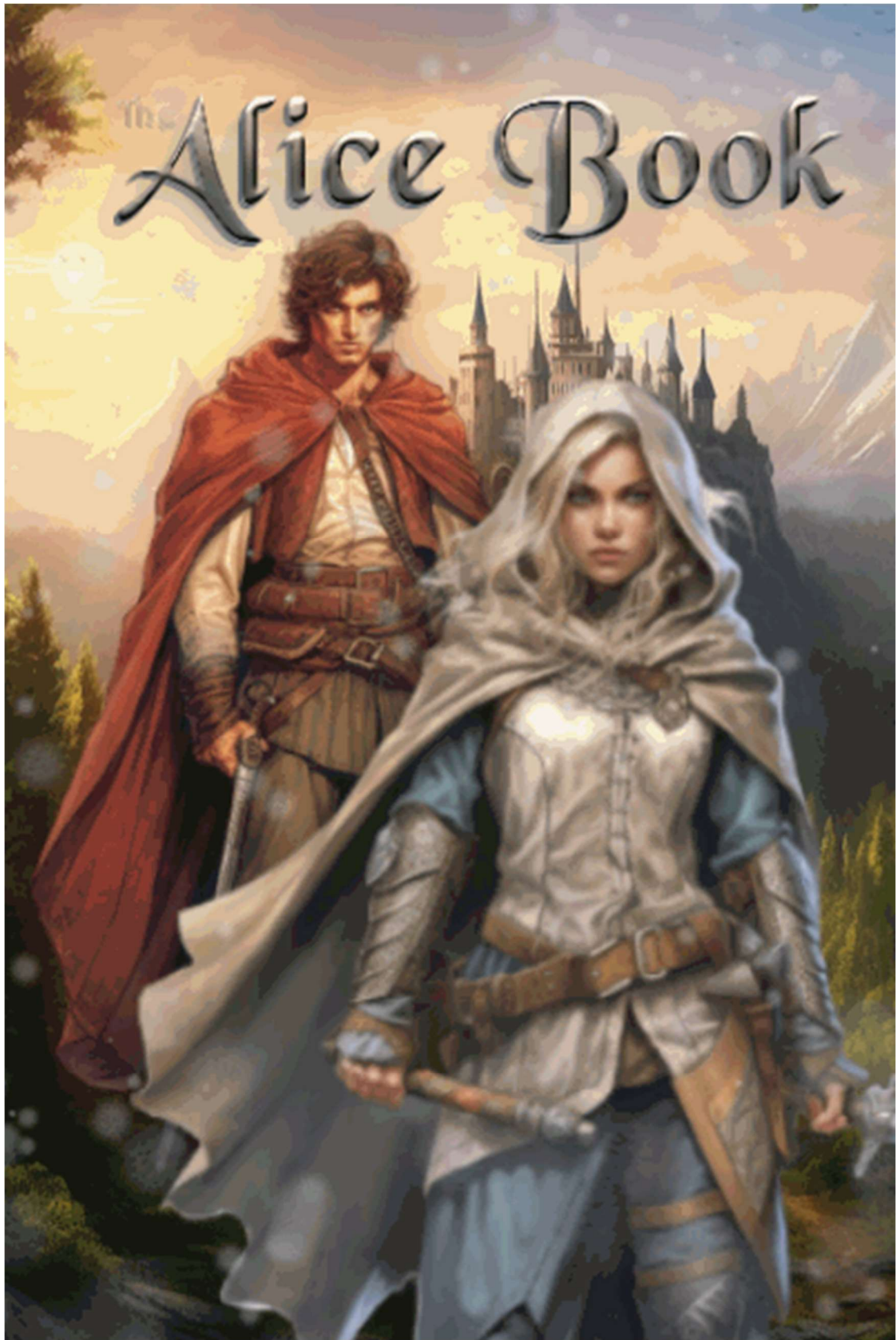


the Alice Book



Excerpt

The Alice Book :: Book 2

Alice's Journey Through Storyland

And One for All

The man on the other side of the room exuded a distinctive odor – fish and urine. Alice couldn't reconcile the two, no more than she could understand why he waved a knife at her. She had passed through the previous barrier and awakened in this storeroom with walls of mortar and stone. Large barrels occupied the space around her, one of them open and filled with dried apples.

Holding the knife high, the man took a step forward, then another – his eyes never left Alice's face. His beady eyes narrowed.

Dressed for the wintry Nebraskan wilderness, clad in a grizzly fur coat and boots, Alice thought she might look like an animal. A heavy scarf covered her face to the eyes. Her words, which would have identified her as human, were muffled by the covering. Quickly, she removed the heavy gloves and waved her hands to let him see she was a person.

The man gazed at her quizzically, but he didn't put away the knife. Alice shrugged out of the coat and the laced leather shirt she wore underneath. When she was down to the wool dress and moccasins, a pile of clothes lay beside her almost as tall as she.

“Much better,” she said.

Clearly, she was human, but that seemed to inspire the man to more aggression. He moved toward her, waving the knife and grinning – a yellow-toothed slice of malice. He repeatedly muttered something she didn't understand as sweat dripped from his fat, florid face. He swiped at the perspiration, wiping what he caught on his filthy apron, slinging the rest about the room.

“Sir, I do not speak your language, but we might come to an understanding if you'd just allow me a moment.”

Like previous journeys through the barrier, she had awakened with no idea what story she was in or where she was to go next. This was, however, the first time she awoke to someone trying to kill her – at least immediately.

He lunged, the knife slashing at her waist. Alice jumped back, bumping into a wall of shelves behind her. He raised the blade to slash again. She grabbed a jug from the shelf and stepped to her right. His weight, most of which was centered in his huge belly, pulled him forward. Alice raised the jug high and, as he stumbled forward, brought it down hard across his head. He continued forward to the floor, toppling like a fallen oak, scattering barrels of stinky fish and something else she didn't want to identify.

Since the room had stone walls, Alice doubted anyone had heard the altercation. Still, she didn't wait to be sure. She jumped over his body and ran through the only door, out into a narrow corridor which led to a large, crowded room. The place was a tavern. She might have stayed, but she couldn't recognize any of the speech, and several people turned and raised eyebrows at her. Unsure of friend or foe, Alice shoved her way through the rollicking crowd and dashed into the street.

It was night with only the glow from nearby windows and a full moon to light the way. Alice gave no thought to direction – she let her feet choose the path, concerned only with getting away from the knife-wielding monster inside the tavern. She ran through narrow muddy streets and alleys until she reached a wider boulevard. She slowed to a brisk walk, but kept her head down, occasionally peering over her shoulder. When she was certain no one pursued her, Alice stopped and surveyed her surroundings.

The streets were cobbled and lanterns on poles functioned as streetlamps. There were shops, one of which appeared to be a bakery. Her stomach growled, but Alice ignored it. Signs hung on buildings and placards stood in windows. She could not identify year or story, but she believed she was in France.

A few people passed by, but they gave her little notice. Alice knew she'd have to move soon, but the decision as to where and how... No matter how many times she went through this relocation, she never failed to feel disoriented and very much alone. "Come now, Alice. You can't figure out where you are by mimicking a lamppost."

A man glanced at her as she stood there talking to herself. "Sir, wait. I am..."

He didn't appear to hear her. He scowled and strode away.

"How rude!" Still, there was no one else in sight. Alice followed him.

The man turned off onto a side street. He glanced over his shoulder once, but showed no concern that she was following him. He entered a building at the end of the narrow road. The structure had a crooked sign that waggled on uneven chains above the door. Two-stories tall, it was larger than the shops and stores on either side of it. She thought it might be an inn or tavern, but light shone through only a few of its windows. Alice went inside.

The barman looked up as she entered, but said nothing. There was no one at the bar and most of the tables were empty. The only patrons were four men at a table in the rear of the large room. They played cards in front of the fireplace.

Alice was yet to see a friendly face, so she approached the table prepared for rejection. She cleared her throat, but before she could address the men, the tavern's door banged open. Four men entered, all wearing black cloaks and hats with extravagant black plumage. They whipped aside their cloaks, gleaming rapiers hanging at their waists. Their most interesting feature, however, were their bright green eyes.

"Alice of Wonderland, we are here to arrest you," the man in the front said.

The men behind her continued their game as if nothing untoward was happening. One of them had a sword in a scabbard slung over the back of his chair. Delicate strands of bright steel laced together in a swirling pattern to create the cross-guard. Alice would have admired the sword further, but the four men at the door were drawing their weapons. She ripped the sword from its scabbard and turned to face her attackers.

"Mademoiselle," said one of the men behind her, "*Je crois que vous avez pris l'épée de mon ami.*"

"I apologize, sir," Alice said without turning, "I do not speak French."

"Ah, she is English. Beautiful lady, I believe you have my friend's sword."

"Yes, and I beg you to allow me to borrow it while I defend myself. I promise to return it shortly."

“She promises to return your sword, D’Artagnan,” the man said.

“A beautiful woman such as this can truly be trusted, don’t you think, Porthos?” another asked.

“As an authority on such matters, Athos, I would say no. Still, she holds his sword with authority.

What do you think, D’Artagnan?”

The one to whom they spoke said nothing.

“A bad sign,” Porthos said, “a quiet D’Artagnan.”

“Why would Richelieu send four oversized oafs to capture one so petite?”

Alice thought that might have been the D’Artagnan to whom the others spoke.

“Those are not the Cardinal’s men,” said another voice, the fourth man.

“Ah, Aramis is right, for the first time today.” Porthos laughed, a deep, infectious guffaw. “To whom do these brigands belong?”

A chair slid noisily across the floor. “Does it matter?” Athos asked. “A beautiful woman is in peril.”

More chairs sliding...

The men came forward, two to each side of her. She glanced to each side and nodded.

“D’Artagnan, what will you use as a weapon?” Aramis asked.

D’Artagnan retrieved a poker from the fireplace. “This will do.” He returned to the line.

“Why do our foes remain?” Porthos asked. “They should be fleeing at the sight of us.”

“They are rather stupid,” Alice said. “They were sent for me. They don’t know what to make of you.”

“And to what fair lady’s rescue are we attending?” Porthos asked.

“My name is Alice. Thank you for coming to my aid.” She glanced to the left and then the right.

“Who, if I may ask, are you?”

“We are King’s Musketeers,” they said together.

“Porthos.”

“Aramis.”

“Athos.”

“And I am D’Artagnan.” They bowed with such grace, Alice blushed.

The men at the door huddled and muttered together.

“An interesting battle plan,” Athos said. “Do they plan to bore us to death?”

Alice stepped out and faced them. “They will form a line and charge. Be careful, their blades are tipped with poison.”

“How do you know this, Alice?” Aramis asked.

She returned to the line, her jaw set. “I’ve been down this rabbit hole before.”

As she predicted, the four men fell into a line and walked straight at them, their swords drawn.

D’Artagnan bowed to Alice. “Forgive me, Alice, but I think I will take my sword now. It is only fair. We are five to their four. I would not be able to sleep tonight after taking advantage of such odds.”

The men were upon them. Alice tossed D’Artagnan his sword and stepped back behind the table.

The initial foray was short and well spent. Alice watched in awe as the musketeers countered each move, parried every thrust. The frustration on the faces of their adversaries was almost comical. The villains attacked, regrouped and charged again, only to be thwarted by the musketeers.

“Messieurs, please retreat,” Aramis said. “No blood need be shed.”

The men regrouped. This time their green eyes glowed.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Aramis said, crossing himself. “They are not men.”

“No, and you must be careful,” Alice said, “they are...”

The creatures attacked, throwing themselves upon the musketeers. Porthos stabbed his attacker through the heart. A stinking black steam and green slime erupted from the thing’s chest. Porthos screamed. The purulent boiled out and burned his skin like acid, creating purple blisters every place it made contact. The noxious fumes scorched his eyes. Porthos fell back over a chair and slammed his head into the bar.

Alice ran to the end of the bar and grabbed the bucket of water sitting there. She meant to return to Porthos, but one of the creatures leapt after her. D’Artagnan grabbed a bottle from a table and threw it

at the creature, striking it on the back of the head. This distracted it long enough for Alice to take up Porthos' sword. She drove the sword through the creature's chest while dancing away from the billowing fumes. The barman grabbed the bucket from Alice and went to care for Porthos' burns.

The other two musketeers dispatched their foes. Athos and Aramis used their tabards as shields as they slew the assailants. The creatures melted to black sludge.

"This is truly the work of the devil," Aramis said.

"Yes, and his name is Mainyard." Alice paced around the steaming slag. "He's growing stronger." She sat down on a chair and stared at the floor, frowning. "These creatures – they were story folk he corrupted. He would not have this power unless..." She looked up, her gaze catching each of the musketeers. "He's conquered the wizards."

D'Artagnan shook his head. "Wizards? Story folk? Lady Alice, I intend no offense, but this smacks of madness."

"Yet the men we fought now lay as molten flesh at our feet," Athos said. "How can we doubt what she says is true?" He turned to Alice. "Alice, you say this Mainyard has defeated the wizards. White wizards?"

"Yes," Alice said. On principle, she was opposed to lying, but these men fought for her without a second thought. She saw no reason to destroy their hope or sanity. "The greatest wizards in all the land stood together to fight; but for this to happen," she indicated the mess at their feet, "they were not successful."

D'Artagnan sat down on a chair across from Alice. "There is fear in your face, Alice. This is not a battle ordinary men can win."

Alice shook her head. "There is but one hope." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small card with *Public Library* on its crinkled surface. "This bit of paper has great power. I must get it to my... to the last great wizard. With it, he can defeat Mainyard."

“Ah, England has fallen and now Mainyard attacks France. Where are you bound, Alice?”

Porthos asked.

He still held a wet cloth to his face, the skin red and blistered about his right eye. Alice worried he would not have sight in the left. “I seek a golden wall of light. It is somewhere in your country, but I have no idea where to look.”

“The miller!” Athos said.

“Yes,” Aramis said. “Today, a man burst into the cabaret off the Rue Féruév, yelling and muttering, first to others and then to himself, that he was not mad. He believed God had stepped foot upon his property, dividing the land with a golden wall of light.”

“Where did this man come from?” Alice asked.

“His mill is at the bend of the Dordogne River just north of the Monastery de Sainte Mère,” Athos said. “It is several hours ride from here.”

“Could you provide me with a map?” Alice asked.

“Should we wait until morning?” Aramis asked. “Porthos should rest, I think.”

“There is no time,” D’Artagnan said. “Mainyard may yet send others for Alice. We should be away as soon as possible. Porthos can remain... ”

“Do not waste your breath on foolishness,” Porthos said. He spoke to the barman. “Francois, please have our horses brought from the stable, and acquire one for Mam’selle Alice as well.” He turned to her. “You ride, yes?”

“I will manage,” Alice said, “but I don’t believe you – any of you, should come along. You will be needed...”

“Get her some clothes, Francois,” D’Artagnan said. “I think the stable boy is her size. We will disguise her...”

“You are not listening to me,” Alice said.

“Indeed, as Porthos does not listen to me,” D’Artagnan said. “You fight to save our country as well as your own. This makes you one of us.”

“All for one, one for all,” they said together.

Alice smiled. “*Merci.*”

“Let us prepare,” Aramis said. “We have a long ride ahead of us.”

Sunrise found them well into the forest just east of the mill. They had stayed off the roads, keeping out of sight of other travelers. Alice preferred the horse to walking, but the clothes, they were another matter. The garments were stiff and coarse and the britches rubbed her legs sore. And the smell – the stable boy must have pulled them directly from his back. Still, beneath the wool cap, she was well disguised.

A few miles from the monastery, the barrier dissected the forest, its golden light visible a hundred yards through the trees. The group exited the forest into a clearing.

“Mon dieu!” Aramis cried. “Alice, what is that?”

“It’s a barrier that separates your... country... preventing you from mounting a defense against Mainyard.” Alice felt her face heating.

“How do we pass?” Porthos asked.

“You do not,” a voice said from the trees. Several men dashed into the clearing, their green eyes flashing. “Surrender the girl or die,” their leader said. He wore the same black as the men from the tavern, but the other six wore the tabards and insignia of the Cardinal.

“Would Richelieu join forces with Mainyard?” Alice asked.

Aramis nodded. “If there is even the smallest amount of power to be gained...”

“Or a way to save his sorry ass,” Porthos said, “than yes, he would.”

“We will find out soon enough.” D’Artagnan got down from his horse and pulled his sword.

“Look!” Athos pointed to the west. A black fog boiled over the horizon.

“Mainyard is attacking!” Alice yelled.

“Then there is no time to waste,” Athos said. He rode his horse into the Cardinal’s men and began swinging his sword in all directions.

“Save some for me!” Porthos jumped from his horse and threw himself into the fray.

“I need a sword,” Alice said.

“No, you need to get through the barrier,” D’Artagnan said. “Aramis, we need a path.”

“My pleasure.” Aramis got down from his horse and joined D’Artagnan. They ran toward the barrier with Alice close behind. Two of Cardinal Richelieu’s men confronted Aramis, but the man in black stepped into D’Artagnan’s path.

“Do not stop, Alice,” Aramis said, “no matter what happens. Go!”

She ran, slipping through the melee. But as she raised the library card to the barrier, the man in black grabbed her wrist.

“Not this time!” His green eyes flashed as he clamped down hard on her arm. He snatched the wool cap from her head.

“Let go of her!” D’Artagnan shouted.

Alice could see D’Artagnan over the creature’s shoulder. Blood dripped from his sword hand. The creature raised his sword, green fire flashing from the stone in the pommel. “It’s you!”

“Yes,” he said, “and I finally have...”

The distraction was enough. D’Artagnan drove his sword into the creature’s back as Alice twisted free. “It’s Mainyard,” she shouted.

“Run, Alice,” Porthos said. “We have the sorcerer. Run.”

Alice scanned the field. The Cardinal’s men were on the ground, dead or wounded. The musketeers were converging on Mainyard, but the Darkness bore down on them all.

“All for one!” Alice shouted as she placed the card on the barrier.

“And one for all!”

The musketeers raised their swords in salute as Alice slipped into the golden light.