

Alice's Tales Told in the Cotting House

The stories as written and told by (the now-Patron) Alice in the Cotting House, from 2012 to 2017.

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Event 0.5 - November 3, 2012 One-Day: The Wood Speaks: Alice's Epilogue

The woodlanders and the Spirit of the Wood came to an understanding. With the spirit's blessing, Cottington would be allowed to grow. The Black Hill Red wolf pack, perhaps sensing the woodland's grace, faded into the woods. They didn't go away, but they were no longer such a threatening presence. The trees around the house stopped moving and the brush grew still.

After so many deaths, men, animal and gingerbread alike, the innkeeper wondered what he had gotten his family into moving the house back to the center of the woods.

Friends were met, old faces seen, deals were struck and inquiries made. It was the first time so many people had gathered together in one place in recent memory, and no one knew where it would go from there.

[Game Over.]

Event 1: April 19-21, 2013: The Exploded Tome - Alice Story: The Burnt Tree Lullaby

The Burnt Tree's Lullaby

Once upon a time there was an enchanted wood. It was a place of fairies and elves, and wolves and other beings. It was a magical place. A great tree grew in that forest, not the greatest of trees, but still great. It didn't have a name, because trees don't have names, but if it did, like all trees, it would have been called Cottington Wood. The tree had a full but lazy existence, like all trees, and especially those of this tree's size and age. It spent its time providing a home for the many woodland animals and the most taxing duty it had to perform was to not steal too much of the sun's light so that its saplings could grow..

Men lived in the wood as well. This was around the time when Lord Curren fashioned his points and men began to fight amongst themselves, so most of those who lived in the woods got nervous when men came around. The tree thought itself above them, not just because it did, in fact, tower over them, but because it had long since learned to walk, and if needs be it could simply take a step and end them. So, because it perceived them as no threat, it simply stood back and ignored them.

But men, and especially those early Robber Barons and the men of the harsh Frostwroth, should never be ignored, for they were prone to doing stupid things. These men were no different. By the time dark settled in with the night they were near insensible with drink. They lit a fire to keep warm, and within moments it seemed, the fire was out of control.

The tree howled, startling the men, who scrambled to their feet and ran away. The tree gave chase, stamping down on their camp, but instead of being smothered the flames took hold, and the great tree began to burn. It howled again, watching helpless as its saplings, not yet old enough to be awake, were consumed.

Within an hour, all that was familiar to the tree was ash. Its own great form was diminished, its limbs twisted and black, its leaves brittle and mostly gone. Its wood, ancient, proved difficult to completely burn away, and so it survived, but only barely.

And who would not go mad when suffering so? The tree blamed the men, of course, and he was not wrong. His home was destroyed, and so he began to haunt the woods. When he saw the animals, he offered them no comfort. When he saw men, he killed them, crushing them under foot or flaying them with wicked thorns. Because of him, the forest became almost unlivable.

The fairies had to intervene.

It was Arafel who taught the men the way to sing the tree to sleep. "It hates men for what they did," she said. "But like all living things, it is soothed by your songs." The men listened to her, prepared a special rite, gathering five waystones and writing special songs to sing.

They lured the tree back to its home, the grove where it was born and where its children died, a place where already new life had begun to grow.

How many men died trying to stay ahead of the tree, with its long crushing legs. But eventually they did bring it home. Seeing that new life was the first step to calming it. Arafel spoke to it then, and while she did, men began to sing. "Your grove needs you here, my old friend," she said, and if trees could weep, this one did. The men lay four of the stones at the north, south, east and west around the tree, and while it wept they placed the last at its feet. And when they did, the singing stopped, and the tree had been sung to sleep.

In this way, the wood was saved from the Burnt Tree.

Event 1: April 19-21, 2013: The Exploded Tome - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of the Exploded Tome

The Spirit of the Woods had given the woodlanders its blessing, but it was clear that life in Cottington Woods was not going to be any easier because of that. The Black Hill Reds had faded into the woods, but when challenged, they came again, and with a vengeance. The rats of the Underlands were a nuisance, but one that Vigo needed gone, and so he paid a bounty to have them killed or driven away. At the bottom of the Underlands the hunters found and fought the Trogloraptor.

Senior Scholar Devon Green came with his Tome of Tales bound for the Index at the Church of the Word in Farraway City. The Tome exploded, inflicted by corruption and doubt. Had he been alone or just with his mission, the Tome would have been lost and the Fate that formed the binding of the Written World irreparably damaged. But the woodlanders entered the tales and unraveled the corruptions, saved the Tome (or parts of it), and saw the Senior Scholar safely on his way.

The woodlanders learned much about themselves and the woods around their town. Ulkarion, King of Wolves was corrupted. A new face, twisted, wild and mad, was revealed.

Other business concluded, and on Sunday, they went home.

[Game Over.]

Event 2: June 7-9, 2013: The Jester - Alice's Story: Edward's Tale

Edward's Tale

Once Upon a Time there was a man in service to the king of Collamoor. His name was Edward, and he was brave, and skilled, and a natural warrior - I did say he was from Collamoor, didn't I?

After many years of fighting the almost endless tide of Frostwroth, he made such a name for himself that he was placed among the protectors of Rodrick Collamoor, the King of Clubs himself. Of course the King of Clubs is fully capable of protecting himself, but even he is capable of seeing in only one direction at a time. And thus, he surrounds himself with the very best, and it was with a great bit of pride that Edward accepted the honor.

Also at this time, rising in power among the Frostwroth was Simrock, a great savage of a man who was as smart and clever as he was strong. Many would demand that the Frostwroth are only brutes, but while it was certainly true that Simrock of the Ice was a brute, it could not be said with fairness that he was ONLY a brute. I tell you that things in the north would be much simpler if it could.

Simrock drove his war ships against the outer homesteads of the Clublands, like so many chiefs before him, and so successful was he that he amassed followers in such numbers as to draw the attention of King Rodrick Collamoor. The King of Clubs went out to fight Simrock of the Ice, and in the far north, amidst great bergs of ice that made their many ships look insignificant, they clashed.

Alas, the battle was not telling. Though many ships slid beneath the waves that day, neither Simrock's nor Rodrick's were among them. The two chiefs were never closer to one another than a far arrow's flight, and no shot was ever made that came close to ending either.

But in that battle, our Edward did fall. Not fatally, but enough that when he returned to port he needed a witch's attention. It would be fair to say that on that day his life was changed. But it was not. He met a girl, who was a girl no longer, but a woman. He had known her in youth, and was happy to see that she was grown up. They fell in love, though it might be true that they were in love a long time before that time, and that neither, or maybe only one of them had known it. That isn't the story I choose to tell.

This is a tale of bravery, and while it is true that Edward showed his bravery by bringing two clever boys into the world, raising them with his much loved witch, this is a tale of battle, of great men and great deeds in a harsh land locked by ice.

Years went by, with Edward taking up the merchant's life. His story was one of such bravery that he could change his life without loss of face before his brothers. Clublanders place value in anyone who is not idle, and Edward was never one to sit still.

You all remember that time, five or so years ago, when the Frostwroth really made a nuisance of themselves. Nowhere along the coast was safe and shipwrights could not carve out ships fast enough.

No man leaves the service of the Clubland King before his time, and it was not meant to be Edward's time, not yet. He was called, and so, saying goodbye to his clever boys and his beautiful wife, he answered.

Was it as if no time had passed? Great fleets sailed amidst seas broken with the white towers formed of icy bergs. Eleven years of freeze and thaw had changed the shape of the horizon, but they all felt it. It was the same desolate patch of frigid water, cold enough to kill before it drowned a man, where the two fleets had clashed before.

Northern war drums pounded among the fleet of Simrock of the Ice. Horns blew in answer among the Clublander vessels. The winds fought to tear the sides apart as a thousand oars sought to bring them together. The sea was calm, and the clash was not long in coming. War machines threw chunks of ice that burst geysers of water and wood into the air. The great ships closed. Soon broken hulls and frozen men lay scattered across the waves.

The ship of the Clubland King was built to murder other ships, and that day it filled the sea with dead. But Simrock of the Ice had only one task - to kill the Clubland King. He waited and moved, dancing among the debris on his own vessel, seeking to put in directly in King Rodrick's path. And he did.

King Rodrick called for the horns, which sounded loudly and his ship surged forward. It rammed the vessel carrying Simrock, who with his greatest Frostwroth warriors leaped over the waves. For every two that fell and died, one clung to the terrible dragon-headed ram, and they climbed aboard. The forces met as the deck rolled back from the wreckage of the barbarian ship. They staggered as they swung, raining blows against each other and slicking the deck beneath them. Atop the ram, Simrock of the Ice sought the Clubland King, and he found him. Rodrick Collamoor waved his own great sword, still unaware of the warlord. Simrock raised his hand.

It was Edward who sensed something foul and called out a warning. Rodrick turned and saw Simrock. Blue fire shone across the masts and spires. King Rodrick glowed, and for a moment, it was like everyone flew. Lightning thundered from the sky and the ship's deck caught flame. Amidst the battle, many didn't even notice. But Simrock did. He did, and he did not care. When he curled his hands to fists the lightning came to him like a tame beast. He collected it, carried it, and he hurled it with brutal force at the Clubland King. And if not for Edward, it would have killed him.

But Edward was a Clublander, brave, skilled, a natural warrior. He lifted his sword, swung, and caught the lightning. He was burned from life in an instant.

Simrock shouted his rage and glared at the fallen merchant, husband, and father of two. And in that same moment King Rodrick Collamoor swung his sword twice over his head and hurled it across the deck. The sword struck Simrock not like a spear but like the branch of a tree, sweeping him backwards and over the ram, and into the icy water that no man could survive.

And it might have been that two great men died that day.

Except that Simrock lived, and Edward did not.

This is my tale for today and I have only one more thing to say about it.

All was not as it seemed.

Event 2: June 7-9, 2013: The Jester - Alice's Epilogue

(seems to have gone missing from our records :()

Event 2.5: August 17, 2013: The Woodland Faire - Alice's Story: Bannon Largo's Tale

Bannon Largo's Tale

I did not write this tale, but I heard it, and now I pass it on.

Before there was Farraway, there was the House of Cards. Before there was the House of Cards there were the Robber Barons. We all know the story of Lord Curren, after whom currency, our system of silver and gold points, was named. Most of us know his tale, of how he rewarded his most faithful with equal shares of stolen gold by melting the loot into uniform arrowheads, or, as we call them now, points.

Lord Curren's tale is not a positive one. The love of money is the root of much evil. And it paints the robber barons in an almost entirely negative light. I wouldn't have you think they were all thus, so I will tell you of another robber baron.

Bannon Largo was a good man, who brought together many of the woodlanders during his time. It was a fairly ruthless time, many hundred years before the end of the robber barons and the formation of the Houses of Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts and Spades, so banding together for mutual protection and not mutual advancement was something rare. It was the habit of men to gravitate towards the strongest lord, not so that he would protect them, but so that he would not kill them for what they possessed.

Bannon Largo, a good man, was the son of a bad man. He began his life with what his father left him, which was a fort and many many miles of woodland. Several homesteads answered to him. When his father died, those who had been loyal became afraid. You see, such transitions always were bloody. At that time there were no less than three other barons who claimed to rule the woodlands, and the people desperately looked to see which of those would be least likely to kill them if they groveled deep enough.

But Bannon Largo reached out to them instead. He suggested that instead of running to another cruel overlord, they serve him instead. When the first of the families still chose to flee, he met them on the road. Terrified, they thought he would kill them, but he only made them another offer to stay, then let them go their way.

Because he could have killed them - his father would have - but he did not, they saw that he was not weak, but wise. He did, in fact, lose many families because he chose to let them go, but he kept many more. It came to pass that, after a time, homesteaders fled not from him, but, in secret, to him.

While travelers certainly made their way to Fort Largo by following the familiar Ways through the woods, there arose a legend that Bannon Largo glowed with a friendly light that was visible from the city

of Collamoor to the southern border of Cottington Woods. His light would guide those who sought freedom from tyranny. One legend, certainly untrue, was that his light lit the first candle in the city of Farraway long after Bannon Largo's death.

In any case, Baron Bannon Largo did what no other baron before him had done. He tied his people to him through caring and mutual trust, and not through fear and oppression. In time he wed, and his wife bore him a strong son, and those who met the boy knew that when his time came to rule, the boy would be every bit as just as his father.

Not all Robber Barons were cut from the same cloth as Lord Curren. Bannon Largo was as different from him as two men could get.

The same could not be said for those three other men who claimed to rule the land. It was true that by the time they saw Bannon Largo as a threat he was too strong for any of them to singularly defeat, so to their credit, they did not try. There was no profit in it. What they did instead was to join together. There are tales of how they later came to quarrel, but that was years later, after they put his son to death, and after they hung Bannon Largo and his wife from the front wall of Fort Largo and broke them slowly to make them scream so that all of his people would hear.

They tried to remind his people to be afraid, but they failed.

As the spirit of Bannon Largo followed his wife to the Deathlands, his people came to him. His light guided them, although it was hard to see through the black smoke and rising flames over the fort. His people came, and a great many died, but they tore his body from the wall and they routed the other barons and sent them running into the woods.

Bannon Largo gave his people a lord they could love.

And so you see, this is a good tale.

Event 2.5: August 17, 2013: The Woodland Faire - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of the First Woodland Fair

Another Woodland Fair came and went.

It was rare for them to be so violent.

There were wolves. There are always wolves.

There were spirits of the Burnt Tree. The King of Clubs, and Riding Hoods.

And in the end, a stolen lantern brought the dead angrily forth.

But despite all of that, the festivities continued, the celebration of life in Cottington Woods. Games of chance and choice challenged the citizens. Games of strength, games of skill, and games of song saw a proud people give their best.

But if the games were only a symbol of the pirit of the people it was echoed in the deeds done in protecting the Balmbearer estate.

And though the night was long and dreadful, it was at last time to rest

[Game Over.]

Event 3: September 20-22, 2013: Sleeping Beauty - Alice's Story

The Sleeping Beauty

I

Once upon a time a little daughter was born to a king and queen. The king gave a naming feast so grand that the like of it had never been known. He invited all the fairies he could find in the land, hoping that each would give the princess a good gift.

When the naming was over, the feast came. As the fairies were about to seat themselves at the table, there came into the hall a very old fairy who had not been invited. She had left the kingdom years before and had not been seen or heard of until this day. The old fairy was angry, and she sat there muttering to herself.

One fairy who sat near her overheard her angry threats. Fearing the old fairy might give the child an unlucky gift, this fairy hid herself behind a curtain. She did this because she wished to speak last and perhaps be able to change the old fairy's gift.

At the end of the feast, the youngest fairy stepped forward and said, "The princess shall be the most beautiful woman in the world."

The second said, "She shall have a temper as sweet as an angel."

The third said, "She shall have a wonderful grace in all she does or says."

The fourth said, "She shall sing like a nightingale."

The fifth said, "She shall dance like a flower in the wind."

The sixth said, "She shall play such music as was never heard on earth."

Then the old fairy's turn came. Shaking her head spitefully, she said, "When the princess is seventeen years old, she shall prick her finger with a spindle, and-she-shall-die!"

At this all the guests trembled, and many of them began to weep. The king and queen wept loudest of all.

Just then the last fairy came from behind the curtain and said: "Do not grieve, O King and Queen. Your daughter shall not die. I cannot undo what my elder sister has done; the princess shall indeed prick her finger with the spindle, but she shall not die. She shall fall into sleep that will last a hundred years. At the end of that time, a king's son will find her and awaken her."

Immediately all the fairies vanished.

II

The king, hoping to save his child even from this misfortune, commanded that all spindles should be burned. This was done, but it was all in vain.

One day when the princess was seventeen years of age, the king and queen left her alone in the castle. She wandered about the palace and at last came to a little room in the top of a tower. There an old woman—so old and deaf that she had never heard of the king's command—sat spinning.

"What are you doing, good old woman?" asked the princess.

"I am spinning, my pretty child."

"Ah," said the princess. "How do you do it? Let me see if I can spin also."

She had just taken the spindle in her hand when, in some way, it pricked her finger. The princess dropped down on the floor. The old woman called for help, and people came from all sides, but nothing could be done.

When that last fairy heard the news, she came quickly to the castle. She knew that the princess must sleep a hundred years and would be frightened if she found herself alone when she awoke. So she touched with her magic wand all in the palace except the king and the queen. Ladies, gentlemen, pages, waiting maids, and footmen—she touched them all. They all went to sleep just where they were when the wand touched them.

The king and queen departed from the castle, giving orders that no one was to go near it. In a little while there sprang around the castle a wood so thick that neither man nor beast could pass through.

III

A great many changes took place in a hundred years. The king had no other child, and when he died, his throne passed to another royal family. Even the story of the sleeping princess was almost forgotten.

One day the son of the king who was then reigning was out hunting, and he saw towers rising above a thick wood. He asked what they were, but no one could answer him.

At last an old peasant was found who said, "Your highness, fifty years ago my father told me that there is a castle in the woods where a princess sleeps—the most beautiful princess that ever lived. It was said that she must sleep there a hundred years, when she would be awakened by a king's son."

At this the young prince determined to find out the truth for himself. He leaped from his horse and began to force his way through the wood. To his astonishment, the stiff branches gave way, and then closed again, allowing none of his companions to follow.

A beautiful palace rose before him. In the courtyard the prince saw horses and men who looked as if they were dead. But he was not afraid and boldly entered the palace. There were guards motionless as stone, gentlemen and ladies, pages and footmen, some standing, some sitting, but all like statues.

At last the prince came to a chamber of gold, where he saw upon a bed the fairest sight one ever beheld—a princess of about seventeen years who looked as if she had just fallen asleep. Trembling, the prince knelt beside her, and awakened her with a kiss. And now the enchantment was broken.

The princess looked at him with wondering eyes and said: "Is it you, my prince? I have waited for you long."

So happy were the two that they talked hour after hour. In the meantime all in the palace awaked and each began to do that he was doing when he fell asleep. The gentlemen went on bowing to the ladies. The ladies went on with their embroidery. The cook went on slapping the kitchen boy, and the servants began to serve the supper. Then the chief lady in waiting, who was ready to die of hunger, told the princess aloud that supper was ready.

The prince gave the princess his hand, and they all went into the great hall for supper. That very evening the prince and princess were married. The next day the prince took his bride to his father's palace, and there they lived happily ever afterward.

Event 3: September 20-22, 2013: Sleeping Beauty - Alice's Epilogue

also missing

Event 4: October 25-27, 2013: The Dragon - Alice's Story: Prince Henry & The Dragon

Prince Henry and the Dragon

In the far north, deep within the icy lands of Frostwroth, lived a dragon named Maxmillius. As are all dragons, he was a terror to the local countryside, burning the homes of men and consuming everything he came across. Nearby was the town of Colburn. Life was difficult enough for the ice-locked Frostwroth, so the last thing they needed was a dragon nearby.

The people of Colburn appeased the dragon by feeding it two sheep, every day, from their flocks. When their sheep failed, they fed it their children, chosen by lottery. It happened that the lot fell on the chief's daughter, who was called Sabra. The chief, distraught with grief, told the people they could have all his gold and silver and half of his kingdom if his daughter was spared; the people refused. The daughter was sent out to the frozen cave and chained to a tower of rock.

It was then that my brother, Prince Henry, came by. The princess, trembling, sought to send him away, but my brother vowed to remain.

The dragon reared out of the cave while they were conversing. As large as a house, its mighty jaws, huge claws and great wings blocking out the sky, Maxmillius surged toward the chained Frostwroth princess. Prince Henry stood his ground. At first the dragon didn't see him, so great was their difference in size. The dragon reached out and snatched the princess from the rock, bloodying the chains that bound her and causing the tower of rock to sway back and forth. As Sabra screamed from pain and terror, my brother struck a great blow against the bottom of the animal's jaw. Maxmillius bellowed and searched the source of this pain. Henry dashed between his legs, searching for a weak spot in the armored skin. Maxmillius was so huge that he found none - the great dragon's skin was like a castle wall. All of his training was for naught against such a beast.

Henry ran into the cave from which the dragon had emerged, knowing that if the dragon took flight, then hope for the captured princess would be lost. The dragon was not fully outside the cave. To enter, he had to finish leaving first. Henry ran down the tunnel and emerged at the edge of the den.

Everywhere lay the eggs of the beast, resting atop sheets of polished dragonstone. Three dragonesses - dragon matriarchs, lay among the clutches. Tiny dragonettes flew through the air, crying at Henry and spitting as they passed over his head. In the center of the den lay the hoard, a vast pile of gold and silver with a huge depression in the center where the king of dragons slept. The lesser dragons avoided the central pile, so Henry raced towards it. The matriarchs saw him and roared, springing to life. They charged for him, but they were heavy; laden with feeding young. They were almost on him when he reached the side of the hill of precious stone.

And then Maxmillius entered the cave. He roared with fury. Still he clutched the taken princess, and still she cried in pain. The matriarchs scrambled to avoid him, but they were caught. No one sat in his chair, but in their haste to catch the man, the matriarchs had forgot. Maxmillius picked up the first queen in his jaws and tossed her aside, where she lay broken atop her eggs. The others tried to scramble out of the way. One succeeded and Maxmillius warned her with a roar like a rockslide not to ever make that mistake again. The other, however, was pinned beneath the second foreclaw. Maxmillius tore at the dragon once, then twice, then a third time. Then he picked up the body and tossed it aside.

By then, Henry reached the top of the pile. He crossed it in a dozen strides, then leapt over the far edge. The sound when that third dragon landed covered the sound of the gold and silver as it tumbled beneath his feet. When Maxmillius crested the hilltop, Henry was no longer in sight.

The dragon searched for him. The other dragons stayed well out of the way. Even the tiny dragonettes kept to the ceiling of the cave and tried to stay quiet. The dragon king had shown his temper, and none there wanted to cross it.

Prince Henry had not fought a beast of this size before. Those that he had were the size of the matriarchs. But the princess was not dead, and my brother is a hero, and he had vowed to remain to help her. He crept along the back of the cave, staying to the shadows while Maxmillius searched. Henry sneaked along the side of the cave, and then he left.

Now, don't you dare think my brother abandoned the fight. He wouldn't do that. He'd never do that. Ever. But there was nothing he could do, down there in the cave. His sword alone would not win the fight. A smaller dragon had hide like stone and was only vulnerable in the joints and right behind the head. Maxmillius did not share those weaknesses.

The tower of rock loomed over the entrance to the cave. The chains were bloodied where Sabra's hands had been pulled through them. The tower had swayed when the dragon had struck it and pulled the princess free. Swayed. Rock doesn't sway while it remains solid.

Henry wondered how long the people of Colburn had sacrificed their daughters to the dragon. Had the sheep also been chained here to keep them in place? The base of the tower was cracked in chipped away where chains and chains before them had been hammered into place. My brother had an idea. He'd only have one chance to get it right.

The sound of cracking stone did not attract Maxmillius. The mountains always cracked this time of year when the water froze and expanded, dumping huge amounts of rock down the countless mountain faces. But the sound of the man shouting was new. Mostly men were very quiet as they made their approach to the cavern lair.

My brother rode the top of the tower and rocked it back and forth, back and forth. He grew concerned when, at the end of its final push, it suddenly did not rock back. Maxmillius had not emerged.

And then he did. Enormous, the serpentine neck stretched forth from the cavern mouth. Henry looked down at the beast. From his vantage it seemed he was directly above. The rock tower that had taken so much abuse with each sacrifice torn from its base was still. Henry's plan, if it did not work, left him horribly exposed. And still the rock tower remained stubbornly still.

Henry hopped into the air. He waited. Nothing happened. The dragon stopped looking around.

Henry jumped again. The great dragon's head slowly swiveled on the long neck. Maximillius turned and looked up. The two met, eye to eye. My brother felt very foolish.

A lesser man would have been terrified.

Then a crack was heard, crisp and loud in the cold mountain air. A rock the size of Henry's head flew out of the base of the rock, down near where the chain had been set into it. The rock spit out and cracked Maximillius in the chin, so hard that the great beast blinked. He looked down at the base of the column of rock.

Henry jumped up and down very, very hard.

Then the tower tumbled. Henry was caught in the fall, but he turned and ran to the back of the tower, then down it, thinking what a fool thing he had done, and maybe wondering, just maybe wondering if his little sister would be worried about him performing such an idiotic stunt. It seemed to him that the tower tumbled very slowly.

Still, great Maximillius could not be free. The dragon was larger than a house, and it took more time than he needed to get himself out of the cave and out from under the tower. The base of the tower groaned once as the weight settled on the earth, and the side the cave dislodged. Instead of the tower, the hill collapsed. The rock showered on Maximillius, crushing his thick neck and forcing him against the ground.

Henry flew, moving slightly faster than the tumbling rock, at a speed which would break both of his legs when he reached the ground. He hadn't counted on the hillside breaking away. It was not part of his plan. He also hadn't seen the Princess Sabra still held in the dragon's claw. If she was, she was surely dead.

Henry landed amidst the mountain of snow that had been displaced with the crumbling tower. His legs did not break, as perhaps they should have. He rolled amidst earth and boulders, which settled around him. He became trapped.

The weight of the rock upon him settled and relaxed, settled and relaxed. It settled, and then, slower, relaxed. It was only when what might have been the dragon's final breath was spent that Henry knew he rested upon the scaled back of Maximillius, the beast's final shallow gasps for air giving him an instant of freedom before the exhale trapped him again.

Then Maxmillius shook, and my brother pulled himself free, scraping against rock and freezing ice and climbing atop it. If the dragon felt him, it mattered not, for with that final struggle, the dragon king was dead.

Prince Henry climbed from the fallen hill and regarded the beast, now inches away. He bent and put his hands on his knees, and considered.

My brother, Prince Henry of Hearts: 4

Dragons of the written world: 0

Maxmillius, King of Dragons? He never stood a chance!

Event 4: October 25-27, 2013: The Dragon - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of the Dragon

Once upon a time a young town in a wood found its way amidst terrible dangers and troubling events.

Aaron, the High King of Faraway, well traveled a man of pride and greatness, awaited his intended in the House of Cotting which had been built by his old companion. Warm with the memory of haigh adventure and happy times. But he had been wronged, and did not know it, for his bride was not herself and his mind was not his own.

Fortunately, the clever folks had seen the deception and had laid plans to delay this ill starred wedding. They involved the King's daughter, the Princess Virtue, to aid them. She was hidden away under the pretense of abduction, then stolen away. Chained to a stone in a cave, she was spied then by the dragon. After eating her guards the dragon lay down to sleep, curled around the princess and her stone! When she succumbed to anxious sleep the beast stretched and flew over Cottington. In its wake came its young - cold blooded and hungry.

But all was saved! For the wedding guests were the resourceful people of Cottington. They saw what their king could not, and found a way to save him. At the last possible moment they lifted the veil from his mind - then all saw the false queen for what she was: the queen of Fairy, cruel and spite embodied, dread and haughty.

But at the reveal, the King's heart was not broken. He had seen and recognized his true love, Aleena "Fleet Foot" Cofter, after long years apart. And Princess Virtue was not devoured, for the wedding guests had found the dragon's lair in shadowed stone. They fought and though the fight was bitter hard, they won.

And between the harvest and the winter there was food and merriment and many stories to be told.

[*Game Over.*]

Event 5: March 21-23, 2014: Goblins & Elves -

Alice's Story: An Unfinished Work

An unfinished work

Alice's Notes: *This is a work in progress. I'm not happy with the way it turned out, and I think I might decide to scrap it. It seems to me that no matter what, the story will never be a happy one.*

Two races, both alike in dignity,
In fair Cottington Woods, where I lay my scene,
Before ancient grudge would break to new mutiny,
And civil blood make civil hands unclean.

From forth the loins of these two folk
A pair of once-true lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured joyous overthrows
Do with their death but begin their parents' strife.

The fearful passage of their death-marked love,
And the ensuring of their parents' rage,
Which, with their children's end, would ne'er be remove,
Is now the traffic of my stage;
The which, if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall fail to mend.

(Alice shakes her head, looking disappointed. "I'm just not happy with it. Let me read from my notes.")

Alice's Notes:

The tale is set in the woods, long ago when the animals changed shape freely and everyone lived forever. It was before time - even before death. Elves and goblins lived side by side, and that is the focus of the tale. My two characters, one a goblin, the other an elf, come from two families who are very close, both fairy, never changing, and never dying.

They meet when the boy secretly attends a ball held by the girl's parents that both are too young to attend. They fall in true love, right at first sight. Both families are overjoyed. They have a few misadventures because the two characters are really very young. One of their friends dies while playing too rough, but, because they are fairy he just comes back immediately.

The two characters get married, and everyone lives happily ever after.

(Alice looks up again, and comments:)

"See, if there's a conflict, I don't know what it is yet. I'm sorry. I have to work on this. My next one will be better."

Event 5: March 21-23, 2014: Goblins & Elves - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of the Goblins and Elves

The cold brisk bite of the March wind was felt... in the hearts of the people of Cottington Woods. The warm hearth of the Cotting House gave them refuge, however, and as always, the stories found their way there.

For the first time in as long as any but elves can remember, the Goblin Door was opened. And OverMarsh... revealed. But not as it once was. Something, beyond the edge of the eye... in the deep black places of the world leaked through and threatened more than just goblin-kind.

As fate would have it, the ancient race of elves also came to the wood, following a terrible ancient threat of their own. Something was in the plants and animals that should not be, changing them in ways that could not be explained.

Meanwhile, the Cotting House's reputation for fine food reached more than just the wanderers of the houselands, but rats and giant ants from below the ground, making pest control a new regular occupation for the woodlanders.

But despite the new threats, several old ones were laid to rest. The betraying vampire Eldred was finally destroyed, the blight of Anathema from the mysterious stone was removed, and the tormented Burnt Tree of the forest finally given its peace.

As the two ancient races now revealed themselves to the woodlanders, and the prospects for the coming year foreboding. Ultimately they decided that this was their home, their land, and there would be no killing that day. Until a peace could be made, neither blood of elf nor goblin would be spilled in Cottington Woods.

[Game Over.]

Event 6: May 30-June 1, 2014: The Inverted Nightmare - Alice's Story: The Asylum

Asylum

I live in Asylum. I like it there – it helps me feel safe. My brother Henry says that Asylum is a place where people go when they have too active an imagination. I think he means it's where you go if everyone thinks that you're crazy.

I'm a Heartlander, but I still like to call a spade a spade.

The thing is, even us "Imaginative" people can help change the world.

Asylum wasn't always up there on the slope of the Black Hills. Up until two hundred years ago it was in the Diamondlands. I don't mean they moved it, like Mister Cotting did this house. I just mean that the people moved from there to here. Let me tell you why that happened.

Two hundred years ago there lived a man named Jareth. Like me, he had a very active imagination. In his case, he imagined that a lot of people wanted to hurt him when in fact, they did not. He saw people watching him when he was alone. He heard voices when everything was quiet.

Two hundred years ago the Diamondlands were also at war. It wasn't a war like the Clublanders say they are fighting against the Frostwroth. This was a war against demons, shadowy and elusive. These demons were strange, which is odd to say about demons, since they are all by definition totally incomprehensible. These ones didn't act with the rage I've only heard about. They still murdered and destroyed whatever they came across, but they retreated to escape rather than fight until they were killed.

It wasn't long before the guard at Midcastle discovered that when the demons retreated, they retreated to Asylum. But when they searched Asylum the town was empty except for the staff and guests. There weren't any demons in sight.

The demons weren't attacking all the time. Weeks, or even months would go by with them being silent. The guard couldn't always be watchful so far from their own walls. When they left, the demons emerged again.

Strangest of all, none of the people in Asylum were ever harmed.

Well, I shouldn't say that. During this time there were actually more instances where the inmates...I mean where the guests hurt themselves. It was a dark time.

Fortunately, there was Jareth. Jareth already saw enemies everywhere, so when enemies really actually appeared, he was not taken by surprise. Because he created villains in his own head, he knew how villains plotted and planned.

The guardsmen of Midcastle came again when the demons emerged. They weren't polite the second time. They didn't care that Asylum was a place for the... mentally not well. They stuck around longer. They still didn't find any demons.

When they left, Jareth stayed alert. He saw the demons emerge from the rooms of the sleeping guests. Crazy isn't stupid, so he stayed very still when they emerged. The demons left Asylum to scour the countryside, and when they did Jareth left his bed to look around.

Beside every person asleep in their bed was a shimmering purple gate.

Now keep in mind that Jareth was insane. He probably wasn't the MOST insane person in Asylum. I mean, his door wasn't locked at night so that the only way he could get out was...

Well, his door wasn't locked at night.

But he WAS insane. That meant he sometimes did really stupid things. Like step into glowing purple gates that demons had just come from.

Jareth was the first person ever to actually enter the Slumberlands. The things he saw I can only imagine. But it expanded his awareness. It, how do the sandmen say it? It blew his mind! He lost himself to it for a time. I bet it was the first time he ever thought, rather than be told, that he was crazy.

He lost track of time. The demons came back.

Jareth wasn't dreaming. His body was in the dream. We take this sort of thing for granted now – the sandmen do it all the time. But back when no one ever did. When the demons came back they crossed through the gates and they sealed them shut. Which of course explains why the demons were never discovered in Asylum.

Jareth hid from them. He followed them. He watched them. And Jareth, crafty Jareth, learned.

By the people of Asylum he was thought to be the first casualty of the demonic invasion. That is until he emerged one night several weeks after he disappeared. The staff was angry. When he explained they said that it was part of his "condition". They didn't believe him.

Because the men in charge did not listen, he spoke to the people who would. He began to teach the other guests of Asylum.

The demonic invasion stopped. It wasn't that the creatures stopped coming – instead, they came and the dreamers, the first fledgling sandmen, fought them. I can't imagine what it must have been like, creatures alien to the world against defenders who were out of their minds.

There are stories upon stories about the encounters that took place, but that's not what I started talking about. I wanted to explain how even people like me can change the world. And why Asylum is now in the woods and not in the Diamondlands.

Really, from this point it's simple. Think about it. The people from Asylum fought the demons all through the Slumberlands, in and out of the individual dreamscapes of the Diamondlanders the demons were here to invade. It only took a short time for someone to recognize one of the sandmen.

Torches and pitchforks are as old as panic, and where there is panic, there is blame. The demons were gone. They weren't slain, just repelled, but they were repelled for the long term. That meant that when the mob came, there were only men and women to confront. And the men and women of Asylum weren't the best when it came to interacting with "calm" folks...

This story, history really I suppose, is an example of how anyone, even people like me, can change the world.

It also explains why the people of Asylum moved.

Event 6: May 30-June 1, 2014: The Inverted Nightmare - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of the Inverted Nightmare

Finally, morning came.

It is strange to say, but morning came and the people of Cottington Woods awoke, quite literally, from a dream. There were no more twisted creatures from the deepest nightmares of men and animals, no more wondering what was lurking just under the bed, and no more wondering what was real and what was not. With the Lady of Nightmare defeated, morning came like a breath of fresh air.

But the terrors of the wood were still real, and the howl of wolves - and werewolves? - in the night still haunted children when they were bad. Slowly, creeping white vines were being seen more frequent, and maddened animals were wandering seemingly driven by something... invasive.

In the Asylum, the lady Ishariel slept a sleep from which she might never awaken, her dreaming self sundered and lost within the Slumberlands.

And the Anathema Stone in town still pulsed, growing stronger. The demons were not going away any time soon.

Nevertheless, the people of the woods were now closer than ever before, having faced their worst fears together - seeking Asylum in the companionship and shared struggle that was daily life in Cottington Woods.

[Game Over.]

Event 6.5: July 19, 2014 One-Day: Ulkarion - Alice's Story: Ulkarian, the Bearkiller!

Ulkaron, the Bearkiller!

Once upon a time there was a wolf in Cottington Woods. His name was Ulkarion, and as wolves went he was both big and as bad as they get. The King of the Black Hill Reds was Karkaroh, Ulkarion's father. Ulkarion was chief among the wolf king's hunters.

It came to be that the great bear, Shardik came upon the lands of the Black Hill Reds. If Ulkarion was big and bad, then Shardik the bear was bigger and badder, fifteen feet tall when he stood like a man, which he frequently did to intimidate those he came across. Shardik the bear swept onto the land like a storm. He hunted the great pack's prey and even killed those wolves he came across. In most cases the predator would have passed on by, but he was slow like a bear, and so when the Black Hills blocked him he did not think to go around. He settled down and made that land his home.

It was not long before the bear became a serious threat. Though he was slow like a bear, he was crafty when it came to the hunt, and the first pack of hunters the wolves sent against him was slain, almost out of hand. The second pack was larger than the first, and they drove the bear into a frenzy before they, too, were slain.

Now, just west of this very spot is the Balmbearer Homestead. A few miles east lies Asylum. I doubt the people at either of those places knew of the clash of power that took place just within the trees.

Karkaroh sent his son to fight the bear.

Ulkaron went to face the bear. With him were the other great hunters of his pack, and chief among them were Grimholt and Accalia, who some of you have met. With twenty wolves they set a trap, and Ulkarion was the bait. Just weeks into Shardik's occupation of the land and the space the bear laired already bent to his presence. Trees were shattered where the bear had scratched. Gouts of earth were turned aside. The broken bodies of the Black Hill Reds lay scattered amidst the bears prey. Ulkarion approached the cave the bear had made its home and howled a wolf's challenge.

Shardik the bear answered. Shardik was no brer, as are most of the Black Hill Reds. He was not like men at all. He was a force of nature. When he came from his lair he stood on all fours, but when he answered Ulkarion's challenge he rose to two legs and stood upright in all his glory.

If Ulkarion was impressed, he did not show it. He stood his ground and howled again. Shardik fell to all fours like a landslide, and surged at him. Only at the last minute did the wolf turn and run.

He was not fleeing. He led the bear from the cave and up into the Black Hills where the pack lay among the rocks atop a canyon and waited. Grimholt crouched at one side and Accalia at the other. They waited, shaking with anticipation. They heard Ulkarion's challenge, and they heard the bear's acceptance. It was a simple plan. They would overwhelm the bear with sheer numbers.

They did not plan on a twist of fate. At the back of the canyon the ground had grown soft, weakened from below by the dripping of water as it flowed down the Black Hills. Ulkarion reached that patch of land and turned, his back to the wall. Had his foot fallen in any other place the fight might have been over quickly, and the tale of the greatest wolf pack the woodland has ever seen would have turned out differently. But his foot twisted that patch of ground, which continued to spiral down like the sands of an hourglass. Ulkarion felt the ground shift, but he could hardly pay it any mind, with fifteen foot of wolf murdering bear surging towards him. When Ulkarion tried to dance out of the bear's way, his foot instead poked right into the ground and he fell to a knee. That would have been the end, except the other wolves then rose from hiding and prepared to leap upon the back of Shardik the bear.

Shardik looked up, sliding forward toward Ulkarion as he did so. Before the first wolf could leap, the shifting ground beneath the two gave way, twisting like a whirlpool and sucking the two from sight. The Black Hill Reds gave pause. Their target and the wolf king's son were suddenly just... gone. The canyon was still.

Beneath the ground sand seeped through the earth like rain. Ulkarion and Shardik appeared as if from an earthen cloud. The bear was stunned, as was the wolf, but the wolf had that moment of knowledge above when the ground began to shift, and used that moment to his advantage. He knew that he was alone, and among wolves those who fought alone were either mad or utterly desperate. Ulkarion became a little bit of both. He leaped on the back of the bear even as Shardik gained his wits and turned. The sound of their coming together caused the earth to shake again.

In the canyon above, the uncertain wolves eyed the ground warily. They didn't know of the titanic struggle below. Minutes passed and they could only look on. Grimholt and Accalia leapt to the canyon floor and began to tear at the ground, for there is loyalty among wolves, even if it is not the sort that is had my men. They gained no purchase. What sand they moved aside was replaced by new sand from the canyon wall. They sank to their knees and were in danger of being swallowed themselves. Still they dug, for if they were swallowed, and if Ulkarion was alive, they could join him and help him if he needed.

Both jumped when a blood soaked paw emerged from the earth, and the wolves around them snarled. The rest of an arm followed, and it folded and pulled against the surface of the earth. The two wolves reached down and grasped the reaching paw, and they pulled. Ulkarion came from the earth like a pup being born to the world. His eyes were closed with the effort of what he dragged behind him, and when the two saw the head of Shardik the bear follow him from the earth they nearly jumped away.

The head of Shardik came separate from the body, which lay beneath the earth where Ulkarion had left it. The sand crusted neck sprayed blood as Ulkarion slung it through the air. He climbed from the hole and dropped the head to the ground, faced the clouds above and belted out a great howl of victory.

Ulkarion Bearkiller was born.

Event 6.5: July 19, 2014 One-Day: Ulkarion - Alice's Epilogue

The Balmbearer Homestead was reclaimed. The boggan that tended the house, through much trial and error, was put at ease and restored to his duties.

Amidst the wreckage of the homestead, the woodlanders discovered the preparations for this year's woodland fair. Almost in mockery of other dangers they faced, they performed challenges and games and a good time was had by all.

Eruve, elf friend, was lost. Her sacrifice gained the elves and their allies knowledge that might help forge future victories against the Invasive.

The Clubland captain had not considered that the woodlanders could aid the press against the demon wolf. He was wrong. The Riding Hoods knew better, and Red put her allies to constant work.

The woodlanders sneaked through venom webs, scouted out and brought war to the wolves.

In the end, so much did they prod the thing inside the bear killer that he turned his attention from the immediate threat of the clubland army and toward the defenders of the Balmbearer Homestead.

It proved his undoing. And with his undoing came the salvation of the true King of Wolves. His death was a mercy, and he found peace with the Spirit of the Woods.

[Game Over.]

Event 7: September 19-21, 2014: The Puppet Master - Alice's Story: Toulon's Tale

Toulon's Tale

Once upon a time there was a young boy named Toulon. He was a smart boy, and creative, but closed to the world by certain conditions of the mind. He spoke slowly, and mostly mumbled. His movement was uncertain and hesitant. When faced with confrontation, he retreated into himself.

Though Toulon's mother tried to be patient, she often failed. His father was a hard man, quick to anger, and his answer was to beat the child until he opened up which, as you can imagine, never happened.

At a very young age, Toulon was sent to Asylum in the hopes that they could "fix" him. I can tell you from experience that this hardly ever works. At Asylum the sandmen and the doctors did tests, entering his dreams to see what was wrong and performing a variety of physically invasive procedures that caused the boy excruciating pain. Neither Science nor Imagination proved helpful.

When the boy was eight, he fashioned from cloth a doll, which over the years became tattered and worn from constant handling. When he held the doll he would speak with greater frequency, often speaking through it. At first the doctors realized that the doll was helping Toulon, but because the doctor's at Asylum are often more concerned with WHY something worked, and are not often satisfied simply THAT it worked, they eventually felt that the attachment with the boy to the doll was unhealthy.

When they tried to remove Tatters, the boy went into convulsions and lapsed into the deepest state of unconsciousness. This lasted several months before someone finally decided to give Tatters back. Though the boy clutched the doll as soon as Tatters was within his reach, he remained sleeping for days. Finally, his eyes still closed, his lips unmoving, his body still except for the hand that held the doll, he spoke in Tatters' voice. "He is my friend," Tatters said. "Please don't make me go away again."

They never did.

The boy woke up then. He carried tatters with him everywhere. He almost never spoke using his own voice, and the doctors thought he might have forgotten how.

Toulon found himself in a high walled garden designed to make inmates feel peace while still keeping them a prisoner within. Tatters sat beside him, and they spoke.

Toulon said, "I wish you could talk back to me."

And Tatters said, "I'm talking now."

Toulon said, "Yes, but you are only saying what I make you say."

Tatters didn't respond. What the boy said was true.

There is a certain fairy who seeks the company of children. Children have an innocence that can be manipulated, and are often open to the world even before they learn to read. This fairy heard Toulon, and helped him.

"Is this better?" Tatters asked.

Surprised, Toulon asked, "Did I make you say that?"

And Tatters said, "Nope!"

The boy grew older. He made new friends, and they had amazing adventures together. There was Damsel, who was pretty and clever and always getting into trouble. There was Hero, his best friend who was an awful lot like my brother, Prince Henry. There was Fool, who made everyone laugh. There was Brawn, who could not speak but was strong like an ox. And there was Brain, the master mind, who always found such interesting things for them to do. Together they told stories.

When Toulon became a man, he left Asylum. He was a smart man, and creative, but still closed to the world by certain conditions of the mind. He spoke slowly, and mostly mumbled. His movement was uncertain and hesitant. When faced with confrontation, he retreated into himself.

But when he was with his friends, he was more than complete.

Event 7: September 19-21, 2014: The Puppet Master - Alice's Epilogue

We began with a troubling tale of human nature, writ in wood. Toulon—a famous puppeteer, perhaps you've heard of him?—was lost in his work, his soul split into the several little bodies he'd crafted so cunningly. Tatters, Hero, Damsel, Brawn, the infamous murderous Fool—and Brain, the author. In the end, the audience wrote the story, and the family was reunited.

But I should go back a bit—to that cat of mine, and his enigmatic little quests! Stuff and Things and...now Paradox? I don't understand half of what he gets up to.

Meantime, the troubles of Elves and Goblins. Carefully refusing to take sides, the woodlanders aided the elves in their quests against the Invasive, and the goblins in the overrun City of Crawling Shadows. More bodies, found amid the leaves: slain goblins, each mysteriously ornamented with a flower—a tulip.

Now recall Rose Braxton, taken fresh from Asylum to a ball in her honor. A fair young lady and a slave to the song in her blood. At the ball, poison in every wineglass. Death came to the guests and then put them on their feet, thralls to the Vampire Queen. Gatecrashers all, the woodlanders fought in the ruins of the party—and they slew her, the wicked Aurora of Auberly.

In the darkest part of night, the Wild Hunt came hallooing through town, Hounds a-seek for the prey their master had marked. Scowlonn, greatest and cruelest Hound, stood against a Wolf—and the Wolf faced him down. But...they say the Huntsman always gets his quarry, and so the woodlanders had to bargain: they staked a man's life and saved all the rest.

And last a murder swift and sharp, to usher the woodlanders into the presence of Death. At his request, they walked his domain to defeat the Jester... again.

Tksen neppah duw tauw derednohw srednalduw uth dna.

[Game Over.]

Event 8: October 24-26, 2014: Wonderland Crossover - Alice's Story: Wonderland

Alice's Journal

July Four

The white knight is sliding down the poker. He balances very badly.

I always watch for such things when they bring us into the common-room, with the fire; it seems to me that I could walk through the fire and into another place, where, possibly, anyone could see the comical ways the chessmen run about—not only me, not only when I think too hard. But they are careful not to let anyone go near the fireplace.

August Two

I managed to find a little shadow by the door, in which I waited between breakfast-time and lunch-time. I had to move many times, because the shadow would slide about as the day changed in the window. It was worth it! Nurse came in, and from right behind I shouted into her ear: "Nurse! Do let's pretend that I'm a hungry hyena, and you're a bone."

I think the milk they gave me after that may have been Looking-glass milk, because it was not good to drink.

August Twenty-Four

Sometimes I dream about a man, a snoring King asleep on the grass, and he's dreaming too. I don't know what it means—maybe he does, when he is awake. But I don't care for him to be awake: what if I turn out to have been in his dream, just as he was in mine? If I disappear,

*Still I'll haunt him, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes.*

September Seven

The doctors here are pre post-er-ous. What they like to do is talk, and they are never inclined to talk about interesting things! They just talk to me about me—it is positively like looking in a mirror.

One does not wish to be rude, so one must try and work out what answers they would like. I told them of a plan I had to be promoted to Queen, and they didn't like that. I told them of a great round man I had seen once, teetering, and when I mentioned the blood streaming down his great round head and soiling his beautiful cravat after he fell, and of how I stared and stared—they did not like that at all.

One must try harder, I think.

September Twenty

Left for a bit. It wasn't difficult, you know: windowpanes are only half-there anyway, being so clear. The cat showed me the way. I imagined that the window was mist, and it mostly worked—I did cut my hand a bit.

A fellow rode by in a great hurry from the direction I'd come from, asking if I had seen a mad girl who had run away from Asylum. It was already rather dark, and though he waved his lantern all about, its light never fell on me.

"I saw nobody on the road," I said.

"I only wish I had such eyes," he remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light."

I think he was joking. But I could, you know! I could see nobody, standing there plain as day in the middle distance. Waiting.

Shortly after that I decided I ought to go back.

October Sixteen

I put some notions into practice, speaking with the doctors again. Politeness! I nodded and agreed with what they said, and I worked out very carefully what they thought I should think, and I agreed with that as well. But much of what they want seems quite impossible. No Bigness? No Smallness? How very unremarkable. A garden where the plants do not talk? The Queens of Red and White working together on my behalf? Impossible. No bandersnatches or Jubjub birds? No unbeatable foe?

Believing these things—quite an effort! But I shall manage. I love my impossible things, but perhaps...

October Twenty-Four

. . . Done, and before breakfast at that. I expect I am quite sane now.

Event 8: October 24-26, 2014: Wonderland Crossover - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of the Wonder Land

On returning to your homes...

I have a notion that you'll each find a gracious invitation to the Prince of Heart's Ball.

But before you can enjoy its handsome engraving - tasteful, if much to sane for my taste...

Fit the First

My cat came to the Cotting House without me - again - bearing a story that revealed I'd gone sane! The problem is that my notions of sanity and the rest of the world's weren't quite the same... and mine prevailed! For example: The Cotting House, quite impossibly, fell down a rabbit hole!

There ensued a busy night of chess: Red versus White... versus Black? I'm not entirely sure Black aught to be allowed to play, even under Wonderland rules. It ended with such an uproar that we woke the Red King. And everyone else. Time to wake up, time for bed.

Fit the Second

A jaunt to Asylum, which was in no state to receive visitors: no doctors, nor no patients. Only a looking glass, with a strange sort of garden behind it.

Not a very nice garden, as it turned out. The plants in it would bite and snap, and some of the poppies obviously belonged back on the other side of the glass., I think they were very grateful to be unplanted.

Here the cat explained, in order to convince me that I was as mad as I am, my friends must find six impossible things before breakfast. With a mission (and dangerously permeable looking-glass) in hand, they returned to Cottington.

Interlude: a catalogue of Impossible Things

1. The Cotting House falling through a normal sized rabbit hole.
2. People turning into plants; plants turning back into people.
3. Impossible smallness.
4. Impossible bigness.
5. Beating (as we shall hear) an unbeatable foe.

Fit the Third

Every hundred years, the Children of the Moon may tell a story. Well, they may tell a story on any night they please, but on this night it comes true. The subject of this century's story was "The Waking of Ishariel." Guess how it ended, if you please!

Fit the Fourth

On every dot of brillig, a trial for my sanity! A very great trial on me indeed, as I'd still been given no breakfast.

The Red Queen, of course, was prosecuting (My mother?) As the borogroves got more and more mimsy, she grew more and more cross. "OFF WITH HER HEAD!" She shouted. "OFF WITH ALL OF THEIR HEADS! I SUMMON THE UNBEATABLE FOE!"

The claws that catch! The jaws that bite! Most manxsome, and as unbeatable as you please, but with a snicker-snack they left it dead. Beaten - the sixth impossible thing.

With me sent off to me long-awaited breakfast...

...came another chapter in an older story.

A year ago today, the heroes of Cottington confounded the Fairy Queen in her plotting. Baeldannen had planned to marry High King Aaron Farraway, while his True Love (thought dead) waited in the wings: Aleena, sometimes known as Silk, the Knave of Clubs. The plot was undone. The King and his love were wed.

And Baeldannen stalked off, with only a last word to satisfy her. Or rather, a last curse - one fit for a new stepmother.

Stepmothers are evil, of course, and Aleena is no exception: that's what the curse makes you. Employing the Silver Hound mercenary band she launched a murderous attack on Princess Virtue. With Virtue no longer alive, you see, she would no longer be a stepmother and the curse would be lifted.

You see? We ARE all mad here.

[Game Over.]

Event 8.5: January 10, 2015 One-Day: The Fairy Ball - Alice's Story: Arislin

Many of you know the tale of Lady Arislin of the Heartlands, and her horrible ordeal as a prisoner of Baeldannen, the fairy queen, of how her skin was stolen and she was kept alive in a woodland tower, forced to survive by wearing the skin of a foul ogre. Some of you rescued her from that fate, though she still suffers under a heavy curse. Even now the lady Arislin remains in an enchanted slumber somewhere close to the Fairylands, being cared for by servants of Arafel, the forest guardian.

I did not like the Lady Arislin for the longest time. Like many, like the high king himself, I was fooled by the fairy queen. I believed that Arislin, who had loved my brother, left him broken while she sought the power of the high king's crown. I'm so sorry now for all the thoughts I had that came to be because of lies. I could not love the Lady Arislin more, now that I know the truth.

But this isn't what you expect from me. You want a story, and a story you shall have. Let me tell you of the night of my brother's coming of age, and of the events that led him to his first meeting with his one True Love.

Lady Arislin was a young girl from the heartlands. Like all young girls who lived near to Briardown Castle, she received an invitation to a ball being held in honor of the then young Prince Henry. Arislin had two stepsisters who were both wicked and cruel, and a stepmother who doted on them when she should have put them over her knee and spanked them. The stepmother did not want Arislin to go to the ball. Her excuse was that Arislin had no dress to wear.

"I have my mother's old dress," Arislin said.

Her stepmother told her, "That thing? It is none too fancy, inappropriate for a royal ball. I won't have you embarrassing me."

Arislin said, "I can fix it up. I can make it pretty."

The stepmother said, "When will you find the time?" And she sent Arislin to her sewing, and cooking, and cleaning, which she alone in all the house did each day.

While Arislin worked and almost gave up hope, the mice and the birds of the castle set about collecting beads and ribbons and fabric that had been discarded by the wicked stepsisters, and from these scraps they turned that simple dress that had once been worn by Arislin's mother into something beautiful.

When the stepsisters saw the new dress, adorned with their own cast offs and leavings, they flew into a rage. They tore the dress while Arislin wore it, all the while calling her names and making her feel very small indeed, until finally, weeping, she fled from them and hid in the forest.

It was there that Arislin met her own fairy godmother. They say that every person has their own fairy godmother, but I don't believe we all do. Really, if I have a fairy godmother then she is sleeping while she should be keeping a watchful eye out for me. In any case, Arislin's fairy godmother came to her that day.

The fairy godmother used her wand to spin a beautiful dress out of glamour for the Lady Arislin to wear. She fashioned a coach from a pumpkin... No, I'm not making this up. It's how it really happened. Really! A little bird told me!

She used her wand to fashion the dress from glamour, and a coach from a pumpkin. She transformed a whole family of mice into servants to drive the coach and act as ladies in waiting.

And with that, the Lady Arilsin was able to go to the ball.

I wasn't there. I was at my home. In Asylum. Locked away. But I understand that the Lady made quite an entrance. The major domo called out her name extra loud, and all heads turned to the door. Her beautiful red gown, her flowing red hair. She was captivating. My brother saw her, and she him, and it was love at first sight of the kid you only read about. The stepmother and sisters were furious, but it didn't matter. To Prince Henry it was like they were not even there.

Arislin and Henry danced through the night. Several times they were asked if someone could cut in, and because they are both polite, sometimes they allowed it. But in many cases it was as if they were alone in the room, and they heard nothing beyond their own quiet talk and the music of the ball as it carried them along.

But, as you know, all deals with fairy come with a catch. While in most cases this catch is a price to pay, in this case it was a condition. Arislin had half of one night to enjoy the fairy's gift to her. At midnight, for her at least, the party was over.

It was a good thing, for her, that we have a very large clock at Castle Briardown. You can hear its toll from anywhere in the city.

I'm sure you all remember the end of the tale, of how the clock began to toll, and Arislin, caught up in all the enchantment of the party, was caught by surprise. She ran from the room, and, stunned, my brother followed. She left a single glass slipper outside the door in her haste. The carriage vanished and the mice were returned to their more natural form.

And that was that.

The rest of the tale you also know, of how my brother sought the one person in the kingdom who would fit in that slipper, and how he found her, but by then she had been taken by the fairy queen, and she broke his heart. I don't want to dwell on that. After all, tonight is a ball, and we should enjoy it.

Event 8.5: January 10, 2015 One-Day: The Fairy Ball - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of the Fairy Mist Ball

The bell tolled twelve, and the ball ended, not just for Lady Arislin, but for all the people of Cottington Woods. So many stories... Such a great change to learn, so long as the woodlanders kept their ears and eyes open.

Twenty years ago, the then prince, Arron Farraway was a different man. His choices were different without the weight of the crown resting on his head. The guests met the soon-to-be High Queen, Gloria of the Diamondlands. And we saw the foundation of the deception that would remove Aleena, Silk to some, from the public eye.

The wonder of that other land made itself known again as the Fairy Mist guests settled in for dinner, certainly MY favorite part of the evening. All that potential for pink and purple. At least no one lost their heads, right?

And Baeldannen held court. Well, it wasn't court, not really, but a gathering of fairies, to cavort and play their confusing games. I'm always wary of fairies - they're always up to something. Baeldannen moved among the guests, and I'm still not entirely sure if she was here and now, or a memory from another time. I think it's best if we all just stay away from her, don't you?

So many other things were said and done. Giant cats, a walking snowman, yummy tarts, choices given, and many, many more tales.

The chief among those tales was that of the Lady Arislin and her first meeting with her True Love, my amazing brother, Prince Henry of the Heartlands. Those last bits of her memory were gathered up, and like tiny gems they are guarded well. Will it be enough? Soon they will be returned to the sleeper and hopefully she will awake, whole and well. Sadly, even the events of tonight don't tell that tale's conclusion.

And now it is time to set our feet on the silver path, to make our way through the confusing lands of Fairy and to our beds. I'm looking forward to it. The woods are cold tonight, so you all try and stay warm.

[Game Over.]

Event 9: April 10-12, 2015: Beauty & The Beast - Alice's Story

No Alice appeared. Instead, Lady Paige came asking for a story and looking for Alice.

Event 9: April 10-12, 2015: Beauty & The Beast - Alice's Epilogue

Missing epilogue

Event 10: June 5-7, 2015: Invasive Zombies - Alice's Story: The Nutcracker & the Rat King

the Nutcracker and the Rat King

I've been trying to think of a good story to tell. I'm sorry, my friends, but every time I search for my own words I begin to think of my cat. I haven't seen him in months. But I didn't want to leave you without a story, so I chose this from among those I was told growing up.

Once upon a time there was a little girl, we'll say her name is Maria, who lived with her parents in Cottington Woods. Maria was given to merriment and an overactive imagination. But because of her imagination she had a fear of the dark and sometimes suffered from terrible nightmares

One Winter's Eve her father gave to Maria a large nutcracker doll, carved from the heartwood of an ancient tree and painted a soldier's blue. Maria was immediately in awe of her new toy, for he stood brave and tall and she knew so long as she had him with her, she need not be afraid of the dark.

Maria and the nutcracker were together all of the time until one evening as she prepared for sleep when the nutcracker fell from her grasp and broke a leg against the hard floor. Maria was up in an instant, cradling the nutcracker and crying. Her father offered to get for her a new toy. "No," She said. "I only want my Nutcracker, for he is brave and strong and I love him so." And with that she took one of her red ribbons and tied it about him to hold him together and kissed him upon his head.

And so it was that she fell asleep with the Nutcracker standing guard before her, until a loud noise in the middle of the night woke her abruptly from a deep sleep. What did she see but a Giant Rat with Seven Heads, and Seven Crowns upon each head, and with him an army of rats, come to steal sweets and food.

But before she even had a chance to be afraid or cry out, the Nutcracker sprang to life! He stood before young Maria, though he had no weapon, and cried out, "Rat King! Begone!"

And the great Rat King took one look at the Nutcracker and called his army to him and ran away.

Maria was so relieved, that she hugged her Nutcracker and thanked him, and then in surprise asked how it was that he could talk and move.

"Because I am a boy," he said, "bound by a terrible curse as a Nutcracker."

Maria wished there was something she could do for her Nutcracker, but he told her that she had already binding his wound. And she told him to keep her ribbon, for it was her favor to him, and he her Knight.

"But why did the Rat King run away?" she asked.

The Nutcracker said, "Let me tell you of the Rat King."

"Once upon a time, there was an evil rat named Cluny. Some may say that all Rats are nasty and devious, but there was a spark of malice in Cluny so great that most rats seemed gentle and kind by comparison. He was larger than most other Rats, cunning and strong, and it was said that his prowess in combat was earned by fighting and killing all seventy of his siblings, until he alone remained supreme.

"He had an appetite, this Cluny, and wanted not only to rule all the rats, but to take the food and warm homes of people above the ratlands in Cottington Woods. He blamed them for chasing rats into holes and tunnels and basements, and blamed them for the constant hunger that drove him. He wanted what was his.

"And so he gathered other rats to him, like-minded in their cruelty and nearly as skilled in their ferociousness, and he made of them an army. And from Rat Nest to Rat Nest he went up, sweeping up all the rats before him, until he had a great army, and a great kingdom.

"He swept up from the tunnels into the larders of homes, stealing food and goods and items. He kidnapped fairies and golems and people to make his army food, so they could feast on whatever they wanted, when they wanted. Even the Sugar Plum Fairies did not escape his greed.

"But all of this was not enough for the Rat King. He did not ever want to chance defeat.

"He sought out and found The Abomination. They struck a dark bargain: in exchange for aiding the Abomination find that which eluded him, the Abomination gave the Rat King such a boon that none could defeat him or kill him.

"Then none could stand before Cluny and his rat army. And one day he raided the Abbey, deep in the Woods, and the good Priest there who watched the Larders said to him, 'Your greed will be the ruin of you, Cluny Rat King, for the nutcracker who wears the favor of a child's love will defeat you seven times, and you will die.'"

Maria delightedly cried, "And here you are. I am so happy you are here." And feeling safe and protected, she went back to sleep.

When she woke the next morning, there was no sign the Rats had ever been there, and her Nutcracker stood as he had before, tall and silent. When she told her mother of her adventure her mother grew angry and told her not to lie.

When it became time for bed that next night, her parents said that she could have the Nutcracker in her room, but he must remain on the shelf with all her other dolls. Still, she felt safe, and so she slept, until the touch of whiskers upon her cheek woke her up, and what did she see, but the Seven-Headed Rat King! "Your Nutcracker is all by himself, with no sword to defend him," the Rat King said. "I will climb up there and chew him to bits, unless you give me all your sweets and food and all your toys."

Maria, not wanting anything to happen her nutcracker, did as Cluny asked.

After she had given all away and crawled back into bed, her Nutcracker said to her, "You don't need to do what he says. Give me a sword, and I will defeat the Rat King for you."

So the next morning, Maria sneaked into the kitchen and took one of her mother's carving knives.

That night, when the Rat King came again, the Nutcracker jumped down from the shelf where he was kept. And though one would expect his leg to break from such a height, Maria's ribbon kept him whole and strong. He called out to the other toys, and they came in formation and attacked the Rat King and his army. The Nutcracker challenged the Rat King, and beat him once, twice, three times, each time cutting off one of his heads. Four, five, six times he beat him.

It seemed certain that the Nutcracker would win, but in the last moment, the Rat King lashed out his long, whip-like tail, and knocked the Nutcracker down. The Nutcracker would surely have died, then, the sword of the Rat King struck through him, had it not been for Maria - who, having suddenly found her courage, cried out. Pulling off her shoe, she flung it at the Rat King's remaining head.

The Rat King staggered back and turned in rage to strike at her. At that moment the Nutcracker surged to his feet and drove his sword through the Rat King, killing him instantly.

"You did it!" Maria cried, and rushed out to embrace him. And imagine her surprise when it was a boy she hugged, and not a wooden nutcracker!

"You're a real boy!" she exclaimed, and he smiled back at her.

"The curse is broken," he said, "because of you."

And he took her away, to his kingdom of toys and sweets and things of childhood delight. He showed her all the wondrous things there, and all the things of his realm greeted her with happiness for what she had done. Though her parents might say it was just a dream when she awoke the next morning, but Maria knew that it was true.

Event 10: June 5-7, 2015: Invasive Zombies - Alice's Epilogue

Have you ever heard of the “rat king”? A mischief of rats with heads jutting out in all directions, tails tied together.

Tales tied together . . . I’m afraid I’ll have to begin with one that’s had me too flustered to think of much else. My cat was missing. I was anxious.

In this matter, the woodlanders had to do a great deal of my doting for me. A fairy kidnapping is quite beyond me. But you saved him! There was fighting, stories and you saved my cat! Not that he was concerned.

But there was a much greasier tale. It concerns his beady-eyed majesty, the rat-king, Cluny. He sat upon a pile of purloined books and made the Cyprian Abbey his palace on the surface. His minions sharpened their teeth on the spines of books and awaited orders.

Then suddenly shouts! The library was stormed! Cluny, who imagined he’d never have to run from anything again, watched the walls explode and the rocks fall behind him.

Back above ground, the day before, the dangers gave way to one blissful moment. The guests convened, invited and uninvited alike, at the union of the not-mayor priest and the Daughter of the Moon. Everyone had a bit to drink, and two very old friends nearly came to blows: they tell me that constitutes a perfect wedding.

And what were the woodlanders up to in the corners? Peculiar conversations. I never imagined that that so many of them could have the same mother. A new and perilous understanding grew among them, expanded, sent out curious tendrils, and then exploded in a puff of spores and blades. Such violence between friends and neighbors! But the invasive, the lygodium (lie-go-dee-um), was cured, fed to a predator even greater than it, the moths, the aranea (a-rah-ney-a).

And then the rat king again.

The woodlanders, brave and true, approached their enemy, ready to hound him at every corner to save the girl, our Maria, Clarissa. They fought him and his hapless, bity minions. With the pink ribbon of the innocent girl’s favor to bind him and keep him strong, the toy soldier struck! The heroes fought. A shoe sailed – wait, what? – a shoe sailed through the air, distracting the King of Rats, and the beribboned blade finished him!

[Game Over]

Event 10.5: July 11, 2015 One-Day: Koschei The Deathless - Alice's Story

Koschei the Deathless

Some of you may know that among the Frostwroth, north of Collamoor, there exists Simrock, a great barbarian chief who now carries the Hoarfrost Banner and seeks to assemble all the tribes of the Frostwroth barbarians to him.

This is not his tale. Instead let me tell you of one of Simrock's ancestors, perhaps as great as Simrock himself, but in his own way, much more terrifying. This was back in a time before the Clublands were a house, when the Frostwroth claimed that land as part of their own.

Once upon a time among the Frostwroth there lived a powerful magician and priest of the word by the name of Koschei (Ko-Shay). What made Koschei so feared was not that he had tribes of Frostwroth beneath him, although he did. What made him feared was that, so the Frostwroth said, Koschei had defeated Death itself. Koschei the Deathless, he was called, and it was said that he could not die. Moreover, he could call back from death those Frostwroth who had fallen.

To many Frostwroth, to be called back from the Land of the Dead and denied the chance to remain with their ancestors is a thing of horror. As a result, while some saw him as a hero, many southern tribes saw him as a horrifying demon and sought to bring him to his end.

Chief of those who fought against Koschei was Hajvard the Hunter, who we would call Hayward. For years he tried to bring death to the deathless. All he succeeded in doing was to add to Koschei's followers with the spirits of his own loyal dead. Still, even witnessing what could be the result of their own end, those southern Frostwroth fought on.

They were pushed to the line of Cottington Woods. Waves of their own dead kin, as well as those living who revered Koschei as a hero, crashed against them again and again. Caught between the restless dead and the strange forces that inhabited Cottington Woods, the southern men chose to enter the wood. The haunting pursuit continued for weeks. The southern Frostwroth allied with the Robber Barons that lived within the woods, and it was there that Hajvard met the silent Spirit of the Forest and the powerful fairies that served her.

A deal was struck. The Spirit of the Woods was unable to defeat Koschei the Deathless. As it turns out, only one of his own blood could bring him to death, and in his early days he had been careful to slaughter any man, woman or child who was his kin. The Spirit could not kill him, so it chose not to. Instead it bade Hajvard to lure the Deathless into a trap, and the Spirit's Fairy Guardians, using the Fairy Mists, captured him. Once Koschei was captured, the Spirit of the Woods took from him his heart. It

broke his heart into four pieces and hid them, and in so doing trapped the Deathless in enchanted slumber.

There was rejoicing among the southern Frostwroth and the men of the Robber Barons who were their allies.

The Spirit of the Woods warned them, however, that what had been done was not lasting. Koschei was deathless, and so he would escape even this enchanted fate. In simpler terms, Koschei the Deathless will, someday, return.

Event 10.5: July 11, 2015 One-Day: Koschei

The Deathless - Alice's Epilogue

The Story of Koschei the Deathless

I think it was brave of Nathaniel Graytower to invite us all to his home - so abused after last year's annual Cottington Woods Woodland Fair - but truly, the many repairs have quite re-made it. The best (well, the sparkliest) sign that all was right again were the fairies. It's a long tradition, you know, fairies at the fair.

Anyhow, there were plenty of non-fairy things to attend to. Recitations! Singing. Archery. Tossing of cabers, and... cow chips. Melees grand and planned and dangerously unplanned. Fabulous prizes.

Outside the estate, but hard to forget: a war in the wings. Soldiers in green and black, daring in their defense of the north, have pointed their sharp spears southward. I hear there were clever doings in the shadows, scouting expeditions and secret spying into whatever it is that the Clublanders are up to...

And! Their old enemies the Frostwroth, suddenly free to roam wherever they like, have taken the long road from their home to ours. They came in search of four withered black pieces of the withered black heart of a dreadful, terrible, cruel gray old man. I've heard he should have died a thousand times and never did. I've heard he lay waiting to jump up and lay furious waste to the houselands.

And jump up he did, that wicked old grandfather of Northern kings. If every child of the Frostwroth, all down the ages, had been loyal to the line of Simrock, I dare say the fair would have ended very grimly indeed.

But there was one of them, just one, who loved the Houselands more than he clung to the summer of his life. He made the most daring and hopeless of sacrifices...

But hopeless sacrifices, made daringly, ought to be rewarded - don't you think? Tonight at least, the summer did prevail. A treasure, kept long in waiting, saved a lost life. A fabulous prize.

And with that, it's time for tired fair-goers to button up their bags and lace up their boots, and go safely home.

[Game Over.]

Event 11: September 18-20, 2015: Hansel & Gretel - Alice's Story: Hansel & Gretel

Hansel and Gretel

This is the story of two young children and what they found while lost in Cottington Woods.

First, it is important to know why these two were lost in Cottington woods. Hansel and Gretel grew up under the care of their father; however, for much of their young life, they had not the guidance of a mother.

It came to pass that their father met a woman and fell in love. As is the way of things, this woman became a stepmother—and we all know what happens to them. Step mothers have the skill, almost magical, of getting their way. I think it is part of their curse. It wasn't long before the father listened to her above caring for them. And it wasn't long after that that the stepmother convinced the father that though he could afford her, he could not do so while affording them.

So it was that on a sunny morning Hansel and Gretel found themselves on a walk in the woods with their father. When he let go of their hands and told them to wait, they did, and it was some time before they realized that he was not coming back. They would forever remember the tears in his eyes, as he walked away; but they could not do as he said and stay put. They grew hungry and, being children, they grew bored. After many hours and at least one restless nap, they set out.

They passed deeper into the wood than was safe, but they had no one left to warn them. Within the woods they found a lake, and on that lake they spied an island. On that island was a house, and from that house came the most wondrous smell. By this time they were hungry, and the smell of sweets was too powerful for them to resist.

At first they thought there was no way to get to that cabin on the island on the lake in the woods, but almost as if by magic a way appeared before them: a thin stretch of land that must have been hidden behind the island itself. They crossed, and got a closer look at their destination.

It was a cabin made of food! The walls were cake, and the trim was made of candy canes and cookies. Icing caulked the visible seams and sugar plums decorated the high and hard-to-reach places. Without waiting, Hansel and Gretel tucked in and chewed a hole through the wall.

It was when they heard a laugh that they caught themselves. A woman was there, watching them through the hole that they had made. They were ashamed, but she shushed them with a wave of her hand. "You have no idea how many children make my acquaintance in just that way. It is as if my house is irresistible." They were still unsure, because their stepmother would surely have had their hide. Of course, their father's house would not have tasted so delicious. She said, "Come in." And they did.

She seemed the sweetest woman; she gave no hint that she was putting them in peril. Winifred was her name, and she opened her door to children in need.

Hansel and Gretel stayed many days with Winifred the witch. The fear that she would eat them—for that is what witches do in the tales that they had heard—did not last. In fact, she was full of care and cautionary tales. For instance, each night when she tucked them into bed she told them, “Now you stay in bed. There’s a monster under the bed that will catch you if you wander.” And that was true. And when they looked across the water of the lake and wondered where the bridge had gone she told them, “You don’t want to leave today, children. There’s a monster in the woods that will catch you if you wander.” And that was true as well.

“What will the monster do?” Gretel asked. Looking guiltily at the candy-cane windowsill, Hansel added, “Will it eat us?”

Winifred chuckled. “No, no. Nothing like that. It will eat your clever young dreams.” And that was most certainly true.

And that is where I will end this tale. For it is not interesting to know that Hansel and Gretel stayed with Winifred until they grew up, their childhood gone. Or that, one day, a dull young man and a dull young woman stepped out of her cottage, crossing the bridge that lay there again, as if it had never gone.

Event 11: September 18-20, 2015: Hansel & Gretel - Alice's Epilogue

Do stories become Stories when they're repeated enough? Maybe not, but I do know that there have been many Hansels and many Gretels throughout the years.

But I'll come back to that.

Yesterday, I was in my chamber when there was a commotion and clatter; with brave soldiers shouting and cutting with awful swords. Nurse told us to run (is it any wonder that Princess Virtue was with me?), and we ran. Behind me in the hallways I saw pawns and the knights running at each other across the forested chessboard, and when they knocked each other over there was no one to take them off the board and make them comfortable. Just one very cold hand pushing them down from the North rank by rank, and many hands trying to save their pieces in the South.

Maybe this is too sad. Let me talk about adventure. The woodlanders went to a hall, where someone had left a door open to the deepest darkest cave. They fought shadows. They shut the door, but when they tried to return home they found the way blocked open, a foot placed to lodge it open. They tried later to slam it again, but the foot was too large, and they failed.

Okay, that's still sad.

Werewolves? Wow, still too scary. Did anything happen that made you all smile?

Something bad that is over and done with? Creepy crawly, white fronds and veins, impossible paths? The way is closed! Finally.

A teaparty happened. But there were tacks in the food. No, the tacks WERE the food. My caterpillar sent you to me. His party was all blackened, so he had naught to do but send you to me. I don't like Wonderland when so much of it is black. It's supposed to be only half the squares!

But you know, back in Wonderland right now, in the eighth rank, in the third file, on a square shouldn't be black but is anyway, my Hatter is home. I think she is safe from nightmare now.

But hang about. What about those Hansels and Gretels? Rescued by the woodlanders, and the boy in green, forever young; and the man with the hook for a hand. Not many went to the gingerbread house, which you would think, is a good thing. But perhaps "wicked witch" is too simple a name for a "Real" Person, and in this story Winifred turned out "NOT" to be the hungry one. Serpent teeth snapped, and cats claws scratched, but the cupboard was bare. And the witch ran for something she'd never run for before. She ran for help.

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, each with a rich full head filled with dreams, nectar to the mad coil.

And that's how you came to find a gaggle of stolen children. The Madcoil had gorged itself on the mystery in their thoughts, and when you arrived it uncoiled and yawned and struck, fangs bared. Its scales shone! Its tail lashed! The children looked on, barely interested; when it was finally starved of laughter, starved of play, and starved of dreams, it collapsed, and Winifred and the Witches put it back deep into its prison once again.

[Game Over.]

Event 12: October 23-25, 2015: Little Red Riding Hood - Alice's Story

Once upon a time in Cottington Woods there was a young girl named Chastity Cailin McCullen. She goes by another name now, but back then she was young and didn't know such a thing as humiliation existed. I wouldn't call her that now in any case. You might get stabbed.

Chastity was raised by the Riding Hoods. Her mother Felicity was a Riding Hood. Her father Connel was a Riding Hood. Her godfather Radcliffe was a Riding Hood. It wasn't exactly the best life for a child. She smiled and laughed more than she does now, but she was a serious child.

This is the tale of little Red, the Riding Hood, but it is not just her tale. Fenris was a riding hood back then as well. He was not exactly a nice man, but few of the Riding Hoods could actually ever be called "nice". They stand between the terrors of the woods and the woodlanders. They work for the High King now, did you know that they worked for the High Queen three generations ago? That was up until High Queen Equilline Faraway made her very bad deal. Anyhow, Fenris. Not a nice man. But not a bad one either. Like all Riding Hoods, his duties were hard, which in turn made him a hard man.

I'm rambling, I know. And I suppose while I am admitting to that I should say that, like the tale of I started about the elves and the goblins of Cottington Woods, this one is not yet done. But there is more that I can tell.

Fenris was out hunting. Werewolves were a problem in the woods then as well, but back then there was no force of werewolf hunters like there is now, and no Red to lead them. All the signs were there – game not just killed, but slaughtered. Food not just eaten, but toyed with beforehand. Terrible loss of life. Fenris was out hunting the beast responsible. What he didn't know was that the werewolves were hunting them as well. They were led into a trap and attacked. As some of you might know, Fenris was bit.

He thought he could hide his injury. He did, after all, kill the beast that bit him. His men were killed but for him and his wound, like most of that sort, healed quickly.

Over time Fenris grew angry. I sad he was not a good man. That is important. He got worse. But the other Riding Hoods trusted him as one of their own. They blamed his new surliness on the fact that he had just lost so many good friends. He spent much of his time away on patrol, and if he wanted that time to be spent alone, who could blame him.

Then came the reports that another werewolf was plaguing the woods. When asked, Fenris said he had not seen the signs. The woods are large, and he was cunning enough to roam far when the moon called up his fury. People went missing. Animals were found partially devoured, cruelly toyed with and slain. Fenris praised the beast, claimed to be hunting it. When his efforts yielded naught, after many months

had passed, a party was formed to help him. He knew that he could not turn this help away without raising suspicion. Instead, he asked to stay behind. He said he didn't want to see another band of friends get killed, and again, who could blame him.

It was Connall, father to little Red, Chastity then if you recall, who began to suspect. When the hunters went off to hunt, he stayed behind. He returned home to find Fenris already there. Felicity held her ground against Fenris, using soothing words to keep him calm, a task that Connall say was doomed to fail. When Fenris turned to face Connall, Felicity signaled him, and Connall knew that he was not along in suspecting that something was very wrong with Fenris. Urgently he looked around for his little girl, but she was not to be seen. He felt relief.

The argument did not go well. Fenris didn't come to talk. He came to hunt while the other hunters were away. The McCullens were his prey. Enraged, he shifted.

There is a difference between suspecting a thing and seeing as truth before you very eyes. What I mean is that Cullen and Felicity were taken by surprise. Before you fault them, remember that the Riding Hoods hunted wolves back then, and that werewolves were rare. Fenris shifted, and they were horrified, and he killed them. It was not a short fight. It took time for them to lose the fight, for they were skilled, took time for them to die.

Fenris, gorged on blood, fled into the night. He never noticed the face of the little girl that had watched from hiding in a storage bin where her mother had put her.

That was how Chastity Caillen McCullenm in an instant, grew up to become Red. How she became leader of the Riding Hoods is another tale, not now for the telling.

This seems more a tale for the Harrow to tell. It is not to my liking, though I am sure I've told darker in the past. It doesn't have an end, not yet, and I am not sure how to end it. Maybe you all could help?

Event 12: October 23-25, 2015: Little Red Riding Hood - Alice's Epilogue

No Epilogue, as everyone was swept away to Neverland.

Event 13: January 8-10, 2016: Neverland - Alice's Story

No Story this event, as everyone falls into Neverland.

Event 13: January 8-10, 2016: Neverland - Alice's Epilogue

The Fairy Mists are not a safe place for a walk, if you mind getting lost at all. You might find yourselves lost in the Mists—you might even find yourselves in the Land of Never.

I'd always imagined a Neverland to be a lovely place, but their visit was very dark indeed. There were shambling pirates, thirsty Lost Boys, snapping crocodiles, and dogs made crazy from a horrible curse. And behind it all, a shadow, hoarding other people's Happy Thoughts.

To set it all in order, the Woodlanders found thimble and thread, needle and sword, to sew the Shadow back onto the boy who'd cut himself and left it lying on the floor.

To end it all, betrayal and the Jolly Roger!

Outside of Neverland, the word moved on. In the three days the woodlanders spent getting to Neverland, saving it, and finding their way home, six months have passed. Farraway City remains under attack by legions of elemental spirits of fire. Parts of the city are ash burned to dust which blows like enormous whirling devils down abandoned city streets. Aiding the spirits are Clubland soldiers and barbarians from Frostwroth to the far north, the otherwise bitter rivals brought together now by the enchanted charm of the evil fairy queen.

Hearts and Spades, only occasionally aided by Diamonds and the stray woodlander, engage the invaders street by street, in a bitter back and forth contest that thus far has revealed no winner. The castle has not been taken but neither have the invaders been driven out. The stories of individual lives lost are enough to fill a wing of any respectable library.

It wasn't all bad news, however. Though the northern kingdoms were allied with the elemental spirits of Earth, Air and Fire, Water at least seems to have regained its senses. While at first the spirits of water had fought alongside their cousins, now they tested their strength against them, as if somehow they had broken free of the fairy queen's control, and were exacting their revenge.

High King Aaron Farraway and Captain Kelis William lead the charge to take the city back. Accounts began to tell of parties of southlanders moving back and forth from in front to behind the enemy, almost as if by magic, a long haired goblin leading the way. At the same time, the High King watches north for sign of the woodlanders return, and with them his daughter, Princess Virtue Farraway.

In Cottington Woods the Riding Hoods patrol, engaging the invaders where they can, occasionally aided by sudden volleys of elven arrows from out of the woods. And if the single Clublander or Frostwroth soldier vanished, found later torn by the claws of skinchanging wolves, no one but the victim complained, and then never for long.

Lastly, to the south and to the east, safe yet from the war that burned Farraway and Laketown, the first library of the new Abbey Grimm has been completed. Sleeping priests have visions of the word, and one such rises quickly from her bed. Reaching for quill and paper she hastily scribbles what she has seen. She rushes from her room and to her superior who is also groggy with sleep. "There is no time," she says. "We have to get word to Cottington."

[Game over.]

Event 13.5: May 21, 2016: The Dark Tomorrow - Alice's Story

No Story this event, as the Heroes of the Woods exit the Mists only to enter into the Dream-Vision of the Dark Tomorrow, believing they have actually returned to the Real World.

Event 13.5: May 21, 2016: The Dark Tomorrow - Alice's Epilogue

There is no tale told by Alice, as the heroes cause the Dark Tomorrow Dream-Vision to crumble, and find themselves back on the Jolly Rancher, tumbling from the Fairy Mists back to the Written World.

Event 14: June 17-19, 2016: Ever After - Alice's Story: The Woodlander's Tale

The Woodlander's Tale

Once upon a time in the middle of the woods, along the old Way between Farraway City and the northern House of Clubs, lay the ruined stones of Cottington. Wolves hunted nearby, and fairies frolicked and had their fun. Then one day, just three years ago, along came Vigo Cotting. He cleared away the trees and rebuilt the house here, over which he hung a tavern sign and opened the new Cotting House. And quickly, as the Way between Farraway and Collamoor was a very busy route, we all settled in and made this place our home.

It wasn't easy. Cottington Woods is alive, and although he could not know it, Vigo Cotting had accidentally upset the balance of things, and the Spirit of the Woods became injured, and as a result, displeased. But with the help of Arafel, the forest's ancient guardian, and of course with the help of all of you, he was able to see things put to right, and after that our small community has thrived.

This isn't to say our time has been without its challenges.

We saw Senior Scholar Devon Greene's Tome of Tales attacked and nearly undone by a possessing demon. We put the book to right, mostly, though the demon itself fled and inhabited the King of Wolves, Ulkarion the Bearkiller. Still, after a year of terror by the Black Hill Red wolves , both normal and demon possessed, we managed to put an end to that threat as well.

We were thrust against the evil fairy, the Mad Jester, one of Baeldannen's highest lieutenants. There we did what has rarely, if ever been done. We killed him, and we sent him to the Land of Death, which nearly choked on him but eventually swallowed him down to The End.

We awoke a princess from deep within the Fairy Mists in the old land of Auberly. She was a vampire, perhaps THE vampire, a creature that had, in her time, never met with defeat. Her charm was strong, and she turned very many of own friends against us. Many died, or fell. And yet again, we did the unthinkable, and we put an end to a thing that could not end.

All this within a year's time spent in Cottington Woods. And at the end of that first year we fought Vermithraxis, the matriarch dragon from the far north that had settled in Cottington Woods and scattered her brood far and wide.

Just a year after Vigo opened the doors to the Cotting House we met reclusive wood elves from Greencloud and shifty marsh goblins from UnderMarsh. Some helped the goblins beneath Mount OverMarsh, now called the City of Crawling Shadows. Others helped the elves against the insidious Lygodium Invasive.

We saw the Land of Slumber twisted and joined with the waking world. Nightmares walked among us, twisting us, showing us what we least, or in rare cases most, wanted to see.

We encountered puppets that had no strings and their puppeteer without a will of his own.

Some of us, with the Patron's Mantle, rewrote the very World itself, a thing that can be done but once every hundred years!

And then, my favorite, we explored a Land of Wonders...

And this past year? We ended the Lygodium Mother ridding Cottington Woods of the Invasive threat for good. We ended the Frostwroth warlock, Koschei the Deathless, trapped the nightmare Madcoil and bested the mightiest werewolf the woods have ever seen. We saved heroes thought long lost.

We traveled to the Never Land, fought pirates and lost boys and for the second time, just now, we flew through the air on a flying ship!

There were, and are, so many curses. The beauty, Belle, who turned man to beast. The Curse of MisFortune and the Stepmother Curse. The curses of the were, and the vampires, family curses, curses of true love broken and of betrayal. And while behind the cause of some were the acts themselves, an evil act, betrayal or decisions unwisely made, behind more was the will of Baeldannen the fairy queen and her host of otherworldly darkness.

All of this, in just three years.

Am I telling you this to catalogue our successes and to tally what challenges we have left to overcome? Am I appealing to your sense of accomplishment, cheering you on to do greater and more heroic things? Maybe. Or maybe I'm just telling you a tale, your tale, because that is what I do.

We're back in Cottington Woods. Our absence of six months has been noted, by friend and foe alike.

Would you be surprised to know that the High King still holds on to the desperate hope that you will find a way to break the fairy hold on Aleena, once Crofter now the High Queen, his wife? And to break the hold on Roderick Collamoor and, in so doing, the hold over all of the Clublands?

The Guardian of the Forest, the Lady Arafel, the Voice of the Spirit of the Woods, accounts us as the greatest of her allies. She has fought and won against the Fairy Queen, but what do we know about fairies? They don't die. Baeldannen, sent to the Fairy Land as a result of their battle, is returned to full strength, and watches from the dragon-bone throne. Arafel, the victor, is weakened from their battle still, but comes now to our aid. Sensing our presence again in the woods, she comes to ready us to battle the Bloodthorn and to further weaken the queen's power.

But first, the sound of the Wild Hunt can be heard approaching!

Event 14: June 17-19, 2016: Ever After - Alice's Epilogue

Last night you did a great thing, a thing that has, in the history of the Written World, never been done. You defeated Baeldannen, the Evil Fairy Queen. I don't know if I could have imagined a story so great as that!

Faraway City still burns with the flames of war, though the gates into the Fairy Land have closed, now that they no longer have their lady's power to keep them closed. The elemental spirits have blown away with the wind, or flowed back into the stone, or simply extinguished. The Frostwroth have not yet learned that the Hoarfrost Banner is gone. When they do, there will surely be fighting between them and the Clublanders, who are now organizing a full surrender under their new, if reluctant king.

It is an amazing turn of events.

And so I wonder. What will the effect of your great deeds be, in a years time? Two years? Five? I can tell you how it would be if I had written it. Would you like to know?

[“By My Voice, Imbue Story Trait by the Written Word!”]

[Out of Game: The below is included at the beginning of each specific PC epilogue...]

After the defeat of the Evil Fairy Queen the city of Faraway found itself in complete chaos. It was a step up from the state of partial occupation that it had been in, but it was still unbearable to the people who lived there.

With the queen's power toppled, the fairy gates slammed shut. The armies of the north were cut off from their chains of command. They continued to fight for a time, with the exception of the elemental spirits.

The spirits were suddenly unbound and under their own control. Being creatures of a chaotic nature, they set about burning and shaking and storming about in a wild attempt to free themselves of the human city. The immediate and uncontrolled destruction was quickly felt in the camps of those who were, until moments before, their allies. But just as quickly the earth spirits sank into the ground and were gone, the air spirits rose upwards and disappeared. Fire and lightning caused the most damage as they left, and then fire alone as lightning was drawn to the warehouse district where they fed the great lightning rods of the Men of Science who lived there. Then even fire burned itself out and was gone.

With no command forthcoming, the human armies of the north continued to hold what land they had taken. For days, almost a week, they maintained peace among themselves, so strong had the influence of the fairy queen been over them. But the war between Collamoor and Frostwroth had been waged over two thousand years, maybe more, and old habits die hard. There were brawls between the armies at first, with the commanders fighting to control their men. Then, with orders still not forthcoming, even the commanders joined the fray.

High King Aaron Faraway had returned to the city in that time. At his side was the High Queen Aleena, his wife. Her presence made it clear to the Faraway soldiers that the war was won. This might have been less clear to the Diamond and Heartlanders, but to the Spadelanders, her house, there was no question. It was just a matter of time. Their orders were simple. Contain the invading forces until they surrendered.

Eventually, surrounded, with no hope of winning, the Frostwroth did what they did after every raid. They sought to head home with what plunder they could carry. They disappeared into Cottington Woods and were not seen south of the Halfway again.

Then it was only the Clublanders left occupying the stolen land. It was clear to both sides then that the southern houses could have defeated what remained, but they did not. Word had come, of course, of the death of King Roderick Collamoor, but this could have been propaganda. Word had also come that he had acknowledged his bastard son, Robin, and made him heir at the moment of his own death. But that also could have been propaganda. Then King Robin came himself. Had it been just the man, that, too, could have been a lie. But he came with several high ranking officers behind him. Still, there were some Clublanders who held out. There was yet some fighting. It didn't last long.

King Robin begged a swift surrender, which the High King was as quick to accept as if he had been waiting for just that request. Ten days after the Fairy Queen's defeat, the city of Faraway returned to order.

Cottington Woods became quiet. A great hush had befallen the woodland, as if every living thing suddenly sucked in a breath and held it. The only obvious repercussion was that the fairies therein had all but disappeared, which to almost everyone involved could only be considered a good thing.

Of the Frostwroth that fled north through the woods, only a few made it their homeland. The woods were none too gentle with the invaders. It wasn't the first time that Cottington Woods had swallowed up the far northerners. History recalls the tale of the Three Hundred.

Asylum saw the end of its armed occupation by the Clublands. The soldiers there, as they walked down the hill and back toward the northern border of the woods, looked only relieved to leave the place behind, though the act of turning their backs to such a nightmarish place caused more than a few shudders to pass through them.

The Balmbearer Homestead remained a way point for Riding Hoods and for the Daring Men. Priests scouting the

nearby Robber Baron Necropolis would often stay there. Only the larger concern for the homesteaders, the Black Hill wolves, remained unchanged. Wolves will be wolves, and where men are concerned that means danger.

The Frostwroth were all but broken after the taking back of Farraway City. The unity that was established under Simrock with the Hoarfrost Banner was shattered, and the many clans are many once again. There were immediate accounts of a new king, but he has yet to prove himself, and his going has been slow. Despite promises made, the Frostwroth have not, in five years, tried to step on Houseland soil. That may change in the future, and as always the Clublands are geared for war.

Liradriel, Eruve, Aranthir and the elves you may have known are gone, perhaps returned to Thornwall and to mysterious Greencloud beyond. No elf has entered the Cotting House in years. Still, a few you know have told of a cousin or a friend, never first hand mind you, who has seen some new elf appear and then disappear, eyeing the dwellings of men curiously, only to disappear shortly thereafter.

Of the goblins, nothing much has changed. They still are most unwelcome in many places around the woods, and they still fight with the Diamondlanders. Those conflicts are newsworthy, and from time to time you hear of them. Mount OverMarsh continues to be closed from the world, and in fact a series of quakes has shaken the mountain - they was felt throughout the Clublands. Those ways into and out of the mountain are more deeply buried than ever before. What occurs within the mountain is still largely unknown, but Rimble has continued to come to the Cotting House, and he, at least, wants to know.

Every now and again, another Goblin body is found with a tulip upon it.

Unrelated to the war, yet still important to the woodlanders, the Deadwood, that place where life no longer flourished has begun to recede. Grandmother, and also Fen and the woodland wood witches, feel that within a dozen or so years only a scar will remain. Woodwitches feared that there might always be a scar to mark its place, but within a dozen years or so, that might be all that remains. Deathlings have become much less common again, but they are still more common than they were before Morrigan came to the land of the Living.

Cottington Woods has always been an effective barrier between the north and south. After the storming of Farraway City, the south cried for reparations. Had the woods not stood between them the war might have persisted. Many had died by northern hands, and everyone knew that not all the killing was done by Frostwroth soldiers or elemental spirit. Still, it was hard going to those Clublanders who lived in the capitol city. There were fights and secret beatings. Prosecution of the guilty only made things worse. Trade between the north and south almost ceased, which hurt the overall economy. When, almost two years after the fall of the Fairy Queen, violence between north and south seemed unavoidable, something happened that closed the divide.

Princess Virtue Farraway proposed marriage to King Robin Collamoor.

What immediately followed was called the Quiet Heard Around the World. Robin really had no choice, not just because he loved the princess, but because even if he did not there were few who could say no to Virtue Faraway when she was trying to be charming. Besides, to say no would have been an insult to the crown and its people, and war would have followed for certain, and while in his younger days he would have said no just for the upset it would bring, the Robin that was now King knew that he had a responsibility to the northerners that were his.

For now, the Houselands are at peace. There is some north and south tension still to work out, but even that wound is healing.

And now, what about you?

[“By My Voice, Remove Story Trait by the Written Word.”]

But that's how it would be if *I* was writing it.

[*Game Over.*
Campaign Over.]