue police van with Jacques Truncheon trying to console her.

“You will receive a fair trial,” he said. “And we will see zat you are provided with a capable children’s criminal lawyer.”

“Alice!” came a concerned shout.

It was Celia Spade sitting with the others in the back of the van that was fenced off from the driver’s seat.

“Oh cribbage, they’ve *handcuffed* you.”

“Are these friends of hers, sir?” asked a second gendarme that was apparently Truncheon’s subordinate.

“I have instructions to let zem go,” said Truncheon.

“No!” shouted Rummy. “If you’re takin’ Alice, you can take us too. We’re all in it together.”

The others loudly voiced their accord.

“Just go,” said Alice. “I appreciate your loyalty, but it’ll just make matters worse.”

“I am afraid she is right,” said Jacques Truncheon.

“Oh, Alice,” said Celia, as she threw her arms around Alice’s neck, sobbing. “We’re goin’ to do everything we can to help get you through this.”

Rummy held Alice’s hand, but said nothing as his eyes looked deeply into hers, causing Alice to feel as though her heart had come up into the back of her throat. He then climbed out of the van and

joined the others.

“It’s gonna be okay, Miss Fancy Dress. I know it,” whispered Gin, clutching Alice’s arm as she turned to go. There was a tear in her eye. “You’re a good suit. I mean it. And it’s okay with me about you an’ Rummy.”

“Thanks, Gin. You’re a good, er ... suit, too. Here,” said Alice as her shackled hands fumbled in the pocket of her dress. “In case something happens and I don’t see you all again, these are invitations to the Woodchopper’s Christmas Eve Ball for you, Nitty and Gritty.”

*What on earth does Gin mean?* Alice wondered, sitting alone in the back of the van as it roared off into the night. *It’s okay about me and Rummy?*



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## In Court

**T**he court is now in session!”  
The low babble of the courtroom crowd faded to silence with Judge Knott’s announcement as he rapped his gavel sharply on his bench.

*This is just like in those dreadfully boring court case movies that Brandon likes,* thought Alice as she looked around at the oak-panelled walls and up at the high ceiling. She was seated in a high backed leather upholstered chair at one of the tables near the front with Mr. Kang, another of those cards with the strange designs. He was a children’s defence lawyer set up by Truco who had reassured her that he was “the best”—although from the one and only hastily arranged meeting she’d had with him just half an hour prior to the hearing, she knew there was something about Mr. Kang she did not like.

“Remember what we agreed, Miss Pleasance,” he mumbled through a sly grin and a chiblet sandwich, “and we’ll all be happy. Including Mr. Rue over there.”

He pointed to a parallel table across the aisle where sat another card with similar designs to his own who was busily rustling through a folder of papers.

“He’s the prosecuting attorney.”

“Mr. Rue, would you like to state your case?” came the sudden inquiry from Judge Knott, a kindly faced chance card who gave the impression that he was not in total agreement with the manner in which the matter was being handled.

“The defendant is accused, your honour, of breaking and entering, trespassing, and most of all, *high treason*,” Rue announced with relish.

“Does the defendant plead guilty or not guilty?”

“Not guilty, your honour,” said Mr. Kang.

“Very well, Mr. Rue, would you like to continue with your case?”

“Yes, your honour. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you see before you in the person of Alice Pleasance what *appears* to be a beautiful, charming, intelligent, sincere and well-behaved young girl. But I want to ask you, no, *beg* you from the onset of this hearing that as you are presented with the irrefutable facts regarding her true nature, that you make every effort in the name of justice, honour and integrity, to base your judgement on sound values and not on what you *perceive* her to be.

“This crime of treason is not just against the venerable Mr. Truco, who deems it a crime not only against himself, for which he is willing to extend forgiveness, but also a heinous crime against you and me, the people of the Useless Status. I *urge* you to ponder the untold damaging effects on the minds of your children, your loved ones, and friends as you watch a decision for her acquittal giving credence to her twisted and hate-filled views. That’s all I have for now.”

“Mr. Kang, would you like to state your defence?”

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” said Kang, with a look of grave concern as he paced the floor in front of them, “like my learned colleague here, Mr. Rue, I too would say that what you see before

you in the person of Alice Pleasance appears to be a sincere, thoughtful and well-behaved girl, and I too would caution you to base your judgement on sound values.

“However, let them be the values that tell us to look a little *deeper*, to draw on our *caring and compassionate natures*, to see that in reality she is but a pitifully sick and demented specimen of humanity, who—through no fault of her own—has lost the ability to think for herself, to be her own person—has lost control of that one thing in life that keeps us on an even keel, that one thing in life that helps us maintain our self esteem and human dignity. Yes, our *mind*, our psyche if you will ... our *mental health*.

“This is why I move to declare the defendant *not guilty* on the grounds of temporary insanity and being in dire need of the best psychiatric care we can offer. That’s all I have at the moment.”

“Your honour,” announced Rue. “The prosecution would like to call the defendant, Miss Alice Pleasance, to the stand.”

Surprised that she was called up so suddenly and feeling very nervous, Alice was encouraged that her friends Celia and Ophelia, Helvetica, Blackjack, Mr. Sage, Trixie, Rummy, and Gin had all come, and were sitting in the back of the courtroom waving, blowing kisses, and demonstrating other signals of support. She even caught a kindly smile and a sympathetic nod from Monsieur Jacques Truncheon, who was among the witnesses.

Looking detachedly into the air above Alice’s head, the bailiff stood in front of her.

“Place your hand on the Bible,” he commanded, “and repeat after me: ‘I, Alice Pleasance, do swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.’”

“I, Alice Pleasance, do swear to tell the truth, the

whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

“Miss Pleasance. Is it not true that you consider Mr. Truco an *evil* man?” challenged Mr. Rue with a tone of calm antagonism.

“Objection, your honour!” said Mr. Kang. “That question is based on an unfounded supposition.”

“Objection sustained,” said the judge. “Mr. Rue, please rephrase the question.”

“Is it true that you have hurled filthy and slanderous accusations at the good name of Mr. Truco?”

Judge Knott leaned forward, “Can you please be a little more specific, Mr. Rue?”

“Oh *yes*, your honour, I can be *very* specific.”

Reaching into his pocket and pulling out a piece of paper he strode over to Alice and leaned close to her face.

“Did you, or did you not say, I quote: ‘Others say that they (the Hearts) are held captive by Truco in a dungeon at his dark estate.’

“Whereupon Mr. Ace Belote said, ‘Don’t tell me you actually believe this!’

“And you answered: ‘Actually I do, Mr. Belote.’ Is that not verbatim what you said?”

“Um ... it...,” Alice faltered. “It was in a conversation.”

“Answer the question, Miss Pleasance. Did you or did you not say these exact words?”

“Yes.”

“I have no further questions, your honour.”

“Mr. Kang, do you wish to cross examine the defendant?” said the judge.

“I do,” said Kang.

“Miss Pleasance,” he said as he stepped forward, “when you begin to voice these twisted and irrational ideas, are you aware of your surroundings?”

“What twisted and irrational ideas, sir?”

“Those that come to you when you are psychoti-

cally delusional and have lost touch with reality.”

“I’ve never lost touch with reality, to my knowledge,” said Alice calmly. “And I do not know of ever voicing twisted ideas.”

“You mean to say you have no *memory* of having those ideas nor having verbalised them.”

“I didn’t say that. I am fully aware of the things I think and say,” said Alice firmly.

Kang shook his head.

“I have no further questions, your honour.”

“The defendant may step down.”

“Your honour, the prosecution would like to call Miss Trixie Barr to the stand,” announced Mr. Rue.

Alice walked sadly to her seat next to Mr. Kang who sat with his head in his hands.

“Mr. Kang? Whatever’s wrong?”

“Listen, kid. If we’re gonna go for you pleading temporary insanity, it doesn’t do for you to answer as if you’re in your right mind.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Alice. “I just didn’t understand what you meant by ‘temporary’ something or other. I mean, you and I had hardly any time to talk and—”

“Temporary insanity means you lost your senses for a moment and that would mean a lighter sentence. Especially if we can implicate your parents as the cause, through heredity or physical and psychological abuse and whatnot. We can suborn doctors to sign documentation to this effect.”

“You can leave my parents out of this, and I’m not insane, Mr. Kang. I know exactly what I’m doing and what my Commission is and everything. You see, I just have to find the Hearts because—”

“Yes, yes, yes, I know all about that, Alice,” said Kang, waving his hand in dismissal before pausing.

“Hey, maybe we can go at it from *that* angle—you know, crazy outlandish dreams, visions or delusions or what have you, of a quest to find these cards for

some imaginary Woodchopper without bringing treason into it. You can wrap the whole thing up by giving credit to Mr. Truco for helping you to see the light. It's *watertight*."

"I thought you were supposed to try and help me get off free, Mr. Kang, not try to prove I'm crazy."

"*Temporarily* mentally unstable, that's an entirely different thing. You merely have these dangerously psychotic lapses where you lose sense of all reason and reality. You kind of *blank out*."

"Don't worry, it's not like you'll be shipped off to the crackerbox!" he added with a laugh, but Alice was not amused.

"You seem to think I really *am* crazy and I'm making this up, don't you, Mr. Kang?"

"That's neither here nor there, Alice. I'm not interested in what you believe or don't believe, or even whether it's the truth or not, but I *am* interested in winning this case. And you *are* interested in going free, right?"

"What if Truco *indeed* imprisoned the Hearts?"

Kang seemed to be suddenly shaken by this question. He stared at Alice for a few seconds, said nothing and started busily straightening his papers.

"That is a point that I cannot even consider. It's out of the question."

Trixie Barr meanwhile had been answering questions from Mr. Rue about her background and the circumstances in which she had met Alice.

"I've never met a more charming, considerate, and *maturitive*-type youngster in all my born days," she was saying, as Alice and Kang turned their attention back to the proceedings.

"Be that as it may, Miss Barr," said Rue, "but on that aforementioned night at the 'Bower and Trump,' did Alice Pleasance allude to anything at all about her stance regarding Mr. Truco and the supposed



imprisoned Hearts?”

“Well...”

“Let me remind you that you are under oath, Miss Barr.”

“We talked about the Commission and how she and Mr. Sage thought that Mr. Truco had the Hearts captured in his dungeon.”

This was met by a murmur of reaction from the crowd.

“I see, a treasonable statement.”

“But I don’t think the poor dear meant any harm by it,” protested Trixie. “She’s a good girl, she is.”

“That’s all. No further questions, your honour.”

“Does the defence care to cross examine the witness?” said Judge Knott.

“I would, your honour,” said Kang as he stepped forward.

“Miss Barr,” he continued. “Was there anything in the defendant’s behaviour that night that would indicate to you a state of mental aberration?”

“Mental what, sir?”

“Did the defendant behave in a way that you would consider strange or abnormal?”

“Well ... I wouldn’t say she’s a *normal* girl—”

“Thank you, Miss Barr. That will be all. No further questions, your honour.”

“But sir, what I mean is—” said Trixie.

“I said that will be all, Miss Barr!”

“The witness may step down,” said Judge Knott and announced a court recess for lunch until three o’clock.



Searching through the crowd milling in the corridors during recess, Alice found Inspector Truncheon and approached him.

“Excuse me, Monsieur,” she said, handing him an invitation. “I meant to give this to you in Truco’s estate, but the unfortunate circumstances did not

permit me.”

The gendarme looked over the card and smiled. “Why, merci.”

“And may I have a moment of your time in private?”

“Ah, Mademoiselle, it will be *avec plaisir*. I was just going across to ze park to eat my lunch. Do you care to join me? I only have sandwiches de chiblet I’m afraid, but zere’s a chiblet dog vendor in the park.”

“That’ll be just wonderful, Monsieur. I’m famished.”

Thankful for the fresh air, Alice and Inspector Truncheon walked through the park for about fifteen minutes before buying a couple of chiblet dogs and sitting down on a bench under a clump of trees by the lake. While munching on a sandwich, the policeman pulled out some dry bread, tore it in two and handed half to Alice.

“Zis is to feed ze ducks,” he said with a smile of contentment as he tossed pieces into the water. “Make sure zey get it before ze pigeons.”

Alice, not wanting to intrude into Truncheon’s enjoyment, complied.

“I am deeply sorry for ze way ze trial is going,” he said at last. “It seems ze deck is stacked against you.”

“Monsieur Truncheon, what if Truco really has got the Hearts?”

“Ze mallards are slow today. Maybe ze bread is not to their liking.”

“What if we can *prove* that Truco is guilty of capturing the Hearts?”

Stopping and leaning his head back on the park bench, Truncheon stared up at the grey sky.

“Proof? I’ve never really thought about that. It’s beyond my wildest stretch of imagination. But if—and zat’s a big *if*—evidence were to arise indicating

such, then Truco himself would be on ze stand and you of course would be immediately exonerated.”

“What if I told you that I think I have evidence?”

“I’d have to consider it.”

Alice reached into her pocket and pulled out the tiny gold ring with the heart shaped ruby.

“I found this on the floor of Truco’s dungeon.”

Truncheon’s mouth dropped open.

“Zat can’t be,” he said, shaking his head. “Zis is a shock to my whole frame of reference.”

“What does it mean?”

“A lot. It’s ... oh, iz zat ze time?” Truncheon stood up, visibly shaken. “I need to go!”

“But Monsieur Truncheon!” said Alice, but the agitated gendarme was already briskly walking out of the park.



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## have a heart

**D**uring the period of the trial, Alice was a ward of court in that she was relatively free to come and go as she pleased. It was advised that she not consort openly with the members of the gang at this time, but many evenings Celia and Rummy would visit her at the Queen of Clubs' apartment and often ended up being invited to spend the night.

One evening while the four of them enjoyed a gourmet meal Blackjack had specially prepared of broiled chiblets and sautéed potatoes and a bottle of vintage Chateau de la Fisseau, they watched the TV-news coverage of the case.

"You should see the newspaper headlines these days," said Celia, munching and waving her hands. "You know the type of thing: 'Mystery Skater Mad?' an' 'Alice the Scatty Skater!' An' they always use the worst pics to boot."

"I know," said Alice. "I can't even wrinkle my nose or scratch my head without it making the front page or being shown in slo-mo on TV."

"Even this *Newspeak* magazine did a feature article on you," said Helvetica. "Listen to this: 'Wonderland holds a sinister secret! Deep beneath this deceptively demure and delicate persona lurks a depraved and twisted mind. A mind that can conjure

up hate ideologies and every conceivable degeneracy. All is not fairy tales of white rabbits and Cheshire cats in this Alice's Wonderland.”

“A load of clobyosh. And this,” said Rummy, pointing to the TV, “is *really* stretchin' it. They've now got witnesses coming forward and saying that they've met Hearts personally while on holiday, sailors saying they've met them out at sea, mountain climbers saying they've spotted them, and even archaeologists discovering traces of their fossilized linen cardstock.”

“Oh fold,” said Celia, as Ace Belote came on the screen stating that his actions were in Alice's best interests and for the sake of her mental health. “Look whose ugly suit's on the tube now.”

“From the moment I first laid eyes on him, I knew he was a snake in the grass,” said Helvetica. “I just *knew* we shouldn't have trusted him.”

“I'm afraid I wasn't so savvy,” said Celia, shaking her head ruefully. “I jus' shoulda listened to Ophelia, and Alice wouldn'ta been in this shuffle.”

“I don't think it woulda happened if I hadn't made Alice climb through that stupid window,” said Rummy.

“It's all right, you guys,” said Alice. “What's done is done, and I have full faith that this is all working out the way it's supposed to. I have that assurance.”

“Gut feelin'?” said Celia.

The doorbell rang, there were voices in the hallway and Blackjack appeared at the dining room door.

“It's Mr. Ace Belote, ma'am. Came to speak with Miss Alice.”

“Well, speak of the Devil and he comes around,” Helvetica blurted out. “You can just tell him to go and—”

“If it's okay, your Majesty, I think I should speak with him,” said Alice.

“Suit yourself. But I’m going to give him a piece of my mind. Show him in, Blackjack.”

Ace Belote walked into a chilly reception as the four sat staring morosely at their plates. Alice stood up to greet him while the others remained seated.

“You miserable piece of laminated cardboard,” bellowed Helvetica. “To think that we trusted you!”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Belote spoke calmly and raised his hands as if to still the tempest. “Actually I am here on Truco’s behalf. He said he would have liked to have come personally, but urgent schemes have called him away.”

He sat down confidently on one of the armchairs, poured himself a glass of Chateau de Fisseau and continued.

“I fully understand your displeasure. I am sure if I were in your shoes I would be equally perturbed, but under the circumstances you will realise that I had to be, as they say, ‘cruel to be kind.’”

“And how’s that?” said Rummy.

“I could see that Alice was pretty set on her Commission thing and I saw no other recourse but to put the squeeze on so tight that she would have no other alternative but to finally accept my offer of ice skating stardom. It was all for her own good.”

The others turned and looked expectantly at Alice.

“Now allow me to make the offer more appealing: prestigiously as well as lucratively. Mr. Truco himself saw the video of Alice’s astounding performance at the Golden Ten and was more than impressed. So much so that he wants to personally finance, guide, and manage her journey to the peak of fame and stardom.”

“But the Commission!” said Alice.

“Not only that, due to the immense public interest in the case he has become privy to the knowledge of the whereabouts of some of the Hearts and has

arranged for Alice to meet them.”

“Wow that’s trump!” said Celia.

“Hmmm,” said Helvetica. “Not so sure.”

“You have nothing to lose, Alice,” insisted Belote. “Just a golden opportunity missed if you don’t. If you’re game, I can call him right now.”

Just then the phone rang and Helvetica picked it up.

“Alice, it’s a Mr. Jacques Truncheon for you,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Sounds French.”

“He’s a police inspector, your Majesty,” reassured Alice. “Yes, monsieur?”

“Mademoiselle, I have some interesting news for you. I drove out to Truco’s yesterday afternoon, and employing my special police powers I made some routine inquiries wizout his knowledge. I took some samples of ze dust from the floor of ze dungeon. I have just received the forensic reports from some clue cards at ze lab which indicate the presence of microscopic particles of laminated linen-reinforced cardboard. The very construction of the average playing card, myself included.”

“I don’t exactly understand all that you’re saying, monsieur,” said Alice, “but it sounds wonderful.”

“It is conclusive proof zat playing cards have been in zat location for quite a length of time up until very recently,” said Truncheon. “Er ... can you talk?”

“Mr. Belote is right here and he says that he and Mr. Truco can arrange a meeting with a couple of Hearts.”

“Ah. Sounds very interesting. How soon can that be?”

Alice looked over at Belote.

“Monsieur Truncheon would like to know when I can meet the Hearts.”

“Whenever,” said Ace with a shrug. “Tonight? Just a phone call away.”

After conferring with Helvetica, Celia, and

Rummy, Alice agreed to meet with the Hearts later that night and informed Truncheon who promised to continue investigating.

“Wise choice. You won’t regret it,” said Belote, as he called Truco on his cell phone.

“So what are we waiting for?” he said after a few minutes of discussion with Truco. “It’s on. Let’s go!”

“She is not going alone,” said Helvetica.

“Don’t worry,” returned Ace. “She’s in safe hands, I assure you. I’ll bring her right back.”

Alice wondered for a moment about whether or not this was wise to go off with Ace Belote by herself.

*Don’t fear, you won’t be alone. You’ll see.*

“I’ll see you to the door, Alice,” blurted Rummy as he jumped from his seat.

“I’ll be in the car,” Ace called out from the corridor.

Standing alone with Alice in the hallway, Rummy took her hand and kissed it furtively.

“Take care, Princess,” he said with a grin which faded to a look of tender concern. “I’ll be ... prayin’ for ya. I don’t know what I’d do if anythin’ were to...”

“That’s sweet of you, Rummy, I—”

Alice gasped as Rummy placed a kiss firmly on her cheek before dashing back into the apartment.

*Gosh!* said Alice to herself as she pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks. *I’m so totally embarrassed, I must be as red as a beet! This must have been what Gin was talking about, and what Rummy meant about me being a complication!*

She stood awhile pondering this incident until the beeping of Belote’s car horn brought her running out to the sidewalk.





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## Margot

Alice and Belote were to meet the two members of the Hearts suit at a little dance club in upper West Bedlam, where they had been booked to perform a one-night song-and-dance act billed as Foppet and Moppet.

Ace Belote was a well-known and much revered personality in this domain, evidenced by the fawning greetings from almost everyone in the crowded club and the bows and forced smiles of the waiters and waitresses falling over themselves to be of service.

"The Hearts. Where are they?" he asked one of them curtly, who escorted them to a table by the small stage where sat two playing cards wearing flamboyant red heart-patterned shirts.

"Acey boy!" shrieked one, who stood up from the table to offer Belote a limp-wristed handshake. "So this must be the Alice that's all the rage these days."

"The very girl herself," said Belote.

"Well, dearie. I'm Foppet and this is my partner Moppet. Charmed to meet you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, sirs," said Alice, as she curtseyed gracefully which sent the two cards into peals of shrieking giggles.

"Ooh, aren't we *posh!*" said Foppet.

“Quite genteel!” said Moppet.

Alice couldn’t help but show that she was a little offended, very disappointed, and already hoping that she would not have to stay and endure their company.

“Do sit down,” said Foppet.

“Make yourself comfortable,” said Moppet.

“I think a round of fizzola would be in order,” said Belote, pulling out his wallet and snapping his fingers in the air, which instantly brought half a dozen hovering waiters. “We have cause to celebrate.”

“Ooh Acey boy, what’s the occasion?” said Foppet.

“What’s the *do*?” asked Moppet.

“That finally Alice’s big mystery of what became of the Hearts is solved!”

“Ooh, of course,” said Foppet. “Here we are!”

“Alive and kicking!” said Moppet.

“I propose a toast to Alice’s future in ice skating,” said Ace as he raised his glass in the air. “To the Hearts, and to the end of that preposterous fairy tale that they are locked up in Truco’s dungeon.”

“To the end of that silly archaic rumour,” said Foppet and clinked his glass with Ace’s.

“To the demise of that foolish antiquated theory,” said Moppet and clunked his glass with Alice’s, but as he did so his glass shattered and fizzola spilled on his shirt. He quickly attempted to wipe himself with a napkin.

To Alice’s surprise, she noticed that some of the pattern of Hearts started smearing and running together, which Moppet frantically tried to dab with more handfuls of napkins, only to soak them in red and white dye revealing patches of a strange design underneath.

*It’s a trick!* she thought. *They’re not really Hearts at all, they are a couple of those weird cards from*

*Krypkille.*

Moppet hastily excused himself to go to the bathroom, while Alice sat staring aghast at Belote who wore a similar expression.

“Well, well, well, dearies,” said Foppet, apparently unaware of what the occurrence had revealed. “Let’s not allow that unfortunate mishap to dampen our festivities. More fizzola?”

“Excuse me,” said Alice, holding Belote’s gaze while sliding her chair back and standing up. “I think I have to use the bathroom also.”

She turned around and slipped quickly through the crowd, past the coat check, out of the back door and stood for a few moments in the dark deserted side street with her heart thumping.

“Alice! Where are you going?”

It was Ace Belote coming up behind her.

“Alice, come here!”

Alice panicked and ran until the sound of Belote’s quickening footsteps behind her faded.

After running as fast as her legs could carry her, Alice found herself standing amongst the teeming, bustling night life on Broadley, the main street of Upper West Bedlam. Breathless and wondering which way to go, she gave a start as she felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Alms?”

It was the same poor card in a brown hooded cloak she had met outside the Calabresella restaurant before her arrest.

“What a nice surprise to see you again,” said Alice. “But again I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t have Lucre with me, I only have my Flash card. Can I get you something you need? Another meal?”

“That is very kind of you,” said the card. “Actually, I am very cold as I am naked but for this brown cloak. I would appreciate a nice warm dress.”

“Come with me,” said Alice, taking her hand

while looking furtively behind her for any sign of Ace Belote. "A couple of blocks down on the corner I see just the place."

Walking into such an exclusive and expensive department store as Sharx and Spendthrift made Alice feel quite important yet unashamed, knowing she was buying for a poor beggar and not merely for herself.

"Excuse me, ma'am," she whispered to the beggar as they stood on the escalator leading up to the women's clothing section, "what is your name?"

"Margot. And you are Alice."

"That's right, ma'am." By now Alice had become accustomed to strangers knowing who she was, even before all the uproar in the news.

"May I help you, Miss Alice?"

Wearing a black top hat and a dark suit with red diamond buttons, a stately older gentleman card who had been observing them since they had walked in, bowed respectfully to Alice while casting a questioning sideways glance at the hooded figure.

"Mr. Earnest Brainwave at your service," he stated in impeccable English. "Unfortunate press coverage you've been receiving, if I may say so, Miss. Must be trying for a girl of your age."

"It does vex me upon occasion sir, that the publicised reports hitherto have been so spurious and unfounded, causing many people to doubt my veracity and even my mental soundness," replied Alice.

"No matter," said Earnest. "I've long since ceased to put stock in the false invectives of Messieurs Hugh and Krye's news agencies."

"But I am comforted," Alice continued, "with the reassurance that my friends are convinced of the verity of my cause and the integrity of my character."

*Oh dear!* she thought. *Here I go again, talking*

*uppity to the max! I just wish I could control it when it starts!*

Alice needn't have been worried, as by now the gentleman was thoroughly charmed,

"That I am *certain* of," he replied. "I must say over the years I have developed a shrewd judgement of character, and I see before me an admirable but rare example of integrity and moral fibre. Nevertheless, what can I do for you and ... er ... your friend?"

"Margot."

"Margot. Pleased to make your acquaintance, madam," he said as he bowed again and gingerly took the hand reaching out from the folds of the cloak.

"She is in need of clothing, sir," said Alice. "I'd like to buy her a beautiful dress, shoes ... whatever she needs."

"Hmmm, I think I have something in mind," muttered Earnest as he strode across the plush grey carpet towards one of the racks. "What do you think of this? The only one of its kind."

Draped over his arm was a long crimson velvet gown edged with gold trim and a fine white ermine collar.

Alice gasped. "It's beautiful."

"Fit for a Queen, I'll say. Over here are the dressing rooms if you wish to try it on."

"Come in with me," whispered Margot as she pulled open the curtain of the cubicle.

Once inside, Margot threw back the hood and let the cloak fall to the floor, revealing a striking head of long white hair that cascaded like fine silver flax to her waist. On her aged but exquisitely structured face she wore delicately framed, grey-tinted glasses through which a pair of sparkling blue eyes flashed and scintillated as they held Alice's gaze.

*She's so beautiful!* thought Alice. But what most surprised her was to see imprinted on her tiny white

cardboard body, twelve red hearts.

“You ... you must be the Queen—”

“The Queen of Hearts.”

“Oh, your Majesty, I am just so...” Alice couldn’t restrain the tears and let them flow as Margot held her in her arms.

“Is ... ahem ... everything in order, Madam?” asked Earnest from the other side of the curtain.

“Just fine, thank you, sir,” said Alice.

“Oh my, I suppose I ought to try this on,” whispered Margot with a giggle, as she slipped into the gown.

“It looks absolutely lovely, your Majesty!” said Alice. “And it fits just perfectly.”

Stepping out of the dressing room, Margot looked every inch the diminutive Queen she was, so much so that other customers and even Earnest found himself instinctively bowing in reverence as she passed.

“What did I tell you, your Ma...” said Earnest, “fit for a Queen.”

“Little do you know how true that is,” said Alice with a laugh. “I think we’ll take it.”

“And shoes for the lady?” said Earnest, looking discreetly at the ceiling.

“Of course,” replied Alice.

“Then I shall escort you to the footwear department.”

“I feel rather ashamed of my dirty bare feet,” whispered Margot as they sat down in the shoe section.

“I’m sure it’s of no consequence,” said Alice. “And there’s not much we can do unless—”

Suddenly a bearded young man in his early thirties, with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail and dressed in a white suit, approached them carrying a basin of water. Over his arm was draped a towel.

“Allow me,” he said softly, as he knelt down be-

fore the Queen and gently placed her feet into the basin. Then, to her surprise, he proceeded to wash them as he hummed a tune, and after he had dried them with the towel he placed a kiss on each one.

“There,” he said as he stood up. “That should do it.” And in a moment he was gone.

*Wow! Now that’s rather nice service,* Alice thought to herself. *I didn’t know these shops hired people to do stuff like that.*

“Here we are,” said Earnest breathlessly, as he rushed up carrying a pair of tiny ornate golden slippers. “I knew we had these somewhere. I had to search the storeroom. Hand made they are.”

They were, of course, a perfect fit and added the finishing touch to the Queen’s elegance.

“Rings on your fingers and bells on your toes, madam!” said Earnest with a smile of satisfaction. “By the way, speaking of rings, is that a ... ?”

His mouth dropped open as he took Margot’s hand and gazed at the small gold ring with a heart shaped ruby.

“It can’t be possible,” he continued. “I thought it was only a legend, fairy tale stuff and all that. Does that mean you’re really—”

“Sssh!” said Margot. “Keep it under your top hat for now. It’s coming, it’s coming. The truth will be revealed soon.”

Alice, bursting with curiosity over the ring, but seeing that Margot was not about to discuss it here, was eager to finish their business in Sharx and Spendthrift.

“It’s been so nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Brainwave,” said Alice as she pulled out her Flash card to which Earnest shook his finger. Alice noticed he was wearing cufflinks with the blue and gold paisley pattern.

“That won’t be necessary,” he whispered with a wink. “All in a day’s work. What you have given me

tonight is priceless.”

“Speaking of priceless, I have something very important for you,” said Alice, reaching into her purse and giving him an invitation, which he received thankfully.

Back out on the street, it was Margot’s turn to take Alice’s hand.

“Come,” she said. “We must find a place where we won’t be seen.”

Presently they came across a vacant lot that was deserted except for a couple of sleeping drunks.

“They should pose no problem,” laughed Margot. “If they should stir and see anything, they’d probably think it was from drinking their polignac. Here, take my cloak, you’re going to need it for warmth,” she said as she lay down flat on her stomach. She then stretched out her arms across the ground in front of her and started rubbing the gold ring, which began to glow.

“Alice, sit on my back and hold tight to my arms.”

Puzzled, Alice did so and to her amazement they started to lift up from the ground; slowly at first, then hovering for awhile in the air above the nearby buildings before shooting off into the night sky.

Alice was speechless and scared, gripping the Queen’s arms tightly for fear of falling off.

“Don’t worry,” said Margot, still rubbing the ring with her arms outstretched in front of her. “Just relax and enjoy the ride. You didn’t expect that I would turn out to be your very own miniature magic carpet, did you?”

“Actually, I’ve come to expect anything these days, your Majesty,” replied Alice with a laugh.

“Well, just in case you are wondering,” said Margot, “we are going to meet some very dear friends.”





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## Follow the Queen

**A**fter watching the lights of the city of Mayhem fade below them, they had been flying for more than an hour through the clear starlit night sky before they began to enter scattered clouds that became more and more dense as they glided on. Alice could not make out any sign of the ground below or the sky above, but still Margot flew on as if she knew exactly where she was going. Finally they broke out from the mist into scattered snow flurries, which made Alice thankful for the brown cloak. Conversation on the journey had been slight, as Alice had remained deep in thought on the events of the past days. Or had they not been merely days but rather weeks? Something about the passage of time had eluded her, for she was positive that during her visit to Old Cardstock it seemed as though it had been summer, and yet it was now snowing.

*Unless it's still winter. Let me see, I left Bezique on Christmas day...*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the Queen.

“See the mountains below us?”

Alice looked down at the vast range of snow-covered peaks that glistened in the darkness.

“We are nearly home.”

In a few minutes they were gently swooping down

towards a dense, snow-capped pine forest where they finally hovered over a small clearing, inside of which Alice could see the lights of two A-frame log chalets, one larger than the other.

"Hello! We're home!" called Margot as they landed on the thick carpet of snow.

Immediately the door of the larger cabin opened, and a tall, beautiful, motherly-looking woman with long dark greying hair pulled back in a bun rushed out eagerly to greet them.

"Hello Alice, my name is Heilige," she said, hugging her warmly. "We've been expecting thee, and we doth rejoice to have you abide with us. Thou must get thee inside quick before thou catchest the death."

"Is it they, dearest?" came a deep resounding voice from the cabin.

"Yea, it is!" said Heilige, as they entered a cosy but sparsely furnished room carpeted with skins and furs and decorated with colourful patchwork cushions and curtains. "This is my beloved husband, Theo."

A giant, heftily built man with a long flowing white beard stood up from sitting in front of the fire where he had been roasting what seemed to be a long skewer of chiblet hunks.

"Aah, Alice, Alice," he said and drew her to him for a fervent bear hug. "I have long been desirous to meet thee."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said Alice, catching her breath before demonstrating her now customary gracious curtsy.

"Sit thyself down, little ones," said Theo, gesturing towards a large fur-covered sofa. "Heilige, bring forth some mugs of hot root beer. Nought like it for a chilly night such as this."

"Wow! It's trump here!" said Alice, clutching and sipping the hot beverage as she looked around,

fascinated by the hand-made household items and rough-hewn furniture, all of which was nevertheless fashioned with precision and beauty. "And the warm vibes feel like home."

*Oh dear, at a time when I should be talking more posh, it's coming out like I talk with my friends and family!*

"Hey!" she exclaimed as her eyes fell on a large axe propped up in the corner of the room. "Are you a Woodchopper, sir?"

"Well, one cannot survive out in these parts without an axe," said Theo. "But yea, that is my trade."

"Did you make all this neat furniture?"

"Some of it, but most was fashioned by my dear son."

He turned to his wife. "Heilige, maybe he knows not that they have come."

At that moment they heard the crunching of footsteps outside in the snow and the door opened.

"Joshua! Alice and Margot are here," said Heilige. "They arrived safely."

Alice stood up and gasped as her eyes fell on the young man that walked in. He wore a fur-lined leather jacket and boots. But the beard, the long dark hair in a ponytail, the warm brown eyes...

*It's the man who washed Margot's feet in Sharx and Spendthrift! Except he looks at least ten years younger.*

"Nice to see you again, Alice," he said with a smile as he took her hand and kissed her forehead. "Sorry I didn't introduce myself at the foot washing, but I knew this opportunity would be better and you'd already had enough surprises! I'm Joshua."

Alice blushed, stammered a faint greeting and curtsyed.

"And Margot," he continued as he took the Queen in his arms, "I have missed you so much. And the

shoes are beautiful by the way. They suit you perfectly. I made sure that Earnest found them where I had hidden them. Not at all snow-worthy though, I am afraid.”

“Oh, they’re just divine, literally!” giggled Margot as she coyly extended her foot. “Thank you.”

“Let us dine,” said Theo. “Ye must be an hungered. There’s roast chiblets, mashed potatoes, and all the trimmings.”

In the excitement of the last few hours, Alice had forgotten she was hungry, but was soon reminded by the sight and the smell of the sumptuous hot meal that Heilige had set out on the large wooden table.

“Stay there,” said Heilige as she motioned for them to remain seated around the fire. “It’s more cosy. Just load up thy plates.”

“I’ll fetch more wood,” said Joshua as he headed for the door.

“I’ll come with thee. We have need of more oil for the lamps,” said Theo.

Seeing that Heilige was occupied with preparing plates for the two men, Alice leaned over to Margot.

“I’ve been afraid to ask, your Majesty,” she whispered. “But this is the Woodchopper’s family, and Joshua is the guy I’m gathering the cards for, right?”

Margot nodded and smiled through a mouthful of food.

“Another thing I’ve been meaning to ask about,” Alice continued as she reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out the small gold ring, “is this.”

“You found it,” said Margot. “That’s wonderful.”

“Is the food to your liking?”

It was Joshua, who had brought a bundle of chopped firewood which he placed on the glowing embers in the fireplace.

“Just lovely, sir,” said Alice.

Margot nodded and smiled again through an-

other mouthful.

"My mother's the best there is," said Joshua. "She riseth while it is yet night and giveth food to her household.—And a portion to her maidens," he added and winked at Alice, who blushed considerably as he sat down next to her on the sofa.

*He's so handsome, she thought. Even more than Brandon.*

By now Theo had returned and was replenishing the oil lamps.

"Of a truth, the young lass is well near to burstin' with questions," he said with a kindly chuckle. "Am I right, Alice?"

"Ask and ye shall receive," said Joshua. "What would you like to know?"

Alice inaudibly mumbled something, then went silent.

"Don't worry, little one. You could never ask me more questions than my dear Margot here. She well nigh wearies me with them on occasion!"

"Josh!" said Margot with a giggle.

"Actually," he continued as he looked Alice deeply in the eyes, which caused her to blush again, "it *excites* me. I *love* it!"

"I think ye are embarrassing the lass, Son," said Heilige. "The poor dear hast not ceased from blushing since ye set foot in here."

"Yea, Mother. I am sorry, Alice," he said as he reached for his mug of hot root beer and raised it aloft. "But here's to the blush of a fair maiden. Verily it is a rare and wondrous sight to behold."

"Sir," ventured Alice, reaching into her pocket, "I was just going to ask Margot about this ring. She has one just like it, and not only did it seem to have something to do with her Majesty being able to fly, but I've noticed that it has like, an *amazing* effect on people who see it. What's its secret?"

"These are the heart-rings," said Joshua, "craft-

ed by my father himself, but their existence has become as legendary as the existence of the Hearts who first wore them. Thus, to those who see these rings, it's proof not only that the legend of the rings is true, but also of the existence of the Woodchopper, who created them. You see, while others have tried to craft such rings, the endeavour is, you could say, *jinxed* from the start. Either the gold tarnishes or melts or shrinks inexplicably. Ask any goldsmith and he'll verify that. Of course, they try to explain their failures away with excuses and put the blame on such things as flaws in the inherent design, the gold's impurity, its incompatibility with the ruby or its weak tensile strength, and so on."

"And this is the legend Truco has been trying to get people to stop believing in?" asked Alice.

Here Joshua paused, as if reliving an old memory. Finally he spoke again. "Truco ... ah yes, the Evil Sorcerer. He has always been trying to turn people away from my father, and to himself. That's why he created the Useless Status, as his world, where he could turn truths to legends, and then order those legends forgotten. So when these rings are seen, it proves that these legends have been true all along."

"So all the Hearts have one of these?" said Alice, inspecting the ring in her hand more closely.

"Yes, but not all of them know of the power it gives them, and so few of them treasure their rings as they should. The one you found was carelessly dropped by one of the Hearts."

"So there *were* Hearts in Truco's dungeon!" exclaimed Alice.

"Yes. But when he found out you were coming, he moved them."

"Then he *did* imprison them."

Margot answered. "Yes, but not all of them. However, the Hearts you're looking for are with Truco right now."

“But then how am I supposed to find them and give them their invitations?” asked Alice.

Margot walked over to a large elaborately carved oak chest and the moment she opened the lid, rich tones began to play the theme of the “Commission Rhapsody.”

*It’s a giant music box!* thought Alice.

Inside the chest was a mirror-like platform of iridescent glass that flashed and reflected the colours of the rainbow as a small circular multifaceted diamond rostrum rotated in the centre. Lying on the glass was a yellowed manuscript tied in a scroll, which Margot picked up and handed to Joshua.

“The answer to your question,” she continued, “can be found in this prophecy that was written long ago.”

A hush fell over the room as Joshua started to sing the words to the accompaniment of the music box:

*In whose eyes they see light, in whose  
words they find hope,  
Destined and born for this hour,  
Prepared for the land where in darkness  
they grope,  
She was nurtured and raised as a  
delicate flower*

*Winsome in manner and gentle in tongue,  
And yet she’s without trepidation,  
They’ll glimpse past and present in this  
one so young,  
And be charmed by the curiously quaint  
combination.*

*So shall they come to this golden-haired  
lass,  
Every suit without an omission;  
Two-score and ten and two weeks shall  
pass,  
And she will accomplish her special  
Commission.*

Alice sat enthralled. "That's just so cool!" said Alice. "I heard that song while I was skating that time, but I had no idea it was like, talking about *me!*"

"And I suppose you are wondering why we brought you here!" said Joshua.

Alice laughed and nodded. "It had crossed my mind."

"Thou hast passed two tests," said Theo. "In those moments of duress, when thou couldst have been tempted to heed not the plea of a poor beggar, ye took the time to feed and clothe her."

"I was an hungered and you gave me food, I was naked and you clothed me," said Joshua with a smile.

"You entertained a Queen in disguise!" said Heilige.

"So that was your ticket after what you'd been through to come rest and be replenished," said Margot. Then she proceeded to rub the ring on her finger, which caused her to shrink to the size of Alice's forefinger before floating onto the diamond rostrum in the music box.

"And *be* entertained!"

As Alice watched with astonishment and delight, Margot pirouetted and twirled gracefully in an enchanting ballet to the harmonic tones of the music box as it repeated the main theme of the "Commission Rhapsody."

"I bet you never thought you'd see a real live



Thumbelina,” whispered Joshua to Alice, “being a playing card to boot!”

Alice shook her head in awe.

When the music finally came to a stop, Margot took a bow as Alice, Joshua, Theo, and Heilige applauded enthusiastically. Then she hopped off the rostrum and floated onto Alice’s hand, before landing on the floor where she grew back to her normal size and stepped back into her gown.

“I am so thankful, your Majesty, and to all of you,” said Alice after an hour or so of enjoying lively conversation and more mugs of hot root beer. “It’s so warm and peaceful and neat here, I could stay here forever.”

“That ye will do one day,” said Theo.

“I do miss home though,” said Alice. “But that reminds me of another question I have. The legend is supposed to be like centuries old and stuff, right? Yet you all and Truco and the cards seem to be like normal ages, not like a bunch of Methuselahs or something.”

“The whole concept of time here is different,” said Joshua. “It’s flexible. You can stretch it, shrink it, and turn it inside out, backwards or forwards. It’s like silly putty.”

“Phew!” said Alice, slapping her forehead. “That’s like *totally* out of my think range.”

“Fret not, child,” said Heilige. “It is not for thee to understand now and I perceive that Margot and thyself wouldst both be desirous of sleep, so I think that we must needs suffer you to retire for the night. I have prepared for thee to sleep in Pedro and Margot’s chalet. I trust that will be to your liking. Tomorrow you will speak with her of further plans.”



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## Authors

Alice awoke the next morning to hear Margot cheerfully singing as she pattered around cleaning and putting logs on the fire in the living room of her tiny chalet.

“Sorry if I woke you,” said Margot, hearing Alice getting out of bed. “Breakfast was an hour ago, but you were sleeping so soundly, I hadn’t the heart to wake you up. Are you hungry?”

“So-so, your highness,” said Alice.

“I’ll fix you a couple of pancakes with cream topping!”

“You really don’t have to—”

“I insist,” said Margot, pulling out a colourfully embroidered tablecloth from a sideboard drawer and laying it on a small oak dining table by the window. “He that will be greatest among you...”

“Should be servant of all!” answered Alice with a giggle.

“That was like, *yummy*,” said Alice after thankfully munching down quite a few pancakes which Margot kept delivering from the stove.

“You’re welcome, dear.”

“Your Majesty, I’ve been meaning to ask ... Theo said this chalet belonged to you and Pedro. Who’s Pedro?”

“Ah,” answered Margot, her eyes lighting up, “Pedro is the King of Hearts. You may get to meet him before all this is over.

“And *now*,” she said crisply as she donned a white fur hat with matching mittens, “let’s go. I have some business to attend to and I do want to show you the area. It’s cold, so you’ll need my brown cloak.”

Alice and Margot stepped outside to a beautiful sunny day with a clear blue sky and a chilly breeze redolent with the refreshing smell of pine. They tramped through the crunchy freshly fallen snow and dead branches on the forest floor until they came to the edge of the wood where the trees overlooked a vast open meadow on which the melting snow had revealed tiny patches of green grass. As far as the eye could see ran numerous lanes, by the sides of which stood quaint little cottages.

“These cottages are for all the friends of the cards,” said Margot as they made their way down the steep slope to the meadow. “They have been helping us to prepare this place for the day when all the cards of all decks will find their true home here in the kingdom of the kind Father Woodchopper.”

As they strolled through the lanes, they were cheerfully greeted by the occupants of the cottages, many of whom were busy in their gardens, yet had the utmost love and respect for Margot as they would pause to bow before her and address her as “your Majesty” or “your highness,” and many inquired about news of the lost cards.

“They miss the cards such a lot,” said Margot, “but they are trying to keep optimistic and a spirit of hope that they will return home someday.”

After briskly walking for almost an hour, Margot and Alice finally entered what looked like a small fairy-tale village of tiny thatch-roofed houses and shops, a few of which were open.

“This is super trump. I’d love to live here!” ex-

claimed Alice. "But where are the people? It's almost *deserted*."

"This is the village for the cards you're collecting. From here, once they're all found, they'll be able to go out and gather other cards for the other villages like this one. But your task is to gather this first deck, and we're hoping to make it a big surprise for Joshua when the deck is complete for his next birthday party."

"But Joshua seems to know all about the surprise and that I am gathering these cards and everything."

"He knows about the Commission, but he doesn't know that we're planning on having the first deck complete by his next birthday. That's our secret, and your special Commission, but time is getting short, and you only have forty days left."

"Oh dear!" cried Alice. "But what if I don't manage to find all the cards in time? That's going to be dreadfully disappointing."

"It would be. But you have been doing well, and have found over half of the cards already. It's your destiny to gather this deck, Alice, but you're not alone. We are helping you as much as we can, and as long as you remember to listen to our whispers, you'll make it."

Margot broke off as she seemed to be preoccupied, and was looking about her as though she was searching for something.

"This place looks cool," said Alice as they stopped in the middle of the village square in front of a large, barn-like building with a thatched roof supported by ornately carved wooden eaves and rafters.

"Mmm. That's where the Christmas Eve birthday celebration is to happen," said Margot.

"Wow! I can't think of a better place for it," said Alice.

"Let's look around the back where the stables

are,” said Margot excitedly. “I think I hear some activity! Maybe that’s where ... *yes!*”

Standing with a rake in his hand was an old Heart card, an Ace, with a crooked nose and a white goatee beard, wearing a straw hat and a thick leather jacket over faded dungarees, who turned around at the sound of their footsteps. He let out a gasp of delight at seeing Margot run towards him with arms outstretched.

“Sweet baby!” he cooed in a deep voice, as he hugged and kissed her passionately. “I thought I’d get busy with some clean up in the feed lot in preparation for the big do while I waited for you.”

“Alice, this is Dave,” said Margot breathlessly, tidying her hair and resuming her composure.

“An Ace as you can see, but at the bottom of the suit,” said the old card with a gentle grin. “Just a feed-lot boy!”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” said Alice with a curtsy.

Dave took her hand and kissed it. “Pleased to meet you too, Alice. I’m charmed. You have a beautiful spirit and a lovely dedicated family, and your brother Brandon is a wonderful boy, has great potential to be mightily used.”

“Oh ... er ... really?” she asked, blushing and looking nervously down at her feet, surprised that for the first time on her adventures she had met a playing card who knew who she really was. “Why, thank you, sir.”

“Fancy a romp in the hay?”

“What?” Alice looked up in shock.

“He’s talking to *me*,” said Margot with a laugh. “I certainly would, Honey! Would you excuse us, Alice? We’ll only be a few minutes.”

Alice nodded, a little embarrassed, seeing that these two were obviously more than just friends. As the two ran excitedly into one of the stables, she

resolved that it was none of her business anyway and decided to wander into the big building to look around.

Inside the giant main hall, Alice was fascinated by the vast number of huge oil paintings that adorned the entire circumference of the high wooden walls. They were portraits of cards, with each of the four walls devoted to a particular suit, and upon closer inspection she saw that they dated back from the present day to quite a few centuries ago, as each one had the date of when and where the card was printed, written on the bottom right-hand corner.

Her curiosity further aroused, Alice strolled over to the wall dedicated to the cards of the Club suit and, which was to be expected, looked to see if Rummy's picture was included in the gallery. Sure enough, there at the bottom in the middle of the wall was his portrait smiling out at her.

*Doesn't look like him at all, she thought. The artist made him look too goofy.*

Above his picture was a painting of his father, Justin Rummy, dressed in a tight-fitting brightly coloured shirt; above that, his great grandfather Oscar Rummy with long hair, a beard, and wearing strings of multi-coloured beads and above that, Rummy's great, great grandfather Archibald Rummy wearing an army uniform.

"Fascinating, isn't it, looking at the brave pioneers of yesteryear."

Her captivation was broken by Dave accompanied by Margot, who were both wearing contented smiles as they entered the hall.

"Very much so, sir," said Alice. "Although I wonder what happened to all the ancestors once they died."

"Aha," said Dave. "I was wondering when you'd ask that. When each playing card is no longer useable and their cardboard disintegrates into dust,

he or she is resurrected as a human being, and comes to live in this land.”

“Then you must not have died yet?” said Alice.

“Yes, I did. But I chose to remain a Heart card in this realm and stay in contact with my beloved Margot. So glad you’ve enjoyed my book, by the way,” continued Dave, “and that it’s been such an inspiration, strength, and comfort to you during this time.”

“Book?” said Alice, “What book?”

“I’m sorry, Honey,” said Margot. “There are many things I haven’t clued her in on yet.”

“Shame on you, Margot, baby,” said Dave with a laugh. “How could you forget such an important element as the author of her—”

“You mean the red book?” Alice blurted out, as a sudden flash of awareness dawned on her.

Dave nodded.

“Actually not so much *the Author*,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “but I’m just, like I said, the feed-lot boy!”

*Margot, Pedro, and Dave!* thought Alice. *Now it all makes sense. At least as much sense as possible under these recent circumstances.*

“Oh, I’m awfully sorry, sir,” Alice continued. “I just didn’t realise who you were. With regards to the situation, the cards and everything, it’s not at all what I would have expected. It’s all been ever so topsy-turvy and curiouser and curiouser.”

*Thank God I’m speaking with that posh, old-fashioned English now,* Alice thought. *It fits much better in this situation.*

“But it has been fun, hasn’t it?” said Dave with a smile.

“Oh, ever so much, sir. I’m never ever going to forget it for the rest of my life. Mum and Dad and Brandon are going to have the most dreadful time believing it all, though. Well, maybe Brandon would.

He takes everything I say very seriously. Not many of my friends have older brothers like that.”

“Suffice it to say that you have been doing a terrific job,” said Dave. “You’ve been schticking at this Commission through all odds. Margot and I are proud of you.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Alice. “And I wanted to say that even though your red book is about the only thing I’ve had to read lately, I have been thoroughly enjoying it. I’d seen it in my parent’s lit trunk for years, but I’ve never read it before. I was familiar with some of the characters though, especially Alice.”

“Sorry you don’t have some of the more recent wine,” said Dave.

“Treasures old and new,” said Margot. “It seems as though this was the book for your hour! And, speaking of curiouser and curiouser and suchlike, you should come take a look in this room.”

Margot led the way into an adjoining room that was lined with large ornate mirrors on all sides.

“There’s the Diamond Palace!” said Alice, running over to one of the mirrors that showed the scene where she had started her adventures.

“Yes,” answered Margot, standing in front of another mirror. “And here’s Mayhem Park Central in the Useless Status, where you’ll be returning to soon.”

Alice went around to all the mirrors, gazing at the living pictures she could see through them, and names of places like Mah Jong, Kaluki, Carioca, Vatikan, Sheepshead, and others.

“When it’s time to go anywhere,” said Dave, “you step through the appropriate looking glass and *voila*, you find yourself there.”

Margot took her hand. “And now I get to show you *my* favourite place ... a different kind of looking glass to step through, you might say.”



Alice followed them through some nearby side streets of the village which consisted mostly of shops, until they stopped at a tall, Tudor-styled building with a bright red roof displaying a large sign that said:



“It’s a wax museum, and this is about the only place in town these days that’s *never* empty,” said Margot, as they entered the building that was teeming with visitors who seemed to have come from many miles around. “This one is dedicated to characters in the red MO book. Hence the red roof.”

Alice wandered around in wide-eyed wonder at the remarkably life-like wax models of the characters she had recently become so familiar with, which included Pied Piper, Snowman, Heidi, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Brother Sun, Madame M, Ivan Ivanovitch, Abraham the Gypsy King, and of course, Alice herself. Against the pitch darkness inside the building, the inventive use of lighting served to enhance each figure that was situated in a setting relating to their story; even Mr. Coosa stood in an ominously illuminated scene from “The Green Door,” and yet scarier scenes depicted Oplexicon and demons from “Demonography.”

“It was amazing,” said Alice at last, as they left the building. “I almost started talking to some of the

figures, they were so real!”

“Madame Tressette has plans for the construction of many more of these museums,” said Margot, “with the colour of each roof corresponding to the colour of the cover of the ML Volume, but the project has had to be shelved for lack of Lucres. We do have a little Green Paper Piggy bank at the door, where we encourage visitors to deposit a donation. It’s precious little, but we do have more pressing projects.”

“How sad,” said Alice. “I have some shiner money saved up that I’ll be sure to send as soon as I return.”

“Thank you, that’s sweet of you. King Pedro handles most of the business, which is one reason he’s not here right now. I do miss him, Alice. If you see him before I do, please give him my love.”

After exploring the village—where Margot and Dave checked each cottage to make sure everything was shipshape in preparation for the cards’ arrival—they started to make their way back along the winding lanes where they stopped at one of the small cottages.

They were cheerfully greeted by a clean-shaven gaunt man in his mid-forties with wavy dark hair parted at the side, dressed in gardening clothes that resembled the style of the Victorian era. He looked up from clearing melting snow from the soil, which he told them later would become a bed of spring flowers.

“My name is Charles Dodgson, but I’m better known as Lewis Carroll,” he said, holding a flowerpot in one hand and extending the other hand to Alice, who curtsied gracefully. “Ah, a joy to behold such deportment. Do they still teach you that in school?”

“I must confess I know not the meaning of the word, sir,” said Alice, thankful that her old-fashioned temperament was manifesting itself for such a visit.

“No matter. Suffice it to say that in these few seconds of acquaintance, you are everything in person that I had hoped you to be.”

“You must have read the book too, I presume?” said Alice.

“Not just *read* it,” said Lewis, “I ... look, come in, come in. Miss Pleasance has prepared afternoon fizzola tea and toasted chiblets.”

“Miss Pleasance? Miss *Alice* Pleasance?” said Alice, looking with amazement at Dave and Margot who nodded with knowing smiles.

“Alice Pleasance Liddell herself,” answered Carroll with a smile. “But she has such a pleasant disposition that we mostly just call her Miss Pleasance.”

The front door of the cottage opened and a slender woman of about twenty-five years of age came running excitedly down the steps. She was of medium height with long wavy dark brown hair and fine features, wearing a light beige, Victorian-style dress similar to Alice’s, embroidered with lace.

“Oh, I’ve been absolutely *dying* to see you in person,” Miss Pleasance said in a breathless voice that Alice recognised as one of the voices she had been hearing in her mind occasionally since the ball. “My namesake!” the young woman added as she gave Alice a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

“The toasted chiblets are getting cold, my dears,” said Lewis, leading them into the cottage dining room as Miss Pleasance continued earnestly chatting with Alice.

“And the adventures are ever so intriguing and interesting. Butter on your chiblets? Fizzola jam?”

Alice shook her head politely.

“Anyway, Lewis and I watch the developments every night on the telly,” she said, pointing to an old television that stood in the corner. “Joshua built the nice wooden cabinet for it, by the way.”

"All my adventures ... on TV?" exclaimed Alice. "Oh dearie, dearie me!"

"And that's not all. I often step into the screen to join you. Although you can't see me, you *hear* me."

"Smile, you're on Candid Camera!" said Dave with a kindly laugh. "But don't worry. It's just sort of a running commentary, soap-opera style. And the cameras are very forgiving. Each one is equipped with an extra spiritual lens."

"But you really must be sure you write down the story of your adventures when you return home," Alice Pleasance continued. "It'd make for absolutely fascinating reading material."

"I most certainly will," said Alice. "I've already had ideas to send it to the *Heaven's Library* team."

"Wonderful!" said Margot, who had been quietly sipping her fizzola tea, absorbed with checking out Lewis' unusual collection of books on science, mathematics, and photography.

"You won't have a moment's peace until you do," said Lewis. "When my Alice was a child, she certainly badgered this lazy cad—*me*—to write down my whimsical tales—the inspiration of which was herself!"

"Except the Alice that everyone knows in the books ended up looking nothing like me," said Alice Pleasance with a chuckle. "I think *you* must have been the artist's model!" she added, turning to Alice who looked in amazement at Lewis.

"You mean *you* wrote those stories about Alice, Mr. Charles?"

Lewis nodded.

"Goodness gracious! To think I'm meeting the authors," said Alice, rubbing her shoulders. "Mr. Dave and now you."

"*Ghost Writers in the Sky!*" sang Dave with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Well, I'm afraid my book wasn't quite as wonder-

ful a wonderland as I'd hoped. You see, I didn't have a lot of wisdom when I first wrote that book, and as you've seen, the world I created was frightfully messy—much of that on account of me, I'm afraid. But I'm so glad you're helping to right the wrongs and set things straight now."

After much animated and stimulating discussion followed by a playful snowball fight on Lewis and Miss Pleasance's front lawn, Margot, Dave, and Alice finally returned to the chalet where they had a hearty dinner and spent the evening swapping yarns with Theo, Heilige, and Joshua before retiring for the night.

"Tomorrow you can just relax, read some of the latest scrolls about your Commission, and in the afternoon we can enjoy a game of Scopa with the local team," said Joshua to Alice as he walked her over to the chalet. "It's a fun sport. I'll show you how to play. Then after dinner tomorrow evening we will give you a warm send off back to Mayhem. Goodnight, lovely Alice."

Joshua bent down and gave Alice a tender kiss on the cheek.

"G-g-goodnight, sir."



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## The Lonely hearts Club Band

Alice stood hesitantly in front of the looking glass labelled “Mayhem Park Central.”  
“Just step through, baby!” said Dave.

“Do you still have your ring?” asked Margot.  
Alice nodded.

“Good. Keep it with you at all times. You will need it.”

Alice gingerly stepped into the mirror. She became aware of the edges growing bright, and she began to feel dizzy.

Within moments she found herself on the grassy bank across the street from Bid Whist Heights, then hastily made her way through the traffic to the other side. A stark contrast to the haven she had just enjoyed, the glaring rush and din of Mayhem nightlife made Alice quicken her pace as she felt quite anxious to get to the safety of the Queen of Club’s apartment.

As she walked up the steps of the apartment block, she was dismayed to see that the lights were out on the ground floor and was just about to press the elevator button when a figure, which she made out to be a playing card, stepped out of the shadows of the nearby stairwell and grabbed her arm.

Alice was about to let out a scream, when the

card quickly put his hand over her mouth.

"I knew you'd be here sooner or later," he whispered. It was Ace Belote.

With muffled protests, Alice struggled to free herself.

"If I let you go, will you promise not to scream or run away?"

Alice nodded and Belote dropped his hands to his sides revealing a dishevelled appearance. His hair was matted and his shoes and torn suit were filthy.

"Don't be alarmed. It's not what you think. I don't want to hurt you. I want to explain and I just want you to listen."

Alice backed up fearfully to the elevator door, hoping that any second it would open.

"Believe me, Alice," said Belote, looking at her imploringly. "I honestly didn't think that Truco ever had the Hearts. I believed like everyone else that it was an old fable. That night in the club I was as shocked as you were to see that Moppet and Foppet were fakes!"

"B-b-but you never actually saw the Hearts in his dungeon?"

"No. But I started thinking, and I just got suspicious as to why he didn't tell me if he had nothing to hide. Then to top it off, the next day I had a visit from Chief Inspector Truncheon. Routine inquiries type of stuff."

"Did he say anything about laboratory tests?"

"Lab tests? No. But what he was getting at led me to believe that he was onto something. He's a shrewd old card and wouldn't delve into a matter like this without due cause."

"So what did you do?"

"I got on the phone to Truco and challenged him. He reminded me that he had put me where I was—at the top of the suit—then told me to keep quiet or it

would get uncomfortable for me and I'd find myself at the bottom. I said I wouldn't, so he sent a couple of his scissor-carrying Tarot cohorts to evict me from my estate and took everything. Even closed up my Mayhem penthouse suite. Since then I've just been bumming in the park, sleeping on the benches, and hoping to see you and get an invitation to the Woodchopper's Ball. I tried to contact Helvetica and your friends but they refused to have anything to do with me."

Just then the elevator door opened. It was Celia Spade and Rummy, who burst into exclamations of happy surprise and relief to see Alice, and threw their arms around her.

"What's the deal with him?" asked Rummy, as their faces dropped to see Ace Belote who stood sheepishly off to the side.

"It's okay," said Alice. "He has ... um ... you tell them Mr. Belote."

"Let's just say I've been a stupid suit."

"Is Helvetica home?" asked Alice.

"Yes," said Celia. "We jus' dropped by to flap our suits sort of, but it's not the same without you, so we decided to go home."

"Well, plans have changed!" said Rummy, throwing his arm around Alice. "Let's go on back up!"

"Helvetica's gonna flip over!" said Celia, as the three of them locked arms and entered the elevator.

Alice looked back over her shoulder to see Ace walking down the steps to the street and then noticed the lining that was hanging from the bottom of his torn jacket had the blue and gold pattern.

"This includes you, Mr. Belote!" she called out. "You *are* invited."

At this the thankful card scurried to join them in the elevator just before its doors closed.





“We just hadn’t the faintest idea what had happened to you for these past two weeks,” said Helvetica as she bustled about fluffing up the cushions on the living room couches before setting Blackjack in motion fixing a snack.

“Two weeks?” said Alice. “I was only gone two nights.”

“But it’s a good thing the court is still tied up with a lot of legal wrangling over what constitutes mental instability, aberrational behaviour, and insanity,” said Ace, happily sitting comfortably in a thick robe, having just returned from taking a much needed bath at Helvetica’s insistence. “They still haven’t decided.”

“So do they consider me a mental case?”

“They haven’t decided that either. But the case is getting so much daily TV and press coverage, the advertisers and sponsors are tickled pink that it’s keeping the public glued to the tube.”

“Even if I wasn’t there?” said Alice.

“You don’t need to be,” said Celia. “It’s sparked off so much discussion and talk shows and special reports and clobyosh put out by *Hugh & Krye* through *Newspeak* magazine on things like ‘What brings on this type o’ mental lapse in a young girl?’ *et cetera, et cetera*. They’re callin’ it AERS and Truco is pushin’ the government to fund the development of a vaccine to prevent it and a drug to combat it.”

“And what on earth is that AERS?”

“Acute Era Reversal Syndrome,” said Rummy. “Ya know, when someone dresses up in clothes from back in history, like medieval or somethin’, an’ talks an’ acts like it.”

“I can’t wear anything else if I try,” said Alice, rolling her eyes. “And sometimes I talk like that because that’s the way it’s coming out. I can’t help it.”

“You don’t have to help it, Princess,” mumbled Rummy, thumbing through a newspaper. “I ... um ...

like you the way you are.”

“Oooh,” cooed Celia, fluttering her eyelids. “Do I sense Cupid’s arrow?”

“Hey look at this!” exclaimed Rummy, “Here’s a full-page ad for that new band called ‘Lonely Hearts.’ They’ve just released an album: *Cardiac Arrest* and the hit track is “Suit Yerself.” I’ve heard it around. It’s actually pretty trump.”

“So?”

“The ad says: *‘Where are the Hearts? Mystery solved! A musical phenomenon! Lonely Hearts: an all Hearts band!’* They’re sponsored by Truco himself, an’ their first live gig is tomorrow night at the Heartache Hotel in Krypkill!”

“Probably something like Foppet and Moppet,” said Alice.

“No!” continued Rummy. “Look at the pics of them. They have the bowl haircuts, tight suits, you know the retro look an’ all, yet their faces, their *eyes*. A bit sad, but they’re Hearts for sure.”

Alice remained in her chair.

“He’s right, Alice,” said Celia after studying the page and handing her the paper. “They *are* Hearts, an’ from *our* deck. I know it.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Alice took a glance, then looked again and a lump came up in her throat.

“It’s true,” she said at last. “They are. We’ve got to get to them.”

“What, go back to Krypkill?”

“I don’t advise that,” said Helvetica. “Remember what happened the last time you took that little trip? What if you bump into Truco?”

“Truco must be up to something,” said Belote. “He knows that we and Truncheon are onto him so he’s covering his tracks. Bringing out some real Hearts, and putting them in the spotlight by sponsoring their success will only serve to tranquillise the public with an ‘oh, what’s all the fuss been about

anyway?’ attitude. Personally, I think he’s expecting you to be there.”

“So are you seriously suggesting that Alice and her friends go?” asked Helvetica.

“It’d be considered normal,” continued Belote. “They’re young and naturally would want to see the band and meet some Hearts. However, I feel that Truco would be less likely to suspect any further monkey business if you and Blackjack were to accompany them, you know, as older chaperones keeping an eye on them type of thing.”

“I’ll go with that,” said Rummy.

“Me too,” said Celia.

“Goodness, it’s late and you kids better get home and get some rest—change clothes and stuff,” said Helvetica after they had enjoyed some small talk and ate Blackjack’s snack of sandwiches. “We’ve got a long ride tomorrow.”

“And you’ll come too, Mr. Belote?” said Helvetica, as Alice saw her friends to the door.

“No, I don’t think it’d be wise to show my face for awhile,” said Ace.

“You’re welcome to stay in my apartment for as long as you need to get back on your feet,” said Helvetica.

“I don’t know what to say, ma’am. I’m so undeserving of your—”

“And you can take your pick of the suits and clothes hanging in the back bedroom closet. He’s about your size.”

“He?”

“Al, the King of Clubs,” said Helvetica sadly, turning her head away. “You probably know him.”

“Not sure.”

“Al ‘Kaiser’ Scopone.”

“Al Scopone! Of course I do. Misunderstood sometimes, but a fine gentleman card. A credit to our deck. I’m sorry to confess I never returned the

respect due him that he always showed me. Now the shoe is on the other foot and here I am having to humbly accept the charity of his lovely wife.”

“*Ex-wife*. We’ve been separated for many years.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Forgive my insensitivity, ma’am,” said Belote.

“It’s all right really, except I’m not getting any younger and it just gets a little lonely.”

Noticing that Helvetica was biting her lip to hold back tears, Ace tenderly took her hand. “If there’s anything a bottom of the deck paper pauper can do to help, your Majesty,” he whispered as he stroked her hair, “I’d be honoured.”

Just then Alice walked in, and sensing an intimate atmosphere, discreetly left for her bedroom where she cuddled up with her red book and thanked God for love.



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## Mum's the Word

I hope yo' all didn't mind me invitin' myself along!"

Alice awoke the next day to hear a familiar voice echoing in the hallway.

"But at my newly 'dopted daughter's insistence I jus' couldn't neglect my motherly duties now, could I?"

*The Queen of Spades!* Alice jumped out of bed, threw on a robe, and ran out to greet her.

"Oh, my precious li'l' thing!" exclaimed Ophelia as she threw her arms around Alice. "I sho' have missed ya. Had a prayer circle goin' fo' ya at the church an' everything. 'All that will live godly in Christ shall suffer persecution,' ya know."

"Did I hear you say 'adopted daughter,' your Majesty? You mean ... ?"

"Yeah," broke in Celia excitedly. "I forgot to tell you last night. Whiles you was gone, we got down to some straight talk, and we 'tied the knot'—mom and daughter-wise!"

"That's splendid, Celia. My heart rejoices with you!"

*Oh, my goodness! Here I go again,* thought Alice.

"Wish I could talk that high lit'rary-type way," said Celia. "Been tryin' it with my friends, but it

don't come out right. With you it's so natural."

"So anyways," announced Ophelia, "my right of jurisdiction over this young lady is now duly officiated."

Just then, down the corridor, the door of the master bedroom opened and out stepped a sleepy but happy Queen of Clubs followed by an equally sleepy, but sheepish-looking Ace Belote.

"Well I never!" laughed Ophelia as she strutted up and hugged them. "I heard all about yo' conversion, brother Ace. But now I ain't so sure!"

"Put the blame on me," chuckled the Queen of Clubs.

Following a sizeable late morning breakfast of fried chiblet strips, eggs, hash browns, and mugs of piping hot doppelkopf dripped from the bean, the team of Alice, Celia, Rummy, the two Queens, and Blackjack were in the Tysiac and on their way to Krypkill.

To take advantage of the beautiful sunny weather, Helvetica decided that they should drive the longer way, what she called the scenic route, which led them through winding country roads and mountain passes where they experienced a couple of flat tires, and brought them exhausted into Krypkill by late evening; about ten minutes before the show was to begin.

After much difficulty finding a place to park due to the considerable turnout for the venue, which mainly consisted of young people, the six of them finally sat down in the back of the crowded cabaret club of the Heartache Hotel where the Lonely Hearts, made up of two guitarists, a bass player, and a drummer, were already performing the last number of their first set, a swiny, shallow little rocker called "Fortune Cookie."

"Dig those paisley shirts," said Celia. "Our deck alright. What'd I tell you?"

"They have a kind of nice 'jingly jangly' sound," Alice remarked. "I like it."

"Trump harmonies," said Rummy.

"Reminds me of the stuff I used to listen to when I was a young card," said Helvetica.

"It's okay," said Ophelia. "Not really my suit. Too red and white. But the bass player's cute."

"Thank you very much everybody," said one of the singers glumly over a rather mediocre response. "See you for our next set in half an hour."

"Let's try to get back there!" said Alice, as she started to make her way to the front. "Talk to them."

By the time she had got to the stage it was empty except for the drummer who had just finished straightening his kit.

"Hey!" she called out as he was about to go behind the backstage curtain. "Little drummer boy!"

He turned around and gasped as his eyes fell on Alice.

"It can't be ... it just *can't be*. It's Alice, right?"

"Yes!"

"I'd heard something about an Alice in town, and I wondered if ... anyway, Truco keeps a lot from us."

By now her friends had joined the two and were eager to introduce themselves.

"By the way, my name's Matt," he said reaching down and pulling Alice up onto the stage. "Come back and meet the others. These your friends?"

Alice nodded.

"They can come too. You know," he continued as they headed for the dressing rooms, "I've seen pictures of your adventures. You don't look a day older than when you went to bat for my great, great, great ... I don't know how many greats ... grandfather, the Knave of Hearts who was accused of stealing the tarts."

"Actually that wasn't..." began Alice, but then

stopped. "Never mind."

"This is Marcos on bass," said Matt as he introduced the members of the band who, needless to say, stood flabbergasted as they stared at Alice. "Lucas on the lead guitar and Juan on rhythm guitar, and we all sing. Even me!"

"I know," said Alice. "Absolutely *lovely* harmonic vocal rendering."

*I give up!* thought Alice. *It has to happen now of all times. It's so humiliating.*

"Actually," whispered Matt, "the show was terrible. I don't blame the crowd one bit for their response. It's just that we are, let's say, *recommended* to sing these songs."

"*Strongly* advised," said Marcos.

"Nice weather today, Alice," said Lucas with a smile as two intimidating scissor-bearing Tarot cards entered. "You travelled far?"

"You are on in five minutes!" barked one of the Tarots. "Get tuned up."

"So what brings you here?" asked Matt.

Alice looked around to make sure the Tarots were out of earshot.

"I'm here on an important Commission. The deck you belong to is being gathered for the Wood-chopper's son."

"We don't belong to any deck," began Matt. "We're just ... Hearts, that's all."

"Yeah, that's right. There is no deck. Just cards. The rest is just legend," Lucas chimed in. "That's what Truco said."

"No! There is a deck," said Alice. "You're part of it, and so are my friends here. See, you all have the same pattern! And these are your invitations!"

"Well, whadaya know?" said Juan, taking his invitation and inspecting the card closely.

"You're up again!" a Tarot card called to the Hearts from the curtain.



“Got to go,” Matt said apologetically. “But stay here. We’ll have to talk more.”

The Hearts meekly trudged back on stage to play their second set, starting with “Eat Yer Heart Out” as Alice and friends loudly whistled and applauded from the wings, which seemed to help the band put a little inspiration into their performance, but it was precious little considering the material they were having to use.

Towards the end, Juan lit up with a smile and addressed the audience as he picked up an acoustic guitar.

“Before we go into ‘Suit Yerself’”—this was met with loud cheers and hollering—“I’d just like to sing this number I wrote a couple of nights ago. It needs no introduction as it speaks for itself.”

After strumming slowly on a chord for awhile, his head thrown back as he squinted down his tiny wire-framed glasses, Juan started to sing in his peculiar nasal tone.

*I could tell you that we’re heading for a  
dark and terrible night,  
I could tell you who the enemy is that’s  
lurking out of sight.  
I could tell you who’s directing you to the  
wrong and not the right.  
But it’s not for me to say.*

*I could tell you that this whole façade is  
not the way it seems.  
I could tell you that they’re laughing as  
you’re living in your dreams.  
I could tell you we’re as cattle in their  
shrewd and crafty schemes.  
Ah, but it’s not for me to say.  
It’s not for me to say.*

*I shouldn't say what's been revealed.  
Mum's the word, my lips are sealed,  
By them.  
But this voice will never yield,  
'Cause it's absurd to leave the field  
To them.*

*I could tell you who's the—*

Suddenly the P.A. system went off and the stage went into blackness as the crowd booed in disappointment.

“Oh cribbage,” said Rummy pointing behind him. “Look, one of those Tarots just threw a breaker switch at the power box.”

*Alice, get the Hearts to make a break for it!*

“This could be our chance to help them,” shouted Alice.

“Let's each grab one and get 'em out the back door stage entrance!” yelled Ophelia.

Celia rushed for Marcos, who willingly surrendered to the abduction.

“Blackjack, haul yo' suit and get the car waitin' outside, lickety-split!” commanded Ophelia.

“Now wait a minute,” objected Helvetica, “he's *my* chauffeur, not yours. I give him the orders. Blackjack, haul your suit and get the car waiting outside, lickety-split!”

“I'll take care of this piece of paper,” said Rummy as the Tarot left his post at the breaker switches and advanced towards them, snipping his scissors menacingly. Rummy grabbed the card's arm and threw him spinning into the corner, where he lay on his back, dazed. This gave the others time to make it out of the back door before another Tarot dashed onto the scene brandishing his open scissors which he brought down onto Rummy's back, leaving a jagged rip in his cardboard as he was about to make

his break.

However, in so doing, the Tarot had driven the point of his scissors so deep into the wooden platform of the stage that he was unable to retrieve them, which gave Rummy, though weak from the slice, a chance to kick the card hard in its middle which sent it flying into the bewildered crowd.

"Oh my poor, poor dear!" gasped Alice as Rummy staggered into the back of the revved up Tysiac and fell into her arms. "You're torn."

"It's nothin'," said Rummy, weakly, "nothin' that a little Irish tape and white glue can't fix."

"I have some at home," said Helvetica. "Can you make it 'til then?"

"If yo' lie still right there in that sweet child's arms," said Ophelia, "yo'll be jus' fine."

"We'd best take the back roads out o' town," said Blackjack, stepping on the pedal and swerving left and right to cut the tight corners of Krypkill's narrow downtown streets. "Truco's gang is goin' to be onto us in no time."

He had spoken none too soon. The shrill sounds of police car sirens were echoing close by.

"I suggest we don't go anywhere if we can hole up here somewhere temporarily," said Rummy. "They are goin' to be expectin' us to try to split town."

"Any of you know a friend here in Krypkill?" asked Celia as she turned to the four bewildered Hearts who up until now had sat speechless in the back.

"We've had hardly any contact with the outside world until recently, when Truco got us into this music deal," said Matt.

"Hey wait!" said Marcos. "Turn left at this side street, up there on the right. See that narrow little white house with a light on outside? We could probably hide out there."

"You know somebody there?" asked Lucas.

“Yeah, remember when we had to take that flight to that resort down in Briscola to film that music clip?”

“I know,” said Juan with a smirk. “That ritzy little Diamond card air hostess? Didn’t she say she lived in Krypkill?”

“Right! The upstairs’ light is on. She’s home.”

Marcos jumped out and whistled up at the window as the car pulled up in front of the garage below. Presently the curtain drew back and the window opened as the sounds of police sirens drew closer.

“It’s me, Marcos!”

“Who?” came a girl’s voice.

“Lonely Hearts, remember? Open the garage door, quick!”

Within seconds the door raised and Blackjack tucked the Tysiac safely into the garage just as a police car roared by.



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## Listening Walls

**T**winkie!”  
“Alice!”

Blinking and rubbing her eyes from having just fallen asleep, the little Diamond card had thrown on a kimono and rushed down to the garage to greet her unexpected visitors.

“You know each other?” said Marcos.

“We met on the plane to Mayhem, about nine or ten months ago,” Twinkie answered, staring incredulously at Alice.

Alice stared back. Twinkie’s silk kimono was covered in the telltale paisley pattern.

“You ... you’re from the Woodchopper’s deck too?” said Alice. “I must give you your invitation.”

“The Woodchopper’s deck? I’m sure I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” said Twinkie. “But I absolutely love getting invitations. Now, ladies and gentlecards, if you would all kindly take a seat upstairs and lower your tray tables, I’ll be coming around with some fizzola.”

“Did you catch the show?” asked Matt, as they made their way upstairs.

“I saw the first set, and I ... er...”

“Split,” said Marcos. “It’s okay, I agree. It was pretty much a fold.”

Small and tidily chic in décor, Twinkie's one-storey house would have been best described as an apartment as it consisted of only one bedroom, a bathroom, and a living room with kitchen combined. However, due to its unusual seating arrangement, the narrow living room was well able to accommodate the ten visitors as down the length of it were two rows of chairs each with its individual eating table that folded down from the back of the chair in front. Twinkie, putting her natural hosting talents to use, soon had everyone feeling very much at home munching Krunchits and sipping fizzola from Stýrivolt cups as Marcos related all that had happened within the last half an hour.

"So I missed all the turbulence," remarked Twinkie as she gently applied white glue to Rummy's torn back, who responded with appreciative smiles and touches which caused Alice to experience unpleasant emotions with which she was not familiar.

"Turbulence can have dire consequences," said Juan.

"I don't see you causing any harm with that music I heard tonight," said Twinkie. "It was flying at a pretty low altitude, if you don't mind me saying so."

"The thing I feel terrible about," said Juan, "is that I thought because Truco wasn't around it would be an opportunity to get some veiled truth out."

"That those who have ears to hear will hear," said Ophelia.

"Right, but I didn't expect those Tarot ruffs to catch on."

"What's the problem?" said Twinkie. "They just cut you off. Big deal. A slight break in transmission."

Juan threw up his hands in anguish. "I've jeopardised all the rest of the Hearts that are captured! *That's* the problem!"

"Truco's plan," said Matt calmly, "was to put some of us Hearts out in public to prove that we are free to come and go as we please. We have no idea where the rest of the Hearts are imprisoned, but he warned us to keep our noses clean by letting the public continue believing that they are all scattered in mountains and deserts and what have you, or else there would be serious consequences for the other Hearts in captivity, if any one of us should step out of line."

"But the point is, see," said Marcos, "Truco strictly forbade us to put any truth in our songs and avoid any allusion to or even mention of the word 'love' whatsoever."

"The monster wants to destroy our so-called 'image' of Hearts being synonymous with love," said Lucas. "Hence junk like 'Cardiac Arrest' and 'Suit Yerself.'"

"Both hits, I might add," said Juan, dourly, "thanks to Truco and his rigging schemes."

"Excuse me," said Twinkie suddenly, as she heard her cell phone beep. "Hello? ... *Bone!* Nice to hear your voice."

"Bone?" whispered Ophelia. "Don't tell me she's talkin' to..."

"I have friends over right now, B.A.," Twinkie continued. "They are in a bit of a fix ... mmm, mmm ... I see ... are you on your way over? ... Roadblocks, huh? ... Yes, it sort of ties in with this. Well not *sort of*, it *does*."

"B.A.," said Celia. "It *must* be him."

"Okay Honey, see you in a few minutes, over and out."

Twinkie folded up her cell phone and straightened her robe. "That was Bone, Ace of Spades. He's on his way here from Mayhem. Got delayed by roadblocks."

"Oowee, honey," said Ophelia. "Yo' sho' landed yo'self one there! Don't come much bigger than

that!”

“He’s been a big help setting me up, finding this place,” said Twinkie, a little embarrassed. “He’s right in there with Truco. Although Bone hates him to pieces, he just does his job.”

“And what’s that?”

“He’s the Ace of gangland, and his job is to make sure Mayhem, Bedlam, and the whole of the Useless Status for that matter, is in constant turmoil by keeping crime and racial tension on the rise so that Truco can have bigger excuses to set up more restrictions and surveillance. I’m not proud of it, but it’s not easy here in Krypkill. You need friends with influence.”

“Yo’ is a feather in his cap too,” added Blackjack, “a pretty little prize like you.”

“I’m sure that you have been a blessing to him, too, Miss Twinkie,” reassured Alice, still fighting her inward jealousy over Rummy. “You’re so thoughtful of others and know how to take care of them.”

Twinkie blushed. “That’s kind of you, Alice. I used to be such a snob, typical of the Diamond suit. Anyhow, I think he can be of service.”



“These here walls have ears.”

Bone, a sturdily built card wearing a long black leather coat that trailed on the floor with one large white spade motif emblazoned on the back, and lined on the inside with the telltale paisley pattern, rolled his eyes and stared around the room at the expectant gathering. He had listened to Alice explain her Commission, then to the Hearts’ tale of woe, and after tugging on his gold earring for awhile in thought, had said those ominous words.

“What I mean to say is,” he continued in a deep resonant voice, “we’d better get the twist outta here. When I set up Miss Twinkie here wit’ this li’l’ place, it wasn’t going to be without some strings attached.



They don't take too easy to cards that ain't from the Tarot pack 'round here. They don't trust 'em. So it was only on the condition that they could bug this joint that they agreed to let her stay in Krypkillle. So after some heavy persuasion I managed to get them down to just a phone tap."

"Oh cribbage!" gasped Twinkie. "I totally forgot."

"Yeah, that phone conversation a few minutes ago could have cost you yo' little happy home, baby. Pack yo' bags."

Within minutes, the two Queens and Bone had decided on how to split up the team into the two vehicles: Twinkie with Alice and the Lonely Hearts in Bone's Pontoon station wagon and Helvetica, Ophelia, Celia, and Rummy in the limousine with Blackjack at the wheel.

"It's Alice and these here Hearts they're after and not me, so take my advice that this is the best way to split us up," replied Bone to Rummy's objection at not being in the same car with Alice, being also concerned about Matt's very apparent interest in her.

Alice stepped forward.

"I think I need to be with Rummy," she stated adamantly. "Not only does he need me in his wounded state but he is in as much danger as I am, having seriously injured two armed Tarots. I suggest that I go with him in the Tysiac."

"I could go with the Hearts," ventured Celia, looking shyly at Marcos. "They could hide out in my apartment."

"I vote fo' that too," said Ophelia, relieved to know that her newly adopted daughter would be safer in the less wanted vehicle.

"Trump! That's settled," said Bone impatiently. "Let's go!"

"And please make sure your seat belts are fastened," announced Twinkie, "and that your seats are in their upright position."

Taking as many detours out of Krypkillen as possible, the two cars finally lost sight of each other. Alice, sitting in the backseat with Rummy asleep contentedly in her arms, stared out onto the neon-lit freeway and meditated on the day's adventures before nodding off herself.

She was woken up by the car coming to an abrupt halt and the sounds of gruff voices outside.

"Step out of the car!"

"Let me see your documents."

A nosey flashlight shone on Alice's face.

"Step out of ze vehicle!"

Alice reached for the car door handle.

"Non, wait. It won't be necessary, Mademoiselle. Stay where you are."

It was Jacques Truncheon. He switched off his flashlight and addressed the other officers,

"Zis vehicle is all clear. Zey can drive on."



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## Psycho?

I've been *what?*" cried Alice in horror as she stared at the woman Tarot card official in a white uniform and a peaked cap accompanied by two scissor-bearing Tarot cards, also dressed in white coats.

"Declared mentally unstable and are to be committed to the care of St. Domino's Clinic in Klaverjas for intensive psychiatric treatment until such a time as they have provided you with a clean bill of mental health."

Alice had been woken from a sound sleep by a very concerned Queen of Clubs who was now wringing her hands and sobbing uncontrollably as they stood together in the hallway of her apartment facing their unsympathetic visitors.

"But whatever for?" demanded Helvetica.

"For aberrational behaviour and delusional psychosis brought on by Acute Era Reversal Syndrome. After considering the evidence and the doctors' diagnosis, the judge and jury pronounced the verdict yesterday."

"But Alice hasn't even been at the court hearings for weeks. She's been waiting to be called. How can the judge and jury pronounce this without hearing from her and especially without her even being

there?"

"Truco passed a new legislation that in the interests of unbiased and uninfluenced judgement in the courts, the witnesses for prosecution and defence shall be from henceforth conducted only by written report and the facts presented therewith. This eliminates the potentially unbalanced verdict that could arise due to monetary manipulation or undue discrimination or sympathy aroused by personality or persuasive oratory from any of the parties involved."

"That's entirely unfair!" said Alice.

"On the contrary, young lady," said the woman, sharply. "It's exceptionally fair. Eliminates the human aspect with its consequent likelihood of error. That's why early in the proceedings, Mr. Truco very conscientiously removed Judge Knott as he was showing signs of bias in your favour, and replaced him with Judge Biggott.

"Now, if you don't mind, madam," she continued, turning to Helvetica, "I would appreciate it if you would gather a few of her essential belongings."

"That won't be necessary, ma'am," interjected Alice. "I have everything I need. I just need to fetch one thing."

With that, Alice marched off to her bedroom, scribbled a note for Rummy who was sleeping soundly and picked up her red book which she tucked under her dress.

"Mr. Belote, I would like to remind you that this is none of your affair and you are in danger of being apprehended for the obstruction of justice."

Alice returned to see Ace Belote wrapped in a towel, standing in front of one of the Tarots with a pair of scissors pointed at his neck.

"This girl has done nothing to merit this," shouted Belote. "If you take her, then it's over my dead body."

"Then let it be as you say," said the Tarot coolly as he swiftly snipped his scissors through Ace's body causing him to fall to the floor with a gasp.

"Ace, no! Ace, my dearest," cried Helvetica as she fell on him weeping.

Alice was about to do the same when the other Tarot card gripped her arms and dragged her out into the corridor, down the stairwell and out into the street where he threw her into the back of an awaiting ambulance.

In the middle of what could have been a traumatic experience for her, Alice was again suddenly very conscious of the aura of protection and warm feeling of peace in her heart that all was working out the way it should, which she partly attributed to the recent strengthening and reassurance she had received from Margot and her friends.

As the van jaunted down the Mayhem streets with its siren blaring, Alice pondered whether to try rubbing her gold ring, but being in the presence of the lady in the white coat who was watching her like a hawk, decided not to draw attention to it and run the risk of it being confiscated.

After what seemed to Alice to have been at least three hours in the back of the ambulance with no view to the streets but for two small dark tinted windows on the back doors, and not a sound from the lady the entire time except for the occasional impatient grunt whenever the vehicle lurched, they finally came to a complete stop.

The doors of the van were opened and Alice was looking up at twenty storeys of an enormous dirty grey concrete building with hundreds of tiny barred windows.

"Here we are, young lady," said the woman official, grabbing Alice by the arms. "St. Domino's."

She hastily ushered Alice into the foyer and up to a counter that stood in the centre of a dingy green

linoleum floor.

“A patient to sign in,” she announced. “Alice Pleasance.”

A bespectacled male playing card in his early thirties with three diamonds on his white coat, looked up from his desk at Alice and nodded before briskly striking a few keys of his computer and running his eyes up and down the screen.

“Yes, Dr. Knutthaus,” he muttered. “Hmm, mmm. Alice Pleasance ... aberrational behaviour and delusional psychosis brought on by AERS. Solitary cell number six on the thirteenth floor. Here’s the key. She needs to be outfitted with restraining clothes. First door on the right down that corridor.”

“What are restraining clothes?” asked Alice, to which the woman made no reply as she marched her into a large white room in which stood three Tarot-card doctors wearing white coats.

“Take off your clothes,” ordered one.

Feeling very humiliated, Alice stepped out of her dress and petticoats.

“I think a size ten would be sufficient,” said another.

The third doctor strolled over to a metal cupboard and brought out a grey padded jacket with many buckles and belts.

“But ... that’s a *straitjacket!*” gasped Alice.

“It’s a restraining outfit.”

Alice made no attempt to struggle, but rather giggled with amusement as the bewildered doctors struggled with the straitjacket that immediately began to shrink the moment they tried to put her arm in one of its sleeves.

“Get another one,” bellowed the woman official. “There must be something wrong with it.”

Of course, the same thing happened with each attempt. They even tried to fit her with one several times larger, but to no avail. The jackets always

shrank when they touched Alice, and would only return to normal size the moment Alice threw them onto the floor.

"It looks as though you are going to have to remain with the clothes you have, young lady," said the woman. "Get dressed. Er ... what's this?"

She bent down to pick up the red book that Alice had tucked under her dress and had fallen on the floor when she had disrobed.

"Oh, that's something I brought along to read," said Alice, attempting to grab it from the official who was curiously leafing through its pages.

"Interesting," muttered the woman as she stepped out of Alice's reach. "I do believe I've found the source of our young patient's psychological condition. Green paper pigs, snowmen, holy holes, and look at *this*."

Striding up to the three doctors, she thrust the open book under their noses.

"Alice in the Magic Garden! Is not this the character that our patient has obviously gone to great lengths to emulate in her mentally disturbed state of identity crisis?" she stated triumphantly. "And this picture is of none other than Mr. Truco himself, obviously being portrayed in a less than positive light. Dangerous and treasonable literature to say the least. I'm sorry," she continued, turning to Alice, "but I'm going to have to confiscate this."

"But ma'am," pleaded Alice, "you *can't*! That book means a lot to me!"

"Maybe *that* is the problem right there—and I'm sure my learned colleagues here would agree, right?"

"Very much so," replied one, whose name was Dr. Hogwash. "AERS can be brought on by extreme or inordinate attachment to certain forms of literature, especially that of a mystical, doctrinal, or religious nature."

Alice was now in tears, which brought on a pretence of concern from the official.

“You poor child,” she said, putting her arm around Alice’s shoulder. “Obviously this book means a great deal to you that it should trigger such emotional release at its deprivation. We’re here to help you get healed of this dependency.”

At this Alice jerked her elbow, which threw the woman’s arm off her back.

“I am not sick so I don’t need to be healed, let me tell you—mentally, healthily, or whateverly, ma’am!” she said sternly, raising her voice and looking the shocked official squarely in the eye. “I happen to be on an important mission for a higher power and it is my duty to warn you that standing in its way could mean dire consequences for you.”

“Is that a threat, young lady?”

“No, but unless you repent for the error of your ways, including the death of Mr. Belote, you are garnering to yourself great retribution, which shall not be delivered by my hand, but by the hand of the one who sent me.”

“Restrain and sedate her,” commanded the woman, which brought one of the doctors swiftly behind Alice, who held her while another injected a sedative into her arm.





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## Solitaire and Learning Patience

Alice awoke very groggily on a bed in a bare cell with light grey padding on the walls, and if it wasn't for the single fluorescent tube that flickered from the ceiling, there would have been barely any light for a sunny mid-afternoon, as the one tiny window was obscured with bars.

She had been sitting up, feeling nauseous and staring down at the green linoleum floor for a few minutes when she heard a key turning in the lock. It was the Diamond playing card who had been at the entrance desk, carrying a small tray of food.

"Here, Miss Alice," he said hurriedly. "Chiblet soup and a cup of diluted fizzola. I shouldn't be doing this, but I had a feeling you might be hungry, so I raided the kitchen. The next regular meal isn't until six this evening."

"That's ever so nice of you, Doctor...?" said Alice extending her hand.

"I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself. I'm Mr. Boodle, not a doctor I'm afraid, just a staff worker here. A mere desk clerk."

"From what I've seen of some of the doctors here so far, Mr. Boodle," said Alice with disdain, "you have nothing to be ashamed of."

"You may very well be right, dear girl," he replied

with a chuckle. "Actually, I am supposed to be at the desk right now, but I am off duty at eight thirty and I would dearly like to speak with you about something."

"That would be lovely," said Alice. "It's going to get awfully lonely in here."

"Solitary confinement is no picnic, I'm sorry," said Boodle. "But I must tell you that I will have to meet with you clandestinely. I have a copy of your cell key. That is one advantage of being a desk clerk! By the way, is there anything I can get you?"

"It may sound dreadfully odd, Mr. Boodle, but I would appreciate a pack of cards."

"Of course," he said, as he stood by the door and waited while footsteps passed by. "'Solitaire' can certainly help to while away those hours. See you later."

After quickly opening the door and locking it behind him, Boodle was gone.



Alice finished eating and picked up the small pack of cards from the tray that had been delivered with the six o'clock meal of boiled chiblets and powdered mash potatoes. She was delighted to see that the back of each one was decorated with the blue and gold paisley pattern.

For Alice, playing cards without anybody else was hardly fun, even though she knew a few games to play that way. But she had sometimes used a deck of cards with Brandon when they had prayer vigil together.

"Let's see," she said to herself as she laid one card face down on the bed and two next to it, also face down on top of each other. "I think that's how Brandon starts the 'Patience' prayer vigil game."

She continued doing the same, with three cards making up the third pile, then four cards making

up the fourth and so on up to seven, making seven tidy little piles in one straight line. The rest she laid face down on the left above them. She then turned over the first card in the row.

“Queen of Diamonds ... Britannica,” she said to herself. “You’ll be at the celebration for certain, your Majesty.”

She did the same with the top card from the next pile.

“Jack Diamond, bless your heart, you’ll be there ... and I don’t consider you a knave at all!”

“Two of Diamonds ... er what was your name?” she wondered, as she turned over the top card on the third pile. “*Madame de Deuce*, that’s right! I hope Jack remembered to give you your invitation, as I only met you before I knew about the Commission. Which your Majesty King Coal, the King of Diamonds here, so kindly explained to me,” she said turning over the fourth card.

“And the way things have been going,” she continued, picking up and looking at the fifth card which was a Two of Clubs, “I pray I’ll have a chance to see those I missed again like I did you, dear Miss Trixie Barr.”

“Nine of Clubs,” she said, picking up the card from the top of the sixth stack. “Don Casino, I didn’t get to know you very well, but you took an invitation. I do pray that you’ll be there.”

She went on to pick up the top card on the seventh stack, it was a Four of Diamonds.

“Pretty Twinkie. I pray you got away from Krypkillie safely, and I really did appreciate you tending to Rummy’s wound. I’ll see you at the celebration.

“Helvetica,” she continued as she picked up the stack of cards above the seven piles and turned over the top card, the Queen of Clubs. “I couldn’t have

survived in Mayhem without you, your Majesty. You get to go and be on top of the King of Diamonds.”

The next card was a Three of Clubs.

“Mr. Immigration Official. I never got your name, I’m sorry,” she said as she put it on the bottom of the pile in her hand and turned over the next one, a Three of Spades, “but I pray you and your friend here, the other immigration man, will be there.

“Oh, wait!” she added, placing the Three of Clubs on top of the Four of Diamonds. “You can go be on top of Twinkie. And look, that means that Madame de Deuce can now go and be on top of the immigration official!”

She was just about to turn over the next card in her hand when she reached over and picked up the Jack of Diamonds.

“Oh, silly me, I just noticed. Jack, you can go and be on top of the Queen of Clubs.

“And Blackjack,” she said with a grin, looking at the Jack of Spades which had been underneath the Jack of Diamonds, “you can be on top of the Queen of Diamonds!”

This left a space where the second stack had been, so she took the upturned cards from the fourth stack, that had begun with the King of Diamonds and placed it in the space. Then she turned over the top card on the fourth stack, a Ten of Spades, and tears came to her eyes.

“And my dear, dear friend Celia, how I miss you so. I pray it won’t be long now, but you can go be on top of Jack Diamond.

“Ophelia, your Highness,” she said gently, turning over the Queen of Spades that had been under the Two of Diamonds, “you have graciously bestowed on me much support. Please keep me in your prayers, and remind those at your church to pray for me too.”

Alice turned over the top card on the fourth stack—an Ace of Diamonds.

“Mr. Sage, dear old friend. We wouldn’t have got wise to Truco’s scheme without you.”



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## Free Cell

**T**here was a light tap on the door. Alice looked at her watch.

*Goodness, time has really flown by. It's eight o'clock. That must be Mr. Boodle!*

"Come in!"

The key turned in the lock and the door opened.

"I knew it was you, sir," said Alice with a smile. "The others don't have the courtesy to knock."

"You've got your cards! Splendid," whispered Boodle. "I suppose you noticed I chose a deck with the very same pattern as my own 'clan' so to speak!"

"Yes, I'd noticed," said Alice.

"And I've brought you this." He reached under his coat and handed Alice her red book, which she clasped thankfully.

"Dr. Knutthaus said it belonged to the 'dangerous psychotic girl' she brought in this afternoon," Boodle continued with a grin. "Then she absent-mindedly left it on my counter, so I took the opportunity to take a look at it. When she left to go home she asked me if I'd seen it, and I pretended not to hear her. By the way, I also brought you a bag of Krunchits, as I know the fare in this place is very much on the meagre side."

"I am ever so grateful," said Alice. "And this book means so much more to me than a deck of cards. Actually I wanted the pack not so much to play games—my brother Brandon is super into card games by the way, you really ought to meet him—but it was more to do with the Commission I've been given. It helped me to remember those I've met and pray for them. Did you find the book interesting?"

"Very much so," replied Boodle. "I was especially drawn to the dream sequence about you in the Magic Garden—being of course, naturally curious, as I'd heard so much in the news and so forth about you."

"You mean you had never heard or read of me before?"

"If you promise not to laugh, I'll let you in on a secret."

"I promise," said Alice.

"Being a Diamond, I was raised quite wealthy. That's why I decided to take up hospital work, by the way, to try and sort of ease my conscience by being a service to mankind and all that. Anyway, when I was young, my parents bought me a beautiful book of your adventures, with exquisite colour plates, hand tinted I believe on the original engravings. They purchased it years ago from the poor chap down the corridor who owns the second-hand bookstore in Old Cardstock."

"Mr. Sage?" exclaimed Alice. "He's here?"

"Yes, they brought him in a couple of weeks ago. He had been arrested, tried, and pronounced dangerously psychotic also. Although I think he's a very pleasant fellow. Very level headed, actually. I've had a couple of discussions with him and I find his rather unorthodox views interesting and worthy of consideration. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Anyway, I read the book over and over, and

literally fell in love with you! I prayed I'd meet Alice someday in Wonderland. Isn't that silly?"

"Not at all, Mr. Boodle," said Alice gently. "You'd be happy to know it's actually becoming quite a common occurrence these days, at least amongst those I'm becoming acquainted with!"

"Well anyway," Boodle continued, "that's why when Dr. Knutthaus brought you in I tried my darnedest to not show any signs of excitement or recognition, when inside I felt as if it was the most wonderful day of my life. Stupid of me, I know. You can chalk it up to foolish pride."

"But Mr. Sage, how is he?" asked Alice.

"He's quite traumatised through the whole experience. Truco was giving him time and publicity to air his views, which of course very few took seriously, because when they were finally broadcast they had been edited in a negative or derogatory context. But he did have his bookstore attacked and ransacked a couple of times by irate mobs accusing him of spreading 'hate ideology.'

"Public opinion became such that people felt it was only right and fair that if you, Alice, could be locked away as a 'crackpot' if I may say so, then the same sentence should be served to Sage."

"Poor Mr. Sage," said Alice. "Is there any way I can see him?"

"I'm sure I can arrange that. Look, I really must be going, I could lose my head if I were caught in here. I'll see you tomorrow. Enjoy your book. Goodnight, sweet Alice."

"Goodnight, Mr. Boodle."

Returning to her cards and putting the Ace of Diamonds in a special place above the rest, Alice surveyed the remaining stacks. Concluding that none of the upturned cards could go on top of any of the others, she turned up the next card in the stack that had been in her hand. It was an Ace of Clubs.



“Ace Belote, the first Ace I met on my journey.” Tears came to her eyes again and she said a prayer for him that if it were possible he would recover.

“Phone call for Alice Pleasance,” announced a voice outside in the corridor together with a couple of sharp raps on the door followed by a key turning in the lock.

Alice quickly took the red book and hid it under the mattress.

Two burly male Tarot nurses entered the cell. Each took Alice by one arm and escorted her to the reception desk where the telephone was handed to her.

“Hello, Alice?”

“Ace!” exclaimed Alice with delight. “Ace Belote! I was just praying for you. How are you?”

“A little weak, but with some white glue, Irish tape, and most of all, Helvetica’s tender love and care, thankfully I’m on the mend. I was actually in a coma for three hours—had an NDE.”

“An NDE, what’s that?”

“You know, a near death experience,” continued Belote. “I was out of my card body and looking down at it lying on Helvy’s bed. The strangest thing was that I myself was no longer a card. I was a human being like you! Then I floated off along this long dark tunnel where there was snow falling, and at the end of it was a bright golden glow, which I stepped through and found I’d come down the chimney of this lovely chalet.”

“A chalet?” said Alice. “Like a log-cabin type thing?”

“Yes! And I met these two most wonderful people—a man and a woman who welcomed me with such kindness and hospitality, I felt like I’d come home or something.”

“Was one of them the Queen of Hearts?”

“No,” replied Belote. “They weren’t cards either.

But come to think of it, the woman *did* have a very queenly bearing about her. She was older and very beautiful, with long white hair. She wore glasses.”

Alice shivered, “I’m getting the gooses, sir!”

“The gooses?”

“Never mind. Was her name Margot?”

“They never told me their names. The man too, had a certain royal bearing. Very tall, bearded ... look Alice, I need to get to the point of this call. We can talk more later. Anyway, at the end of a most wonderful time together, in short this couple instructed me to challenge Truco and call his bluff—to demand that he release the Hearts, or myself and the Lonely Hearts will go public and tell the whole story. At first I was hesitant, but as soon as I agreed, boom, I was back in my card body on Helvy’s bed.”

“Did you tell Truco?”

At the mention of Truco’s name, Alice’s two Tarot companions who had been watching her closely, moved in for further scrutiny.

“Are you free to talk?” asked Belote, sensing Alice’s slight nervousness.

“N-not as much as I would like,” she answered.

“Hmmm. Yes, I did contact Truco. At first he ranted and raved and threatened to destroy all the Hearts, but I stuck to my guns and he decided to negotiate, which shows he’s aware of his precarious position. Let’s just say that I think you’ll be out of there in a few days. Hang on, okay? I’ll get back to you soon. Bye.”

“Bye, Mr. Belote.”

No sooner had Alice handed the receiver back to the desk clerk but the two Tarot cards roughly whisked her off, pushed her into her cell and locked the door. However, due to Ace’s encouraging phone call, this treatment did not perturb her, and with renewed hope Alice returned to her Patience game. She took the Ace of Clubs and placed it next to the

Ace of Diamonds then turned over the next card in the stack. It was a Five of Clubs.

“Rummy,” sighed Alice dreamily. “I probably would find it most dreadfully difficult to say this to you in person right now, but I know you like me a lot, and I like you too. Of course, I don’t know what Brandon and my parents and friends would think of me being courted by a playing card, in light of the Charter and everything. It doesn’t mention anything about that. But if you pardon me saying so, it would be quite an odd feeling being kissed by a piece of cardboard. I don’t mean to be unpleasant or anything, but I must admit it would be ever so nice if you were a human being like Joshua!”

After talking to Rummy in this manner for quite awhile, Alice felt drowsy and lay down on the bed where she slowly drifted off to sleep with a prayer for Rummy and all the other cards.



“Service with a smile!”

The cheery voice of Mr. Boodle carrying a tray of scrambled chiblets, toast, jam, hash-brown potatoes and fizzola awakened Alice, who yawned and stretched on her cot amongst the scattered playing cards.

“Good morning, sir,” she murmured through a sleepy smile.

“I’ve brought you a specially prepared breakfast,” Boodle continued, “a sample of my culinary talents in compensation for the fact that I haven’t been able to visit you for the past week. I took sick all of a sudden. Mah Jong flu, at least that’s what they’re calling it now.”

“A *week?*” exclaimed Alice. “I just saw you last night before the phone call from a friend. Unless I’ve been asleep for a week.”

“Well, I can understand with all the tests and medication and whatnot,” said Boodle, “that you

could sleep more than usual. But a week is a long time.”

“Anyway, thank you, Mr. Boodle, for this breakfast. I am extremely hungry,” said Alice as she tucked into the scrambled chiblets. “Aren’t you going to shut the door?”

“There’s something else I’ve come to bring you,” said Boodle, “good news. As of half an hour ago, they’ve signed your declaration of independence. You are *free!*”

Alice gasped with delight.

“Free? Oh, that is wonderful!”

“A Mr. Ace Belote called earlier and gave me the news. He should be here within an hour or so to pick you up. Said to apologise for not contacting you sooner, something about negotiations taking longer than necessary.”

Suddenly a bent card figure was at the door.

“Another surprise, Alice,” said Boodle.

“Mr. Sage!” said Alice, jumping up and hugging him tightly. “You poor thing! You’re shaking!”

Sage said nothing as he smiled faintly through a tear.

“They’ve been pretty hard on him here, I’m afraid,” said Boodle. “Browbeating him about his views and subjecting him to endless card scans under heavy sedation.”

“I’m so very, very sorry Mr. Sage,” said Alice, stroking his head affectionately.

“But the good news about him too, is that he has also been set free,” added Boodle. “Seems as though your friend has pulled some pretty powerful strings, Alice.”

“The most powerful there are,” smiled Alice.

“And on top of all this good news,” said Boodle with a chuckle, “I’ve been set free too. I got the sack!”

“You lost your job?” said Alice. “Aren’t you sad?”

“On the contrary,” replied Boodle. “It’s a relief. Somehow Dr. Knutthaus found out about me fraternizing with some of the inmates, namely you and Mr. Sage, and apparently when she heard of your release she threw a blue fit, and the moment I arrived for work this morning she handed me my dismissal papers. I believe she thought I had something to do with it. Anyway, we don’t have to stay in this hole a moment longer. Let’s get out front and wait for your friend.”

Alice bolted down the last remains of her breakfast, grabbed her red book, and accompanied by the two happy cards, walked gaily past the reception desk behind which sat a glowering Dr. Knutthaus, and then out onto the driveway where they sat and waited for Mr. Belote.

“Psst! *Alice!*”

She looked across the driveway in the direction of the voice, but saw nothing.

“Up here!”

Alice looked again, and spotted in the branches of an almond tree a grey pigeon flapping its wings.

“Come here, quick! It’s important!” it squawked.

Alice turned to Sage and Boodle—who returned her questioning look with a shrug of their shoulders—and then she walked over to the tree, astonished to hear a pigeon talk.

“I don’t have time to explain,” it continued hastily, “but you have been summoned. Follow me. Don’t worry. Tell your friends you’ll be back within the hour.”



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## Kings in the Corners

**A**fter a couple of blocks, the excited pigeon and curious Alice entered a pleasantly tree-lined trailer park where they walked up to a small red and white motorhome nestled in the corner.

The pigeon tapped on the door with its beak, and a deep voice invited them to come in. Alice opened the door, and inside sat a tall, middle-aged bearded card with long, grey-streaked hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing glasses and a white robe covered with red hearts.

“Oh, er ... good morning, I’m Pedro, and I know who *you* are,” he said to Alice with a merry twinkle in his eye as he rose to his feet. In front of Pedro was a white table covered with scattered piles of papers amongst which was a golden crown, and at his feet lay a number of open volumes of books, one of which Alice noticed was a copy of the red book.

“Excuse the terrible mess,” he added. “I don’t have Margot with me right now to help me with getting organised!”

“Margot sends you her love, your highness,” said Alice. “She misses you so.”

“I miss her terribly,” said the King. “In fact, just now I was getting the inspiration for another sonnet in dedication to her.”

“A sonnet? Like a Shakespeare-type thing?”

“I would not dare to deem it as worthy of the same merit,” said Pedro.

“I am sure it’s written with just as much love as Shakespeare’s, your Majesty,” said Alice, “if not more so! How many have you written?”

“This is number one hundred and thirty.”

“Wow! They’re all dedicated to Queen Margot?”

“Many of them,” said Pedro, “but most of them are dedicated to Joshua, the Woodchopper’s son, and I’ve managed to send copies of them to the Hearts and the people back home by Walter here, my faithful courier pigeon. It’s by Joshua we Hearts live and move and have our being. I owe everything to him, even my special love for Margot. You know him, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, your Majesty,” said Alice, as her heart skipped a beat and she felt a flush come to her face. “He’s ever so nice and I wish that ... never mind.”

The pigeon fluttered nervously, sensing Alice’s desire to say something of a personal nature.

“Thank you, Walter. You may go,” said Pedro, upon which the pigeon gave a short bow and flew out of the window.

“Bye bye, birdie,” said Alice, and sighed.

“Do you wish to talk about it, Alice?” said the King gently as he poured her a glass of iced grape fizzola.

“I’ve wanted to tell someone, your Majesty, but the time has just never seemed right. Queen Margot was very busy and I did not wish to burden her with such sentimental trifles, and Queen Helvetica ... well I’m not supposed to say anything regarding my visit with Theo and Heilige. Then there’s Rummy. I like him, but he’s a card, if you don’t mind my saying so, and it’s not ... you know. It would break his heart if he knew.”

“You’re in love with Joshua.”

“Yes. Is it wrong?”

“Not at all,” said the King.

“But methinks sometimes he’s too old for me, then sometimes it seems he’s only as old as Brandon, if not younger. Then at other times it’s like he’s *aeons* older than me. It’s ever so confusing. And when he talks to me inside, I just don’t want to be with anyone else in the whole world. That makes it a little hard when I’m with Rummy, ’cuz he’s in love with me, I know it, but I just don’t have the same ... you know.”

“I understand perfectly,” said Pedro.

“Should I tell Rummy, your highness?”

“Yes. He’ll understand.”

“Oh dear,” said Alice. “I’m extremely sorry for having taken so much of this time telling you about my insignificant personal affairs. It’s so dreadfully selfish of me when it’s such a privilege and a blessing to meet you.”

“It’s not insignificant at all, Alice,” said Pedro. “After knowing about all you’ve just been through, I planned this meeting so we could talk together specifically about this very important and sensitive matter on your heart.

“After all, matters of the heart are my business, you know!” he added with a wink as he lifted his glass of fizzola in a toast. “To Joshua!”

“To Joshua!”



Elated and somewhat dazed, Alice presently returned to the asylum driveway where she sat down with Sage and Boodle, who sensed that it would not be good form to inquire about her activities. Within minutes the Tysiac limo with Blackjack at the wheel roared up and out jumped Helvetica, teary-eyed with joy, who ran to Alice and hugged her fervently.

Alice waved to Ace who had remained in the back of the car.



“He has to stay sitting down for a while, honey,” said Helvetica. “It’s going to take a little while longer for the special white glue to set completely before he can go in for a total relamination. It’s a costly operation, but apparently there won’t be any sign of a rip.

“He was clear sliced in two,” she added with a whisper. “It’s a miracle he recovered.”

It was a happy reunion in the car as it made its way back to Bid Whist Heights, with Ace Belote having to divide his time between Alice’s questions and his incessantly beeping cell phone that kept him negotiating with the various parties involved in the release of the Hearts.

“At the moment it’s a Pitch battle with Kang and Rue,” he explained after a long and heated exchange on the phone, “over the release of Jacques Truncheon.”

“Monsieur Truncheon?” said Alice. “What on earth has he been arrested for?”

“Truco saw that Truncheon was getting too close for comfort with his investigation and was coming up with undeniable proof of his treachery with the Hearts, which was also starting to unearth other vile schemes and shenanigans that Truco had cleverly concealed from the public with lying propaganda, a lot of which Bone Ace came forward and exposed.

“This of course put Bone in danger of losing his life, but being the smart card that he is, he went into hiding and is in the process of writing a book exposing Truco’s schemes which Queen Britannica has agreed to publish through her printing house before we all leave for the Woodchopper’s Ball.”

“So in view of all that,” Ace continued, “Truco saddled Truncheon with trumped up charges of police brutality and human rights abuses which, with the help of *Hugh & Krye’s* news agencies, got the public howling for blood and put Truncheon in

the clink.

“However, Truco felt in your case, Miss Alice, that to put you in prison would garner too much public sentiment as a ‘martyr for the cause,’ so to speak, therefore he decided it would be better to have you go down in the public’s view as a mental case.”

“Anyway, ‘all’s well that ends well,’ that’s what I always say,” said Helvetica, reaching over and clasping Alice’s hand. “It’s great to have you back home, honey, and you too, Mr. Sage.

“And it’s wonderful to have you along too, Mr. Boodle.”

“It certainly is an occasion worthy of celebration,” said Belote. “But the battle is not over yet, and it’s getting very close to Christmas.”

“I must write to Monsieur Truncheon,” said Alice earnestly. “We must pray for him. Is there anything being done?”

“Actually, the bottom line with Kang and Rue is lucre,” replied Belote, “and two very wealthy and influential members of the Diamond suit, a certain Mr. Earnest Brainwave and Madame de Deuce came forward with sizeable sums to help with securing Truncheon’s release. They said that they knew he must be a good man if he was helping you, Alice. You made quite an impression on them.”

“I hardly knew them,” said Alice. “Especially Madame de Deuce. I only talked with her for a few minutes.”

“Suffice it to say that they were thoroughly charmed,” added Ace.

“How are the others?” inquired Alice, feeling embarrassed and desiring to change the subject. “Celia, Rummy, and all? I can’t wait to see them!”

“Helvy was planning a welcome home party with everyone,” said Ace as they pulled into the parking-lot of Bid Whist Heights. “But when we seriously considered the shortness of time and the fact that our

chickens are not all hatched yet with regard to the Hearts, we felt it better to continue to lie low."

"We felt? I had no such reservations," interjected Helvetica with a laugh. "Since his NDE, Ace has gotten very conscientiousness about your Commission, Alice. But it's true, Christmas Eve is only two weeks away and the rest of the gang with the Lonely Hearts are very busy helping to search out the remaining cards."

"But we came to a compromise," said Belote as they entered the Queen's apartment, "which I'm sure you'll be very happy about."



"Princess!"

"Long time no see, sis!"

There waiting in the living room, to Alice's delight, were Rummy, Celia Spade, and Twinkie, who all jumped up to greet her with warm embraces.

"And what's all this with the dress up?" said Alice as she stepped back to look at Celia who was wearing a Victorian-style dress, hose and shoes similar to her own.

"Picked these togs up at 'The Mad Hatter's'—a new boutique on Broadley," said Celia, snapping her fingers and spinning around to perform a rhythmical curtsy. "You and all your publicity really started somethin'. This kinda dress up is all the rage now! Even Gin's gotten into it, of all people. She got her hair straightened an' dyed the same colour as yours at the new 'March Hare Salon' an' she and a couple of her friends are takin' elocution lessons to try an' learn to talk proper!"

"They got all the paraphernalia to go with the trend too," said Rummy. "It's kinda trump. Alice headbands, bloomers, 'Drink Me' mugs, school folders, Bunny hole clubs, and whatnot."

Alice shook her head in bewilderment. "I would have never thought I'd be a ... er..."

“Trendsetter,” said Helvetica.

“Precisely. I always considered myself quite *out* of the *in*-crowd.”

While Blackjack set out chiblets and dip and diet fizzola, the happy team lounged on the couches and chatted enthusiastically about their recent experiences with the Lonely Hearts and their looking for the rest of the lost cards.

“I successfully tracked and cleared the remaining Diamonds,” said Twinkie.

“Of the Spades,” said Celia, “which is kinda my department, at the last count there were six left to find, an’ we found five of ’em. The only one missin’ now is the King of Spades—C.C. Leroy.”

“Didn’t he play guitar in the ‘Alice in Funkyland’ show with you?” asked Alice.

“Yeah—well that’s the thing. The show’s startin’ up again for the Christmas season. They want me back in the deck, by the way, but I told ’em nothin’ doin’. But anyways, they can’t find the King of Spades *nowhere*.”

“I notice that Ophelia doesn’t talk about him very much,” said Helvetica, lowering her voice. “I don’t mean to pry, but were they close?”

“Yeah, they used to be,” continued Celia. “She don’t ever say nothin’ to me about it, though. Very sensitive jass.”

“I can totally relate,” said Helvetica, nodding her head.

“Except she did tell me they lived together once upon a time, back in the days when she was ‘livin’ in sin’ as she puts it.”

“I know it’s none of my business,” whispered Helvetica. “But why did they split up?”

“Apparently back then she treated him somethin’ fierce. Always bossin’ him around,” said Celia. “Ya know how she can be sometimes, even now.”

“Come to think of it,” said Helvetica, “I had no-

ticed.”

“I think she’s a wonderful woman,” said Alice.

“Yeah, she’s mellowed out like, amazin’,” continued Celia. “So when she came to realise that she was ‘livin’ in sin’ with him, she threw C.C. out. Broke his heart.”

“That’s absolutely unforgivable,” said Helvetica.

“She didn’t want to marry him ‘cuz she felt it’d interfere with her career which was startin’ to outshine his. He was jus’ doin’ Don Casino’s club circuit, singin’ and playin’ his guitar.”

“Pretty trump music, “ said Rummy. “He’s got a good band.”

“And the Clubs?” asked Alice.

“That’s *my* department,” said Rummy with a smirk as he jutted out his chin. “Last count on the Clubs is we found three out of the five that are left. The two remaining ones are a six and Al Scopone, the King of Clubs. An’ we are in the process of negotiating with her Majesty Helvetica here to get in contact with him!”

Helvetica turned her head and busied herself with straightening some cushions.

“Isn’t that right, your Majesty?” said Rummy, with a grin.

“I really don’t want to discuss it. I’ve had it up to here with problem Kings.”

“Helvy is a little concerned that Scopone will take exception to me or my presence, knowing I’m with his wife,” said Belote.

“Ex-wife,” snapped Helvetica. “How many times do I have to remind you? I don’t want anything to do with him, and the Six of Clubs just happens to be his new little floozy girlfriend, Barbu.”

“I am willing to speak to him myself, honey,” said Belote, calmly. “I believe he’s a sincere card and—”

“It is absolutely none of your business, Ace, so stay out of it!”

With that, Helvetica pulled a tissue out of a box and stormed out of the room. The embarrassed silence that followed was broken by Alice who rose from her chair and excused herself to leave the room.

The Queen was in her bedroom, lying on her giant four-poster bed and sobbing into her pillow when Alice entered.

“I do beg your pardon, your Majesty,” she said gingerly, “and I know it’s none of my business especially, but you have become a very dear friend to me and I do so hate to see you sad. It’s just that, as you probably understand, for me I must—”

“I know,” said the Queen, her voice muffled by the pillow, “for you it’s this damn *Commission*. Everything is the Commission!”

Alice was tempted to get upset with that statement, but realising that Helvetica was speaking out of frustration, she remained gentle in spirit. Suddenly something came to her mind like a flash.

*I can’t say that!* she thought. *It would be so presumptuous of me!*

Still she ventured out, knowing that when she obeyed that still small voice she had nothing to fear.

“It must be very difficult, your Majesty, to still be very much in love with the King of Clubs,” Alice said softly, “and to be so deeply in love with Ace Belote.”

The Queen lifted her tear-stained face from the pillow and looked at Alice with awe.

“Alice, sweet child, where on earth do you get this insight? Such *wisdom*? It’s just not normal in a girl of your age. I’m beginning to wonder if some of those crazy stories about you being an angel or a life form from a bygone century are true.”

“I’m just a normal girl, ma’am. All I do is listen to the instructions I’m given from ... well, I guess you could say from the ‘authors.’”

“But what can I do about this quandary?” asked the Queen. “Is it wrong to love them both so much? What do the ‘authors’ say about that?”

Again Alice ventured out, speaking very slowly in a trembling voice. “There is nothing wrong with loving them both, your Majesty. Love is of God. He that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.”

The Queen started to cry again, and grabbed for a tissue.

“Oh my,” she said, as she glanced at herself in the mirror, “my Tippex white-out is running, now you can see all my wrinkles. It’s the water-based kind, you know. They say the other type can have adverse effects on the cardboard. I just look *awful*.”

“No you don’t, your Majesty,” said Alice, handing her another tissue. “Without the Tippex, you actually look a lot like Margot.”

“Margot?”

“The Queen of Hearts.”

“Trump, honey!” said Helvetica. “Legend says she’s *beautiful*. But don’t tell me you’ve *met* her! Have you?”

“You just said for me not to tell you I’ve met her,” said Alice with a giggle. “But yes, I have. Where and under what circumstances I am not at liberty to say right now. She’s *selah*.”

“Okay then, baby, I trust your word. So much so, I’m throwing away my Tippex right now! Ace’ll be happy, he’s been tryin’ to get me to do this ever since we’ve been sweet on each other.”

After getting up and sweeping the collection of various bottles of the white-out fluid, marker pens, and *Vanity Fair* magazines off her dressing table into a trash can, the Queen walked into her bathroom and washed her face.

“And I’m calling that Al Scopone immediately,” she called out to Alice. “We’ll get him and that chit of a card of his to that Woodchopper’s Ball, if it means

I have to go and drag them there myself!”

Returning to the living room, Alice found Rummy excited over some information he had discovered in the latest *Kacophony* magazine.

“Guess what, Princess? There’s a li’l squib in here about the King of Spades, C.C. Leroy, possibly playing at the Blue Chip on Shoulder Street in Lower East Bedlam the night before Christmas Eve!”

“That’s splendid!” said Alice. “It does leave us rather tight for time though, if he doesn’t accept an invitation right away.”

“I don’t think you’d have any problem,” said Celia. “Jus’ curtsey and that card will be wet tissue paper in your hands.”

“Another factor has arisen in the equation that has a great deal of bearing on our immediate plans,” announced Ace Belote suddenly from the corner of the room, where he’d been engaged in another long-winded conversation on his cell phone. “I just had a call from Jacques Truncheon, and he has been *released*, thanks to the generous ransoms, if you will, of Madame de Deuce and Earnest Brainwave!”

Shouts of joy and gratitude filled the apartment, waking up Mr. Sage who had been sleeping on the couch.

“It seems the prison officials were rather relieved to let him go as he had caused no small stir amongst the inmates with his radical views.

“But that’s not all. Truncheon gave me details of the whereabouts of the captured Hearts that he has deduced from his many investigations. They are imprisoned at Alkort.”

Celia shivered. “Oh cribbage.”

“Spookville,” said Rummy. “I’ve heard stories ’bout that place.”

“What’s Alkort?” inquired Alice.

“It’s a fortress on the Isle of Alkort in the middle of Lake Zwickern. It was apparently abandoned be-



fore it became a penal institution. No one has ever been sentenced there and returned,” said Mr. Sage cryptically.

“Here’s the deal,” continued Belote. “The negotiations are dragging on, and I get the feeling Truco is just stalling. So how would you both, Sage and Alice, like to go there, get a foot in the door kind of, and see if there’s a way to speed up the process and get the Hearts out of there? I can check with Helvy about Blackjack driving you there and picking you and the remaining Hearts up afterwards.”

“What about Celia an’ me going, too?” said Rummy, in a somewhat offended tone.

“You each have a responsibility to find the remaining Spades and Clubs respectively.”

“Well, in that case one of the Hearts should go with ’em,” said Celia.

“That seems logical, true enough,” replied Belote, “but the Lonely Hearts collectively is our bargaining chip right now, and should a public front be necessary, they need to be together.”

“You sure got your chops down, Mister Belote,” said Celia, slapping his hand. “I gotta give it to you!”

“You sure have,” said Rummy.

“Miss Twinkie here, through Bone Ace and his contacts,” continued Belote, indifferent to the compliments, “has arranged for a boat to take you both across the lake to the Isle of Alkort tomorrow afternoon.”

“Do we have tickets?” said Alice.

“No need, the boatman will be waiting for you. Just state your names when you get there.”



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## The Vulgar Boatman

Stepping down to the small stone quay nestled in the rushes by the edge of the mist-shrouded lake, Alice and Mr. Sage approached the boatman who was seated on a wooden bench—a large, rotund middle-aged man with a ruddy face and scraggly stubble for a beard, wearing a big floppy cap.

“Excuse me, kind sir ... we need to get across to the Isle of Alkort,” said Alice, pointing to its faint grey silhouette on the horizon.

“Ah missy, it depends what page number you’re on,” he replied gruffly, pulling a clay pipe out of his pocket into which he stuffed a small wad of black tobacco.

“Page number?”

“The page number of the story,” he said as he lit the pipe and puffed at it nonchalantly. “You *are* Alice Pleasance and Mr. Sage, right?”

“That is correct,” said Mr. Sage.

After rummaging in the pockets of his heavy, well-worn black Melton coat, the boatman produced a crumpled piece of paper, which he studied intently for a few moments,

“Yes, yes, you are scheduled to take this trip on page two hundred and fourteen. What page are you

on now?"

"I'm sorry sir," said Alice, with a hint of frustration. "I've really no idea what page we're at."

"Page we're *on*," corrected Mr. Sage.

"Then until we've established that, I am not authorised to row you across," said the boatman with a tone of finality. "Because if you happen to be on page two-hundred-and-eleven, for instance, then you'll have to wait three pages until you get to page two-hundred-and-fourteen. Maybe you'll have to get involved in another chapter perhaps, to pass the time."

"But what if we're on page two-hundred-and-sixteen?" asked Alice.

"Then you've missed the boat."

"But that's ever so unfair," said Alice indignantly.

"Not at all," said the boatman. "It'll teach you to be on time in the future."

"Look, Mr. ...," Alice said, hitting on an idea.

"Mr. Stortok."

"Mr. Stortok, sir," Alice continued. "If someone were to be reading this story right now and saw that I was going to miss a very important turn in its events, they would be frightfully disappointed and they would end up blaming *you*. And because neither you nor I know what page we're on in the story, what if the reader was to look at the page number and find out we actually *were* on page two-hundred-and-fourteen? They would then have every reason to be even *more* upset with you."

Mr. Stortok scratched his stubble for awhile, then reached inside his coat and brought out a small bottle of polignac from which he took a swig, then offered it to Mr. Sage who politely declined.

"You have a point, missy," he said thoughtfully. "You have a point."

"And just think what a hero it'll make you,"

added Mr. Sage, "when they read that you stepped in at a crucial moment in the plot and saved the day. I know from experience, being an avid book reader, that one's sentiments are deeply stirred and favourably disposed toward the character who at first seems reluctant, yes and maybe even downright unsympathetic, but changes his mind and is inclined to clemency and goodwill."

"I don't understand everything you're saying, but I think I'm getting the gist," said the boatman. "Very well, I'll take you."

Alice clapped her hands in gratitude, gave the boatman a kiss on the cheek and the three of them clambered into the flat-bottomed boat that more resembled an open barge. Mr. Stortok took the large wooden oars in his hefty weather-beaten hands, pushing and pulling them back and forth in the water with the greatest of ease, causing the craft to glide effortlessly across the lake. As he did so he started to sing,

*I had a young maiden in Old Stackford  
town,  
Everyone knew her as 'Nelly,'  
Her real name would take me too long to  
write down,  
So I got it tattooed on my belly.*

*Tara lara lai yay, tara lara lai yo,  
Here we go up on a wave,  
I push to and fro, and I heave and I ho,  
And huff like a rough galley slave.*

*I had a fair woman in Bedlam one night,  
I was taken aback by her charms.  
She took me outback, then she left me  
outright,  
Her name is tattooed on my arms.*

*Tara lara lai yay, tara lara lai yo,  
Here we go up on a wave,  
I push to and fro and I heave and I ho,  
And huff like a rough galley slave.*

*Suzie and Sally was a couple o' twins,  
A wink of an eye and I'd got 'em.  
We broke a few beds in a number of inns,  
Their names are tattooed on my—*

“Now wait a minute, Mr. Stortok,” broke in Mr. Sage. “We appreciate your courtesy immensely, but I must remind you that we have female company, and Alice is quite young, you know.”

“You don’t take too kindly to my boat song, Miss Alice?” said Stortok, looking a little crestfallen.

“No, it’s not that, sir,” said Alice. “I think it’s quite amusing, but I do find it rather vulgar.”

*Vulgar?* Thought Alice, *I’ve never used that word before in my life, and I certainly don’t find the song that bad!*

“That’s why,” replied Stortok, “it’s called the song of the vulgar boatman.”

“The word is actually Volga,” said Mr. Sage. “And I don’t recall the song having any such content.”

At that the boatman took another swig from his bottle of polignac and fell sullenly silent as he continued rowing.

“Oh, please don’t stop singing, Mr. Stortok,” said Alice. “I especially enjoyed the chorus. You have a nice deep voice!”

The boatman smiled sheepishly and began to sway from side to side as he started up again in song:

*Tara lara lai yay, tara lara lai yo,  
Here we go up on a wave,*

*I push to and fro and I heave and I ho,  
And huff like a rough galley slave.*

*I once had a girl in this rugged old boat,  
As fair as the statue of Venus—*

“The chorus, Mr. Stortok,” insisted Mr. Sage. “Alice loves to hear the chorus.”

Oblivious, the boatman continued singing and swaying vigorously as he rowed, causing the boat to tip so far over from side to side that billows of water splashed in, drenching them all.

“Oh, sir!” shouted Alice in alarm. “Be careful. You’ll capsize!”

Stortok stopped singing and swaying.

“My cap size?” he asked indignantly. “What’s wrong with my cap size?”

“Nothing,” said Alice. “It’s a very nice cap. It fits you perfectly.”

“In actual fact it *doesn’t*,” the boatman continued. “I always buy my caps at least three or four sizes too big. It’s more comfortable, and it gives the impression that my head is too small, which is better than giving the impression that my head is too big.”

“I meant...” Alice stopped as she didn’t want to argue, feeling relieved that the journey was now going smoother and the boatman was concentrating on his rowing, although she had genuinely enjoyed his rambunctious singing.

After about half an hour, the silhouette of the Isle of Alkort loomed clearer through the mist, and soon the boat was gliding into the caverns situated beneath the towering walls of the giant fortress that crowned it. Stortok lit a lantern and held it aloft while he pushed and steered the craft with a long pole.

As they drew deeper into the dark caverns, silent but for the lapping of their boat and the hollow

echoing tones of dripping water, Alice felt a shiver of fear as she watched the shadows of the stalactites dancing ominously against the sandstone walls in response to the swaying of Stortok's flickering lantern.

*Oh, I do wish Joshua was here,* she thought.

*I am,* came his voice to her mind. *Have no fear. You will accomplish your task.*

The boat suddenly lurched to a stop.

"I believe this is where I was supposed to take you," said the boatman, helping them onto a narrow ledge next to the water. "It's a bit slippery, so watch your footing.

"Now you climb up there," he said, pointing to a long flight of nearby steps hewn out of the stone wall of the cavern, "and eventually you'll come out onto the ground on top. I'll stay here with the lantern until I'm sure you're safely up there."

Alice and Sage hesitantly made their way up the slippery narrow steps, clutching onto the side of the wall for dear life. After quite a tense while, Mr. Stortok heard them call down their relieved reassurances that they had made it to the top safely, and they bid goodbye.



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## Alkort

**A**t the top of the steps, the odd couple found themselves in a small cave with a narrow opening through which they crawled, and to their surprise were greeted with a blue sky and bright sunshine, a welcome alternative to the grey mist that had enveloped them for the last hour or so.

“How curious,” said Alice. “This is like a tropical climate compared to what’s on the other side of those walls.”

They looked out over the green grassy knoll on which they stood and were further astonished to see swimming pools and white lawn chairs, recreational areas, barbecue pits, small outdoor cocktail bars, and buildings that resembled the finest hotel resorts.

“Not at all what I imagined Alkort to be,” said Sage.

“I know. I was having visions of prison bars and stuff like you see in those ‘lock-’em-up’ movies,” said Alice, wryly. “The kind that Brandon likes. I don’t usually watch that type anyway. You really ought to meet him, Mr. Sage. He knows a lot about books.”

“It might be beneficial for us right now to remember that we are trespassing,” said Sage, pulling Alice behind a nearby palm tree. “Stay



hidden.”

He had spoken not a moment too soon, as a Tarot card patrolled close by, checking on the litter baskets.

“I’m a little apprehensive,” whispered Sage, who to Alice suddenly became as a frightened child. “Where do we go from here? After all *you* are the heroine of the piece, not Mr. Stortok—so you should know.”

“It depends on what page you’re at, Mr. Sage,” giggled Alice with mock gruffness. “Sorry ... on!”

“This is not a laughing matter,” returned Sage. “We could get killed.”

“Dear Mr. Sage,” said Alice tenderly, “we shan’t get killed. Joshua just reassured me that we will accomplish our mission.”

She fell silent for a moment.

“He just said that we should walk across the lawn in full confidence, as if we are on official business.

“Excuse me, sir!” she said, as she strode over to the Tarot. “That litter basket looks dreadfully dirty. I suggest you take it and have it cleaned right now!”

The Tarot looked up in astonishment. “I’m sorry ma’am, I er ... cannot have it cleaned right now. The service cards responsible for sanitation have gone home.”

“Then you shall have to clean it yourself, won’t you? Lord Truco will not take too kindly to the knowledge that some of the waste receptacles were found to be sullied.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the Tarot and scuttled off with the litter basket.

“By the way, when you’re done, bring it back for inspection.”

Alice and Mr. Sage then walked across the grass until they came to a swimming pool where an attractive young female Heart card had just arrived, carrying a towel and a bottle of some kind of lotion.

"Alice!" she gasped, dropping her bottle on the tiles, the shattered pieces of which Mr. Sage gingerly picked up and placed in a nearby litter basket.

"Sssh!" said Alice, putting her finger to her lips.

"But you are Alice, right?" whispered the card.

"If you only knew how many times I've answered that question lately!" chuckled Alice. "But yes, I am. Please do keep it to yourself right now though."

"I'm Botifarra," said the card, reaching out her hand to her visitors. "I would invite you to swim with me, but I can't go in the water without pasting myself every time with that cheap laminating lotion, otherwise my cardboard gets all soggy and it takes forever to dry out. Then I run the risk of dog ears and wrinkles. I'll need to get another bottle."

"That's all right, Botifarra," said Alice, "we can swim together some other time. But I am here on a very important mission for the Woodchopper and his son, and it's quite urgent."

"I know," said Botifarra. "I've heard about it, and I am very excited. But you might not get much support from some of the rest of the Hearts, I'm afraid."

"Why is that?"

"When we were first brought here," she continued, reclining on one of the deck chairs and inviting Alice and Mr. Sage to do the same, "Truco threw us all into a dungeon similar to the one we had just come from in Krypkill, except it was even worse. It was colder, damper, and even darker. He saw that this was increasing our dependency on and love for one another, so he tried another tack. I'm sure you can see what I mean."

"I think so," said Alice, looking around. "It's beautiful here."

"Exactly. He set everyone up with their own plush apartments with everything they need and want and encouraged us to mingle with the Tarots."

“But why did you say we’d have a hard time with the rest of the Hearts?” said Alice. “Uh oh, wait a minute...”

“I believe I have wasted enough time here with you, Miss Botifarra, I need to continue checking the grounds,” she snapped suddenly, much to the card’s astonishment, who was quickly reassured by Alice’s discreet smile and a wink.

The Tarot on patrol had returned with the litter basket for Alice’s inspection.

“Hmmm,” said Alice, stroking her chin. “Could be better, but it’ll do. By the way, this young card here very foolishly dropped a bottle of laminating lotion. I think it would be in order for you to clean up the resultant mess and to fetch her a replacement.”

“Right away, ma’am,” said the Tarot and obediently hurried off.

“Looks like we’ll be able to swim together after all, Botifarra,” said Alice.

“That would be trump. It’s almost impossible to find one of the other Hearts to accompany me.”

“Why is that?”

“It seems that by and by most of us have become self-sufficient, self-satisfied, and don’t want to be with each other,” Botifarra answered ruefully. “Whenever I’ve asked the others why, they say that because we’re Hearts we’ve already got all the love we need so there’s no point in giving any to each other. I really don’t agree, and I don’t understand how this wave of thinking came in, but I have a feeling it’s because some of us have started getting in with the Tarot cards.”

At this, Botifarra burst into tears and Alice put her arm around her.

“It’s going to be all right, Botifarra,” she said softly. “I have it on good authority that this mission is going to be successful.”

“I would caution you to desist from this display

of affection, Miss Alice," said Sage. "I think I see the Tarot returning with your lotion and cleaning supplies."

Alice quickly resumed her role, and barked a remonstrance to the Tarot about his tardiness as he set about scrubbing the tiles next to the pool after delivering a bottle of laminating lotion to Botifarra.

"While he's performing this task," said Alice to her, "I would appreciate it if you would acquaint me with the recreational facilities."

"Certainly, ma'am," said Botifarra.



"This is the workout room, a favourite with us now, especially the boys."

Botifarra led Alice and Mr. Sage into a gymnasium that was extravagantly equipped with every conceivable toning and card-building device imaginable. It was empty, except for a solitary young male Heart who was being pressed between two large, steaming hot rollers, onto one of which he was strapped.

"Is he being tortured?" asked Alice with concern.

"No. It can be painful and *does* leave you incredibly sore, but it's totally self-inflicted," laughed Botifarra. "It's a card straightening machine.

"Hey Skat, come and meet Alice and her friend!"

After flipping a switch which brought the rollers grinding to a halt, the card unbuckled himself and stepped down to greet them.

"Oh hi, Botifarra the Meek," he sneered and then turned to Alice. "So you're the one who's come to 'rescue' us?"

Alice, a little disconcerted by this remark, smiled nevertheless and tried to be friendly.

"So nice to meet you, Skat."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," said Mr. Sage, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

"Ouch!" Sage grimaced in pain, gripping his

hand.

“Your shoulder, it’s as sharp as a razor!”

“Card-sharpening exercises, Mister,” said Skat, pointing over to a contraption with a belt and sanding wheel. “It’s trump. Discourages people from messing with you. I still need to work on my left and bottom side.”

“I think it’s a load of clobyosh myself,” whispered Botifarra to Alice.

Alice was beginning to see that the task could turn out to be more difficult than she imagined, and was almost wishing the Hearts were back in the dungeon. She decided to get straight to the point with Skat.

“In answer to your question, Skat,” she said, her heart beating nervously, “as a matter of fact I *have* come to rescue you and the other Hearts. My mission is to make sure you are all with the rest of the deck to be presented to the Woodchopper’s son on his birthday next Christmas Eve.”

“Supposing we want to stay?” said Skat.

“You mean be a prisoner of your own choosing?”

“I’m not a prisoner.”

“Did you choose to be here?” asked Sage.

“No.”

“Can you leave if you so desire?”

“No. Look, I don’t know why all the interrogation,” said Skat, impatiently. “Has Boti here been filling you in with her spin on this situation? Maybe *she’s* not, but most of us are quite happy here, thank you very much. Why don’t you concentrate on ‘rescuing’ the ones of us who *want* to leave?”

“But you all have to be there!” implored Alice. “You don’t belong to Truco, you belong to the Woodchopper’s son.”

Suddenly there was a commotion at the door, and a young girl’s voice was heard plaintively protesting.

"I come in here every day for card toning and Tippex treatment, what's the big fuss?"

"Not today you're not," barked a stern-looking Tarot who had held the girl, who was another Heart card, by her arms, "nor any time in the near future as far as I can see. You're coming with me. Truco's orders."

"It's Teen Pathi," said Botifarra. "Looks like trouble."

"Okay, you Hearts!" bellowed another Tarot who appeared at the doorway carrying a large pair of scissors. "Stand up over here against this wall. Vacation's over!"

"What does he mean by that?" sneered Skat.

"It means just *that*," said Botifarra as she walked over to the wall. "No more fun and games."

"Get over here, paperboy!" the Tarot yelled at Skat.

"Wait a sec, Mister," said Skat, "nobody talks to *me* like that."

"Be careful, young man," said Sage.

"This is where card-sharpening workouts come in handy," Skat whispered to Alice with a wink as he swaggered over to the threatening Tarot.

"What did you say, paperboy?" hissed the Tarot card, staring into Skat's face.

"I said nobody talks to *me* like that," retorted Skat as he gave the Tarot a push on the shoulder, to which the Tarot responded by grasping Skat's hand; then by deftly twisting his arm, he lifted the stunned Skat high in the air before bringing him swiftly back down to the floor with a sharp slap as he landed on his back.

"Now get up, paperboy, and stand against the wall with the rest of 'em."

Skat groaned and winced as he limped sheepishly over to join Botifarra and Teen Pathi, who looked at him with a mixture of sympathy and shrugged shoul-

ders that seemed to say ‘what did you expect?’

“This’ll take care of *you*,” said one of the other Tarots, grabbing Skat’s hands and clamping a pair of handcuffs on them. “You all can take a last look around. This is the last time you’ll be enjoying this place. Let’s go.”

“Why? Where are we going?” whined Teen Pathi.

“Back to the dungeon.”

“Alice, do something!” yelled Skat.

“Alice?” said one of the Tarots abruptly, turning to look at Alice who was frantically motioning to the Hearts to keep quiet. “Is that who you are?”

She recognised him as the very same Tarot whom she had ordered to clean the litter basket, but she managed to retain her composure.

“Yes,” Alice said firmly. “And it is nothing to get bent out of shape about. I do happen to be here on Truco’s authority.”

“I guess we’ll have to check that out,” said the Tarot, threateningly, “*then* we’ll see who’s job it is to clean the waste baskets. Stick with her and that old Diamond card. Don’t let them out of your sight,” he snapped, turning to one of the other Tarots who was carrying a large exacto knife. “If they try any funny business, you know what to do.”

After giving Alice an icy glare, he marched the three distressed Hearts out of the gymnasium.



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## Sharla Tann

**O**h alas,” said Alice helplessly as she and Mr. Sage watched on in despair as the Hearts were hauled off. “I wish there was something we could do. I just wonder...”

She suddenly realised that in her nervousness she had been absent-mindedly rubbing her ring with her thumb, and as she did so she started feeling a renewed surge of boldness and decided to address the Tarot with the exacto knife.

“Excuse me, but who is in charge here in Truco’s absence?”

“Th-that would be Sharla Tann, Truco’s lady friend,” said the Tarot, unsettled at Alice’s straight-forward manner. “We don’t hardly see her, and we take our orders directly from the chief Tarot here.”

“I demand to talk to her at once.”

“She’s not here at the moment. She’s away on monkey business.”

“When will she be back?”

“Possibly this evening. I can find out for you.”

“Please do,” said Alice firmly. “As soon as possible.”

“Right away,” said the Tarot.

Sage shook his head and chuckled. “‘Where angels fear to tread,’ Alice,” he said as they left the



gymnasium and strolled over to the pool. "I never cease to be amazed at you."

"I never cease to be amazed at myself, Mr. Sage. I know that it's not my own power, that's for certain."

The evening was falling as Alice and Mr. Sage quietly prayed and made a tentative plan of attack while they sat by the swimming pool waiting for news of Sharla Tan. Suddenly Alice was reminded of something.

"Mr. Sage, do you know Madame de Deuce?"

"Very well," he said, sadly. "Although it's been years since we've seen each other. We were lovers before I met Onion, my late wife, and she helped me get ahead in the second-hand book business. I was at the bottom of the suit at the time, but then I started making quite a living, got to the top and became a successful pain in the posterior. Maybe it sounds terribly trite, but if I could do it all over again, I'd do things so much differently."

"Oh, don't be dismayed, Mr. Sage," said Alice. "It's never too late to make amends. I'm sure you'll have another chance when you meet her again at the ball. It won't be long now."

After a few more minutes of talking, as Sage basked in Alice's affectionate reassurance, they were shortly interrupted by the Tarot card with news that Sharla Tann was on the premises and had arranged to meet with Alice for dinner. This served to put Alice in even higher standing with the Tarot, who was now intent on making a favourable impression on her in hopes that she would put a good word in for him to Sharla.

"Your impeccable conduct and hospitality has not gone unnoticed," said Alice in response to the Tarot having made sure that her and Sage were set up in one of the finest luxury chalets during their visit to Alkort. "However, it might be in your best interests to remain discreet in this favour towards us, lest other

more unscrupulous Tarot-card opportunists use this to further their positions with Sharla Tann.”

“Very wise, Miss,” said the Tarot.



Situated on the far side of Alkort, overlooking a giant hexagonal swimming pool, stood Sharla Tann’s enormous white bungalow that gleamed with reflected moonlight. Beside it on a hill was a small heliport in which was parked a black helicopter with rotors that resembled long bat wings.

“Hiyaaa!”

Alice was practically thrown back on her heels as she entered the front door and was met by the fierce green eyes of a tall, raven-haired woman wearing a black cape and black leather boots who was striding towards her along a hallway that led from a wide sunken living room, its deep purple walls subtly illumined with indirect green lighting.

She reached out and gripped Alice’s hand in a cold clasp, which caused Alice to shiver and withdraw it into the pocket of her dress.

“M-Madame Sharla Tann?”

“None other, Alice darling,” she said in a voice that sounded to Alice like two voices overlapped.

*Like the sound of some singers on the tapes,* thought Alice. *But this is spooky.*

“You have *fear*, I notice,” said Sharla, baring her upper teeth and running them across her red lower lip as she leaned close to Alice and peered into her eyes. Alice noticed her pale skin was uncannily smooth, like wax. “Am I scary?”

“N-n-not at all,” said Alice, trembling.

“You’ve hurt my feelings!” said Sharla with mock offence. “It’s okay, baby. You can be honest! One’s power is equal to how much fear one can instill in others. That’s the secret of mine and Truco’s control. How else do you think we can so manipulate those stupid, unthinking masses? So don’t sweat. I don’t

mind being thought of as scary. In fact, I *revel* in it!”

With that she threw back her head in a shrill cackle which sounded to Alice like a higher pitched version of Truco’s, causing such a chill to run down Alice’s back, that she started nervously rubbing her ring with her thumb. She immediately felt a surge of inward strength and confidence returning that defied her natural senses and caused Sharla Tann to appear before her eyes as a shrivelled wretch controlled by the very fear of which she boasted.

“Madame Tann.”

“You can knock off the ‘Madame Tann’ thing okay?” said Sharla as she threw her arm over Alice’s shoulder and walked her into the dining room, where down the centre stood a long table, covered with a black embroidered satin cloth displaying a sumptuous banquet of all manner of foods, sweetmeats, desserts, and drinks. “You’re with friends. Just call me Sharla.”

“Very well, Sharla.”

“Hungry, Alice? You won’t find any chiblets and fizzola here!”

“That’s very kind of you, but I would very much welcome getting straight down to business.”

“Me too. Rumour has it that you have something to do with the disappearance of the Lonely Hearts.”

“I would very much appreciate it if my colleague, Mr. Sage, could be present for this discussion.”

“That can be arranged,” said Sharla as she trotted over to the intercom. Within minutes, Mr. Sage was standing humbly at the door.

“So,” said Sharla, turning back to Alice, “is it true?”

“What?”

“That you have the Lonely Hearts?”

“Well, that’s part of the business we’re here to discuss.”

“What sort of business is that?” inquired Sharla as Mr. Sage snacked cautiously on the dainties.

“The business you are involved in, Miss Tann,” said Sage, dryly. “Monkey business.”

“Monkey business?” Sharla’s eyebrows raised in interest. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” continued Sage. “And we know you are very interested in the preservation, conservation and development of monkey business. You and your cohorts ... er ... co-workers are very much opposed to the fact that well-meaning human beings in the name of religion have hindered the natural spread of monkey business.”

“So true, so true,” muttered Sharla, nodding her head solemnly.

“In fact, we thought that in order to help prevent its further depletion and its eventual extinction due to man’s irresponsible exploitation of it,” said Alice excitedly, “that you would be interested in putting on a special ‘Save the Monkey Business’ charity benefit to raise funds towards it right here in Alkort.”

Alice was so surprised and amused at the words that were coming out of her mouth that she sputtered and choked for a moment as she attempted to stifle a giggle.

“Let me get you a glass of water,” said Sharla. “It sounds very interesting, but what’s in it for me?”

“If we could bring Truco here, and you and he could personally sponsor it,” said Sage, “just think of the favourable publicity it could generate for you both if it’s on film.”

“We can always use that. But what’s in it for you?” said Sharla, narrowing her eyes suspiciously. “There’s an angle somewhere. Everyone’s got an angle.”

“As you are well aware, Sharla,” said Alice, “we want the Hearts released, but the negotiations are dragging out, and now the Hearts have even been

thrown back into the dungeon. We were wondering if we could speed up the process by offering to support you in this 'Save the Monkey Business' campaign. You may or may not realize, but these cards have incredible untapped performing talent. We could put on a benefit concert with all these Hearts that would make you more Lucre in a day than the Lonely Hearts would have made in a year."

"A sort of mutual 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' Monkey Business understanding," said Sage dryly, causing Alice to have to excuse herself for a few minutes in order to stifle a further fit of giggles. "Not only will the Lonely Hearts agree to keep silent in their exposure of their card rights abuses at the hand of Truco, but they will publicly appear again to support this campaign."

"It all sounds very acceptable to me," said Sharla.

"So then I suppose we'll have to wait for a final decision until you have discussed it with Truco and it meets with his approval?" said Sage.

"That will not be at all necessary. My approval *is* the final word," snapped Sharla, as she stood up and began to see them to the door. "But I shall call Truco and have him fly here tomorrow with our most trusted Tarots so we can all finalise the plans together. Until then—"

"I do have some small suggestions to put forth if I may, Madame Sharla," said Sage.

"You may do so."

"With such a distinguished entourage coming to Alkort, I would strongly suggest that even by tomorrow there be a strengthening of the security."

"By putting more guards on duty?" said Sharla.

"Not necessarily," said Sage. "But rather by having a concerted endeavour to make it impossible for anyone to not only leave Alkort but also to enter, by sealing up any breaches in the walls, putting double

bolts and locks on the doors inside and out and making sure that they are well nigh watertight. This should greatly deter the occurrence of any untoward incident that could possibly be instigated by some competitive Monkey business.”

“Good idea,” said Sharla. “See to it right away, I leave the responsibility of its implementation in your capable hands. You have a shrewd right-hand man, Alice. I would hire him for my own shenanigans in a second!”

“Sorry, but his calling and election is sure!” said Alice. “And one more thing, Madam Tann. This endeavour would of course necessitate the Hearts being released for practise time.”

“Of course, of course,” said Sharla, with a dismissive wave of her hand. “You go about your business now. I must be about mine.”



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## Escape from Alkort

Sharla arranged that Mr. Sage could take the morning to implement the security measures she had entrusted him with, starting of course with her own bungalow, and Alice was granted the time to rehearse with the Hearts in the gymnasium. With the help of Botifarra, Alice was able to put on a convincing appearance of serious rehearsal as the Tarot guards kept an eagle eye on their progress.

“How is it coming along, Alice?” Sharla’s voice boomed from the intercom into the gymnasium.

*The intercoms,* thought Alice. *Must remember that.* “A trifle slow,” she replied. “We are all a little out of practice and the Hearts are losing breath. Maybe this afternoon we could practice outside and get the benefit of some fresh air. I know a perfect spot that’s close to the swimming pool.”

“Very well. Do forgive me for breaking up your little party, but I’d like to inform you that our distinguished guests are here. It would be in your best interests for you and Sage to be here promptly.”

“Yes ma’am,” answered Alice.



“How are things going?” whispered Alice to Sage as they walked up the narrow white stone pathway to Sharla’s bungalow.

“Couldn’t be better,” said Sage, looking official wearing a well-stocked leather tool belt and triumphantly clutching a large ring of keys. “Everything is escape-and-enter proof!”

As they approached the building they saw that another black helicopter had landed. It looked similar to Sharla’s, larger but with the same batwing shaped rotors.

The Tarot guard on duty let Alice and Sage into what seemed to be a board meeting room with no windows on its deep purple walls that were lit with the same soft indirect green light. In the centre stood a large, round, black marble table embossed with a six-pointed silver star, and sitting in the twelve chairs that surrounded the table were eminent-looking Tarots resplendent in black satin capes. Among them, on two adjacent chairs that resembled thrones, sat Truco and Sharla.

“We meet again, Alice,” said Truco with a smirk. “This time under more conventional circumstances,” and to the embarrassment of Alice and the great amusement of the Tarots, he proceeded to relate the incident of the night at his estate in Krypkillle.

“And there she was with her Victoriana dress and petticoats draped over her head, her legs hanging out of the bathroom window and her arms waving and practically dangling in the toilet!”

“How ridiculous, darling,” roared a Tarot, who Alice recognised as Foppet.

“How absurd!” shrieked another, who she recognised as Moppet.

“Alice in Blunderland,” snickered Foppet.

“She came in through the bathroom window!” sang Moppet mockingly.

“I really must excuse myself,” said Alice at last, “the Hearts and I are in dreadful need of practice for this important event. Every minute counts.”

“That’s unfortunate,” said Truco sarcastically,



“just as my colleagues were getting to know you.”

“Very sad,” said Foppet.

“Regrettable,” said Moppet.

“I’m sure that you are all quite capable of handling this business without my immediate presence,” said Alice, holding back her irritation. “Mr. Sage can represent me and inform me of any developments.”

“I suppose we can go ahead with the negotiations without her, Trukie,” said Sharla. “You are excused, Alice.”

“The way out is through the front door, dearie,” cackled Foppet, “just in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Don’t mistakenly use it as a lavatory!” sniggered Moppet.

“Which reminds me, Madame Sharla, I have a couple of minor details that need immediate attention regarding the security. I beg your leave for a few minutes.”

Sharla hastily nodded her consent over the babble of laughter and off-colour jokes that had been fuelled by Foppet and Moppet, as Alice and Sage quietly slipped out of the room and Sage locked the three giant padlocks attached to the outside of the door.

“That takes care of them,” said Sage. “At least until one of them notices they can’t get out. That’s why I need to take care of these intercom wires.”

Pulling a pair of clippers from his tool belt, he quickly made his way through the bungalow snipping electrical wires and locking rooms as he went.

“There,” said Sage with a wink as he finally locked the front door. “Safe as houses! The highest security possible. No one can enter, and no one can escape!”

Alice smiled. “As Brandon would say, ‘Once they’ve checked in, they won’t check out!’”

“And last but not least...,” Sage added mischievously as he headed for the heliport and Alice set out

for the swimming pool area where the Hearts were scheduled to begin their afternoon practise.

*Taking care of these bits of paper might be a little difficult*, thought Alice as four Tarots guards marched across the grass towards her with the six Hearts under their watchful eye.

“Alice, I want you to meet the rest of the Hearts whom I don’t believe you’ve met,” said Botifarra warmly, as she introduced three female cards who shyly came forward and greeted Alice with a hug. “This is Charity and her two daughters, Faith and Hope.”

“We’re so thankful to know you had come,” said Charity. “We’d been quite sick and we didn’t think we were going to make it, but for some reason we started getting better in the dungeon.”

“I know your mission is going to be successful,” said Faith.

“I’m so looking forward to being back home,” said Hope.

“Are you bits of paper supposed to be getting to work?” snapped a Tarot suddenly.

“Right away,” said Alice, as Teen Pathi set up a CD player. “You might as well lie down, relax, and enjoy the dancing.”

“Please do,” said Botifarra, flirtatiously as the five female Hearts changed into their gossamer gowns, and the four guards complied with smirks of approval.

“For the first twenty minutes or so,” Alice continued, turning to the Hearts as she selected a song from a CD, “we’ll just loosen up with slow-motion inter ... what’s the word for that kind of dance?”

“Interpretative,” said Sage, who by now had joined them.

Alice turned on the CD player and the repetitive refrain of a slow dreamy song began wafting through the hot mid-afternoon air.

*Sleep, sleep, you're going to sleep,  
Sleep, sleep, sleep.  
Deep, deep, slumber so deep.  
Deep, deep, deep.*

"A little polignac?" said Sage cordially to the guards who were now comfortably reclining on the grass as he poured each of them a large plastic cup of the potent brew with a dash of sleeping powder to hasten its effect.

*Sleep, sleep, you're going to sleep,  
Sleep, sleep, sleep.  
Deep, deep, slumber so deep.  
Deep, deep, deep.*

The song continued unchanging, and lulled by its drowsy monotony and the effects of the drink, by and by each Tarot nodded off to sleep. Sage took the opportunity to escort the Hearts one by one to the narrow cave entrance through which he and Alice had first come to Alkort, until finally he, Alice, and the seven Hearts were making their way down the sandstone steps to the underground lake where, to their immense relief, Stortok was waiting with his boat.

"Ah, ah, ah! Wait a minute," Stortok bellowed holding up his lantern as they began to board the vessel. "Not so fast."

"If you are going to ask me what page number we're on," said Alice impatiently, "I haven't the faintest idea."

"I am well aware that you wouldn't know what page number you're at."

"On!" said Sage.

"Because, by rights you should be here quite a few pages later. You're too *early*," he stated as he

studied his crumpled piece of paper.

“Too early?” said Sage.

“Yeah! So tell me,” demanded Stortok, “is that *all* there is to it?”

“What do you mean ‘is that all there is to it?’” asked Alice, furtively looking up at the top of the steps.

“I can’t believe you’re calling this puny chapter ‘Escape from Alkort,’ like it’s gearing up to be this big dramatic episode. The ‘Escape from Alkort’ should have taken quite a few more pages. You know, built up to a crescendo—more drama, Truco in hot pursuit, maybe a couple of the Hearts losing their lives or something ... or even you, Alice, meeting a violent and grisly death. Tug-at-the-heartstrings-type of stuff.”

“Oh, Mr. Stortok,” said Alice, “that would never do. I’m just thankful we all got out of there alive.”

“And we might not even yet,” said Sage, “if we keep this absurd book review going any longer.”

“Well, I just think it’s a disappointment, if you ask me,” said Stortok.

“We’re *not* asking you,” said Skat. “So can you *please* let us into the boat?”

“It’s like you had the readers in the palm of your hand,” continued Stortok sullenly, “you let ’em off too easy when you could have crushed ’em like an egg.”

“All I can say,” cried Alice frantically, “is that I’m glad *you’re* not writing the story. Now can you please let us into the ... d ... boat!”

“Ah, that’s the spirit, my girl!” said Stortok, brightening up and taking a swig from the bottle of polignac in his pocket. “You almost *cursed*. Blood, sweat, dirt, cursing—that’s the stuff that makes a good novel in my book.”

“It’s *not* your book,” said Botifarra.

“Mr. Stortok, please!” Alice pleaded, almost

on her knees with desperation. "Any minute now those Tarots could come charging down these steps if they've woken up and discovered our narrow escape."

"That weren't no narrow escape," said Stortok who had now decided to light up his pipe. "That's the most easiest breeziest escape I would ever have the misfortune to read about."

"Look," said Alice with sudden calmness as an idea came to her, "why don't you take us right now in the boat and you can sing us all that lovely song about the girl who looked like the statue of Venus?"

"Oh, yes sir. Please do," said Botifarra and Teen Pathi.

At this, the boatman softened and, beaming with pleasure, reached out his hand to help the girls step into the boat.

"At least you will have the satisfaction of bringing a little more tension into that admittedly rather uneventful escape, Mr. Stortok," said Sage, hurling his ring of keys into the water and mopping his brow with relief as they glided out of the caverns and into the open lake.

"Are we going to get to hear the song, sir?" asked Teen Pathi.

"Yes, but I just got an idea for a great escape," said Stortok. "I noticed that Truco and Sharla's helicopters had flown into Alkort, so I was wondering if we could at least have an incident here where they come flying overhead to capture you, and maybe Alice can zap their gasoline tanks in mid-air with her magic gold ring. That'll make for great action stuff."

"As far as the helicopters are concerned," said Sage, "I took care of those when I did my 'security check' by drilling a few little holes in those very gasoline tanks."

"Way to go, old man," said Skat. "Quick and

simple.”

“Too simple, if you ask me,” said Stortok, glumly. “Thanks to Mr. Sage, the chances of making *something* out of this escape are ruined. The villains are never going to get out of Alkort.”

“That was precisely the objective,” said Skat, “and it’s obvious that neither you, me, nor anyone else here have anything to do with the writing of this plot. Besides, the story’s fine with me the way it is. “

“Me too,” said Alice. “It’s different when you’re actually in a situation like this and when you’re watching it on video night.”

“Well, they’ll never want to make a movie of this, that’s for sure,” grumbled Stortok.

“The song?” chirped Botifarra and Teen Pathi.

Seeing the girls’ eagerness, the boatman swung into his rowing with renewed vigour and sang his “Song of the Vulgar Boatman” with full gusto as his thankful passengers joined in on the chorus, with the exception of Mr. Sage who covered his ears with embarrassment.



After a long and tiring journey from Zwickern to Mayhem with Blackjack driving the Tysiac, he and Alice, Mr. Sage and the seven Hearts crowded into the Queen of Clubs’ apartment where, after the initial exclamations of delight at seeing the Lonely Hearts and meeting some more cards from other suits, the newly released Hearts started excitedly jabbering about the recent adventures.

“I thought that was like, the last *fold* for me when the Tarots hauled us back to the dungeon,” said Teen Pathi, chatting with Celia who immediately felt a kindred spirit in her. “Had to forsake those trump Tippex treatments.”

“I’d like to make an announcement,” said Helvetica, raising her voice and clapping her hands above the hubbub. “As you are probably well aware,

tomorrow we leave from Mayhem Airport at seven o'clock sharp in the evening. The traffic could be quite congested due to it being Christmas Eve, so I would suggest we all bed down early."

*Christmas Eve, tomorrow?* Alice thought as she gasped in shock. *I thought we had a week left at least! This shrinking-time business is really so confusing.*

"Rummy! We need to go!" she said in a tone of utter panic, finding him engrossed in a conversation with pretty Botifarra. "C.C. Leroy! Remember? Tonight he's playing in Lower East Bedlam. It's nine o'clock already. What was the name of the club?"

"Umm, I don't quite remember," said Rummy, somewhat dreamily. "Would you have any idea, Botifarra?"

"Of course she wouldn't, Rum," snapped Alice impatiently. "Sorry, Boti. Oh cribbage, what are we going to do?"

"It was in the *Kacophony* magazine, right?" said Rummy.

"Right," said Alice as she hurriedly dashed off to inquire of Helvetica, Ace, and Blackjack as to the whereabouts of the magazine, only to find that it had been thrown out with the trash along with many other periodicals and junk that Helvetica knew she would have no further need of.

Standing in the hallway at her wits' end, Alice calmed down and asked Joshua.

*The Blue Chip on Shoulder Street.*



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## The Blue Chip

Seeing that the train was already at the platform, Alice and Rummy scrambled down the subway steps and dashed to the turnstile that Rummy was about to jump over as he gave Alice a mischievous wink.

“Are you thinking of not paying for the tickets?” inquired Alice with a disapproving look.

“Ah, me and the gang do it all the time,” said Rummy with a shrug of his shoulders. “Think it’s wrong?”

“For one thing I do not think it is honest,” Alice replied. “And for another I don’t quite see myself attempting such a stunt in these clothes. I can pay with my flash card.”

“Suit yerself, Princess,” mumbled Rummy as he ambled behind Alice who marched over to the ticket machines. “Just thought we’d save time.”

As soon as they boarded the train that appeared to have been waiting patiently for them, its doors slid shut and it rattled off with great speed along the underground tunnels towards their destination.

“Here we are!” announced Rummy, after a number of stops had gone by. “Preference and Fifth St., Lower East Bedlam.”

The two companions hastily jumped off the train



and scaled the steps to the street where they were greeted by torrential rain pouring out of the hazy night sky. After scurrying through some side alleys of this low-life club area, they arrived drenched at the Blue Chip lounge on Shoulder Street where Alice presented her flash card and they managed to squeeze into what amounted to nothing more than a crowded bar with 'standing room only'—a pool table, a row of gambling machines and a stage on which sat a group of musicians consisting of a drummer, a bass player, a pianist, a trumpeter, and a saxophonist.

"Ladies and gentlemen," came an announcement over the microphone, "tonight for your entertainment with his magic guitar, the King of Spades himself ... C.C. Leroy!"

Stepping onto the stage to an enthusiastic reception, was a heavy-set playing card holding a large red electric guitar; his face looked sad and he was already mopping beads of sweat from his furrowed brow as if he had been playing for awhile. He said nothing, but at the introductory signal of a couple of snare cracks from the drummer, immediately launched into an up-tempo instrumental shuffle, arching back and forth and swaying from side to side as he punctuated through the tight rhythm section with stunning phrases on his guitar, grimacing painfully with each note.

Then with a voice that sounded like the hoarse croak of a bullfrog, he started to sing.

*People say when it comes to layin' down  
sorrow and the saddest songs, I am  
the King,*

*Yes, they say when it comes to layin'  
down sorrow and the saddest songs,  
I'll always be the King.*

*But you won't be seein' me around*

*tomorrow, 'cuz I'm checkin' out of everything.*

"That was a li'l' thing called 'Checkin' Out,'" he informed the eager crowd as the drummer brought the number to a stop with a few sharp hits and rolls.

"That was some trump jass," whispered Rummy with a grin as he turned to Alice.

"It's not exactly my type of music," said Alice. "I would find it dreadfully difficult to dance to. I think my brother Brandon would like it, though. He's ever so good on the guitar, too."

After quite awhile of standing enraptured by Leroy's performance, Rummy turned to Alice.

"You're shiverin', Princess," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder. "And your dress is *soakin*! I'm goin' to get you a shot of hot polignac," he added, jutting out his chin and snapping his fingers at the bartender, a slickly dressed menu card.

"Only fizzola for you, sonny," was the offhand response to Rummy's request. "You and your girlfriend here are too young."

"Now wait a minute!" started Rummy.

"It's perfectly all right," whispered Alice. "I'll take whatever is acceptable."

"Big turn out tonight," observed Rummy, sitting down on a stool in an attempt to regain his confidence.

"Yep," said the bartender, as he dried some glasses and set them on a shelf behind him. "It's to be C.C.'s last show."

"Then what is he going to do?" inquired Alice.

"Dunno, rumours have it that he ain't gonna play the guitar no more."

"That's a fold," said Rummy.

"They even say he's thinking of checking out of *everything*."

“Checking out?” said Alice.

“And now for my last number, *ever!*” announced the King of Spades suddenly, who meanwhile had been pleasing the crowd with a couple of songs that they were familiar with. “It’s dedicated to the woman in my life, the one who brought me down to this. The one I couldn’t live with and now I can’t live without.”

Turning up the volume control on his guitar, Leroy started plucking out a wailing solo over the slow pulse of his rhythm section, his huge black fingers bending and trilling the strings dexterously to produce plaintive tones of utmost sorrow.

“He’s so sad,” whispered Alice to Rummy. “And it sounds like his guitar is crying too.”

“That’s what’s so trump about it,” said Rummy.

Finally, Leroy began to sing, answering each line with a few judiciously placed mournful notes on his guitar,

*Once had a woman; prettiest thing I’d  
ever seen,  
Yes, I once had a woman, let me tell you  
she was the sweetest thing I’d ever  
seen.  
I was her only King, ooh, and she was  
my only Queen.*

*Then one day she told me, “C.C., us  
shackin’ up together is a shame an’ a  
sin,  
“Yes, you an’ me livin’ together, I swear  
it’s a shame and a mortal sin.  
“So jus’ pack yo’ bags and hit the streets,  
’cuz I don’t think I should even see yo’  
face agin.”*

*So I fell down on my knees, I said, “Baby,*

*then won't you please be my wife?"*  
*Ooh, I fell down on my knees, I begged*  
*her, "Honey, please won't you be my*  
*wife?"*  
*She said, "I don't need no two-bit guitar*  
*playin' card hangin' 'round here to*  
*complicate my life."*

*So then I took to drinkin' an' tryin' to cry*  
*my blues away,*  
*Yes, with my guitar as my only*  
*companion, I tried to cry my blues*  
*away,*  
*But nothin' worked to ease the pain,*  
*that's why this is my dyin' day.*

Leroy then went into another solo, this one burning with even more melancholic intensity; and as he did so, he stepped off the stage and lumbered through the crowd to the fire escape door at the back of the club, playing as he went.

"Where's he think he's going?" asked Rummy.

"I don't know," said Alice, jumping off her stool. "But something tells me I need to get to him fast."

Pushing through the bewildered crowd who were standing waiting and expecting Leroy to return, Alice threw open the fire escape doors and looked up to see his stooped, forlorn figure making its way up the rain-drenched iron steps to the top of the building.

"Your Majesty!" she cried out.

At this, Leroy turned his head momentarily, a startled look of recognition on his face.

"Yo' Majesty?" he muttered. "Yo' dissin' me?"

"Whatever that means, I don't know, but I think not," replied Alice, as Leroy returned to playing his guitar and trudging up the steps.

"But pray tell me, where are you going?"

Leroy didn't reply and was soon standing on the ledge at the top of the building overlooking the street with the wind and rain whipping against him, still plucking out anguished guitar phrases to the faint accompaniment of his band in the club below.

"Do be careful, your Majesty," urged Alice. "I don't know what you're doing, but you're going to get awfully soggy standing in the rain like this, and that nice guitar is going to get absolutely *ruined*."

Just then there was a lightning flash followed by a crack of thunder.

"Besides that," continued Alice, as she timidly made her way up the steps, "you might get electro ... um ... cuted and have a terrible fall."

Ignoring her, Leroy turned his head upward to the black sky and started singing again.

*Let the storm unleash its fury, let me die  
in the pourin' rain,  
Ooh, let the storm unleash its fury, let me  
perish in the pourin' rain.  
And if a bolt of lightnin' strikes me, I  
believe it'll be my fittin' end.*

*So goodbye, goodbye people, I'm throwin'  
myself down to the street below.*

"No! No! Your Majesty!" screamed Alice as Leroy put one foot out and tottered slightly before withdrawing it.

"What's happening, Princess?"

It was Rummy, clutching an umbrella which he held over Alice's head.

"Oh, it's terrible," wailed Alice. "He's going to ... Rummy, get in the club and borrow a handy from someone. We've got to call Ophelia."

*Yes, goodbye people, I'm throwin' myself*

*down to the street below.*

“Ophelia still loves you, your Majesty!” cried Alice as another streak of lightning flashed and a peal of thunder cracked.

Leroy stopped singing and peered through the rain at Alice who was now standing but a few feet away from him, silhouetted by the ghostly glow of the dim neon light on the roof.

“Yo’ is jus’ bluffin’ me, angel,” he muttered sullenly, bracing himself to take a step forward into open space. “I’ve decided, and no amount of persuadin’ is gonna change my mind.”

“But it’s true, your Majesty, Queen Ophelia feels dreadfully sorry for what she did to you!”

“Then why didn’t she come see me sooner?”

Alice was desperately searching her inner senses for a reassuring answer from Joshua; it came.

*Sing, Alice! I’ll give you the words!*

With a lump in her throat, she stepped closer to the King and started to sing:

*Ophelia’s dreadful sorry for everything  
she did to you,  
Ooh, I said poor Ophelia’s dreadful sorry,  
C.C., for every low-down thing she did  
to you,  
I swear to God your Majesty, ooh, every  
single word I say is true.*

The melody was coming out in a style not unlike Leroy’s, but Alice’s angelic whisper of a voice with her quaint accent caused the King to melt with a gentle smile.

“Can you hear it, Ophelia?” shouted Rummy who had returned holding up a cell phone in the air.

“Sho’ can!” came a voice from the receiver as Alice continued plaintively singing:

*So go on back home to your woman, hold  
her close in your loving arms.*

By the time Alice started singing the second verse and had moved close enough to Leroy to put her arm on his shoulder, to her relief he had stepped back from the ledge and was joining in with his tasteful guitar phrases, his smile having now turned to a wide beam on his face.

*Yes, go on back home to your woman,  
hold her close in your lovin' arms.*

Alice was singing with all the urgency she could muster.

*With that bond of love around you, nothin'  
and no one can do you no harm.  
Yes, with that sweet bond of love around  
you, ooh, I swear nothin' and no one  
can ever do you no harm.*

“Wait!” shouted Rummy, as Alice was about to draw the song to a close. “Ophelia wants to sing too. Keep playing!”

Through the receiver came the Queen of Spades' soulful voice:

*Yes, come on home honey baby, I'll be  
waitin' up fo' yo' call,  
Ooh, please, please, please honey baby, I  
tell ya, I'll be waitin' up fo' yo' call,  
'Cos we gotta date this Christmas  
Eve, yo' an' me together at the  
Woodchopper Man's Ball.*

This drew the song to an end, and the trio of

Leroy, Alice, and Rummy, who was holding the cell phone and the umbrella in the air, fell into each other's arms, laughing and crying while Ophelia whooped and hollered on the handy, promising Leroy a hot meal of buttered chiblets with malt fizzola and "all the sweet lovin' he can handle to make up for lost time."

Suddenly a loud ripple of applause interrupted their rejoicing and they broke off to see the club audience crowded on the fire escape steps, huddled together under umbrellas, smiling and demonstrating various gestures of approval.

After shaking hands with his relieved back-up band and enjoying a round of polignac, Leroy turned to Alice as they, together with Rummy, stepped out of the club and onto the street.

"Yo's an angel, ain't you?" he whispered. "I know it."

"What makes you say that?" said Alice.

"It's crazy, but I had a dream last night that I wuz standin' on a mountaintop, feelin' like bad suit and a voice was tellin' me to throw myself down when suddenly you appeared lookin' jus' like yo' did tonight and you said 'Don't do it!'"

"That's ever so thrilling, your Majesty," said Alice, rubbing her shoulders, "But I'm not an angel."

"It's gonna be hard to convince me of that," said Leroy, taking her hand. "If it wasn't fo' you I wouldn't be standin' here talkin' with ya—I'd be lyin' there dead on this street with amb'lances an' sirens goin' and cops and jass. How can I ever thank you?"

"The best way you can thank me, your Majesty—"

"Say angel, what's with this 'yo' Majesty' thing anyway?"

"Although you may not feel like a King, your Majesty, you truly *are* one in your realm."

"Ma realm?"

"Music," said Rummy. "The King of that there



guitar.”

“That too,” said Alice. “But many people look up to you and respect you, all those people at the Blue Chip tonight for instance, and it would be a sad loss to the world if you had abdicated your throne and thrown away your crown.”

“Yo’ have a point there, angel,” said the King softly. “If there’s anything I can do to help.”

“You can thank me by getting home to your Queen as quickly as you can, your Majesty,” said Alice with a smile, “and being there at the Woodchopper’s Christmas Eve Ball. Here’s an invitation.”

“I will fo’ sure, angel,” said Leroy as he climbed into a taxi, clutching his guitar case, and with a wave and a thankful smile he was gone.



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## A Raucous Place and a Cocktail

**A**fter a few thoughtful moments Rummy turned to Alice.

“Wanna walk home, Princess?”

“What? All the way to Mayhem Park Central? It’s raining.”

“Well at least back to my place. Why not?” said Rummy. “It’s only midnight and we don’t have anything else to do and we couldn’t get any wetter. But there’s somethin’ I want to talk about.”

“Okay, Rum.”

As they started walking, Rummy, holding the umbrella, timidly took Alice’s hand. She could sense that he was having great difficulty mustering up the courage to say what was heavy on his heart.

“Well?” Alice ventured softly. “Do you want to tell me?”

“Okay, this is the straight flush, Princess,” he said, characteristically jutting out his chin as if to bolster his confidence.

Suddenly a car pulled up alongside them, splashing them with dirty rain water from the overflowing gutter.

“Alice! Hey kid!” The window rolled down and a head leaned out; it was a card with a clover design on his three-piece suit. “Remember me?”

Alice stared at his face intently, but being preoccupied about her conversation with Rummy, could not recollect.

“At the airport about a year ago. Remember? I’m Don. Don Casino.”

“Oh, of course,” said Alice. “You did take an invitation to the Celebration tomorrow, didn’t you?”

“Yes I did but ... do you guys need a lift anywhere?”

Alice looked over at Rummy, who shrugged his shoulders.

“That would be awfully nice,” said Alice as Don opened the car door. “It would be lovely to get out of the rain.”

The rain was now pouring more heavily as the car ploughed through the puddles of the Lower East Bedlam streets and despite the vigorous work of the windshield wipers, visibility was becoming increasingly difficult.

“You both want to come back to my place for awhile ’til this eases up?” asked Don.

“Sure,” said Rummy.

A penthouse suite in Lower East Bedlam was not much to speak of, its view from the roof affording nothing in the way of scenic beauty, which Don was quick to admit as they sat down in the living room’s plush black leather sofas.

“Wanna drink?” he asked, standing at a small bar near the French windows that opened out to a swimming pool. “Polignac?”

“Sure,” said Rummy.

“I’ll take a fizzola if you have,” said Alice.

“Trump! And now some music,” said Don as the theme of the “Commission Rhapsody” wafted out from the lavish sound system. “Amanda Tresillo is just *great* on this.”

Suddenly Alice noticed Don’s seemingly overconfident manner was diminishing as he sat in the

couch, put his head back and closed his eyes.

“Not just great,” he said, his eyes remaining closed, “*beautiful*. Yes, I did get your invitation Alice, and I didn’t forget what you said. But I blew it off and things in my business and my life went from bad to worse and I just got ... well ... *mad* at everything. I tried ripping up the invitation.”

“Oh, no!” said Alice.

“So, because business was bad I decided to exploit C.C. Leroy and his decision to ‘check out’ on his last show, which as you probably noticed was a huge crowd draw. And with advance tickets at five hundred Lucres a head, I cleaned up, but inside I felt like doing the same thing as Leroy. Anyways, last night I picked up this chick, Trixie Barr.”

“Trixie! We know her,” said Alice.

“We came back here and got to talkin’ and getting close and she put on this ‘Commission’ CD of Amanda Tresillo. It was the first time I heard it. It just got to me and I boo-hooed like a baby in Trixie’s arms. I started feelin’ bad about using C.C. like that, so tonight I drove down there to see if I could help him change his mind. I got stuck in traffic and got there late. Everyone told me that this chick who looked like Alice in Wonderland had just been there and she’d miraculously stopped Leroy from throwing himself down off the roof. I immediately figured it must have been you, so I asked which direction you’d gone and that’s how come I picked you up.”

“It’s ever so wonderful that we meet again,” said Alice. “But the invitation.”

“I said *I tried* to rip it up. The thing was it *wouldn’t rip*, so I tried throwing it away in the trash but it would reappear in my pocket. This sort of freaked me out and I figured the thing was jinxed, so I tried to burn it. Same thing happened—just reappeared again. This was before I heard the Commission CD, then things started to look clearer.”

“Looks like the rain has eased off some,” said Rummy who, to Alice’s annoyance, had been fidgety throughout Casino’s story.

“You kids wanna do something?” asked Don. “Go dancing?”

“Sure,” said Rummy, jumping to his feet. “The night is young.”

“The night is not so young, Rum,” said Alice. “It’s now one-thirty in the morning.”

“C’mon, Princess, the plane to the Ball is not ’til seven tomorrow evening. We’ve got *decks* of time.”

“I don’t know Rum. I’m just feeling that maybe we shouldn’t—”

“Listen,” Don continued, pouring Rummy another shot of polignac. “I have to do some last-minute biz at one of my clubs. I could take you there, and if you don’t like it I’ll just whisk you home. Simple as that.”

“Yeah,” said Rummy, knocking back his drink. “Mr. Casino is on the same schedule as us as far as catching that plane. What’s the twist?”

Despite her inner misgivings, Alice agreed to go along and soon found herself on the crowded dance floor of a glitzy night club pulsating with ear-splitting Sueca music, as Don Casino proudly introduced her to numerous personalities who had heard of her or seen her on TV.

“You’re charming the pants off them, kid,” he commented with a wry smile as he walked Alice and Rummy to the bar. “Especially with those irresistible curtseys. It’s a clever angle to get what you want.”

“It’s not a clever angle, Casino,” said Rummy. “That’s really *her*. Nothing phoney.”

“Excuse me, sir, but what is this?” asked Alice, staring at a small pink-coloured drink that Don put in her hand.

“A polignac spitzer cocktail.”

“If I may, Mr. Casino, I think I should have a

fizzola. I'm too young to drink this kind of thing. It's not according to the Charter."

"According to the what?"

"It's a *celebration*, Princess!" said Rummy. "At least *taste* it. We've got all the cards. Now we can afford to relax. Cheers."

Alice gingerly took a sip and finding it quite sweet and delicious, quickly downed the glass.

"Whoa, Princess," exclaimed Rummy. "That's the way to go!"

Almost immediately, another glass was in her hand.

*No, Alice!*

"I'm thirsty," she mumbled, and drained its contents in one gulp.

"One for the road!" said Casino with a wink, replacing the empty glass with a full one which Alice, feeling pleasantly light headed, emptied with a giggle.

"One f-f-for the road, two for the t-t-toad," said Alice, swaying to the music which had now turned slow and sensuous. She grinned at Rummy, who seized the opportunity he had been waiting for.

"Wanna dance, Princess?"

"Dance, dance, dance," said Alice blithely as she stumbled into Rummy's arms, allowing him to lead her onto the strobe lit dance floor.

After awhile of dancing close and enjoying the sensation of having Alice lay her head on his shoulder and savouring the scent of her hair, Rummy, his courage being fortified by the polignac, whispered in her ear.

"Are you like ... in love with someone else?"

"Hmmm. Why?"

"I can tell. Somethin' 'bout you when you are quiet, kind of like you're far away thinkin' of someone. You *are*, aren't you?"

She giggled into his shirt. "Yes."

“Matt?”

Alice laughed loudly.

“Of *course* not. He’s a *card* and I’m...” She stopped and gasped in dismay. “Oh, Rum, I’m ever so sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, I meant—”

“It’s okay, Princess. I got the picture and I understand. I was just checkin’.”

Alice was silent, her heart pumping heavily as she floated dizzily in Rummy’s arms, ashamed of what she had blurted out.

“It’s Joshua,” Rummy said at last. “You’re in love with him.”

“How did you know?”

“He just told me. I’ve been hearing his voice since I met you.”

“I do think that’s ever so lovely, Rum. I’ve been praying for you to get to know Joshua. He’s wonderful.” Alice’s words were becoming increasingly slurred as the dizziness intensified. “I’m ... ssh ... sorry if I’ve hurt your feelings, but I sh ... still love you, love you, love you. You’re a dear and precious friend. It’s just ... like, *different*.”

“I know it’s different,” said Rummy, unable to hide the hurt tone in his voice. “I’m not just a dumb piece of paper. I will love you anyway, as a sister, a friend ... whatever.”

“I’m your whatever friend,” Alice sang dreamily and passed out.



Alice was woken up with a painful throbbing headache and the only recollection of the night before being one of leaning over a toilet and heaving violently. She slowly sat up and realised she had been sleeping on a couch in the living room of Don Casino’s apartment and Rummy was peacefully snoring on the carpet next to her. There was a note on the coffee table.

*Alice, gotta go, kid. Last-minute biz. Sorry about the hangover. See you at the airport.  
Don*

Alice looked at the clock in horror.

“Rummy! Rummy! Wake up! It’s four thirty in the afternoon! We were supposed to meet at Helvetica’s apartment and drive to the airport!”



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## The Christmas Angel

**B**reathless after running from the subway station, Alice and Rummy sat down under a tree in Mayhem Park Central across from the Queen of Clubs' apartment.

"We made it," said Rummy.

"I feel better now," said Alice, as she reached in her purse for a handkerchief to wipe her brow. "All fifty-two invitations have gone. Every card has received one, and the flight is in two hours. *Now* I'd like to relax!"

"I didn't get to go back to the hangout and pack some things," said Rummy morosely.

"I don't think that will be at all necessary," said Alice with a smile. "Where we're going you'll have everything you'll ever need and more!"

"Sounds like you're talking about going to Heaven!"

"I suppose you could call it that!"

"When we get there, Princess," said Rummy, hesitantly, "do you think there'd be *any* chance at all that you and me could, like...?"

"Oh no! Where did these come from?" Alice suddenly exclaimed as she noticed two invitations that had fallen out of her purse when she'd pulled out the handkerchief. "There must be some mistake,

maybe the King of Diamonds gave me too many!"

Alice and Rummy ran a quick review listing on a piece of paper all the characters she had met.

"Everyone's checked," said Alice, puzzled.

"Maybe he gave you a couple of extras in case you lost one?" ventured Rummy.

"No. I remember him specifically instructing me to count them. He told me I had fifty-two weeks to get all ... *Fifty-four!*" she exclaimed as she threw her hands up in dismay. "Of course! The Jokers, Hee Hee and Ha Ha! Oh, why didn't I think of them before?"

"Do the Jokers really count?" asked Rummy. "I mean, they don't have a number or a suit or anything."

"Of course they count! I remember now that the King said there were fifty-four invitations, one for each card. Oh dear, what am I going to do now?" Alice said pitifully, shaking her head as she sat looking down at the grass. "And where are you going?"

Rummy had stood up and was walking towards the street.

"I'm going to check out a copy of *Kacophony* magazine. Seeing as it's Christmas Eve, Hee Hee and Ha Ha are for sure going to be doing a show somewhere."

Presently Rummy returned with a magazine, to find Alice quite in the doldrums.

"Well, Princess, looks like there's hope," he said cheerfully, his finger marking a page. "They're on in Upper West Bedlam at the Tribello Theatre."

"So?" said Alice morosely. "It still doesn't give us time to get down there and get to the airport. What if they're not even there until this evening?"

"It says the first show was this afternoon at four thirty. It's now five fifteen."

"Hello? Get *real*, Rum," broke in Alice, slapping her forehead. "It'll take us like, at least an hour and

a half to make it to Mayhem airport in this rush hour traffic. The flight to the party is leaving promptly at seven just for your information.”

Alice stared at her hand and noticed the gold ring flash.

“I beg your pardon, Sir Rummy,” she said softly, as she looked into his downcast eyes. “My manner has been most inconsiderate and unbecoming.”

*I just want to apologise and it comes out like this!* she thought with a sigh.

“Trump! That’s the Alice I know,” said Rummy, kneeling beside her and taking her hand. “I was beginning to worry there for a moment, Princess.”

“Go on ahead and meet the others to catch the plane, Rummy. I shall go and get the Jokers.”

“You go into Bedlam alone on Christmas Eve, Princess? Never! It’s already getting dark.”

“I’ll be all right, believe me. I know it.”

“Gut feelin’?”

Alice nodded. “Yes, I do feel a sense of reassurance that...”

Rummy suddenly interrupted her sentence with a kiss, leaving Alice flushed as he jumped up and stammered a hasty goodbye.

“See you at the do, Princess,” he called back as he ran towards the street.

“Farewell, my prince!”

Finding a solitary spot in the park, Alice lay down on the grass, stretched her arms out in front of her and rubbed her gold ring. Within moments she was flying above the trees of Mayhem Park, thankful that night was falling, making it easier to avoid attracting attention. She found it now quite simple to guide her flight by pointing her outstretched hands in the direction she wanted to go, and had also discovered that she could regulate her speed by the intensity with which she rubbed the ring, which proved to be tiring at first until she learned that a

few gentle rubs could keep her cruising steadily for quite awhile.

By taking careful note of the street signs, she was soon flying above the din of Upper West Bedlam, gaudily decorated with bright Christmas lights, a nearby streamer of which momentarily blinded her as she began to make her descent to the street. Suddenly she felt herself caught by something that had hooked onto the bow at the back of her dress, and as her eyes adjusted to the lights she found herself suspended on the top of a giant, brilliantly lighted, gold painted Christmas tree.

"Look, Mommy!" exclaimed a little girl Christmas card who was pointing up at Alice from the passing thron below. "The fairy princess just flew down and landed on the top of the Christmas tree!"

"That's lovely, Honey," said her mother, keeping her eyes on the shop windows as she hurriedly pulled the child on her way.

It wasn't long however, before a crowd had gathered around the tree and was gazing up at Alice who was helplessly suspended aloft as nearby loudspeakers played a song called "Christmas Angel."

"Beautiful," said one spectator. "It actually moves. Do you think it's real?"

"No," said another with a tone of authority. "It's obviously one of those new cyber creations."

"A very novel idea," said another.

*This requires drastic measures,* came the voice, who Alice now recognised as Joshua's. *They're expecting a show. Now don't be afraid to give them one. Point your hands upwards and use the ring!*

She did so, and after rubbing the ring for a few seconds, the straps of her dress tore loose from the tree as Alice soared up into the night sky where she performed a series of loops and dives before floating gracefully down to the pavement where she stood for a moment before the flabbergasted onlookers.

## THE CHRISTMAS ANGEL

“Happy Christmas!” she said with a curtsey, then dashed through the crowd and off down the street.



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## Laugh and Lie Down

**A**fter asking numerous directions, Alice found her way through the bustling throngs of last minute Christmas shoppers, to the Tribello Theatre where a garish billboard emblazoned the show's attributes:

*"Crease up with the raucous 'Jokers Wild' team of Hee Hee and Ha Ha in 'Die Laughing!'—a side-splitting musical farce that will have you flipping in the aisles!"*

As Alice bought a ticket with her flash card, she was informed that the first half of the performance was almost over and minutes away from an intermission, during which she took the opportunity to make her way to the stage while the audience mingled in the foyer for snacks and restroom breaks.

Due to the unusual nature of her apparel, the bouncer in charge of the backstage door assumed that Alice was part of the cast and deferentially allowed her to walk freely through.

*That's them!* thought Alice as she recognised the peals of cackling laughter that came from one of the dressing rooms, which she entered nervously and found the Jokers cavorting around foolishly, dressed in what looked to Alice like Pied Piper costumes of red, white, and black. They each wore a floppy hat

having three long points with a bell attached to each one and soft, pointed booties with a small bell at the toe.

“Ooh, what have we here?” said one of them, who had been bending and doing somersaults on the dressing-room table.

“A fairy princess,” said the other who had stopped giggling and hopping around on one foot, to bow in mock reverence, to which Alice responded with a curtsy.

“My name is Alice,” she said as she extended her hand.

“I’m Hee Hee,” said one. “Always good for a giggle!”

“I’m Ha Ha,” said the other. “Always good for a laugh!”

“I don’t want to spoil your fun,” said Alice timidly, “but I have something really serious to tell you.”

“Serious?” said Hee Hee. “What does that mean?”

“It means something that you can’t laugh about.”

“*Can’t* laugh about?” said Ha Ha. “That’s impossible.”

“What do you mean?” said Alice.

“It means that no matter what subject you bring up,” said Hee Hee, “there’s always *something* we can find in it to laugh about.”

“I don’t agree,” said Alice. “I can think of lots of things that you shouldn’t laugh about.”

“Ah hah!” said Ha Ha. “You said ‘*shouldn’t* laugh about,’—that’s a far cry from saying ‘*can’t* laugh about.’”

“Well, I think it’s the same,” retorted Alice. “If you think of something to laugh about a subject that you shouldn’t laugh about, then I don’t think I can laugh because it won’t be funny.”

*Oh dear,* she thought. *I’m getting myself mixed up.*

“That’s precisely our job,” said Hee Hee. “To take

a subject that you shouldn't laugh about and make people laugh about it. And we've never failed yet, have we, Ha Ha?"

"No, we've hit the jackpot every time."

"Well, in my opinion," said Alice indignantly, "that doesn't say as much for your talents as for the wretched state of your audiences. And you're acting like a couple of imps."

"Hey, watch the malice, Alice," said Hee Hee with a snigger.

"*Malice Alice!*" shrieked Ha Ha, creasing up with giggles. "Ooh, that's *rich!*"

"Do excuse me, that was impertinent of me I know," said Alice. "I'm sorry."

"Impertinent and impudent," said Hee Hee.

"Impolite," said Ha Ha.

"Improper," said Hee Hee.

"All together very '*imp*'-ish of you!" said Ha Ha. "So who's the imp now?"

At this the two Jokers fell on the floor and rolled around in another fit of giggles; Alice was not amused.

"She's not laughing," said Hee Hee. "I get the *impression* she's *implacable!*"

"Maybe the joke hasn't sunk in. *She's impervious!*" said Ha Ha.

"*Imp*'-ish," said Hee Hee looking wide-eyed at Alice with tears of mirth running down his face. "Get it? *Impertinent, impudent.*"

"Of *course* I get it," said Alice, testily. "I'm just not in a laughing mood right now."

"Are you *implying* that you didn't think it was funny?"

"I'm sure it's very funny," said Alice.

"Then why aren't you laughing?"

Alice didn't answer, feeling very much at a loss as to how to get the conversation onto the business at hand.



"We've failed with this one," said Ha Ha, looking uncharacteristically downcast. "That's a first."

Just then the stage manager poked his head round the door and announced that they were back on in ten minutes.

"Listen, Jokers," pleaded Alice, "we don't have much time, and I've got to get you to the Christmas Eve celebration of the birthday of the Woodchopper's son."

"Why didn't you say so?" said Hee Hee.

"What?" said Alice, puzzled.

"We'd heard through the playing-card grapevine about this big event and a whole lot of cards were splitting town for it," said Ha Ha. "They all had invitations, so we figured we were out of the shuffle 'cuz we're Jokers."

"Out of the *shuffle*," chuckled Hee Hee. "Get it?"

"Whatever made you think that?" inquired Alice.

"You know," said Hee Hee, "being Jokers, we don't belong to any suit and we don't have any number or status. We're even left out of some games altogether. On top of that, no one takes us seriously."

"I wonder why," said Alice.

"So we just laughed it off and chalked it up to us being *ostracised* when it seemed obvious we weren't invited. But that's okay. People pay big Lucre for us to entertain them, so you can say we're laughing all the way to the bank."

"He who slarfs lars, slarfs lousist,' as they say!" chortled Ha Ha.

"But you *are* invited," said Alice, reaching into her purse. "These invitations are especially for you. You *do* want to come, don't you?"

"I suppose so," said Hee Hee, huffily.

"If you twist our arms," said Ha Ha.

Acting on a spur of initiative, Alice grabbed an arm of each one and escorted them hurriedly

out of the dressing room, down the corridor then out through the backstage entrance and onto the parking lot.

“This girl means business,” said Hee Hee, catching his breath.

“And what is she up to now?” said Ha Ha, tittering as he looked down at Alice who was lying face down on the ground with her arms outstretched in front of her.

“Get on my back!” she commanded.

“Get *on* my back!” cackled Hee Hee. “That’s a new *twist* to the common expression.”

“*Twist!*” laughed Ha Ha. “That’s a *crease up!* Hee Hee, you’re such a *card!*”

“I mean it!” said Alice, sternly. “Both of you get on my back and hold on tight.”

The Jokers complied, and as Alice rubbed her ring they were soon floating above the theatre with Hee Hee and Ha Ha unsuccessfully attempting to hide their fear with nervous giggles.

“Don’t worry,” said Alice in spite of her own apprehension as they swept up into the night sky. “Relax and enjoy the ride!”

As hard as she tried, Alice could not remember the directions she had taken with Margot on their journey together to the Chalets, and consequently she grew quite worried until she heard Joshua’s voice: *Just keep your arms outstretched in front of you and let yourself go.*

Alice relaxed and as she did so she felt her arms being drawn like the hands of a magnetic compass in the direction she was supposed to go.

“Let’s sing a song,” said Hee Hee.

“That would be lovely,” said Alice.

“Let’s do the one that always brings the house down in our act,” said Ha Ha.

“You mean ‘Laugh It Off’?” said Hee Hee.

“Of course!”

“Okay! One, two, three...

*When something serious comes around,  
Just laugh it off.  
Never allow it to bring you down,  
Just laugh it off.  
Ha ha ha ha, hee hee hee;  
Shrug your shoulders, laugh with glee.  
This is our philosophy,  
Just laugh it off.*

*Should a need to contemplate begin,  
Just laugh it off.  
Fill your face with a big fat grin,  
And laugh it off.  
Ha ha ha ha, hee hee hee;  
Live your life hilariously,  
Don't take anything seriously,  
Just laugh it off.  
Ha ha ha ha, hee hee hee;  
Shrug your shoulders, laugh with glee.  
This is our philosophy,  
Just laugh it off.”*

“That’s an awful song,” said Alice. “I mean I *love* to laugh, but I think that’s taking it to an extreme. I think there are times when we need to be serious.”

“Here we go,” said Hee Hee. “Are we going to get on this *shouldn’t* laugh and *can’t* laugh thing again?”

“That shan’t be necessary,” said Alice, curtly. “I just don’t fully agree with the song.”

“Like what in particular?” said Ha Ha.

“Like not taking *anything* seriously.”

“I tell you what, let’s play a game,” said Hee Hee. “You think of different things that we *shouldn’t* laugh about, and we’ll think of something about it that we *can* laugh about.”

"I think that'd turn out to be a dreadful game. I'm not interested, thank you very—"

Alice lost her balance and shouted in alarm. "Ha Ha, what do you think you're doing?"

Ha Ha was giggling and swinging in the air, holding onto the hem of Alice's skirt with one hand.

"That's *dangerous!*" cried Alice. "Get up on my back at once!"

Ha Ha ignored her and Hee Hee followed suit by hanging in the air while holding onto Alice's collar, laughing madly and tickling her under her arms as he did so. This caused her to flounder clumsily in the air, which made her manoeuvring of the flight quite difficult as they were now entering thick snow flurries, resulting in Alice tensing up and rubbing her ring more vigorously than was necessary.

"OH NO!" Alice suddenly screamed as she watched the ring fall from her finger toward the thick snow-capped forests far below, making her immediately lose altitude, so that she, along with the petrified Jokers whose cackles had now turned to shrieks of panic, plummeted downwards through the icy air.



Alice opened her eyes, her head was spinning and she was lying on her back, freezing cold, with snowflakes gently falling on her face. She gazed at them swirling in the dark sky above, and for a few moments she had no idea where she was, until she looked over to her side where lay Hee Hee and Ha Ha, face down in the snow. She attempted to stand up, but because it seemed to her as though the ground was swaying with the strong winds, she sat back down, when she realised that they had landed on the top of a tall, snow-laden fir tree.

She reached over and shook the Jokers who moaned pitifully as they regained consciousness.

"Where are we?" inquired Hee Hee groggily.

"I haven't the foggiest," Alice replied. "Except that we're stuck on the top of a tree."

"How did we get *here*?" groaned Ha Ha.

"It's all on account of your foolishness," said Alice, "and the gold ring which was our only means of transportation is lost."

"It's cold," said Hee Hee.

"And I'm hungry," said Ha Ha.

"It jolly well serves you right," Alice continued angrily. "It will take nothing short of a miracle to get us to the Woodchopper's celebration now. Can you find something to laugh about in *this*?"

The Jokers sat speechless and Alice, who could restrain herself no longer, burst into tears, which made them feel very ashamed of themselves.

"I have to admit," mumbled Hee Hee at length, "that I find our 'laugh it off' philosophy quite inadequate at the present moment. Never thought I'd ever be one to apologise for anything, but I'm ... er ... sorry Alice."

"Me too," said Ha Ha. "I wish there was something I could do."

"One thing we *can* do is help the poor girl not to catch a death of cold," said Hee Hee. "And that is by the two of us leaning on each other to form a tent over her."

"Good idea," said Ha Ha, and the two cards propped themselves up face to face against each other to make an A-frame shelter under which Alice thankfully crawled.

"Thank you, Jokers," she said, looking up at their faces with an apologetic smile. "But what about you? You must be freezing too."

"We're cold, but we can take it better than you," said Hee Hee, bravely. "We can afford top quality lamination, you know."

"Something else we can do," said Alice softly, "is pray."

Half expecting this suggestion to be met with scorn, Alice was pleasantly surprised to find that the Jokers, being humbled by this recent turn of events, responded with utmost respect.

"An excellent suggestion," said Hee Hee, "although I've never prayed in my life."

"Me neither," said Ha Ha. "I don't know how."

"That's all right," said Alice, gently. "If you don't mind, I'll go ahead and pray and you can learn from me."

"You have an *improvised* tent now," said Hee Hee, "so you could start a little *impromptu* tent revival right here!"

"Just you and a coupr'a praying cards," said Ha Ha as he stifled a giggle. "Sorry."

"Dear Hee Hee and Ha Ha," laughed Alice, "I'm sorry, too, for my outburst back there. I suppose we *could* use a little humour around here under these circumstances!"

With that, Alice closed her eyes and prayed a heartfelt prayer asking that somehow, by a miracle, they could make it to the celebration.

"Now let's be quiet and listen," said Alice softly. "Whatever you hear inside, say it."

There was silence for a few seconds before Ha Ha spoke in a whisper: "Shake the tree, shake the tree. Make haste, climb down and shake the tree. Put your faith and trust in Me, Make haste, climb down and shake the tree."

"Very well," said Alice, "let's go!"

The Jokers would have had no difficulty making their way through the rugged branches and down the prickly trunk of the giant pine tree; but Alice found her cumbersome attire entirely impractical for such an endeavour and was thankful for the assistance of the playing cards, who suddenly decided to hold hands and form an A-frame parachute which, as Alice held onto their feet, allowed her to float gently

to the ground.

“It would take a hurricane to shake this thing,” said Hee Hee gazing up at the tree that stood towering over them.

“That’s where faith comes in,” said Alice, as she stepped forward, grasped its huge trunk with her tiny hands and started shaking it vigorously.

To the astonishment of all, including Alice herself, the tree became like a willowy reed in her hands as it shook violently, bringing drifts of snow tumbling down from its branches onto the three companions below. All of a sudden, something small and hard hit Alice on the head and bounced into the snow at her feet. She looked down, and there glistening magically in the darkness was the precious gold ring!

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## Queen Alice

The welcoming lights of Theo's and Margot's chalets greeted the dishevelled team of Alice and the two very subdued Jokers as they floated down through the softly falling snow into the forest clearing. Alice was about to land when she noticed that not a soul was around, but she could hear lively music coming from the distant village.

"The celebration must have already begun," she said sadly, as they started flying towards the sounds of the festivities. "I hope we haven't missed too much."

"At least we're here," said Hee Hee.

"Here, here," said Ha Ha with a half-hearted chuckle. "Get it? Here, here—hear hear?"

"Yes, but it's not funny," said Hee Hee.

"I know," mumbled Ha Ha.

Even the surrounding village streets were alive with crowds of people that were enjoying the various stands and stalls that offered everything from barbecued chiblets to prize-winning games and fizzola-drinking contests, as it seemed that the hall was not big enough to contain all the people that had come for the event.

After touching down in the feed lot at the back of the building, Alice and the two Jokers squeezed



through the crowd and made their way to the stage at the back of the giant hall that was decorated with coloured streamers and banners, boughs of holly, sprigs of mistletoe, and elaborate wreaths of all types of dried flowers.

A full orchestra, which included the white mice musicians that Queen Britannica had engaged for her Ball exactly one year before, began the majestic introduction to the "Commission Rhapsody" as Theophilus the Woodchopper stepped onto the stage and took the microphone.

The music became softer, and with a voice that was trembling with emotion Theo spoke to the hushed audience.

"This occasion is of utmost significance and a dream come true for Heilige and me, and I believe to all of ye here, a fulfilment of many prayers. There are many I desire to thank, whose contributions and support were indispensable towards making this mission a success. But methinks everyone would agree that most of the credit should be bestowed upon one who with dedication and singleness of purpose, suffered many a hardship and hath sacrificed her time, health, and strength to make this special night a reality.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Alice Godley."

The audience responded with such an ovation of whistles, shouts, and loud applause that Alice felt like running out of the door, but she could not refuse Theo who eagerly beckoned her to step up to the stage.

"I wish to give thee something as a reminder to everyone of thy love, bravery and place in My Kingdom. Come forward, children."

With great dignity, two young children, a boy and a girl, stepped slowly out of the wings, one carrying a large red velvet cushion on which lay a small golden tiara and the other a crimson cloak edged with white

ermine.

“It’s thy coronation, Queen Alice,” said Theo with a tear in his eye as he took the small crown and placed it on her head.

*A Queen? Me?* Alice thought as she looked around at the audience and her heart skipped a beat to see Joshua sitting with Heilige in the special reserved box situated in the wall at her left. With a tender look and a smile, Joshua communicated with her.

*Remember? ‘Gracious, loving, and kind to all whether rich or poor, and she must have poise.’ Yes, Alice. You have all the qualities necessary to be a queen.*

“All hail to the teen queen!” proclaimed Joshua to the entire audience.

Alice felt her tears flow hot on her cheeks, and she stood speechless as Theo took the cloak and draped it on her shoulders.

At Theo’s signal, Mr. Sage stepped reverently up to the microphone, opened up the red book, and with great emotion read a passage from “Prayer for A Queen,” followed by more applause.

“I would very much like you to join me, Queen Alice,” said Theo, “in making the presentation.”

“H-h-hey, but sir,” said Alice, “I’m not, like, eloquent. It’s like a *major*-type trial to think of something speechy-like to say right now.”

A faint ripple of laughter went through the audience.

“Oh cribbage, Mr. Theo,” she continued, “I’m messing this up like, *big time*. It’s just not coming out right.”

*What is happening?* thought Alice, blushing with humiliation as the audience’s amusement grew, *of all the times on this whole trip I needed to speak in that old-fashioned English, it’s now. I just don’t sound like a queen.*

She looked up helplessly at Joshua, who winked

and gave her another gentle smile.

“Whatever it is thou art doing,” said Theo, “the audience is loving it! So just keep going!”

“This is *killing* me, you guys,” said Alice to the crowd as her heart pounded furiously inside, “but on the behalf of Theo and Heilige I wish to present to Joshua, on this the night of his big birthday bash, his long-lost, beloved *deck of cards!*”

Although the audience responded warmly, Alice felt mortified, but before running backstage to cry her eyes out, she managed to muster up a smile and extend her hand to the wings as the orchestra went into the second movement of the “Commission Rhapsody” entitled “The Patience Waltz.”

Smiling and looking their best with a fresh coat of lamination, the set of cards trooped onto the stage and set up in a Solitaire formation with their backs turned towards the audience. Then one by one they turned around, and danced gracefully over to a card that preceded them from a suit of the opposite colour and stood swaying in front of them. The meticulously choreographed routine, which was designed to play out as in a game of Patience, continued until all the cards were finally standing in descending order in their four rows of suits, with the Kings at the front and the Aces at the back.

The cards bowed courteously to the audience’s enthusiastic reaction, and any feelings of chagrin that Alice suffered from her introductory speech were quickly dissolved at the sight of Joshua’s expression of sheer enjoyment.

“And now,” said Theo, “in order for me to be able to join my wife and my son in the box where I can enjoy the rest of tonight’s show, I will turn over the M.C. duties to Sir Earnest Brainwave.”

“Sir Earnest Brainwave?” whispered Alice as she stood with him in the wings. “I didn’t know you had a *title!*”

“Little did you know...,” he said quietly with a wink as he stepped out to take the microphone from Theo.

“That you had entertained ‘princes walking as servants upon the earth,’” finished Queen Margot, who was standing behind Alice.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” announced Sir Earnest, “in case thou hast noticed their absence during the last act and in order to spice up the proceedings with a little comic relief, we’d like to bring on an uproarious duo of cards. Put thine hands together and give a warm round of applause for the *Jokers Wild!*”

The Jokers looked at one another, stunned.

“No!” said Hee Hee.

“We *can’t!*” said Ha Ha.

“Of course you can,” said Alice.

“Tell ‘em I’ve broken my funny bone,” said Hee Hee.

“Tell them I’ve burst my jocular vein,” said Ha Ha.

“Look, Jokers,” said Alice firmly, “I will do nothing of the sort. Everyone will be expecting it from you. They’ll be awfully disappointed if you don’t, and Joshua will want you to make him laugh as well.”

“Joshua will?” chorused the Jokers.

“Of course,” said Alice. “He’ll enjoy it ever so much. Just don’t make jokes about things you shouldn’t laugh about.”

“That’s the problem,” said Hee Hee, ruefully. “We’ve laughed so much about *everything*, that we’ve forgotten what the things are that we shouldn’t laugh at.”

“Tell you what,” said Alice, “I’ll stand in the front and I’ll give you a signal if you start to make a joke that’s out of the Spirit.”

“Out of the Spirit?” asked Ha Ha.

“You know, if you start making a joke that’s in bad taste. Okay?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” chorused the Jokers as they started up the steps at the side of the stage.



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## Pun My Word!

**Y**ou know, a funny thing happened on the way to the Woodchopper's Ball," announced Hee Hee as he took hold of the microphone.

"What was it?" asked Ha Ha. "Tell our audience out there."

"I met a big feller with an axe to grind," said Hee Hee.

There was silence from the audience.

"Get it? A big *feller!*"

Still there was silence except for a distinct clearing of the throat from Mr. Sage, followed by an announcement.

"One of the definitions of 'fell' according to the ... well I will not say which dictionary, it's a matter of some controversy..."

"Controversy!" called out Helvetica.

"No, it's *controversy!*" shouted Ophelia.

"I'm sorry," said Sage, "to have started such a contro ... debate. But one definition of *fell* is to chop or cut down a tree. So I assume the joke is a play on words, a *pun* if you will. And to 'have an axe to grind' means..."

"Anyway, this big *feller's* name was Jack," continued Hee Hee. "He told me his wife *wood* lose her *timber* and *bark* at him."

"She *wood bark* at him! What for?"

"For walking like a bear."

"What did she say?" said Ha Ha.

"Don't *lumber*, Jack!"

A smile of relief showed on Hee Hee's face to hear a few chuckles from the audience.

"I think we need to get on with the show," said Ha Ha.

"Yes," said Hee Hee. "Otherwise we *wooden* have time for the other *axe*! And that *wood* never do, *wood* it?"

Suddenly Alice burst out in a giggle. "I get it!" she exclaimed over the ripple of laughter that followed. "Time for the other *axe*! Meaning the other *acts*, a-c-t-s. Now *that's* funny."

"Alice," said Ha Ha, "come on up here! Chop, chop! We're going *out on a limb* here and we need something to get this off the ground. Ladies and gentlemen, our heroine of the hour, Miss Alice Godley."

"She's a queen now, remember," whispered Ha Ha soberly.

"I'm so sorry, ladies and gentlemen, *Queen Alice*!"

*Oh no! What can I do? I'm not a comedienne!* thought Alice, looking around nervously as the crowd let out loud cheers and applause. But despite herself, she stepped up onto the stage and gracefully curtsyed to the delight of the audience.

"Can I *axe* you a question, your Majesty?" said Hee Hee.

"You may."

"What did the tree say to the Woodchopper?"

"I don't know," said Alice.

"Leaf me alone," chuckled Ha Ha.

"What do you call a bunch of logs floating down the river?" said Hee Hee.

"I don't know," said Alice.

"Swimming trunks!" howled Ha Ha.

Alice giggled. "Yes, that *is* funny."

"Yes," said Hee hee after waiting for the laughter to die down. "That one usually gets the crowds *cutting* up!"

"Unless they haven't *twigged*," said Ha Ha, creasing with mirth.

"Maybe it just took awhile before they saw the joke," said Alice.

"*Saw* the joke?" said Hee Hee. "Good one, Alice! But they're not supposed to *saw* a joke. They're supposed to *see* a joke."

"See saw, see saw!" laughed Ha Ha, who was holding his sides and rolling on the floor.

Alice looked questioningly up at Joshua, who gave her a thumbs up sign.

*Keep it up! Just watching this whole scene is hilarious!*

"Well, without any more ado," said Hee Hee.

"*Ado, ado, Auf Wiedersehen, goodbye*," sang Ha Ha.

"We want to introduce the next act," continued Hee Hee, looking frantically over at Sir Earnest Brainwave who was standing in the wings, "which is—"

Earnest quickly stepped forward and took the microphone,

"Which is," he announced, hastily looking over a piece of paper, "ah yes, another dynamic duo. Let's hear it for C.C. and Ophelia Leroy, the King and Queen of Spades!"

"This is a number that used to go down real good in the Funkyland show," said Ophelia as the band kicked into a medium up-tempo groove while Celia, Gin, Rummy, Nitty and Gritty took their places as back up singers in front of a microphone. "But C.C. and me worked the lyrics a little to make it mo' apropos for the occasion. It's called 'You Wanna



Know who's Boss?"

Twisting her cardboard frame in time to the beat, Ophelia looked sternly at C.C. as he plucked out rhythmical patterns on his guitar, and let rip with her strident and commanding singing voice,

*I'm here to make it plain that it ain't you  
Who's callin' the shots around here;  
Give credit where it's due.  
I ain't givin' yo' chauvinistic macho ego a  
boost,  
So don't be getting' no big ideas 'bout  
tryin' to rule the roost.*

*You wanna know who's boss?  
(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
You wanna know who's really the King?  
(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
Without whom we'd all be at a loss  
As to how to live and have our being.*

After a short interlude featuring C.C. piercing through with a few aching wails on his guitar, he ambled up to the microphone, grinned sheepishly as he looked into Ophelia's eyes, and started to croak.

*Seems I need to make it plain that it ain't  
you  
Who's layin' the law around here,  
And who I cow tow to.  
So don't you give me that feministic  
women's libber stuff;  
I ain't about to be bossed around by a  
woman actin' tough.*

*You wanna know who's boss?  
(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
You wanna know who's really the King?*

PUN MY WORD!

*(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
Without whom we'd all be at a loss,  
As to how to move and have our being.*

Ophelia and C.C. then shared the microphone to sing together as they looked up at Joshua who was beaming and bopping back and forth in his seat, along with King Pedro, Queen Margot, and Dave, who at Joshua's invitation had now joined him in the box.

*I hope we've made it plain it ain't either  
of us  
Who's really in charge around here;  
It's mighty obvious.  
By now our marital situation woulda  
been a total wreck,  
Without our beloved Joshua being the  
Master of this deck.*

*You wanna know who's boss?  
(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
You wanna know who's really the King?  
(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
Without him we'd all be at a loss,  
As to how to live and have our being.*

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Ophelia, pointing her hand in Joshua's direction, "let's give a round of applause to the man himself!"

Her request was met with a thunderous ovation to which Joshua stood and bowed graciously as the audience joined the performers in singing a repeat of the chorus.

*You wanna know who's boss?  
(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
You wanna know who's really the King?*

*(You wanna know? You wanna know?)  
Without him we'd all be at a loss,  
As to how to move and have our being.  
Without him we'd all be at a loss,  
As to how to live and have our being.*

After the song died down, Celia Spade stepped forward and delivered a moving performance of “King of Hearts” to a hushed audience.

“And I’m so glad I found him,” she softly announced while the music faded, and blew a kiss to King Pedro whose tears Margot was gently wiping as they rolled down his cheeks into his beard.

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## happy Birthday!

The show continued without a hitch as a variety of acts followed, which included Mr. Sage expressively quoting from memory some of his favourite poems and passages appropriate to the occasion which he had selected from numerous books; Trixie Barr performing a burlesque which included a comedy routine and a bawdy music hall song, which to her delight was met with much warm appreciation by Joshua; a trapeze act by Botifarra and Skat; a mime from Madame de Deuce; a magic show from 'Jack the Shifter' which turned out to be Jacques Truncheon in disguise; a rap number featuring Bone Ace on a trampoline and a surprising lion-training act with Teen Pathi.

The younger element in the crowd, including Alice, especially enjoyed a set of Juan and Marcos' own compositions performed by the Lonely Hearts.

"This stuff is trump," whispered Twinkie to Alice as they stood in the wings watching the band perform. "Miles above in altitude compared to what they were doing in Krypkillie."

"Must be because now they're singing what they believe," said Alice.

"For our last number," announced Juan in his droll tone of voice, "with the help of the orchestra,

we'd like to bring Queen Alice up to sing her own composition, a favourite of ours: 'I Think I've Been the Answer to Somebody's Prayer.'"

Being accustomed to many such surprises in recent months, Alice stepped out onto the stage with only slight twinges of nervousness, which faded as soon as she was met with Joshua's reassuring smile, and she delivered a heart-touching rendition of her song, her soft voice captivatingly enhanced by the lush, heavenly strings of the orchestra.

As the last chorus burst into a crescendo, Alice looked around the audience and noticed to her surprise a couple of friends she had made during her adventures, Sam and Mr. Stortok, who were visibly moved by her performance.

*We saw darkly through the looking glass,  
but now we understand,  
And our dreams are now reality in this  
our Wonderland.  
I don't believe it's merely chance that I  
should meet you here;  
I know I've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer.  
I don't believe it's merely chance we're all  
together here.  
I know we've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer.  
I know we've been the answer to  
somebody's prayer."*

"And now Alice would like to sing her recently penned number," said Juan over the applause. "It's a trump little opus dedicated to our dear Joshua."

Alice was aghast.

"Juan, I—"

"We heard her getting it one night in Queen Helvetica's apartment, so as a surprise for her, we

Lonely Hearts worked together on the music for it. It's called 'Joshua, You Are, You Are.' Hope it meets with your approval, your Majesty," he added, giving Alice a grin while he strummed the opening bars on his acoustic guitar.

The rest of the band kicked in with a laid back, but insistent and sensual Sueca-style groove, which caused Alice to feel a little awkward due to her attire, which she felt did not match the music, until Celia, who had sensed her reservations and changed into similar clothes, stepped onto the stage behind her and began jerking and bending to the beat.

As she took the microphone, Alice felt herself instinctively moving to the rhythm and, looking over at Celia, saw that she was in perfect synchronization with her every move, to a degree that no amount of choreography practice could have achieved.

Following a nod from Juan, Alice began singing.

*I heard your voice, before I knew  
This still small voice would turn out to be  
you.*

*I felt your love inside of me,  
Before I knew just whose this love could  
be,*

*Mmmm, before I knew just whose this  
love could be.*

*Long before your dark brown eyes  
Inflamed my cheeks and gave me  
butterflies,*

*My heart was yours and you came in,  
And I felt your presence deep within.*

*Ooh, I felt your lovin' presence deep  
within.*

*Joshua, you are, you are  
The one I want by far, by far.*

*Joshua, you are, you are  
The sweetness that no hate can sour.  
My inner light, my morning star —  
Joshua, you are, you are, you are.*

The band then went into a long instrumental musical refrain during which Alice and Celia moved with such wild dance motions that even Ophelia who was watching from the wings expressed a little concern.

“I sho’ do like to dance,” she said with an embarrassed smile, “and I bin accused of such things in my time, but those two kids sho’ are pushin’ the envelope! Although Joshua himself seems to be thoroughly enjoyin’ it.”

“I must admit that those motions *are* overtly suggestive,” said Mr. Sage.

“Excuse me, sir, but that’s a contradiction in terms, isn’t it?” said Rummy, his eyes fixed on Alice, who had started singing the last verse.

*Now that I’ve abandoned all,  
To be surrendered to your beck and call,  
Take and use me as you will,  
For every wish you want me to fulfil,  
Mmmm, every wish you want me to fulfil.*

*Joshua, you are, you are  
The one I love by far, by far.  
Joshua, you are, you are  
Perfection that no hate can mar;  
My inner light, my morning star  
Joshua you are, you are, you are.  
Joshua you are, you are, you are.*

Following the immense reaction to Alice’s performance, King Pedro stepped up to read one of his sonnets dedicated to Queen Margot, who then

treated the audience to the dazzling final act, which featured her and the Hearts in a ballet presentation of Alice's quest set to the music of the "Commission Rhapsody." This was met with a standing ovation as Sir Earnest Brainwave announced that it was midnight and invited Joshua to the stage. While the orchestra played the music, the performers and the audience sang with roof-raising gusto.

*Happy Birthday to you,  
Happy Birthday to you.  
Happy Birthday dear Joshua.  
Happy Birthday to you!*

"Thank you, thank you," said Joshua, raising his arms to quiet the applause. "I will not delay the moment you have all been waiting for with a long speech, except to say that this is a momentous day for me, a day I have been long awaiting. I could not have wished for anything more.

"I want to thank you all as a body for your prayers, without which the mission would have failed, and I will be giving more personal commendation to each of you individually later on tonight and during the following days. But now, the banquet is ready, the food is hot, so eat, drink, and enjoy. Thank you again."

The sumptuous feast that was laid out on long tables consisted of hundreds of varieties of, you guessed it ... *chiblets*, prepared in an assortment of ways from exotic and spicy to cold cuts. And the drinks? There was fizzola of course, ranging from huge kegs distilled in various degrees to bottles of it containing a wide range of flavours from creamy chocolate to fruit, and for those so inclined there was an ample amount of barrels of polignac and root beer.

Although she was very hungry, Alice had diffi-



culty eating her food as she was so besieged by the guests and the villagers desirous to meet her and extend their congratulations, that she put her plate down and merely sipped a small glass of fizzola as she entertained them. This did not go unnoticed by Queen Britannica, however, who hustled through the crowd and drew her aside.

“My dear child,” she said, “I want to commend you on demonstrating a remarkable and sacrificial example of royal deportment and propriety such as befits those of our rank and file. It would never do for us to be giving audience to the subjects of our kingdom while munching on a greasy chiblet sandwich. Congratulations on walking worthy of your crown.”

“Thank you, your Majesty,” said Alice with a curtsey.

“Actually, speaking from Queen to Queen,” whispered Britannica, “you can drop the ‘your Majesty’ title. You can call me Auntie Britt.”

“Yes, of course,” said Alice, although she did not feel at all comfortable with that.

After the banquet, the celebration progressed with card games such as ‘Chase the Ace,’ ‘Looking for Friends,’ ‘Follow the Queen,’ and ‘Happy Families,’ in which the cards participated with the local people and townsfolk until the lights dimmed and the orchestra began playing again as desserts were served.

The music was slow, yet gently rhythmic and romantic, and Alice, who had been sitting at the side engaging in cheerful conversation with Lewis Carroll and Miss Pleasance Liddell, looked up to see Rummy, elegantly clothed in dark evening attire, standing awkwardly holding a paper bag.

“I noticed you didn’t eat, Princess ... I mean your Majesty,” he mumbled, “so I tucked away a stash of selected foods for you to enjoy later.”

“That’s ever so thoughtful of you, Rum,” said

Alice, rising to her feet and giving him her hand. "We can enjoy it afterwards, *together*. Dance?"

Being conscious of Alice's official rise in station, Rummy was at first lacking in confidence as she glided into his arms, but sensing her desire for him to lead for this occasion, Rummy swept her onto the floor where they waltzed together in the amber glow of the lights, oblivious to all but the special bond that had grown between them.

"This can never be broken, Rummy," whispered Alice. "*Never*."

They danced this way for a good while into the night until Rummy broke the spell.

"I think someone more worthy than me would like the last dance," he whispered.

Alice opened her eyes, and her heart leapt to see Joshua standing in the shadows.

"May I?" he said softly to Rummy as he put out his hand to Alice.

"Certainly, sir," said Rummy with a chivalrous air that filled Alice with admiration. "I cannot think of a higher honour than to be ... *bequeath* her to you, I think that's the right word. Bin workin' on my elocution by the way. Actually she's *yours* anyhow. It's like she was just on loan. And for that I want to thank you, sir."

"She is yours too, Sir Rummy."

"*Sir Rummy?*"

"Yes," said Joshua, with a wink. "*Unofficially*. The official Greater Commission ceremony will be next week, New Year's Eve. And now ... Alice?"

Taking Alice in his arms, Joshua led her as they danced together.

"Joshua," she whispered timidly after a few moments of dancing with her head nestled against his chest, "when I met you at the shoe store you seemed as though you were like, in your thirties—you know, thirty-three or something. Then at the chalet you

seemed about twenty or so, but now you seem even younger, like you're about Rummy and Brandon's age. I don't get it."

Joshua chuckled.

"Remember what I said about *time*?" He paused. "Here it's like silly putty."

He kissed her. His voice suddenly sounded even younger to Alice, who was blissfully drifting in his arms, becoming less and less conscious of her surroundings, "You can pull it and stretch it..."

"...and roll it in a ball and bounce it and *everything!*"

Alice slowly opened her eyes and squinted at streaks of bright sunlight that were streaming through shutters, before fully opening them to see a beautiful olive-skinned little boy of about five years old with black wavy hair, standing staring at her through large dark brown eyes, holding what appeared to be a small ball of rubber.

"It's silly putty. Want to play with it?"

"That's awfully kind of you, I'm—" Alice gasped as she realised she was in her T-shirt and jeans and was lying on the couch in the living room of her home.

"Joshua! Come! Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry," said a tall, dark-haired woman who poked her head around the door before tiptoeing into the room.

"You must be Alice," she whispered. "My name is Consuelo, I'm sorry my boy woke you up on your sleep-in morning."

"'Tis of no consequence, ma'am," said Alice sleepily. "Will you be abiding here?"

"I just came by to pick up some provisioning with my husband, Theophilus. We're the newly appointed COs and we've opened a Home near here. Anyway I'd better let you sleep."

After giving Alice a kiss on the forehead, Consuelo and the little boy left the room.

Still in a state of drowsiness, Alice had not quite adjusted to the fact that she was back home, half expecting at any moment that the Queen of Clubs would call or one of her friends like Rummy or Celia would come bursting in, so her frame of reference was completely clarified when Brandon poked his head in the door.

“Brandon! Oh, I missed you ever so terribly!” she said, jumping up and hugging him fervently.

“Really?” said Brandon wrinkling his eyebrow and scratching his head. “Couldn’t do without me for eight hours? Sorry you slept on the couch. I was positive you had gone to your bed when the card game finished. Hey, I’ve never seen that ring on you before. Was it a gift?”

Alice stared for a few moments at the ring with a ruby heart.

“Oh dear, is this ever going to be a long story,” answered Alice.

“Oh, by the way, Dad just got off the phone with one of our new contacts,” Brandon continued. “She’s the wife of the guy who owns the Air Rhombus airline company, and she wants to throw this big Christmas Eve bash for all their rich friends where we can do a show and present our work and stuff. Cool, huh?”

“It sounds absolutely lovely.”

“Yeah. Er ... what’s with the ‘Jane Austen’ lingo all of a sudden?” said Brandon quizzically. “Oh, and it looks like someone dropped a card under the couch.”

He reached down to pick it up. It was the Queen of Hearts.

“Funny,” he said, handing it to Alice. “I don’t remember this playing card wearing glasses and having long white hair.”

Alice looked at the card and let out a gasp. On the Queen’s hand Alice saw a perfectly matching small golden ring with a ruby heart.

“Come on, crazy girl. I’ll make you some breakfast,” called Brandon, heading for the door.

Alice took one last look at the card, and could have sworn that the Queen smiled at her.

The End

A

ADDENDA

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# Alice's Deck in Order of Appearance

Queen of Diamonds - Britannica  
Jack of Diamonds - Jack Rhombus  
Two of Diamonds - Madame de Deuce  
Two Jokers - Hee Hee and Ha Ha  
King of Diamonds - King Coal  
Two of Clubs - Trixie Barr  
Nine of Clubs - Don Casino  
Four of Diamonds - Twinkie  
Queen of Clubs - Helvetica  
Three of Clubs - Immigration Official  
Three of Spades - Immigration Official  
Jack of Spades - Blackjack  
Ten of Spades - Ali  
Queen of Spades - Ophelia  
Ace of Diamonds - Mr. Sage  
Ace of Clubs - Ace Belote  
Five of Clubs - Rummy  
Six of Spades - Gin  
Four of Clubs - Nitty  
Five of Spades - Gritty  
Jack of Clubs - Jacques Truncheon  
Queen of Hearts - Margot  
Nine of Diamonds - Earnest Brainwave  
Ace of Hearts - Dave  
Five of Hearts - Matt  
Seven of Hearts - Marcos  
Nine of Hearts - Lucas  
Jack of Hearts - Juan  
Ace of Spades - Bone Ace  
Three of Diamonds - Mr. Boodle

ALICE AND THE CARDS

King of Hearts - King Pedro

Six of Hearts - Botifarra

Nine of Hearts - Skat

Two of Hearts - Teen Pathi

Ten of Hearts - Charity

Eight of Hearts - Faith

Four of Hearts - Hope

King of Spades - C.C. Leroy

*(The following were mentioned but did not appear:)*

Six of Clubs - Barbu

King of Clubs - Al 'Kaiser' Scopone



# Alice's Deck by Suits

## **DIAMONDS:**

King - Coal  
Queen - Britannica  
Jack - Jack Rhombus  
Ten - unnamed  
Nine - Earnest Brainwave  
Eight - unnamed  
Seven - unnamed  
Six - unnamed  
Five - unnamed  
Four - Twinkie  
Three - Mr. Boodle  
Two - Madame de Deuce  
Ace - Mr. Sage

## **CLUBS:**

King - Al "Kaiser" Scopone  
Queen - Helvetica  
Jack - Jacques Truncheon  
Ten - unnamed  
Nine - Don Casino  
Eight - unnamed  
Seven - unnamed  
Six - Barbu  
Five - Rummy  
Four - Nitty  
Three - Immigration  
    Official  
Two - Trixie Barr  
Ace - Ace Belote

## **HEARTS:**

King - Pedro  
Queen - Margot  
Jack - Juan  
Ten - Charity  
Nine - Lucas  
Eight - Faith  
Seven - Marcos  
Six - Botifarra  
Five - Matt  
Four - Hope  
Three - Skat  
Two - Teen Pathi  
Ace - Dave

## **SPADES:**

King - C.C. Leroy  
Queen - Ophelia  
Jack - Blackjack  
Ten - Ali  
Nine - unnamed  
Eight - unnamed  
Seven - unnamed  
Six - Gin  
Five - Gritty  
Four - unnamed  
Three - Immigration  
    Official  
Two - unnamed  
Ace - Bone

**TWO JOKERS:** Hee Hee and Ha ha

# Names of Card Games Used in ALICE and the CARDS

- Alkort (4 players)
- Authors (3 to 6 players)
- Barbu (4 players)
- Belote (4 players)
- Bid Whist (4 players)
- Blackjack (2 to 7 players)
- Bone Ace (2 to 8 players)
- Boodle (= Michigan) (3 to 8 players)
- Botifarra (4 players)
- Brag (3-card, 4-card, 5-card) (4 to 8 players)
- Briscola (2 to 6 players)
- Calabresella (= Terziglio) (3 players)
- Canasta (4 players)
- Carioca (2 to 4 [5] players)
- Casino (2 to 4 players)
- Chase the Ace (6 or more players)
- Clobyosh (2 or 3 players)
- Conquian (2 players)
- Cribbage (Five Card) (2 players)
- Dobbm (4 or 5 players)
- Don (nine card) (4 players)
- Durak (2 to 6 players)
- Flush (=Teen Pathi) (4 to 7 players)
- Follow the Queen (Poker variant)
- Gin Rummy (2 to 4 players)
- Happy Families (3 to 7 players)
- Have a Heart (4 players)
- Jack the Shifter (Poker variant)
- Jass (2 to 6 players)

Kaiser (4 players)  
 Kaluki (2 to 6 players)  
 King Pedro (4 players)  
 Kings in the Corners (2 to 4 or more players)  
 Klaverjas (4 players)  
 Knaves (3 players)  
 Krypkillen (3 to 8 players)  
 Laugh and Lie Down (5 players)  
 Looking for Friends (6 to 12 players)  
 Mah Jong (4 players)  
 Patience (Solitaire) (1 player)  
 Pinochle (double deck) (4 players)  
 Pitch (=Setback) (3 to 6 players)  
 Polignac (4 to 6 players) Polish  
 Pontoon (3 to 8 [or more] players)  
 Pounce (= Nerts) (2 to 10 players)  
 Preference (3 players)  
 Root Beer (president) (3 to 6 players)  
 Rummy (2 to 6 players)  
 Scopa (2 or 4 players)  
 Scopone (4 players)  
 Sheepshead (5 players)  
 Skat (3 or 4 players)  
 Snap (2 players)  
 Solitaire (Patience) (1 player)  
 Spitzer (4 players)  
 Stortok (2 to 5 players)  
 Stýrivolt (4 players)  
 Sueca (4 players)  
 Tarot (French) (3 to 5 players)  
 Teen Pathi (4 to 7 players)  
 Tonk (=Tunk) (2 to 7 players)  
 Tresillo (3 or 4 players)  
 Tressette (4 players)  
 Tribello (3 players)  
 Truco (2, 4 or 6 players)

Trumps (= Knockout Whist) (2 to 7 players)

Vatikan (2 to 5 players)

Zwickern (2, 3 or more players)

## Red MO Volume Titles

*There are 40 MO Letter titles from the Red Volume hidden in this story. Can you find them?*

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