One Promise Kept: Book 3

by Manniness

Summary

This is a direct continuation of OPK: Book 2. Three months pregnant with her and Tarrant's child, Alice is called upon to be the Champion of ALL of Underland. But, this time she won't be meeting this challenge alone!

WARNINGS: Violence, Semi-explicit Sexual Situations, Mature Themes, Mild Language

Notes

The fan work posted here is the Original Version with Mature Themes, including sexual situations. If you are not a fan of reading about sexual situations (a.k.a. SMUT!) please see my homepage where a less graphic version is available. Thank you!
“Hmmmgh,” Alice sighs, stretches, and sniffs.


“Tarrant?” she murmurs, finally opening her eyes.

“How’s that?” she manages, struggling to follow his thoughts. It’s far too soon after waking and far too long before her first cup of tea for Alice to be able to find her way out of Sleep and into his Mind.

He nuzzles her right knee and explains, his lips brushing against her skin. “Whene’er ye fight in earnest, ye bruise... Here...” he continues, placing a butterfly kiss against the jut of a bone. “An’ here...” Another location, another kiss. “An’ here...”

Realizing that this could go on for a very Long Time, indeed, Alice reaches down and tugs on a lock of her husband’s long hair.

He giggles, coming back to his original thought and concludes, “Yer knees tell me when ye’re safe, when ye’re home, when ye’re mine.”

“I’m always yours,” she reminds him, curling the strands of soft, auburn hair around her finger. Once, this hair had been much shorter, wilder, brighter... but the years since that time have lengthened it past his shoulders, tamed it with the help of her fingers and the occasional leather cord, darkened it with the slow release of the mercury his body had hoarded for so long.

He looks up and grins. “Bu’yer knees tell me tha’ – at th’ moment – ye are’nae a Champion an’ tha’means ye’re Mine.”

Alice smiles at the significant capitalization she hears in his tone. After a moment, his grin fades and he reapplies his mouth to her bare knee. Slowly, he kisses his way up until he’s brushing his lips over the flesh between her hipbones. Her heart stumbles a bit and sputters as he closes his eyes, cradles her hips in his hands, and smoothes his cheek over her lower belly.
“I worry, Alice,” he says simply.

She pushes his hair back over his shoulder so she can see his eyelashes where they lie against his cheekbones, the line of his nose, the curve of his lips. She marvels at the color that has come back to his skin since she’d rejoined the tea party that Griblig Day ten years ago. He’s still pale – he’ll always be pale – but the mercury stains have faded with his growing happiness and the unnatural pallor has been conquered by contentment.

She worries, too. She worries that these concerns he bears will change him again, hurt him again. Starve him into mercury-marked deathly whiteness again.

“Everything’s fine,” she replies, petting his hair to keep it from obscuring her view of his beloved and unpredictable expressions.

Tarrant lifts his head and concentrates very deliberately on kissing a meandering path from one hipbone to the other. Each and every gentle touch feels like the ghost of a worry against her skin. Not for the first time, Alice wonders if she and Tarrant are really ready for this – this unstoppable adventure.

_We’ve still over six months to become accustomed to it... _she reminds herself. And then she wonders, yet again, if the child will be a girl or a boy.

“We ought to think of names,” she says when he softly presses his forehead against her and takes a deep breath against her skin.

“Wha’ d’ye think th’littlin’ wou’like?”

Alice contemplates that, slowly tangling and untangling his hair around her fingers. “Your father’s name was Eaim and mine was Charles. How about one of those... if it’s a boy?”

“As much as I wou’like teh,” he murmurs, “tis th’worst luck teh name a littlin’ fer sommun who’s passed.”

“Oh... Well, then I’m out of ideas for boys.”

Tarrant nuzzles her stomach again.

“What about girls’ names?” she muses, in no hurry to rush out of bed and into another day despite her responsibilities and the tasks awaiting both of them. “Mirana has named her eldest girls for us... and we might not be here, like this, if not for her...” Alice recalls that terrifying moment aboard the sinking ship: Tarrant reaching for her through the looking glass in the queen’s office and the bottle of Pishsalver being offered by the White Queen’s hand... “Should we...?”

He sighs, looks up, and smiles. “I d’nae mind, if tha’s wha’ye’d like.”

Endeared and frustrated, Alice replies, “You have no opinion on this at all?”

“I do,” he answers, his smile changing into one that makes Alice’s heart beat faster. “I’d prefer ye teh think on it... _later._”

“Oh?” she replies playfully. “And what ought I be thinking of now?”

Pushing himself up, Tarrant crawls up her body, caging her on the bed with his limbs. He brushes his cheek, jaw, then chin over her nipple. Then, drawing an invisible line with the tip of his nose up to her ear, he whispers, “_Us._”
Alice smooths her palms up his chest and turns her head toward him for a kiss. She has no trouble whatsoever granting his request. After all, over the years, she’s had quite a lot of practice at it. And, if she does say so herself, she’s quite the expert by now!

“Us,” she agrees and allows herself to contemplate only that single word.

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“Miss Alicibeth, if you don’t pick up your feet, you’ll be picking yourself up off the ground,” Alice says for perhaps the dozenth time today.

The princess pouts. “But I don’t want to fight.”

Alice bites back an exasperated sigh.

“I do!” Alicibeth’s twin sister asserts. “Is it my turn, Alice?”

“Not yet, Tarra,” Alice replies firmly. “And you’ve ten more repetitions to finish.”

“I didn’t forget!” Tarra replies, lifting her short, wooden sword and practicing the block-block-lunge-turn-thrust! maneuver Alice had shown her. As usual, it had only taken Tarra two demonstrations to grasp the basic movements. Her sister, on the other hand...

“I wanna go talk to the roses!” Alicibeth whines. Dear Fates, she is her mother’s daughter.

“No,” Alice tells her. Firmly. “This is important. Now, once more...” Alice narrates the movements and demonstrates with her own wooden sword, following Alicibeth’s reluctant movements like the Jubjub bird intent on its prey.

Please, she begs whomever or whatever may be listening. Please do not let our child follow this example.

Alicibeth suffers and whines through her exercises – correctly! Thank the Fates... – and Alice feels no compulsion whatsoever to keep her from her date with the flora.

“Now is it my turn?”

Biting back a laugh, Alice nods and turns toward the much muchier twin sister of the crown princess. “Do you best!” Alice invites and the clanking and clapping of wooden swords echoes across the pitch.

Blocking a slash and knocking away a thrust easily, Alice marvels at how two sisters can be so completely different and yet so inherently good in their own ways. Despite Bethie’s aversion to sports, there is no kinder or gentler child in all of Mamoreal. And despite Tarra’s fiery temper, there is no braver or more persistent six-year-old.

Tarra’s attacks are uncontrolled and sometimes completely wild, but Alice knows that, someday – when Tarra is no longer so small and her body so undisciplined – this girl will be a frighteningly good fighter, indeed. That is, if her interest in the sport doesn’t wane in the meantime.
“No, no, no,” Tarrant had replied when she’d mentioned the possibility, however slight, of Tarra growing up to be a proper lady. “She’s got a Leif to impress!”

Alice has to resist rolling her eyes at the memory. For the love of squealing mome raths, that man is stubborn when it comes to his ideas! In fact, his namesake is nearly as obstinate as he is!

Face flushed and scowling with determination, Tarra continues her advance and Alice gives ground. Yes, she could easily defeat a small girl, but that is not what these lessons are about! When Tarra manages a rather good cutting attack, Alice lets her sword be knocked wide and Tarra takes advantage, rushing her. A spike of alarm bursts from her heart as the dullish point of the wooden sword thrusts toward her belly.

No!

She grabs the blade reflexively with her left hand and, using the force Tarra is exerting on it, pushes herself back another step until there’s sufficient distance between the tip of the weapon and Tarrant’s child.

Alice lets out a breath in relief; all is fine; everyone is safe. If only she could get her heart to stop pounding, now...

A tendril of worry whispers beneath her skin, over her heart, and Alice struggles with the adrenaline for a moment. Before he can send a more urgent inquiry, she replies to Tarrant’s initial hesitant connection – oh, how he hates to interrupt her when she’s working! – with reassurance.

And he’s not the only one who needs it. In front of her, Tarra looks severely peeved at Alice’s maneuver, which the girl no doubt feels is cheating.

“Excellent attack, Tarra!” Alice enthuses, still a bit breathless from the close call. She doubts anything serious would have happened had Tarra managed to ram her stomach with the practice blade. Still, it’s the idea... Alice tells her, releasing the sword and reaching out to ruffle the girl’s untidy hair, “Well done.”

Grinning, Tarra races around Alice toward the castle. “Did you see me, Mumma? I beats Alice today!!”

Turning, Alice regards the queen, seated comfortably next to the pitch. Her usual attendants are present and currently minding Amallya, who is playing peek-a-boo behind an ever-blossoming cherry tree, and Thacie who is flailing happily on her nurse’s lap, trying her hardest to run just like her elder sisters can.

“Yes, I saw you, squimkin! You were wonderful!”

Alice wanders closer. “Tarra’s got a strong arm, Your Majesty,” she informs her, using the honorific in the presence of their audience.

“Hear that, Mumma? I’m strong! Can I fight Leif next? He’s strong! And big! But I’m small and fast and I can fight him, can’t I, Mumma?”

Alice merely raises her brows and lets the queen handle that one. She glances over at the pair of white bassinets placed next to Mirana on the quilt. She can see that newborn Prince Dalerian is fast asleep. His twin brother, however, is staring up at the sky with wide, dark eyes, his small mouth opening and closing again and again.

“Hello, again, Leivlan.” Alice glances over at the queen as she tickles her squirming squimkin. When
Tarra races off, swinging her wooden sword with more enthusiasm than intent, Alice inquires, “Are you calling them Ian and Lanny yet?”

Mirana smiles at the twin boys in the bassinets. “Not yet!”

“You look well today. Childbirth agrees with you.” It’s hard to believe the woman is up and about so soon afterward. Alice dares to hope she’ll be at least half as strong when her time comes...

The queen smiles. “It seems to. I was quite lucky, I think,” she replies, reaching out a finger to tickle Leivlan’s nearly bald head. Alice watches his little hands curl into fists and his dark eyes dart about as if looking for the source of the sensation, but unable to focus properly enough to find it.

“You are lucky, Mirana,” Alice whispers. The nurse holding Thacie has wandered over to where Amallya is trying to climb a cherry tree in defiance of her minder’s warnings. Alice glances at the king’s First Claw, which Mirana still wears around her neck. “The Soul Bond is truly an amazing thing. Seven children and all of them are so...”

Mirana replies, “How is it the magic of Underland still surprises you, Alice? You’ve experienced it for yourself time and time again!”

Alice shakes her head. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the idea that two people can provide a... a moral compass for their children. Through a Soul Bond, I mean. That’s just...”

“Necessary in a powerful family,” the queen finishes gently. “If only my parents had taken such measures, perhaps Iracebeth wouldn’t have...”

Alice nods, understanding. Yes, if the previous king and queen had initiated a Soul Bond between them, then cruelty and callousness never would have gotten a foothold in Iracebeth’s heart. The Soul Bond would have subtly bound their children to their sense of morality, which – from the occasional stories Mirana has told her – Alice believes had been of the purest and kindest sort. She doesn’t ask how Dale and Mirana’s children will carry on the tradition without a First Claw, for none of them resemble their lion-father; there are many rites in Underland that will bind two souls.

“Still,” the queen continues, “I can understand why my parents had not chosen that path...” She frowns as she watches Tarra raise her sword and wave it at the rose bush her sister is conversing with. Immediately, Bethie puts herself between them, protecting the flowers. “Is it right to take away even that much of someone’s will?” Mirana whispers wonderingly. “I’m still not sure...”

“But it’s necessary,” Alice reminds her, knowing another Red Queen must never be permitted to rise to power again. Ever. “So... let’s talk of something else.”

“Yes,” Mirana agrees whole-heartedly. “Let us discuss your plans to start a family.”

Alice winces. “Well, you know...”

“I’ve told you time and time again, Alice, the Oraculum has shown nothing to discourage...”

“But it can change so suddenly,” she rebuts.

“Is that why you and Tarrant haven’t...? Well, I assume you’ve spoken to him about it. He seems... more thoughtful and... cheerful? Recently,” the queen murmurs.

“Yes, we spoke,” Alice says simply.

Mirana pats her hand. “Well, when the time is right for both of you, you will take that last step.”
Already taken, Alice thinks but does not say. This child is their secret. For now. For as long as they can manage it. Alice’s experiences years ago with Stayne and then later with Jaspien, Valereth, and Oshtyer have taught her to always keep her most treasured of treasures close, secret, hidden. Alice knows she won’t be able to conceal her condition indefinitely. In fact, it’s mostly thanks to Mirana’s off-handed speculation about how Underlandian pregnancy remedies might have to be adjusted to suit Alice’s Uplander biology that Alice has managed to keep the nausea and exhaustion at bay at all.

Thank the Fates Mirana likes to talk to herself about alchemy, Alice thinks, and speculate on my private life. Luckily, the dosage recommendation the queen had whimsically muttered about during her pregnancy with Amallya had stuck in Alice’s memory... and it had also worked when Alice had found the need to try it.

Still, this deception won’t be possible forever. At best, she’ll be able to manage only two more months of it.

And then what?

Alice sighs and admits the answer she already knows: And then she’ll have to let Tarrant look after her, take up her sword if necessary. Once upon a time, she would have asked Chessur, but with his own responsibilities taking up so much of his time, Alice knows she can’t ask the Cheshire Cat to step in for her as the Queen’s Champion.

No, it will have to be Tarrant.

She gazes out across the pitch and frowns.

Dear Fates, I hope he and Leif don’t end up killing each other during training practice...

Despite the years – and the possessive tendencies of a certain six-year-old princess – that have mellowed Leif’s heroic nature into an easy-going friendliness, and despite Tarrant’s ever-increasing self-control, they’re still males, after all...

“Males with pointy sticks,” she mutters darkly.

“I’m sorry, what was that, Alice?”

“Hm? Oh, nothing. A wandering mind,” she replies, noticing that the queen had lifted Leivlan from his bassinet and is nursing him beneath a shawl thrown over her shoulder and across her chest.

“Are you looking forward to the Clan Gathering?” the queen asks.

“I think so,” Alice tells her. “Sometimes I am. Sometimes I’m... not sure. The Irondirks are coming, so... sometimes I don’t know what to think about that.”

Mirana frowns. “But... Davon, isn’t it?”

Alice nods.

“He looked out for you in Causwick, did he not?”

“He did. For the most part he managed to keep the other mercenaries in line. And both Tarrant and I appreciate that. Still, seeing him will bring back memories.”

“Not happy ones,” the queen adds sadly.

“We survived,” Alice says with a wry smile, thinking of Davon’s attempt to kill her during the
Champions’ Duel. She doubts Tarrant has forgotten that, either... “The Clan Gathering will be fine,” she declares and does her best to wish it into being.

“You’ve quite the task ahead of you, Alice, what with the Hightopp clan hosting the Gathering this year... and there just being the two of you to manage it. Are you sure I can’t persuade you to borrow Thackery or the Tweedles or...?”

“If a small contingent of your guard could bring and erect the tents and also deliver the provisions we’d discussed, that will be more than sufficient. But thank you for the offer.” Alice once again glances around her, checking on the children and their minders. “I think this is something Tarrant needs to do himself...

“Yes, of course,” Mirana replies, laying her son down and buttoning her bodice. “When will you be leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning, I think. That’ll give us nearly two days before the clans start arriving.” Alice considers that event and the number of guests they’re expecting. “I’m actually surprised so many are coming given the location and its... history.”

Mirana pats Alice’s arm. “That Hightopps are one of the most respected families amongst the Outlanders.”

“Tarrant said they’d always been employed at court. Would that be why?”

The queen smiles. “I shall let Tarrant tell you that story, perhaps...”

Alice laughs. “Yes, thank you. After seven years, it’s getting harder and harder to find new topics to discuss. We’re lucky you and the king have so many exuberant children or I fear our evenings would be woefully silent, for the most part.” She winks.

Mirana’s gape is brief but genuine. “Don’t tell me you gossip about my children to pass the time!”

“That and when you’ll be producing the next one,” Alice admits, only half-joking.

The queen sighs and shakes her head. “Those days are at an end, I think, dear Alice. Five births and seven children in as many years is...”

“Yes,” Alice replies, smiling in hopes of chasing away the faint sadness in the queen’s face. “Yes, it is. They are. Most definitely.”

And the queen’s smile returns. “They’re wonderful, aren’t they?” she asks with genuine curiosity. “Those aren’t just the words of a mother, are they?”

“No. Your children are...” Alice searches her ever-expanding vocabulary and chooses the terms in Outlandish she hopes convey the meaning she’s seeking: “Wonderfulously beautrific, callaycious, callouryin’—”

Mirana laughs. “I suppose that’s the other thing you and Tarrant do with your not-quite-silent evenings together? Outlandish?”

Alice feels herself blush. “Um, something like that.”

The queen laughs, reading Alice’s unspoken admission easily: Alice doesn’t try to learn, nor does Tarrant try to teach her. In moments of passion, when she asks him to speak Outlandish... well, can she help it if she remembers some of his more creative and distinctive phrases? No, of course not.
Glancing at the sun, Alice decides she ought to get moving. She and Tarrant have a lot of preparations to make before they can leave on the morrow. She bids the queen a good day and wanders into the castle, stopping at the small weapons closet long enough to put away the equipment for the day’s lesson (with the exception of the wooden sword Tarra is probably going to try to keep with her for the rest of the day... again!) before heading toward the hat workshop.

She makes a brief detour toward the kitchen to ask Thackery for a lunch tray and, just on the other side of the kitchen door, she spots an old friend hovering in the hall, contemplating the entrance.

“Chessur! What are you doing here? I thought...”

The cat gives her a typical grin. “Oh, just thought I’d come by and–”

“Ye’ll no’be taken all m’Thrambleberries, Chessur!” Thackery hollers from inside the kitchen.

Alice Looks at Chessur whose grin curves wider with embarrassment. “The hatchlings do love those berries,” he muses by way of explanation.

She bites her lip and hums noncommittally. She still marvels that Chessur had ended up being part of the solution to the impossible thing the Jabberwocky had alluded to in Iplam.

“As the last of my kind,” it had confided to her one summer afternoon when she and Tarrant had returned to Iplam to start rebuilding his family’s ancestral home. “It falls upon me to bring my fellows back into Underland. Underland is far too large for one jabberwocky to manage all on its own,” Krystoval had said. “And yet even one hatchling is far too much for one jabberwocky to manage...”

And that had been the moment when Alice had thought of a shape-shifting cat with evaporating skills who had been undoubtedly smitten with the Jabberwocky for some time.

It’s an unlikely alliance, but – clearly – an advantageous one.

“And how is everyone?” Alice asks, still finding it hard to think of Chessur as the sort to watch over four juvenile jabberwockies while their... mother? father? parent? creator? is out and about looking for dinner.

“Oh, fine, fine...”

“And... has Maevyn spoken yet?” Alice hates asking but she can’t stop herself from hoping...

Chessur sighs. “No. No, not as yet. Rest assured, Alice, either I or Krystoval will notify you immediately should Maevyn acquire the ability to identify the one who...

Alice nods. She doesn’t say that she regrets not being able to give the baby Jabberwocky and its parent the justice they deserve. She would only be repeating herself and she’s well aware that both Krystoval and Chessur know she would do anything to hunt down the beast that had injured Maevyn.

“Are they flying yet?” she asks instead.

“Just fluttering a bit here and there,” the cat admits proudly, as if he’s a parent himself. Well, in a way, Alice supposes he is. Chessur has no closer friend, no dearer companion, than Krystoval. Kindred spirits, those two: droll, witty, wry, and often times snobbishly exclusive and patronizing kindred spirits.

Narrowing her eyes in speculation, Alice asks, “Well, they’re certainly mobile enough to go forage
for their own Thrambleberries. Why are you always elected to the task?"

“Oh, the leaves are poisonous, you know. To jabberwockies. Makes their scales break out in a terrible rash.”

“Is that so? I’d hate to see an itchy jabberwocky.”

“As would I. Hence, I do the Thrambleberry fetching.”

“Wait... have you ever actually seen one of the jabberwockies contract this rash?”

“Well... no...” Chessur gives Alice his undivided attention and grins. “What are you suggesting now, Uplander?”

Alice replies with a smile that feels rather... mysterious. At least from her side of it. “Well, everyone knows there’s no better Thrambleberry harvester than a March Hare and, I believe, Thackery is the reigning champion of the Pick-a-Therry Festival?”

“Yes...?”

“Well, if you wanted the very best berries, then where would you find them?”

“With the reigning champion, in the White Queen’s kitchens, naturally.”

“And would a jabberwocky be able to get into the White Queen’s kitchens?”

“Well, of course... not... Oooh...”

Alice bites back a laugh as understanding lights Chessur’s furry face.

“Why those devious, slithy, tove-ish excuses for jabberwockies,” he muses looking far too delighted for the words themselves. “That, my dear Alice, is a strategy worthy of a cat.”

“I’m sure a Cheshire Cat could do one better,” she muses.

The grin Chessur gives her... well, she’s never seen a smile so wide from him. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve a bit of recompense to contemplate.”

“You’re excused,” Alice says to the suddenly empty air. Chuckling she steps into the kitchen, ducks a wooden bowl, and greets the March Hare. “Hello, Thackery. How are you?”

He twitches. “Thramble thieves!” he exclaims worriedly.

“Chessur’s gone,” she assures him. “Your berries are safe.”

“Ar, ye think so? A mahn can ne’er be tae careful wi’his berries!”

Biting back a smile, Alice nods in whole-hearted agreement.

“An’ ye’l be wantin’ sommat tae lunch on?” he says, convulsing a bit next to the stove as he seems to debate the contents of each pot.

“That would be nice. Can you spare...?”

“Spare? No, no sparest teh be had, but I made a bit fer ye an’ yer lad.”

“A rhyme,” she congratulates him, then holds the plates and bowls while he flings the bread and
stew at her. She considers this another form of Champion training and today only a small splatter manages to spot her shirt cuff.

“Not bad,” she tells herself as she continues on her way to Tarrant’s workshop. It’s a measure of how busy he is that he doesn’t meet her somewhere between his workshop and the kitchen; the man has a sixth (or would this be the seventh?) sense as to when Alice is balancing their lunch plates on a heavy tray in the castle hallways. In fact, she’s a bit surprised to arrive at his workroom and find herself facing a closed door.

Wondering what in all the realms of Underland he could be doing in there that would require privacy, she taps her toe against the door, rapping out the distinctive beat to the Waltz of the Tumtum Tree. She makes it to the first stanza before the door swings open.

Alice smiles. “Oooh, now I see why you had the door closed.”

In the midst of reaching for the lunch tray, Tarrant glances at her sheepishly and blushes. “Jus’ checkin’ tae see if ‘twould need alterin’...”

“Uhm hmm...” she muses, kicking the door shut behind her. She follows him to the small tea table, her gaze focused on the kilt he’s wearing. “It looks as if it fits you just... fine.” Of course, she could have reminded him that he hasn’t gained an ounce of weight in all the years she’s known him. In fact, he hasn’t even gained a wrinkle. Actually, sometimes – like now, for instance – he looks younger than she can ever remember him being.

“Raven...” she wonders aloud as he sets their lunch down on the table. Stepping closer to him, she gives into temptation and ghosts her fingers over the tartan wrapped around his hips. “What do Outlander lads wear under their kilts?”

His blush deepens. Alice marvels. She teases him about this very thing every time she sees him in his kilt – which is admittedly rare, but still memorable, she thinks! – yet she still manages to fluster him.

“If’n yer askin’ ‘bout all Outlandish lads, I’m afraid I cannae help ye, Alice,” he replies gamely.

“Not all; just one.” Alice is sure she’s grinning madly as she pushes him into his chair and leans over him. She rephrases: “What does an Outlander hatter wear under his kilt?”

He gulps. “Tha’s a question only tha’ particular hatter’s wife wou’ge’an answer teh.”

“I believe I’m this hatter’s wife...” She settles her palms over his bare knees which peep out above his mismatched socks. (Of course his socks are mismatched – how boring would it be to wear two of the same kind when one has the chance to model a variety! And at the same time, no less!)

“Aye,” Tarrant agrees, giggling. She tries not to tickle his knees too badly. “Tha’ ye are...”

“And has the answer to my question changed since I last asked?” Her hands slide up to his lap and disappear beneath the Hightopp colors.

Tarrant giggles a bit hysterically. “Wha’ was th’answer las’time?”

Alice encounters wonderfully bare skin as she pushes her palms up his thighs. “Hm...” Arriving at her destination, she feels her grin turn a bit... manic. “The same as it is this time, if I’m not mistaken,” she replies, exploring.

“I... cannae recall... jus’ nauw,” he whispers, his thimbled fingers thrusting gently into her hair. “Alice...?”
“Yes?”

“Ye ken I... try ver’hard no’teh interfere wi’yer work...”

“Oh, am I interfering?”

“Um, ah...”

“Shall I stop?”

He groans softly. “Stop wha’, Alice?”

“What I’m doing.”

“Wha’te ye doin’?”

“Interfering with your work.”

“Ahem! Oh, yes. Yes! I believe you... are. That’s... very... very... ngh!... a ver’bad habit! ... Alice...?”

“Tarrant?”

“Jus’ a wee bit...”

“More?”

“... aye...”

Needless to say, the stew is a bit cooler than it ought to be when they finally get around to eating it.

Chapter End Notes

1. No, Chessur and the Jabberwocky are not in a sexual relationship. More on this in later chapters.

2. Yes, the queen’s children are named after her fiercest protectors: Alice (Alicibeth), Tarrant (Tarranya), Chessur (Chestor), Mallymknun (Amallya), Thackery (Thacie), Dale (Dalerian), and Leif (Leivlan). No doubt she hopes those names will bring her children strength and an auspicious future.

3. A special “Thank you” goes out to Ver for the comment on my LJ (back in Book 2, Chapter 2) about the Soul Bond being “Something Important.” At the time, I’d just planned to use it as one more obstacle Alice and Tarrant would have to overcome (and they do, in Book 2, Chapters 14 & 15). But I got to thinking about it: Why is a Soul Bond advantageous for a ruling family like the Avens? And then my brain spat out this explanation: it’s a moral compass for a couple’s children. And that was just... perfect. So, THANK YOU, Ver!

4. A Glossary of Underland is available on my homepage (please see my profile for the link) if you are curious about any of the Underlandian, Outlandish, or Shuchish words used in this fan work.
“I’ve just a thing or two to do in the workshop,” he’d said. “Go on to bed.”

He’d lost an hour when she’d asked him to lie down with her. Lost an hour, but gained a sense of peace and tranquility that he wouldn’t trade for anything. The memory of his wife’s face, surrendered to the exhaustion that she can’t always fight and finally relaxed in sleep; the feel of her body curled toward his like a flower turned toward the sun; the heat of her breaths – no, both her breaths and his littlin’s, for she breathes for both of them, doesn’t she? – against his arm though the fabric of his shirt: these things keep him company now as he works his way toward midnight.

A thing or two to do. Yes, that is exactly what Tarrant does. The task that occupies his time now is rhythmic, simple, and repetitious. After being at it for so long, his hands move from memory. From the corner of his workshop, the sound of the loom booms in the silence, but he doesn’t care who he wakes and as soundly as Alice has taken to sleeping these past not-quite-three months, he doubts – if he wakes anyone – it will be her. This is his last chance to finish and he will finish In Time!

Sometimes he has to pause and reapply the fabric pins before he can continue weaving. Sometimes he has to stop and fold the finished length of cloth over his lap lest it develop unseemly wrinkles. Sometimes he has to ignore the fact that the wool is not as fine nor the weaving as uniform as it ought to be.

After all, he’s never made a tartan this way before. His Fa had. His Fa had shown him how to do it, but that had been so Long Ago... And Tarrant had nearly forgotten the rite altogether what with he and Alice living in the White Queen’s castle and only rarely meeting with other Outlanders.

Outlanders...

Tarrant glowers as he jabs the fabric pin a bit more viciously than is strictly necessary.

Other Outlanders, like the Irondirks: skilled smithies and fighters, the lot of them, but Tarrant knows what that man’s role had been in pushing his Alice into madness. He’d even watched as that man had tried to kill her on the battlefield!

Lickspittle, pilgar-suckling, shukm-greizin’...!
Tarrant lifts his hands from the loom, closes his eyes, focuses on the warm, steady pulse – Alice’s pulse! Their littlin’s pulse! – of his Heart Mark, and takes a deep breath.

Calm again, he admits that although he is not fond of Davon Irondirk – no, not fond AT ALL! – for some odd reason, Alice finds the man amusing.

And speaking of Outlanders and other things he’s most assuredly Not Fond of...

It had driven Tarrant to distraction when his Alice had gone to Salazen Grum to help Fenruffle sort out the property deeds amongst the new citizens of the White Realm. He’d only lasted two days before he’d asked one of the horses to take him there so he could see for himself that his Alice was safe.

At least she hadn’t been angry with him for that. She could have been, he knows. She could have accused him of not trusting her ability to look after herself. But she hadn’t. And, with a single look, he’d known she wouldn’t. His need to see her had had nothing to do with a lack of trust and everything to do with his own weakness: he’d spent twenty-three days without her and the final seven of those in fear for her, not knowing what she was doing or what she was being forced to endure. He had not been able to withstand Not Knowing a second time.

In Salazen Grum, he’d kept himself busy and out of her way – Alice had been working, after all! – instructing the children of the former mercenaries in the art of basic clothing repair, and he’d also assisted the wives and mothers with clothing alteration techniques, and – before he’d known it – Alice had announced that it was time to go home.

Strangely, in that moment, he’d thought of Iplam.

And he’d kept on thinking of it even after they’d arrived in Marmoreal.

And so, the following spring, Tarrant had asked his Alice for the biggest and Most Important Favor he’d yet dared to request:

“Will ye help me rebuild Hightopp Village?”

And she had. Every summer, they gone back to build: a guest cottage first, then the bath house and the kitchens. After that, it had taken three years to complete and furnish the Main House. In the process, they’d cleared out the debris from the well, torn down the shambles of the stables, and put up a new storehouse for harvested edibles. Not that there are any edibles to harvest from Iplam at the moment, but... someday... there might be...

Aye, someday ye might go back there, lad. When ye’ve resigned yer post... When Alice’as found a worthy replacement fer th’Queen’s Champion...
Tarrant dares to wonder about that future, about their child’s place in it...

He has to pull his hands away from the loom and press the heels of his hands against his eyes to keep the simmering heat of tears from pushing out. He can still barely – hardly, scarcely, dare to! – believe that Alice had agreed to... that she wants his... wants him to be a...

He can’t think it. Not now. Not when it’s late and he’s too tired to keep the emotion from erupting out of him and waking his wife.

His wife. Yet another miracle he cannot think about without feeling utterly overwhelmed.

Tarrant reaches for the pin again, jabs it ten times, then turns back to the loom, to the tartan his wife will need if she’s going to be a right-proper Lady Hightopp of Iplam! He doesn’t glance at the clock, for as long as the window beside him is dark, there’s still time to finish, time yet to complete and then bestowed the honor upon his wife that is hers by right, time yet to fulfill his duty to her as the Laird of Iplam, time yet to marvel that he is even here, now, doing this at all.

*~*~*~*

“Did you manage any sleep last night?” Alice gently asks him when he jerks himself awake for the two-and-two-thirds times four-hatpins-and-a-silver-ring time since beginning the familiar journey.

“So sorry,” he mumbles, both to the horse that had kindly volunteered to be his mount and to Alice whom he’s sure had been telling him something interesting or important or impressive (Perhaps today is an “I” day?) just now. “Preparing. Much to do. Be done. Was done. Prepared and now packed... Hm, perhaps it’s a day for considering words that start with the letter “P”...” And, upon hearing himself say that utter rubbish, Tarrant gives himself yet another shake. “So sorry, Alice. What were you saying?”

“Would you like to stop for tea?” she says patiently.

“Don’t know about this droopy bloke,” Tarrant’s steed, a fellow by the name of Fitzfrey, interjects, “but I could do with a bucket or two.”

“I’ll second that,” Alice’s mount – Winsommer – adds. “Did you pack any sugar cubes, love?” The horse glances back at Alice.

“A bag or several.”

“This looks like a good place to stop, then,” Fitzfrey decides and wanders off the trail to a small,
cozy-looking break amongst the budding trees. Tarrant struggles to keep his balance as the beast navigates the softer, uneven earth of the forest floor.

“Tarrant?” Alice asks worriedly.

Winsommer snorts. “Dismount before you disgrace yourself, Hatter.”

“An excellent idea,” he mumbles in agreement. Fitzfrey holds still while Tarrant attempts to gingerly swing his leg over the saddle. He moves so carefully that Alice has plenty of time to slide down from her mount and assist him with stepping down from his.

“So sorry,” he thinks he says again as he stumbles against her.

“It’s fine. Now, sit here. Good. Relax for a bit and I’ll make tea.”

“Hrmmpff...” he thanks her. Tarrant leans back against the trunk of a Tumtum tree (which feels far too soft to be possible) and his hat tilts over his eyes and...

... the next thing he knows, he’s laid out on a bedroll with a warm arm wrapped around his shoulder. Blinking, he takes in the late afternoon light filtering down through the still-scanty forest canopy.

“We’re late,” he says. His voice sounds rough and scratchy to his own ears. He clears his throat.

“A bit. It’s your fault for staying up all night. Naughty,” Alice informs him.

He feels her amusement against his heart and finds himself giggling. “And I’ve missed tea.”

“It’s not gone brillig yet,” Alice informs him, sitting up.

He rolls over and watches her stoke the small fire and place the kettle on it. The nearby Tumtum trees groan worriedly.

Alice reaches out and absentely pats the trunk of one. “I’m not taking my eyes off of the fire this time,” she assures the forest.

Tarrant’s brows arch in inquiry. Alice sighs. “I just turned away for a moment to get the buckets and cups and...”

“Yes,” he agrees. “Moments do tend to get away from one when one’s not paying attention!”
“In any case, no harm done.”

The trees shiver.

Tarrant considers his wife. He watches as she adds the tea leaves then closes her eyes and tilts her head to the side just so...

*Listening to the tea leaves steeping!*

He smiles and he’s still smiling when she hands him a cup of perfectly brewed black tea.

“Winsommer finished off nearly all of the sugar cubes,” Alice tells him as she draws something out of her pocket. “But I hid a few...”

Tarrant holds out his cup and accepts two. “Thank you, Alice.” He holds out his arm and, collecting her own cup, she sits next to him, pressing against his side.

“Are you nervous?” Alice asks after a moment of companionable, tea-sipping silence.

“I don’t think I’d mind overly much should Fitzfrey or Winsommer wander by and see us sitting here...”

She snorts. “I meant about the Maigh.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

Tarrant stalls by blowing across his cup, taking a sip, and then playing with Alice’s short hair. She turns to kiss his fingertips.

“Tarrant!”

“What?” he asks, surprised by her scandalized tone.

“What?! WHAT?!” She sends him a disbelieving look. “What have you done to your poor fingers? Does your other hand look like this?”
Tarrant winces as she grasps his palm and examines his many-times-punctured and still-raw fingertips.

_Ye fergot th’Pain Paste, lad._

Obviously.

“‘Tis fine, Alice,” he assures her.

“No, it’s not.”

She moves to stand, but he tightens his arm around her shoulders. “Later. Just... jus’ stay wi’me fer nauw?” he whispers against her hair. After a moment, Alice relaxes against him, as he’d known she would. Yes, sometimes Outlandish is _very_ Useful.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she reminds him.

When she picks up her teacup again, Tarrant says, “I will. Tomorrow. Ask me another answer for now.”

Alice gives him a wry smile. “Mirana says the Hightopps are quite highly regarded by the other clans.”

“Ah...” he murmurs, surprised by Alice’s choice of answer to ask. “Well, tha’tis a bit o’a long story...”

“The horses are foraging. I think they’ll be a while yet.”

He finishes his tea and leans back against a particularly fat and comfortable-looking Tumtum tree. Alice settles against him. He begins, “Long, long ago, when Underland had no kings or queens or boundaries or borders, the people and animals and plants lived as they wished. Or as they wished they could, for there was one problem and ‘twas the seasons.

“The seasons came and went whenever they felt like it and Winter in particular was rather reluctant to move on once he’d arrived. The Hightopps – a modest clan of tailors then – got the Idea to host a party. A Farewell Party for Winter, actually. Hoped to tire the fellow out and send him off to bed so that Spring might be able to stop by for a visit.”

Tarrant pauses and leans his cheek against Alice’s hair, closes his eyes, and waits for her to prompt him for more, which she unfailingly does whenever he tells her a story:
“What happened?” her ever-burning curiosity makes her ask.

He smiles against her hair.

“Well, the festival was a success; all the dancing – the first Futterwhacken, actually – and singing and the be-ribboning of the Maypoles... well, the merriment wore poor old Winter out and he toddled off home. When Spring arrived, of course, the party became a Welcome Party and there was more dancing – better Futterwhacken this time as everyone was so happy to see that the plan had worked – and more singing and more ribbons on the Maypoles... Spring was so overjoyed to be Welcomed so warmly that he gave the Hightopps a very special gift.”

Again, he waits. And again, she pushes for more: “What was the gift, Hatter?”

“Guess, my Alice.”

She considers it for a few moments. “Spring taught the Hightopps how to make hats, to keep their heads dry during the spring showers?”

“An excellent guess, but...”

“Not the right one. All right...” He can nearly feel the thoughts churning within her head. He sighs, content. He loves nearly feeling Alice’s thoughts.

“He gave Iplam to the Hightopps?”

“No. Try again.”

She sighs, thinks, and – hesitantly – says, “Spring gave you all the colors in your eyes?”

He giggles, pleased. “You’ve guessed it, Alice! Well, nearly...” He stretches out his arm so that she can clearly see his jacket sleeve and cuff. “Not only our eyes change color with our mood,” he tells her and, concentrating on how very Much he Loves his Alice, Tarrant watches with her as his shirt cuff turns from a pale pink – his usual color of contentment – into a rich lavender.

“Of course, my eyes change color faster. They’re connected, you see. Clothing needs a bit of time and responds to one’s overall disposition.”

Alice reaches out and touches his cuff and then moves to his jacket sleeve which is starting to slowly molt into indigo from plum. “You know...” she muses aloud. “I have no idea why I never asked about that. I suppose I just thought it was something you could do, being a milliner.”
Tarrant giggles again. “I was rather surprised you didn’t ask, either!”

“Why did Spring give the Hightopps so many colors? The ability to effect them, I mean?”

Finally, he concludes the tale that’s been passed down through his family for generations: “So that we need never be surrounded by the Grey of Winter again.”

“That’s a beautiful story, Tarrant,” she rewards him, turning so that he can see her smile.

“I’m glad you liked it, Raven.”

For a long moment, there is only he and she and the warm pleasure that comes from a gently told, sweetly ending tale. And then her smile fades. Tarrant moves his hands to her arms as if to hold her in that moment of happiness with him.

“I’m sorry. About the winter, I mean.” Looking very sad, Alice explains, “You were very... grey when I arrived, late for tea on Griblig Day. And...” She raises a hand and lays it against his cheek. “For so long you were so pale...”

“And had you not returned to Underland, Alice, I would still be living in those Grey Days, but you did return and so I am no longer required to kill Time and I think – that is, I believe – that I shall never be forced to do so again. I have faith in us, you see,” he explains as the words come to him. “Perhaps I’m not so pale now because I am not so frightened of being alone.”

Alice’s response to this simply-stated declaration exceeds his expectations. She sits up, swings her leg around and straddles his lap. Petting his face and paying particular attention to his brows and mouth and the skin under his eyes – eyes which he’s sure must be Glowing at this point – she brushes a whisper against his lips:

“I choose us.”

Even after seven years, those three words still have the power to make him come Undone.

Perhaps now, even more so. Now that us is no longer just the two of them. He closes his eyes and fights against the shudder that threatens to jumble his thoughts. Dear Fates, what would he do if something were to happen to his Alice now?

“It’s all right,” she whispers.

His worries recede enough for him to notice that she’s combing her fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry,” Tarrant tells her. “I...”
“Worry,” she finishes. “I know. It’s all right.”

Perhaps it is. Perhaps it isn’t. But his wife’s voice and hands and Real-ness make it seem so. “Shall we call for the horses?” he asks, finally.

“I suppose we should. It’s getting late.”

The ride to Iplam is brief and Tarrant thanks the horses before helping them with their tack. He opens the storehouse for them while Alice takes their things to the guest cottage. He’d been afraid she would mind not staying in the Main House, but she hadn’t.

“We’ll need the room if it rains,” she’d assumed aloud.

Tarrant had shaken his head. “It’s not the weather we have to worry about. This is Spring’s party, after all.”

“So what will we need it for?”

Tarrant had grinned. “For the newlyweds.”

“The newlyweds?”

“Yes, yes. On the first full day – the day of the Maigh – there’s the Declaration of Vows, at which time those that have been hand-fasting or betrothed or promised to each other since the previous Maigh will state their vows and be wed.”

Alice had glanced around the clearing nervously. “Oh. That changes things. I ought to have asked Mirana for something to decorate—”

Tarrant had shushed her with a finger placed gently against her lips. “Traditionally, that’s for the guests to bring. Everything is just as it should be.”

With a small smile, Alice had relaxed and noted, “We already made our Declarations here, didn’t we?” She’d lifted her left hand and placed it over his heart.

Transfixed by the sight of the ring – his ring – still on her finger, he’d merely nodded.

“So we’ll be putting the newly wed couples in the guest bedrooms of the Main House?”
Another nod.

“Where they can make as much noise as they like and it won’t bother the rest of us?”

A giggle. “More likely, the noise from the party will bother them. It’s one party,” he’d clarified at her puzzled look. “And it lasts from brillig on the Eve of Maigh to the morning after Maigh.”

“So... what? No one sleeps?”

“Only when absolutely necessary!”

And so, while they’d had the chance, they’d gone to bed and gotten a good deal of sound slumber in.

The next morning had been a busy one: unpacking, airing out the mattresses in the Main House, opening up the kitchen and the bath house. And then, suddenly, with the arrival of the Queen’s Guard, things had gotten considerably busier! But now that the soldiers have gone back to Marmoreal, things are quiet once again. Quiet, and ready for the arrival of the first wave of guests.

The tents have been erected and the kitchen and bath house stocked. There’s stew in the cauldron and bread warming in the clay ovens. Even the flowers had been managed; Alice had asked the First Flower to tell the others to remain underground for a few days lest they be picked or trampled by the guests.

Yes, all is ready. Or, very nearly. He can feel brillig’s relentless approach as Tarrant considers the clearing and the spot he’d dug for the Maypole.

“Do you need some help with that?”

He does, but he’d rather not ask for Alice’s assistance. “The pole’s too heavy for you to lift,” he replies, mulling over the problem of placing the base in the hole he’d dug and then holding it steady while he fills it in.

“I can lift a shovel,” she reminds him.

Tarrant glances at her stomach, still normally shaped, of course! That still startles him: knowing their child is within her and yet inconceivably small yet... That lack of evidence never ceases to frighten him. Sometimes he thinks he must have dreamed up that childbearing rite or that he’s dreaming now and any moment he’ll wake up not expecting to be a father... He shakes his head, denies the fear its usual foothold.

“No shovel,” he tells her. “’Tis nae good fer yer back.”
Crossing her arms, Alice gives him a droll look. “I can at least brace the Maypole, can’t I? That won’t strain anything.”

Tarrant feels himself blush at her tone. He knows he’s being Overprotective but, brangergain i’tall! he hardly ever has the opportunity to protect his Alice! He’d like to do a good job of it despite his lack of recent experience!

“D’nae take tha’ tone wi’me!” he replies. He hears himself, knows his tone is a tad too sharp but can do nothing about it. “’Tis a husband’s right teh worry abou’ his wife whil’ she’s a-carryin’ his littlin’!”

Alice blinks at him, shocked. Tarrant’s a little shocked at himself as well. His words seem to echo in the field, bouncing back and forth between the sparse collection of buildings. This is the first time he’s spoken those words aloud beyond the safety of their apartment. For an instant, he feels a swelling wave of panic: Has he been dreaming after all?

He watches as Alice draws closer to him. The panic wars with his remorse at having shouted at her. She places her hands on his arms, then, after studying his expression for a moment, wraps those slender arms around him.

“I’m fine,” she says. “We’re fine. We’re all fine. And I want to help.”

He presses his palms against her belly before sliding his hands around her waist. “So sorry, Alice,” he lisps into her ear. In truth, he’s not even sure why he’d suddenly snapped.

“It’s my fault as well. I don’t mean to... mock you.”

Is that what she’d done? Is that what had just happened? Tarrant frowns. Surely not! No, the blame for his outburst must lie elsewhere. Haltingly, he reminds her, “I’m still mad, Alice. Sometimes, my mind... it... I can’t... I’m not sure of anything... except that I’m mad sometimes. Still.”

She sighs. “How many times have I told you that all the best people are?”

“An’ I’m slurvish...” he continues in a daze. “Mayhap I shoul’nae’ve agreed teh... The littlin’, Alice, I could... I might...” Oh, why had he thought he could do this? Be a father? Be a child’s mad hatter of a father?

“But I was so, so happy when you asked me, Alice,” he can’t stop himself from adding. The words help him focus on staying calm. “All I could think was... I want this. Him. Her. Her. Him. With you and...”
“Hush,” Alice croons, rubbing her hands over his back. “You are allowed to doubt.”

It’s such a simple sentence and yet the Relief he feels is incredible.

“Am I?”

“Yes. Yes, you are.” Alice takes a step back and meets his still-worried gaze. “But I know exactly who you are. I knew it when I asked if you wanted this. Do you trust my decision?”

Well, when it’s put that way...

Tarrant closes his eyes and nods. “Alice?” He takes a deep breath. “If... sometimes, I start to... I become... a little frightened... could you... would you...?”

“Yes,” she promises. “I’ll tell you: You can do this. You’re not alone.” She reaches for his left hand a presses his palm over her belly then covers it with her own: two heart lines and a babe. “Together, remember?”

“Everything. Perfect. Together,” he agrees and settles his lips against hers.

Alice lifts her arms to his shoulders. Her fingertips tickle the back of his neck and the edge of his ear. The soft, whispering touch of her lips becomes firmer as his arms pull her closer.

“The Maypole?” she murmurs against his mouth when the kiss, rather than ending, becomes a massage of warm lips and hot breaths.

He answers her by easing his tongue between her lips. Alice moans with needy surprise as he brushes his tongue against hers with gentle, shallow strokes. He knows she likes this sort of Kissing best... His palms smooth up her sides until his thumbs are resting just against the underside of each breast. She moves against him, impatient.

Pulling away, she takes a step toward the guest cottage. “Come inside,” she whispers.

He shivers at the words, spoken innocently but taken in more ways than one. “I intend to,” he replies, following in her wake. Somehow he makes it through the door, remembers to close it behind him, navigates the cluttered room and meets Alice on the mattress.

“They’ll be here soon,” she warns into his mouth then surrenders to his kiss.

The buttons of her tunic part for his fingers with ease. He nuzzles her neck and growls. “We’ll take as much or as little time as we like.”
He feels the heat of her hands move down his shirt, leaving undone buttons in their wake.

“Alice...”

“Hmm. Last chance for days,” she pants.

“Bloody Maigh,” he agrees, working her trousers down her hips and then helping her kick off her boots.

“Lovely rhyme,” she murmurs and, amazingly, Tarrant doesn’t spare the observation a thought. No, his entire focus is bent upon the woman beneath him, the child she carries, the fire in his blood, her blood, their blood.

In the years of passion they’ve enjoyed, Tarrant has learned exactly where, exactly how to touch his wife to make her the most impatient. He deliberately uses that knowledge now, not because they’re pressed for time, but because he wants to – needs to – see that Desire in her unfocused eyes; he thirsts to witness her expression tense with Pleasure; his skin burns to feel her Reaching for him, drawing him closer, deeper...

“Tarrant...!”

And his name in her gasping, breathless voice... He leans down and moans against her throat, licking, sucking, kissing...

Alice rolls her hips against his and hisses. He whimpers at the feel of her – hot, soft, wet – against him.

She urges, “Don’t make me wait.”

He doesn’t.

Perfect things, Tarrant has learned, rarely last for more than an instant, a moment. This perfect thing – this... with Alice – lasts much longer than a moment, and yet it is always too brief, too fleeting. This perfect moment when Tarrant is whole and his past and his madness as his love for Alice all come together into something so overwhelmingly beautiful and breathtaking... He knows why this perfection cannot last forever – for if it did how would he ever know what he was feeling was so very Precious? – yet he also knows that when it is over, another perfect thing will be waiting for him, for her, for them: the perfection of their life together.

She shudders, tenses against and around him. Comes. He doesn’t stop. Tarrant knows his Alice is capable of much more pleasure than this. He moves within her until she stirs, moaning, and moves
with him again and again and again and again...!

The second time she comes, he pauses long enough to rectify the neglect he’d forced upon her breasts. Moments later – more blissfully Perfect Moments later – when she writhes, he kisses her neck and Moves. She gasps, arches toward him, and the friction and the angle must be Perfect because...

... because she’s coming again!

“...Ta...rrant!”

He whispers her name against her throat, leans back and rubs her from the inside out until he has no other thoughts except how Lovely she is caught up in her passion and how her eyes are very nearly violet with Desire and Need... And then he feels his own release building and it’s too soon!

Always too soon!

But he can’t stop it, can’t help it, can’t avoid it, and he brushes his fingers over that sensitive place just within her body, just above the place where they’re joined and...

... and...

... and they come.

When awareness returns to him, it comes in the form of sound and touch: of panting breaths and racing heartbeats. He kisses her as he withdraws.

“Nnngh,” she informs him. And then her eyelashes flutter open and she smiles. “I’d say I’m sorry I didn’t help you with the Maypole, except...” Her gaze moves down his body suggestively. Her lips twitch. “Except, if I’m not mistaken, I think I just did.”

Tarrant presses his face to the inside of her bent knee and cackles, snorts, and giggles. “Naughty...” he tells her skin. When he looks up, they share a grin that’s luminous with their own unique kind of madness. “Thank you, Alice. I can always count on you for assistance.”

She laughs out loud.

They dare to linger in bed for a few more minutes, touching, murmuring, ignoring the fact that they have not killed Time at all and brillig is drawing ever closer.

“Well, Lady Hightopp,” Tarrant says with finality, “I cannot have you greeting our guests dressed
“Is the tunic too much?” she dares, indicating the one garment that had never been removed entirely.

“Too Marmoreal,” he corrects her with a soft kiss. Uncaring of his own state of undress, he kneels over a trunk that the queen’s soldiers had delivered that morning. Opening the lid, he gently removes the accessory he seeks. With a wide grin, he turns and settles the mahogany-colored top hat on her head. Alice laughs and investigates the edge of the brim with her fingertips.

While she’s distracted, Tarrant turns back to the trunk and removes the other item – the garment – he seeks. He pauses momentarily, recalling the weeks he’d spent at the loom working on this very fabric, and then offers it to Alice. With a confused smile, she accepts it and allows it to unfold.

“These are the Hightopp colors,” she observes wonderingly.

“Aye,” he says. He knows he ought to get dressed but he can’t stop himself from enjoying Alice’s reaction to the fullest before that.

She runs her hand over the garment, down the soft, white chemise and the bodice and then the skirt itself.

“There’s more,” he tells her abruptly, unfurling a scarf and placing a brooch – a silver top hat – upon the bed.

“Where... Tarrant, where did you find your clan’s tartan?”

He sits down on the bed beside her. “I didn’t. I made it.” He knows he could let the explanation die there, except he’d promised to tell her what he’d done to his fingers, so he holds them up and waggles them to catch her attention.

It works. With a flash of intuition, she accuses, “You let a loom do that to your fingers?!”

Tarrant shakes his head slowly. “‘Tis th’ o’ly way teh make th’ Hightopp colors fer someone who wasnae born inteh th’ clan. Wool an’ th’ blood o’ a Hightopp.”

Alice gapes at him, at his fingertips which had been quite sore before she’d forced a bit of healing ointment on them the day before. Her hands brush over the fabric with new reverence. “Your blood is in this?”

“Every thread, mogh ’linyae Alice.”
Eyes wide, she observes, “But there’s yards of fabric here!”

Giggling, he leans forward and presses his lips to her slack mouth. “It was my pleasure, my Alice, my Lady Hightopp of Iplam.”

And he means it: his blood, his sweat, and his tears; his Alice is worth all that and more.

Shocked silence is her eloquent reply.

He glances down at the dress between them and asks, “Will you meet the clans with me... as Alice Hightopp?”

Still silent, Alice pulls the dress toward her, embracing it. She nods.

Cradling her face in his hands, he ducks beneath the brim of her new hat and brushes a chaste kiss over her lips. “Thank you.”

When he moves to stand and locate his kilt, assortment of socks, shirt, vest, jacket, and sporran, her hand stops him. She presses her palm against his chest, over his Heart Mark, and *speaks* through her heart line.

Disbelief, love, awe, concern, shock, nervousness, adoration, devotion, amazement...

Tarrant chokes on the potent jumble of emotions. “I’d so hoped you’d like it,” he manages, smiling, brushing his fingertips along her cheek and jaw. And then he prepares to meet his fellow Outlanders, not as a mad-hatter-to-the-queen-in-need-of-a-wife, but as a Hightopp, as the Laird of Iplam with his Lady by his side.

Chapter End Notes

1. For those of you unfamiliar with what a sporran is, it's a leather pouch worn on a belt in which one's money or other valuables are kept... since kilts don't come with pockets!

2. And for those of you who think this love scene is unrealistic or idealized... So. Not. Impossible. As a wise woman once said: writing imitates life. (^__~)

3. A Glossary of Underland is available on my homepage (please see my profile for the link) if you are curious about any of the Underlandian, Outlandish, or Shuchish words used in this fan work.
The Maigh

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s going to take some getting used to: being called Lady Hightopp.

Alice tries not to roll her eyes at the irony of it; ten years ago, she’d escaped that very fate by turning down Hamish Ascot’s proposal.

As Tarrant guides her away from the most recent arrival – a family of papermakers headed by a wizened old man called Jonnath Sheafment – Alice interlaces his fingers (where they rest on her left hip) with her own. Leaning close, she murmurs, “Laird and Lady Hightopp? Of Iplam?”

He blinks at her. “Ye’re surprised?”

“Well... yes. I thought...”

Part of her hopes he’ll pick up on her thoughts – use that genius intuition of his to read her mind as he so often does. He doesn’t.

“Ye thought...?” Tarrant prompts.

Alice sighs. “I thought it was a term of... endearment or some such,” she reluctantly admits, feeling stupid enough to deserve a scolding from Absolem-of-old.

Tarrant’s confused expression reforms into something resembling regret. “Ye di’nae need teh be concernin’ yerself o’er it. ‘Twon’t be many responsibilities fer us outside th’ hostin’ o’ the Maigh – this Maigh.” He takes a breath and tightens his arm across her back. “Th’ title has no meanin’ beyon’ th’ clans. ‘Tis only used because we still have th’Hightopp ancestral lands an’ we’re their host an’ hostess.”

Alice reads the truth in his expression and softly presses, “Earlier... the Bakerstones, was it? Clayton called you The Hightopp... Is that...?”

Tarrant rescues her from her verbal fumbling. Oh, she hates it when she doesn’t know how to ask the questions churning in her mind! He says, “I’m called The Hightopp nauw as I’m th’ head o’ Hightopp clan. By default as ‘twere.”
Alice ignores the next arriving clan – still a good two dozen paces off – and gently turns Tarrant toward her. She rises up on the balls of her feet and presses a warm, sure kiss to his lips. She’s only a little startled by her own actions – she and Tarrant rarely kiss in public. But, then again, this isn’t public, per se. This is their family, their people. And Alice already knows how affectionate and warm Outlanders are in general.

So no one seems to mind the display, most especially Tarrant, who smiles down at her, his eyes a luminous, rich green.

They greet and assist clan after clan with settling into the roomy white tents. Alice is introduced to Laird Huffin Bootsmith, the Master Cobbler from Galandonland with whom Tarrant’s father had once attempted to encourage him to apprentice. She shakes hands with Gloriana Clefbar, a music mistress and fiddle-maker. She then finds herself making light conversation with a husband and wife called Paneshine who are accomplished artists in glassware.

The air buzzes with enthusiastic greetings and gossip as the clan heads exchange news, the artisans set out their wares, the children chase each other around the tents, and last year’s smitten lads shyly approach and whisper to their lasses. The field – which had been so utterly peaceful before – is bursting with activity and Alice almost wishes she and Tarrant had been able to travel to one of the other Maighs.

“This is wonderful,” she breathes, leaning close to his ear.

Tarrant cackles. His eyes sparkle. “Jus’ wait ‘til we finish supper. If’n I recall correc’ly, there’s a wee bit o’ dancing and singin’ afteh-wards...”

Alice leans back a bit and gives her husband a once-over: he looks magnificently dashing in his kilt, waistcoat, and jacket. Too magnificently dashing. “There’ll be no dancing with any of the lasses,” she warns him. “Unless that lass is your wife.”

His smile widens. “An’ wha’ wou’ ye say if’n I told ye ‘twas tradition fer the host teh dance with a lass from each clan?”

She smiles back. “Then, I’m afraid I’d have to honor the tradition of the hostess dancing with a lad from each of the clans.”

“Ah, but, Alice there is no such tradition fer th’ Lady o’ th’ Maigh!”

“There will be.”

Tarrant gently curls his hands around her upper arms and growls. “No dancin’ wi’ anyone other than me.”
“Likewise.”

“Aye,” he agrees.

And then, because it’s well past brillig and the sun is beginning to set, Tarrant heads for the kitchen to start serving the stew they’d prepared from Thackery’s recipe (with a pinch less salt than recommended) while Alice waits beside the Maypole, which had finally been erected with the help of two burly lads hopping to be taken on by a carpenter and an ironsmith. She watches the group she can just barely see approaching through the trees. And when they round the bend and step from the gloom of the Tulgey Wood, Alice feels a wry grin pull at her mouth.

“Lassling! How be ye?”

“You’re late, Davon,” she scolds him, nodding to his sister and her eldest daughter (who looks quite marriageable, now!), and three apprentice-aged boys.

“Och, an’ye still be rememb’rin’ me name!” The man practically bursts his waistcoat seams as his chest puffs up.

“Forgetting it even as you speak.”

“Ar, ye’re such a fibber, Lassling!” As she escorts them to their tent, Davon glances pointedly around. “Where be yer laird an’ husband at nauw? No’ plottin’ me demise, I hope!”

“So long as you keep your hands to yourself, you’ve nothing to worry about,” Alice replies, surrendering to a wide smile.

“Och, nauw we come teh th’pickle o’it, fer how’m I teh ask ye teh dance if’n I mus’ keep me hands teh meself?”

Alice laughs. “I’m afraid I don’t know the answer to that one, but if you come upon a solution, please feel free to restate your invitation!”

He winks. “I’ll be doin’ tha’, m’Lady Hightopp.” Sketching a mocking half-bow, Davon turns away to begin directing the boys where and how to set out the various daggers, dirks, and bodkins that his family had brought to trade.

Drawn to the fine quality of the knives, Alice promises herself that she’ll come by their booth again later when she has time and then makes her way toward the kitchen to help Tarrant hand out the traditional Eve-of-the-Maigh meal to their guests.
“Th’ Irondirks?” Tarrant asks, ladling stew into two bread bowls before passing them to the young woman waiting beside the table.

Alice picks up the bread knife and starts working on hollowing out the loaves of bread for the next guest. “Yes. Everyone’s here now.”

Tarrant nods, ladles, hands over the second stew-in-a-loaf to the girl, then turns and murmurs intently to Alice, “An’ he behaved himself, I hope.”

Alice gives him a smug grin and a tight nod. “Only dancing with one man this Maigh,” she reminds him and he leans over and kisses her briefly in thanks.

In drips and drabs, the clans send their children to retrieve dinner from the kitchen and, when the last one has been sent off with a serving in each hand, Tarrant passes a stew-filled loaf to Alice and they wander over to their own tent where Tarrant had set out the hats he’d made specifically for trading.

“Thank you, Alice.”

In the midst of seating herself on the quilt, she glances at him and is surprised to see a certain... hesitance in his manner and bearing as he looks out over the crowded clearing. “What is it?” She asks, but she thinks she knows his answer, nonetheless: “Memories?”

He sighs and scoops out a bit of stew. She watches him take a bite and his eyes widen with surprise. “This is quite good!”

Alice grins and tastes her own dinner.

They absorb the sounds of the families and friends around them. And then:

“Almost every family here lost someone to the Jabberwocky on Horvendush Day,” Tarrant says quietly. “I couldn’t... couldn’t have... not alone, I wouldn’t have been able to... But, you’re here, my Alice. My Champion. So, I could.”

Alice places her hand on his arm and squeezes gently. No, she can’t imagine having to face so many still-grieving families all alone, the awkward silence that would very likely follow the initial greeting and words of welcome. “It’s fine,” Alice replies, meeting his worried peridot eyes. “And what happened that day was not your fault.”

And, with any luck, this festival will ease whatever strained relations still linger between the last born-Hightopp and the clans that had lost beloved members of their family all those years ago.
She reminds him, “This is a new beginning for all of us. Iplam is different. You’re different... Everything will be fine,” she predicts, then blinks with surprise when Tarrant leans in and presses a quick kiss to her cheek.

“‘You’re right, of course!’”

Looking resolved and cheerful about it, Tarrant finishes eating. Alice rushes a bit to keep up with him and then they begin to wander from tent to tent. Tarrant is greeted by the head of each clan and Alice finds herself trying her best to follow the thick burr of their spouse or clansman... or clanswoman...

“Ye’ll b’lookin’ f’rward teh th’Declaration o’ Vows, then on th’morrow?” Clarisha Paneshine murmurs with a friendly smile.

Alice takes a moment to smile back and make sure she’d understood the woman’s Outlandish correctly before replying. “I’m looking forward to everything – it’s my first Maigh.”

Clarisha nods. “Aye, w’ken, Lady Hightopp. Asked yer laird teh bring ye teh our Maigh two Springs back bu’ he said th’twine o’ye ‘twere tae busy teh attend. W’all been keen teh meet th’lass who cou’ tame tha’ one!”

Alice feels herself blush a bit – with both embarrassment and temper. She hadn’t “tamed” Tarrant Hightopp! Of all the ridiculous insinuations! However, she resists saying exactly that. “It wasn’t a question of taming but of waking up,” Alice replies, enjoying the puzzled frown Clarisha gives her in reply to the enigmatic answer. “I would have liked to have attended your clan’s Maigh,” Alice continues before the moment can turn awkward. “I regret not being able to. The White Queen, you see, had been expecting the birth of her daughter, Thacie...”

“Oh, aye,” Clarisha agrees. “‘Tis our duty as women teh stand wi’each other a’those times an’ help our sisters on teh th’ birthin’ bricks.”

Alice nods, remembering. Indeed, Alice had been the one to wrap her arms around the queen and brace Mirana’s elbows in the crook of her own, their hands tightly clasped, as the woman had stepped onto the special bricks meant for giving birth. The first time Alice had performed that duty, she’d been shocked to discover that women in Underland do not typically give birth lying down as women in London do.

“Why... not ask... Gravity for... a bit of... assistance?” the queen had panted when Alice had blurted out her observation.

Why not, indeed!
“From tha’ look, m’lady, I’imagine ye’ve had quite a bit o’ practice wi’ assistin’ in births…”

Alice snaps her attention back to the glass-smithie. She chuckles. “I have.”

“An’ when will i’be yer turn, Lady Hightopp?” Clarisha asks with startling forthrightness. But, Alice knows, this is merely the way Outlanders are: there’s no point in beating around the bush unless you’re negotiating for something in particular. For that reason, Alice knows Clarisha is genuinely interested and curious. And, well, Alice would never blame anyone for giving in to their curiosity!

She glances around the field. “Soon, perhaps,” she hedges. “The house is rebuilt. Perhaps it’s nearly time for people to start living in it again.”

“Glad teh hear it, m’lady.” Laying a warm, strong hand on Alice’s arm, the woman invites, “Ye’ll send word if’n ye be wantin’ help steppin’ up teh the bricks, nauw, won’ye?”

“I will. Thank you for the offer, Mrs. Paneshine.”

“Clarisha, m’lady.”

“Alice, Madam Glass-smithie.”

Dusk melts into night and Alice finds herself nodding thoughtfully along with Jonnath Sheafment’s expert advice on the proper long-term storage methods of important documents – something she’ll have to mention to Fenruffle with regards to the deeds office in Salazen Grum, what with it being so near the ocean and the air so humid at times! – when the sudden, sweet announcement of a chord from a fiddle bursts out across the clearing. Suddenly, the hum and hash of gossip and bartering dies down.

The fiddler strikes another chord... and then another... and another... And then a tin flute joins in with a brief, fleeting melody. A rawhide drum is struck. A pulse of silence rolls over the assembly. And then, as one, the musicians begin to play.

“May I have this dance, Lady Hightopp?”

Alice turns and smiles. “You may, Laird Hightopp.”

Tarrant smiles and leads her out to the clearing, lit with standing torches and meandering fireflies, and swings her about in a dance that resembles a waltz only as much as Underland resembles London: the pace is fast; the turns are wild; the rush of excitement is undeniable. Tarrant easily dodges the children chasing each other through the dancing pairs and Alice keeps her eyes on his to avoid getting dizzy.
The song changes but never stops and Alice forgets to keep track of Time. When both she and Tarrant are starting to get breathless, he twirls her out of the way and toward their tent for a rest. As they sit, side-by-side, Alice watches young men and women, exchange surreptitious glances and then sneak away from their parents who, it seems, purposefully turn a blind eye. Alice glimpses hands being held and whispers being made in each other’s ears in the shadows between the tents.

Again, Tarrant’s left arm presses against her back and his hand cups her hip. She covers it with her own, her heart-line finger touching his. “They’re so...” she murmurs.

Somehow, despite the music and revelry and screams of delight from the children, Tarrant hears her. She feels his hair brush her shoulder as he follows her gaze to those young, romancing couples. “Aye,” he agrees.

“That was never us. At a Maigh, I mean,” she says, her heart oddly aching for the memory of first love in the Outlandish custom that she and Tarrant had never known.

He brushes his lips against the brim of her hat. “Ours was better,” he whispers.

Turning, Alice tips her head back a bit so that her hat brim conceals none of his expression from her. “You really think so? No regrets that we didn’t happen this way?”

“None.”

She doesn’t ask him if it would have been better if she’d been born an Outlandish lass, if they’d met at a Maigh, if the trials and tribulations they’d endured had never happened. Those Ifs and Maybes don’t matter; after all, they’re Here.

“Together,” she murmurs, brushing her thumb over his hand.

“Perfect,” he agrees.

The nights stretches out; the children fall asleep wherever they happen to sit down for too long; barrels of Battenmead are opened and cups passed around. The music fades as the Clefbars join everyone in a second, late night feast of cheeses and toasted bread and dried fruit. Conversations turn toward more serious topics: politics, history, and rumors from foreign lands.

Again, she and Tarrant wander amongst the tents to speak with the clans and learn news from the other lands and the clan members who had chosen not to attend this year. With so many unfamiliar names – let alone Outlandish words she’s never heard before – Alice can’t participate much. Tarrant doesn’t say much, either, as he often ends up explaining the details and history whenever Alice loses the thread of the conversation.
*The thread of the conversation,* she muses, amusing herself for a moment. Yes, with a milliner for a husband, she’s sure he can help her manage to keep all those threads straight!

The fifth or sixth time – Alice has long since lost count – she drowsily lists a bit too far to one side, a warm arm wraps around her shoulders and pulls her against a Tarrant-scented chest. “Come teh bed, Alice,” he whispers, urging her along. Alice is muzzily aware of stumbling a few steps before being swept off of her feet completely. She curls toward her husband – following his scent and warmth. The sounds of murmuring voices and distant guffaws and crackling torches fade from her awareness...

... and the next time she opens her eyes, she finds Tarrant next to her, snoring gently, his eyes hidden beneath the brim of his hat.

It’s morning, she notes, and Iplam is quiet although a few people are moving about, mostly to and from the bath house or the kitchen. Turning, Alice studies what she can see of Tarrant’s face. She bends down and winces in sympathy at the dark circles she sees beneath them in the shadow of his top hat.

Alice doesn’t even bother to consider asking him what time he’d finally laid down to sleep. With only his perpetually broken pocket watch to go by, he can’t possible tell her how late – or how early! – he’d stayed up the night before.

“Sleep,” she whispers and then, sighing, Alice stands and heads for the kitchen. As hostess, the least she can do is help their guests feed themselves.

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Tarrant opens his eyes, finds himself alone, inhales sharply, glances about the clearing, and – not seeing his Alice in the immediate vicinity – sends out a stutter of panic along his heart line.

“I’m fine,” the mark over his heart seems to say with its replying warmth.

He stands, still searching for her among the guests who are moving about freely. He judges the time to be mid morning by the position of the sun and the fact that banners and streamers have been hung around the clearing for the Declarations later in the afternoon. The younger children – those barely old enough to become baker’s apprentices – are galumphing around the Maypole, gleefully tangling up the ribbons.

“Bit out o’practice with a-Maighin’, Laird Hightopp?”
Tarrant limits his glare to a mere glance. “Irondirk. Wha’ brings ye a-gimblin’ o’er teh this side o’ th’field?”

“’Twas lookin’ fer th’ Lady Hightopp,” the man announces with far too much enthusiasm for someone who had been very nearly swimming in his cups of Battenmead the night before. “She set me a riddle an’ I was hopin’ teh un-gyre it f’r her.”

Tarrant scowls as the man lifts a pair of white gloves that look very much like the ones Nivens insists on carrying around with him wherever he goes... except this pair are considerably larger. Irondirk holds them out until Tarrant reluctantly accepts them.

“Th’ answer teh th’ riddle?” Tarrant prompts, indicating the gloves.

“Oh, aye. ’Twasnae all tha’ difficult teh solve in th’end. Mayhap she was hopin’ I would!” And with a wink, the man wanders off. Tarrant stares after him for a moment then glowers at the gloves in his hand. He turns and tosses them on the quilt next to the hats and marches over to the kitchen. Although he receives a rather nice slice of warm, buttered bread for his trouble, he doesn’t find Alice.

So, again he Asks with his heart line: “Alice...?”

And again, she Answers: “I’m fine!”

The note of slight irritation might have made him smile any other day, but Tarrant remembers how easily his Alice finds trouble, especially in unfamiliar situations.

“... but ‘twas so dark, Mam! Is tha’... normal?”

“Fer a heart line, I suppose so. W’don’ see many o’ those these days.”

“’Cause only th’ Hightopps use ‘em?” a young girl asks her mother. Tarrant notices the damp bath linens over their arms and the bundle of – presumably – yesterday’s clothes between them.

“Tha’s righ’, dearlin’.”

The girl sighs. “’Twas so pretty. I wan’tae be Thrice a-Vowed jus’ like th’Lady Hightopp one day!”

The mother opens her mouth to reply but Tarrant moves forward at that instant. “A-gehd mornin’ teh ye, twine ladies,” he burrs. “Were ye seein’ m’Lady Hightopp jus’ now in th’ bath?”

“Aye, tha’ w’were, Laird Hightopp.”
“How come yer heart line’s red, m’laird?” the girl asks suddenly.

“Corea, hush now!”

“Howe, nae, ‘tis al’righ,’” Tarrant replies. “Me Alice isnae an Outlander. She’s from Upland, ye see. An’ th’ folk up there has red blood.”

The girl wrinkles her nose a bit at the odd idea of someone having red blood.

Her mother, on the other hand, looks a bit startled. “An Uplander? So ‘tis true then; th’ Queen’s Champion isnae bein’ o’this world?”

Tarrant frowns. He makes an effort to sound pleasant despite the unpleasant reminder of Alice’s origins. Will she ever want to go back?! Tarrant says, “Aye, she isnae. But Underland chose teh bring her here, an’ tha’s surely sommat teh take under consid’ration...”

“Indeed, ‘tis, m’laird. Gehd day teh ye. Come along, Corea.”

For a moment, he merely stands there and watches them haul the laundry to their tent, but then he glances in the direction of the bath house where Alice is no doubt washing up. He sends a brief apology to her through his heart line, then takes himself off to bathe.

In some ways, this day – Maigh – is even louder and busier than the evening before. Tarrant helps the parents set up a few games to keep the younger children occupied and out from underfoot: He hides one of his new hats and gives the children a riddle to puzzle out (“Wha’ can be taller than ye, yet able teh be sat upon?”) and sends them off on the hunt for the answer. He also devises a game of hat-tossing after a pair of bright-eyed girls have won the hunt by solving the riddle then locating and presenting him with the hat he’d hidden. The Hat Toss provides a good deal of entertainment for the children as they fling hats by the brim down a stretch of grass and mark the distance... and then demand rematches with the winners.

Tarrant keeps his eyes open for Alice, but with all the activity, all he manages is a glimpse of her as she’s ushered into the Main House with several mothers. Tarrant sighs; no man will be allowed in that house this morning and he doubts Alice will be able to rejoin him before the Declaration of Vows is about to start.

He frowns as he struggles to remember what his Mam had said of the hostess’s tasks. It had been so very long ago... He vaguely remembers something about helping the brides bathe and dress and... oh. Oh! Tarrant glances worriedly at the house again. He’s just remembered: the hostess is expected to give the girls advice of an... intimate nature concerning their wedding nights.
He winces.

Oh, lad. Ye really should’ve remembered tha’ bit a little earlier... Alice isnae goin’ teh b’pleased wi’ye fer f’rgettin’ teh tell her ‘bout tha’ duty!

No, he doesn’t expect she will be.

Lips compressed in a tight line of indecision, Tarrant hesitantly decides to apologize both now... and later. An instant after he sends his heart line message, Alice’s confused query massages his heart. And as he stands there, trying to figure out how to explain her predicament though emotions, another pulse tickles his chest.

He twitches and blinks. Alice is... laughing? Oh, she must be! He’d know the feel of her laughter anywhere! And then there’s a caressing warmth around his heart and he knows that not only has he been forgiven, but also reassured.

Tarrant sighs. Of course Alice would be all right with advising the brides. Of course she would! His Alice can do anything! And she’s never yet let at challenge defeat her! He giggles.

And he feels thankful for their heart line. He can’t recall if his parents had ever used it they way he and Alice do, if it had deepened to the point where his Fa and Mam had been able to very nearly converse with it, but he suspects they hadn’t. He suspects that the connection he and Alice have is very Special...

Tarrant startles as several lads shuffle past him carrying one of the long kitchen tables.

Ah, yes, yes! The Declaration preparations!

He launches himself into action, locating white table cloths and chairs. In the kitchen, men and women and some of the more responsible children are slicing, dicing, baking, and simmering the afternoon meal. Noticing Irondirk amongst them, Tarrant steers clear of the kitchen and asks a pair of bored-looking boys to help him untangle the Maypole ribbons.

The morning races by and suddenly the lads who will be wed to their lasses appear in their clan colors.

“A few words o’ wisdom fer th’ new husbands, m’laird?” the Master Cobbler asks him.

Tarrant blinks but recovers quickly. By the nervous – but not embarrassed! – expressions on the faces of the young men, Tarrant realizes that he’s not expected to give advice on the wedding night, but on marriage in general.
Clearing his throat, Tarrant says simply, “Th’ lass always has th’ right o’ it. So ye’d best be resignin’ yerselves teh listenin’ teh her from th’ start ‘r ye’ll be regrettin’ it sommat fierce later on!”

Master Cobbler Bootsmith laughs. “I see ye’ve learned tha’ lesson well, Hightopp!” The older man steps closer to Tarrant. The lads, looking slightly more relaxed now, begin to talk amongst themselves or idly pace a bit in the field, waiting for their betrothed. “I ne’er thought I’d see ye so happy, lad. Be-giddies me heart.”

“Thank ye, sir.”

The cobbler grins. “Oh, how proud yer Fa an’ Mam wou’be teh see ye nauw, lad. A grown man, a hatter, a husband, a happy man... ye ken tha’s all they e’er wanted fer ye?”

Tarrant swallows, but it takes a good bit of concentrated effort to do so. “Mayhap they wou’d’ve wanted teh see me makin’ shoes instead...”

The cobbler laughs. “O’ course no’, lad! Di’ye ken how enpuff’d yer Fa was teh’ve his own son take on th’ trade? ‘Twas impossible teh talk teh th’ man! Right be-pride-ish he was o’er it!”

Tarrant feels his mouth open, eyes widen, and brows lift in disbelief. “But he...”

“Wanted wha’twas best fer his o’ly son, Tarrant. Ye’ve done the twine o’ them right proud, ye have. Or I’l eat me smelly, dusty sole!” The cobbler winks, claps Tarrant on the shoulder, and moves back to the assortment of grooms.

“Right, ye lot! Le’s have a las’ look a’ye, nauw! Leorgan, mind yer hem, lad; if tha’ kilt’s straight, then ye’re a bit lopsided...”

Tarrant watches the lads fumble with their kilts and sporrans, getting themselves ready for the Declaration and their future wives. He watches and... he wonders if that might have been him, nervous and twitchy, waiting to wed his Alice on May Day... Another him, perhaps, and another Alice, in another Underland. Or perhaps, merely in a dream...

A hand brushes against his fingers and clasps them. Turning he smiles at Alice, lifts his arm and pulls her against his side with a sigh of contentment.

“You worried,” she accuses.

“Aye,” he admits. “If’n ye can be late, then I can worry.”
He enjoys her breathy laugh. “I suppose that’s only fair. One bad habit for another.”

His smile turns apologetic. “An’ if’n ye can be th’ wrong Alice size, then I can f’rget teh mention certain duties o’ th’ hostess teh ye?”

“It’s fine,” she assures him, as he’d more or less expected she would. “It’s all taken care of.” Her smile is rather... wide.

Tarrant Knows that smile!

“Oh, boggletogs,” he murmurs, amused and yet apprehensive. “Th’ poor lads won’ survive their lass’s demands, will they?”

“A few might,” she replies optimistically.

Tarrant cackles and snorts so loudly he earns himself the Evil Eye from not a few of the anxious grooms. “Beg yer pardon,” he murmurs, allowing Alice’s hand, which is rubbing circles across his back, to calm him down.

And then he’s released from their attention as the door to the Main House opens and, one at a time, the lasses emerge, take their Fa’s arm and walk toward the Maypole and its fluttering ribbons. Tarrant leads Alice away from the center of the clearing and, leaning his cheek against the brim of her hat, watches as each lad steps forward and – on bended knee – declares his love and loyalty to his betrothed. Many of the lads had chosen to craft sonnets in Old Outlandish and Tarrant aches to translate them for Alice. When he draws a breath and prepares to whisper in her ear, she merely brushes her fingertips over his lips. He sees the tears in her eyes and knows she needs no translation. The moment itself and the cadence of the words speak for themselves.

And the lasses reciprocate. Pulling their husbands to their feet by their trembling, sweaty hands, they sing their acceptance. The lads twirl their lasses so that their wives now stand facing the crowd. The young men step up behind and to the left, take their wife’s hand, and the music starts.

Tarrant watches as the seven newlywed couples begin the Wedded Step together. They move in concert – in utter and complete unison.

“How is this dance possible?” Alice murmurs. Tarrant can feel her awe radiating in his own chest. “Have they practiced before this?”

“No’mam,” he replies. “They learn th’ steps from their Mam ‘r Fa, but this is th’ first and o’ly time they’ll dance it taegether.”

“But they’re... perfect,” she argues.
“‘Tis magic, my Alice.”

She sighs happily. “I’ll never learn everything there is to know about Underland.”

Tarrant is very happy she sounds so pleased by that.

The Wedded Step concludes with a flourish from the tin whistle and then the fiddler strikes up a lively tune: the party has begun!

Younger couples take to the circle of dancers around the Maypole. Fathers clap each other on the shoulders and shake hands. Mothers hug and kiss their new sisters on the cheeks. The children make mad dashes for the banquet laid out on the long tables.

Noticing Alice’s stillness despite the infectiously festive atmosphere, he turns and crouches a bit to see beneath the brim of her hat. “Alice?”

She gives him a trembling smile and Tarrant fishes for a handkerchief to mop up the tears on her face. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m just being silly.”

He watches as her hand drifts over her belly. He follows her gaze to where the families – now joined through their children’s marriage – are coming together, laughing and crying and embracing.

“That will be us... some day,” she whispers.

Tarrant gasps. He struggles with his own response to that, thankful that Alice hadn’t Shared this feeling with him; he’s not sure he could have handled both hers and his own! He pulls her into his arms, lifts her chin, wipes away her tears, and agrees.

“Aye. One day...”

She rises up and he leans down and their hats bump as they kiss. Tarrant doesn’t care. And, if the strength of Alice’s grip on his shoulders is any indication, she doesn’t care, either. He gives them both the kiss they need: warm, wet lips; sinuous, brushing tongues; hot, panting breaths; sharp, scraping teeth. No one interrupts them.

But when they part, knowing smiles on their swollen lips, someone shouts:

“Nauw, tha’s how it’s dun!”

Several people cheer, whoop, and applaud.
One daring soul shouts at the newlyweds, “Le’s see wha’ ye young’uns can do, nauw!”

More cheers follow that challenge and, blushing, one groom – then another and another! – takes his wife into his arms and gives her a thorough kissing.

“Ours was better,” Alice informs Tarrant as the crowd eggs the newlyweds on.

And just because he can’t resist his Alice when she praises his skills in pleasing her, he kisses her again. This time no one notices. No one except Alice, that is. And, frankly, that’s exactly how it ought to be!

There’s dancing and drinking and eating and all sorts of merry-making until the sun begins to set. And then the new wives and their new husbands race between lines of cheering Outlanders toward the Main House and disappear inside.

“Where’s tha’ barrel o’ Battenmead?” one woman hollers. “‘Tis callin’ me name!”

And then the drinking and feasting and reveling begin anew. And, just as the night before, the festivities do not stop, even when the air is filled with fireflies.

Tarrant sweeps Alice across the much-trampled grass in time with the lively jig, feeling more complete and whole and healed than ever before! She keeps her gaze on his and, despite the fact that it’s terribly crowded! Tarrant is beyond noticing anyone other than his wife in his arms.

“Oy! Yer attention, ye boisterin’ lot!” a woman calls, banging a wooden ladle on one of the long tables. The music dies down and the dancers stop. Tarrant notices this a tad belatedly and draws a bit of ribbing for it:

“Aye, aye, we can see yer still madly in luvv,” the announcer says with a smile and roll of her eyes. “But nauw ‘tis time teh gi’th young’uns a chance!” She pauses for dramatic effect. And then: “All ye lasses who be looking fer a fella, open yer eyes an’ yer hearts! ‘Tis time fer th’ Futterwhacken!” She turns toward Tarrant and Alice. “Yer ladyship? Ye’ll be one o’ our esteemed judges...?”

The cheers and general uproar of approval makes it impossible for Alice to decline. With a nod of her head, she joins the woman – Mrs. Bakerstone – at the long tables along with the eligible lasses.

“An’ nauw, ye lads lookin’ fer a lass, le’s see yer Futterwhacken!”

Tarrant and the other married men step back into the crowd, clearing the area for unwed lads of all ages to step up and face the judges. Tarrant does his best to ignore the fact that Irondirk is among them.
The Clefbars strike up the music and the spectators clap, stomp, and whoop in time with the music. One by one, the men in the clearing give the dance their all, taking turns and striving to outdo each other. The judges cheer with the crowd when a lad manages a particularly difficult maneuver – a head spin, then a twist of his upper body, and finishing with a leap-and-tumble. Tarrant enjoys the show immensely. And he also enjoys the fact that, after the music has died down, Alice looks out across the clearing, finds him, smiles and winks.

“Yours is better,” the twinge around his heart seems to say.

“An’ nauw, w’shall consult!” Mrs. Bakerstone announces. The unwed lads in the clearing wait while the ladies gather together. There’s a bit of gesturing that indicates particular techniques that impressed the lasses. Tarrant watches, as – for the most part – Alice merely nods along with the younger women and seems to endorse their preferences.

Long moments and yards of speculation later, the lasses resume their positions along the near side of the long tables.

“W’have decided,” the masonry matriarch says loudly (no doubt with the aid of a bit too much Battenmead), “tha’ w’have three fortunate winners this year!”

*The number changes every year?* Tarrant finds himself wondering. Oh, how he wishes he could more clearly recall the first Maigh his clan had hosted!

“Fylvin Sheafment!”

Unable to contain his victory, the lad in question leaps into the air not once, not twice, but over and over again!

Belatedly, Tarrant wonders what the prize is...

“Ollant Clefbar!”

The lad whoops and spins around, his kilt flaring just shy of an indecent level. Ollant turns back to the judges and just grins.

A faint thrum of dread vibrates in the pit of Tarrant’s stomach.

“And Devon Irondirk!”

Irondirk doesn’t celebrate. No, the bloody bastard *smirks*. 
Tarrant’s eyes narrow and his nostrils flare.

“An’ nauw our lads may claim their prizes – a kiss from each o’ our luvely judges!”

Alice’s eyes widen. She turns toward Mrs. Bakerstone and squeaks, “A kiss?”

The woman merely smiles.

Tarrant considers doing something highly... unpleasant to her. After he breaks the winners’ noses, of course.

Remember teh use yer left hand this time, lad!

“Aye,” he growls.

“D’nea worry, Alice. I’ll b’gentle,” Irondirk announces and the crowd roars.

Tarrant feels his heart race with Alice’s alarm. He’s a breath away from stepping out there and forbidding any of those greizin’-grommers from TOUCHING HIS ALICE!

“Stop.”

He blinks at the calm, controlled emotion stealing over his heart. He looks up and Alice is smiling softly at him.

She says, “But I won’t be if those lips of yours come anywhere near mine, Davon Irondirk!”

The crowd guffaws. Men smack their thighs and women shriek with laughter. Tarrant tenses and wonders how this can’t not remind Alice of that horrible trial she endured in Causwick Castle years ago...

He watches for the madness to take her, for her smile to stretch just a little too wide, for her brown eyes to turn black and vicious... but none of that happens.

“Step up, Young Sheafment, and claim yer kisses!”

The crowd counts as the young man steps up to the first lass who gives him a brazen smile and an eager kiss. Tarrant marks the boy’s passage down the line of eight lasses before stepping – a bit reluctantly, Tarrant notes with satisfaction – in front of Alice. She stands tall and straight. Tarrant has
seen that haughty expression on her face before although, thankfully, never directed at him. Still, she takes pity on the lad and presses a chaste kiss to his cheek.

The knot that had once been Tarrant’s lungs and stomach relaxes enough for him to breathe. At least, until the second lad – bit older than the first – steps up to claim his kisses. Again, Alice doesn’t give him the chance to kiss her on the lips. Tarrant manages a deep breath before Irondirk steps forward.

The man is nearly Tarrant’s age, but that means nothing to Outlanders. If a lass is of marriageable age and desires to find a husband, there’s nothing to stop her from choosing a much older, unwed man. Still, Tarrant wishes there’d been a way to bar the bastard from competing in the Futterwhacken altogether!

The man gives each girl a seemingly gentle kiss, just as he’d promised, but as he moves closer and closer to Alice, Tarrant feels his ire mounting. He can only guess what color his eyes are now and very nearly squeezes them shut to keep everyone from finding out how very Much the Idea of another man kissing his Alice upsets him. He doesn’t shut his eyes, however. Alice will find a way out of this. He Believes. He Knows. He Demands...!

Smirking with unrestrained glee, Irondirk moves toward Alice and stands opposite her.

“I hope ye don’ think I’ll le’ye ge’away wi’a tiny peck on th’cheek, m’lady!”

Alice glares. “I hope you don’t think I’ll let you walk away with that jaw unbroken if you try for more!”

More laughter rolls out over the field. Tarrant is too busy fisting his hands to notice.

“Ar, ye’re still a righ’laugh, Alice!”

She gives him a tooth-filled grin. “Continue thinking that at your own peril, sir.”

More sounds of merriment that Tarrant barely hears.

“Bu’ I like livin’ dangerously,” the man burrs, leaning closer.

Mind blanking with the madness Tarrant hasn’t felt in years, he tenses, feels the burning begin beneath his skin, behind his eyes... He is one Instant away from pulling that son of a shukm-lickering booly-geber away from his wife...!

And that’s when it happens:
Suddenly, there’s a rush of air, a powerful blast of wind that dampens the torches and scatters the fireflies. A shadow passes over the clearing as something large comes between the moon and the people below.

And then they hear the roar. A beast unfolds its massive wings. A crested head rises up, a jaw (full of wickedly sharp teeth) opens.

“CHAMPION ALICE! I REQUIRE YOUR SERVICES IMMEDIATELY!”

The shout destroys the silence, the moment of suspended terror and disbelief. People scream and scramble toward the shelter of the woods. Tarrant, however, does not.

As he sprints across the field, Alice pushes past Irondirk.

“What is it, Krystoval? Is it...?”

“Yes,” the Jabberwocky replies. “You must come with me now.”

“Th’lass isnae goin’ anywhere wi’ye!” Irondirk proclaims, reaching for her.

Alice evades his arm easily and reaches out for Tarrant. In the next instant, he has her hand clasped in his and they’re facing a shadowy monster with flashing red eyes.

“Champion Alice,” the Jabberwocky tells the Outlander, “has promised me her assistance should I require it. I require it now!” Turning back to her, it says plainly, “Maevyn has spoken.”

Chapter End Notes

1. As for giving birth in Underland, using birthing bricks is not my original idea. I first read about this in The Red Tent (a novel by Anita Daimant). In biblical times (at least) this was the typical way women gave birth and, quite honestly, I think it makes more sense than doing so lying down, but having never attempted either, I can only speculate... (^__~)

2. Reminder: A Glossary of Underland is available on my homepage (please see my profile for the link) if you are curious about any of the Underlandian, Outlandish, or Shuchish words used in this fan work.
Chessur, despite being a cat – and not just any sort of common cat, but a Cheshire Cat, no less – takes great pride in the fact that he makes an absolutely fabulous jabberwocky.

He glances at the nest, at the three hatchlings snoring-snorting-snuffling in their sleep and then gently pets the fourth he has wrapped up in his long, scaly tail.

“Chessur?” the creature mewls, almost like a kitten might.

“Yes, love?”

“How much longer?”

“I’m not sure. Soon.”

The small jabberwocky – smaller than Alice’s true Alice-size – snuggles deeper into the coils of Chessur’s Jabberwocky tail. He knows it doesn’t sleep. It hides. Chessur pets the youngling’s still-soft scales carefully with the smooth, curved backs of his claws.

Yes, Chessur rather enjoys being a jabberwocky. Surprisingly, he rather enjoys looking after Krystoval’s little ones: the next generation of Underland’s dragons, keepers of the earth, bringers of life. He does not envy these creatures their duty to Underland, however. No, Chessur has no interest in creation, in the healing arts, in magic of that sort. It smacks of politics, he’d long ago decided. And Chessur is quite content to have nothing more required of him than companionship and stimulating conversation and... at times like these... a watchful eye directed at the hatchlings.

Hatchlings. Still, the four of them are so very small and young despite the five years they’ve aged. But, Krystoval had warned him:

“I am not sure how much time they will need to mature. It has been a very long time since a jabberwocky has been born and I did not pay attention to the passing of time when I had been a youngling...”

At this rate, Alice and Tarrant will be knee-deep in generations of Hightopps before these juveniles manage to grow strong enough to leave the nest!

Not that Chessur will miss them when they go. No, he can’t imagine that he will. He’s still a cat at heart, after all! And cats do not attach themselves to others. Not as a general rule... Well, not lightly
in any case!

He sighs and, briefly, almost wishes for the ability to breathe flame. It would certainly help to pass the time were he able to amuse himself with the various shapes and smoke rings he might create.

*For the love of Thrambleberries, how long does it take to interrupt a Maigh festival and abscond with a Champion and her husband?*

Chessur grins at the mental picture. For he’s *sure* that in no possible version of events does there exist one in which Tarrant *does not* accompany his wife – the mother of his could-be-son-or-daughter – to the Lair of the Jabberwockies!

*Yes, Alice...* he muses, his cat’s mind twisting and leaping fluidly from one thought to another. Yes, he knows Alice carries Tarrant’s child. Had known it immediately. It had been in her changed scent. Just as Tarrant’s (and also Alice’s) had changed after they’d performed the first exchange of the Thrice a-Vow, Alice’s smell had changed following the Ritual of Conception. Instead of smelling the usual Alice-with-a-touch-of-Tarrant smell, Chessur had also detected that plus the scent of a stranger. A new little person.

What puzzles Chessur is why neither Alice nor Tarrant have told *anyone*. Not the queen, who had smelled no different at all despite the fact Chessur is *sure* she would have been reeking of smug pride had she known. Not Mally or Thackery or Champion Leif... No one. They hadn’t even bothered to inform Chessur!

*Ungrateful bipeds,* he accuses, his teal eyes narrowed. Well, if a cat can hold his own against Thrambleberry-scheming jabberwockies, he can *certainly* outwit a stubborn Outlander and his paranoid Uplander wife!

And with the thought of that particular couple, Chessur mourns the lost opportunity to wear Tarrant’s hat at their Choosing. Of course, he hadn’t been invited. No one – *again with those two doing things their way!* – had been invited. In fact, the Choosing itself had included only the two of them at Iplam. One day, Tarrant had been angusting and emoting like it was going out of style, and the next he’d been all smiles and giggles and riddles with his gaze unerringly locked on the ring on Alice’s finger.

He’d been a pathetic sight, really.

Yet another reason Chessur is forever thankful that jabberwockies do *not* wed. Nor mate. Yes, being a jabberwocky is a blessedly simple existence when it comes to personal relationships. Companionship of the... *carnal* sort is always dreadfully complicated and fraught with misunderstandings and insecurity and abject misery. Chessur has seen it often enough to know how true that conclusion is! It’s a relief that he’ll never be expected to engage in those sorts of acts with Krystoval. No, the only things the Jabberwocky has ever asked of Chessur have been companionship, conversation, the occasional hatchling-sitting, and – of course – the fetching of Thrambleberries. All of which are things Chessur had gladly given – and still gladly gives! – his
most closest of friends. Well, with the exception of the Thrambleberries, of course. He and Krystoval seem to be at a bit of an impasse on that issue...

The small, warm body curled up within his long tail stirs again. “Chessur?”

“What it is, dearness?”

“I’m scared.”

“Of what, child of the fearsome Jabberwocky?”

There’s a contemplative pause. The baby shifts, sniffs the air, paws at the ground with its tiny claws. “I don’t know. Something moves. It makes me feel... bad.”

Chessur frowns. “Have you felt this before?”

“Sometimes. Lots of times. But I couldn’t tell you before now.”

Yes, Maevyn had been the last among its siblings to find the power of speech.

“It will come,” Krystoval had assured them all time and time again. “When Maevyn truly wishes for it, it will come.”

And, finally, it has!

“Krystoval will return soon,” Chessur says, resuming the stroking motions of his claws against the tiny thing’s back and Maevyn subsides with a gusty sigh. Luckily, the scales on his tail protect him from being burned by the white-blue flame.

Chessur finds himself contemplating Maevyn’s odd claim: *Something moves*... Of course, since it makes no sense whatsoever, his mind finds it a fascinating concept to contemplate... Nearly as fascinating as the impressive phenomenon that is a jabberwocky’s memory. Truly amazing mental faculties, jabberwockies have. Able to recall – and with great clarity and detail – all the way back to the time spent in the egg... Remarkable! Although, Chessur can’t say he envies them that skill. There are plenty of things he’d be more than happy to forget if only...

And then the familiar burst of Jabberwocky-scented air fills the nesting site and Chessur looks up.

“Krystoval!” Maevyn squeaks and tumbles out of Chessur’s loose grasp to clamor over to its arriving parent.
Chessur stands lazily and smirks as Tarrant slides down from Krystoval’s back and then reaches up to help Alice down.

“No clan colors?” Chessur drawls as the Jabberwocky nuzzles Maevyn in affectionate greeting. “And here I thought we were interrupting a party.”

Alice rolls her eyes. “You can’t expect us to charge off into the unknown, on the back of the Jabberwocky, wearing a skirt and a kilt, can you?” she rejoinders, hands on her trouser-clad hips.

“Won’t your guests be offended with your abrupt departure?” he muses.

“Somehow,” Tarrant replies, “I don’t think they’ll be noticin’ our absence o’ermuch. No dou’ they’re fleein’ back teh their homes as we speak.”

Alice places a hand on his arm. “Davon might manage to keep everyone calm.”

“I apologize for the poor timing,” Krystoval says, a bit stiffly. “However, I was under the impression that you wanted to be notified as soon as possible when Maevyn was ready to speak.”

“I did. I do. Of course this takes precedence, Krystoval. And, honestly, your timing could not have been better,” Alice says with a curiously wry grin.

Chessur has to ask: “And what imminent catastrophe did our favorite, fully-grown jabberwocky circumvent?”

Alice snorts. “Me breaking an Outlander’s jaw.”

With a soft smile, Tarrant collects her fisted hand and busses her knuckles with his fingers. “I’d been considerin’ th’ nose, me-self,” he murmurs, gooly-eyed.

Chessur valiantly forces back a gagging cough at the utter sweetness of the exchange. “What fascinating parties you throw, Tarrant. Punches included, it seems.”

The man’s eyes flash with amusement and Chessur realizes, with no small amount of irritation, that he must have just made a rhyme... or a pun... or said something-or-other that a madman would find interesting.

Alice turns toward the Jabberwocky. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t do anything for Maevyn... before. I hope that will change now.”
“As do I, Champion Alice,” Kystoval replies, cuddling the youngling.

“Alice?” A small, hesitant voice calls out. “Alice is here?”

Chessur turns and notices three pairs of bright eyes watching them from the nest. Glancing at Krystoval, Chessur grumbles, “Had to wake everyone with your grand entrance, didn’t you?”

The Jabberwocky arches a brow and drawls, “Don’t I always?”

“Maevyn?” Alice asks, approaching the Jabberwocky and its youngling.

“Yes, Alice?” is the hesitant reply.

“You know I’ve spoken to your siblings about what happened that day. The day you were hurt. Would you tell me what you remember now?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Chessur notices the subtle motion as each of the three hatchlings lower their heads in shame. Four years ago, they hadn’t been able to speak of the attack on their nestmate. And, last year, when they had finally managed to find their Words, they hadn’t been able to say much, for they hadn’t seen much. It had been Maevyn who had wandered out of the nest and into the forest where the attack had occurred. Still, Chessur knows the silly younglings feel irrationally guilty over their inability to both help their sibling in its time of need and provide any useful information regarding the event itself. With a put-upon sigh, Chessur gathers the hatchings together under his fully-functional Jabberwocky wing and nuzzles their necks.

“I remember...” Maevyn begins, peeping over the Jabberwocky’s claw. “I remember a... a cloth. Bright. Beautiful. It fell from the sky and I watched it dance over the edge of the nest. I... I followed it.”

“It’s all right,” Alice replies, reaching out to pet Maevyn’s stubby crest. “No one is angry with you. And we all know you’re more careful now. Everything’s fine.”

Chessur watches this and, reluctantly, admits that Alice is going to make a very adequate mother. But, then again... she’s had plenty of practice with looking after Tarrant, hasn’t she?

Maevyn sniffs a bit and with a flash of muchness in its eyes, continues, “I went into the forest. I don’t remember going so far. I was just following the pretty cloth. When I finally caught it... that’s when the men came out.”

“The men?” Alice prompts.
Maevyn buries its face in Krystoval’s claws. “Two men. With knives and something else. A glass something. They hurt me with the knives and they pressed the glass against my scales. I think... I think they took my blood.”

Chessur stiffens and glances from Alice to Krystoval and then to Tarrant. From the Outlander’s tense posture, he knows Tarrant has grasped the significance as well.

“It’s all right now, Maevyn,” Alice continues, no doubt seeing that Krystoval is too enraged to speak softly. “You’re safe now, aren’t you? Krystoval and Chessur are here and you’re safe.”

Indeed, that day Chessur had been called to Marmoreal to assist the White Queen. Queen Mirana had wanted to know if Chessur would be open to using his evaporating skills to spy on Jaspien, just to be sure the worthless creature wasn’t planning anything. Of course, he’d had to refuse, but not before agreeing to train a suitable replacement. And when Chessur had arrived back at the nest, Maevyn had been missing and Krystoval frantic, torn between leaving the three hatchlings behind to search for the youngling and remaining in the nest to keep its other children safe. It had only taken moments for Chessur to follow the scent of blood and fear and locate Maevyn, a few licks of his tongue to purify and close the wounds, but Chessur had been too late to catch the beasts that had done that horrible thing.

And now, to find out that those beasts had, in fact, been men...!

Well, as a cat, he shouldn’t be surprised.

“Tell me about the men,” Alice asks gently.

Maevyn mews. “They covered my eyes. Didn’t see. Couldn’t see! It was so dark!”

“Shh... open your eyes Maevyn. It’s not so dark now and your family is here.”

The hatchling does. “They had names. Men with names.”

“What were their names, darling?”

“Osh... Oshtyer. And Vale... Valereth.”

The silence following that announcement is telling.

With a visible effort, Alice gathers herself, folds up her anger and puts it away. “Did they say anything else? Where they were going? What they were going to use your blood for?”
Maevyn closes its eyes and shakes its head, curling into Krystoval’s chest. The Jabberwocky covers the baby’s shaking body with its other claw and strokes its scales just as Chessur had done earlier.

“No more, Alice,” Krystoval says gruffly.

Alice nods. “It’s fine. It’s enough.”

“Chessur, if you would take Champion Alice and her Hightopp back to Iplam?”

The cat-who-is-also-a-jabberwocky nods. Krystoval moves toward the nest and curls up with Maevyn. The other three hatchlings toddle out from under Chessur’s wing and climb into the nest as well, snuggling together.

Chessur experiences an odd twinge in his chest at the sight. If he didn’t know better, he’d say he regrets not being able to join Krystoval in cuddling up with the hatchlings, but, as a cat, he would never want such a thing!

Turning back to Alice – who looks far too knowing for Chessur’s peace of mind – and Tarrant – who also seems a bit too smug at the moment – he growls, “Well, do you want a ride back to Iplam or not?”

“We’re waiting on you,” Alice tells him.

“An’ I hope ye’re better a’flyin’ nauw than ye were durin’ th’ Trial o’ Threes,” Tarrant muses, with a glance at Alice.

“I am,” Chessur replies shortly, but not wanting to risk getting vomit and bile between his scales addresses Alice, “but if you’ve brought whatever it is that keeps you from becoming nauseous, then I suggest you ingest it now.”

Alice looks startled. “You know I...?”

Chessur gives her a droll look. “Honestly, did you think my nose would tell me otherwise? At a more convenient time, Alice, you and I shall have a talk about the futility of keeping secrets from me, but for now, a bit of your nausea remedy, if you don’t mind.”

With a sigh, Alice pulls a small, leather pouch from her tunic pocket and Chessur catches a whiff of Himoha flower. “And, I’m curious, Alice,” he continues as she places one shriveled petal on her tongue. “Just how did you procure that pregnancy aid without the assistance of the queen?”
“What makes you think I didn’t?”

Chessur lowers himself to the ground and allows Tarrant to climb onto his shoulders. “Please,” he says with a roll of his eyes. “If the woman were any more in the dark, it’d be midnight at Marmoreal every hour of the day.”

Alice admits, “I helped Mirana with her children, you know, so I knew about the Himoha flower. And when she speculated that, were Tarrant and I to start a family, all I’d have to do is just reverse the dosage from one blossom to—”

“To one petal, yes. What with your contrary Uplander body,” Chessur finishes as Tarrant pulls Alice up and in front of him. Chessur unfurls his wings and pauses to check just one more time: “Is your stomach quite settled, Alice?”

“I’m fine. I won’t get sick all over your beautiful scales, Chessur,” she promises.

Deciding that’s more than sufficient as reassurances go, the Chessur mutters as he gives his wings an experimental flap, “At least Krystoval let you both put trousers on...”

“Ye’d have an objection teh carryin’ a man in a kilt?” Tarrant drawls.

Chessur grits his teeth at the Outlander’s obvious amusement. “A kilt and naught else beneath it,” the cat replies. “Yes, I’d have an objection. One, at the very least.”

“So would I,” Alice contributes.

And before they decide to abuse his delicate ears with an elaboration on that thought, Chessur launches into the air.

*~*~*~*~*

Alice reaches for Tarrant’s hands and slides down from Chessur’s shoulders. Her feet hit the ground and she winces at the roll her now-tender stomach makes. Krystoval’s flying had been much smoother.

“Thank you for the ride back, Chessur.”

He pointedly inspects his still-pristine scales. Ascertaining their spotless condition, he replies, “My pleasure, Alice.”
“I’ll jus’ step ou’ an see how many o’ our guests ‘ave taken Irondirk’s assurances teh heart,” Tarrant murmurs, brushes his fingertips across her cheek and then makes for the clearing. Alice can still see movement beyond the trees, so she knows that either some have decided to remain or they simply haven’t finished packing yet.

Eager to put off rejoining the crowd, Alice turns back to Chessur and smirks. “You know, I don’t remember you caring so much about the condition of your scales before you got this new set.”

Chessur glares at her. “How would you like a bit of jabberwocky spit in your hair, Champion?”

“About as much as you’d like to have my lunch revisit us on your fancy scales. Speaking of which, Krystoval let you learn this shape?”

Chessur clears his throat. “In a way. The Jabberwocky was having a bit of trouble with the laying of the eggs and I suggested a massage might... Why am I telling you this?” he suddenly demands.

“Because I asked? And I’m curious?”

“You’re nosy,” he corrects.

“And you’ve been secretly hoping for an opportunity to tell me how exactly you learn a shape, since – somehow – I never see you on Tarrant’s birthday.”

“Ah, yes. The one day a year when it’s perfectly acceptable to embarrass someone as much as possible...”

“So?” Alice asks. “How do you do it?”

Chessur leans toward her and grins. Motioning her closer with a claw, his smile widens until it stretches nearly all the way up to his crest. “By doing what cats do best,” he answers blithely.

Alice bemusedly shakes her head. “What? Cough and vomit up bits of hair from their gullets?”

“No!” Again, Chessur clears his throat. “By rubbing against a body, Alice. And, when the acquisition of... finer details and... textures is required... by licking. A cat’s tongue is very sensitive, you know.”

Alice resists covering her face with her hands. Just barely. “I almost wish I didn’t,” she replies. “Know, that is.” She glares at Chessur out of the corner of her eye. “If I weren’t absolutely sure that you’ve given away your soul to the Jabberwocky, I’d probably be jealous.”
“Jealous of me for having rubbed and licked Tarrant?”

“Years before I found the opportunity to do so myself, yes.”

Chessur shudders. “I... did not need to know that. Fairfarren, Alice.”

“Wait! Will you be stopping by Marmoreal to alert the queen?”

“To your disturbing Tarrant-licking tendencies? I don’t think so... Not in the near future, at any rate.”

She huffs, “No!” Honestly, Alice doubts Mirana would be very surprised by the revelation should Chessur elect to share it with her. But Alice decides she’ll let Chessur traumatize himself with that whenever he gets around to bringing the subject up with Her Majesty. She clarifies, “I meant about Oshtyer and Valereth.”

Chessur considers her with his vibrant eyes. “Again, no. You’ll be returning to the castle shortly. That will be sufficient. I may stop by later... to see what’s being done about the situation.”

“You’re more than welcome to. Fairfarren, Chessur.”

Chessur turns to once more take to the skies and, stomach now mostly settled, Alice forces herself to take a step in the direction of Iplam. Fates only know what sort of mess is waiting for her there. No doubt a series of ingratiating apologies will be required and she’ll no doubt end up having to explain the informal treaty of friendship between the White Queen and the Jabberwocky and then the lot of them will publicly ostracize both her and Tarrant for even considering befriending such a beast...

In short, this should be only slightly more bearable than having to remove that sewing needle with which Tarrant had once managed to skewer his thumb.

She cringes at the memory.

Nearing the end of the sheltering trees, Alice takes a deep breath and wades out into her and Tarrant’s doom...

Silence falls over the milling crowd when Tarrant pauses, turns, and spears her with his gaze. At first, she wonders if their guests have gone so far as to organize a lynching, but then she notices the rich, lovely green of his eyes and the broad smile on his face.

She nearly runs smack into a young boy who tumbles into her path, breathless, and pants, “C’n I ride th’ Jabberwock next, Lady Hightopp?”
Alice gapes. “What?” Dear Fates on plates, Kysoval would not be happy to be spoken of as if it were nothing more than a pony at a fair! “Um... I’m afraid the Jabberwocky has gone home now,” she manages when the boy repeats his insane request.

Several children whine and pout upon hearing that.

She glances up at Tarrant again and she can see him biting a knuckle to keep from bursting out laughing. She turns to the man who is, undoubtedly, the culprit of this insanity. “What did you tell everyone, Davon?”

The smithy smiles, showing off his crooked, broken, stained, and missing teeth with his usual brashness and cheer. “Why, abou’ th’Trial o’Threes, o’course! Tha’ our Lady Hightopp met th’Jabberwock on th’battlefield an’walked away wi’it under her thrall!”

Alice... gapes. “You... you said that...”

“So, nauw everythin’s al’righ’ an’th’ Jabberwock has an int’rest in death an’ destruction nae longer,” he concludes with a flourish.

Although Alice knows that much is true... Still! Davon had made Kysoval sound like a tame house cat! Of all the...! She’s gathering herself – and her thoughts – for a good lecture on that very point when a movement draws her attention. Tarrant lifts his chin a bit, smiles at her – his grass-green eyes sparkling – and winks.

Alice swallows back her ire and irritation. She sighs. “That wasn’t for you to tell, Davon,” she grumbles, wondering how long it will take the Jabberwocky to hear of this. Well, maybe she’d better tell it herself rather than wait around for the gossipmongers to do it for her via Chessur. And she’d better tell the queen as well. If megalomaniacs like Jaspian, Valereth, and Oshtyer had abducted her and the queen simply because Alice had been an undefeated Champion with a heart line, what good could possibly come from Alice’s supposed control over the Jabberwocky becoming public knowledge?

However, that is a battle for another day. Now, other issues must take precedence.

“Irondirk,” she says decisively, “a word, if you don’t mind?” As she passes Tarrant, she gives his arm a squeeze then strides over to and steps inside their tent, leaving the curtains open.

“Nauw, Alice, d’nae be upset a’me f’r speakin’th’truth,” Davon gently scolds her, looking highly amused with himself, as always.

Alice give him a droll look. “What you’ve done, you’ve done and there’s no undoing it now,” she replies. “However, that was not what I wish to speak to you about.”
He considers that for a moment and then his expression brightens. “Be this concernin’ th’answer teh yer riddle?’”

Alice has to think about that for a moment before she can even recall giving the man a riddle. Although it had only been yesterday, it seems so much further in the past!

Before she can tell him to just forget about the blasted riddle – which hadn’t really been a riddle at all but a clever way of refusing absolutely to dance with him – he remarks, “Och, I though’ I couldnae trus’T’Hightopp teh giv’i teh ye...”

*Oh, botheration, let’s just get this out of the way once and for all!*

“Give what to me?” Alice asks with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm.

“Th’gloves! Ye said if’n I cou’find a way teh dance wi’ye wi’out layin’ a hand on ye...”

Alice rubs a hand over her face as if she could scrub the exasperation she feels from her skin. “As... genuine as your effort seems to be, you’ve answered the wrong riddle—”

“Have I nauw?!”

She can’t help the smirk she feels twitching her lips upward. “Most definitely. And once you figure that out, I expect I’ll be back in Marmoreal.” At least, she very much hopes to be! “Now, are we finished with this nonsense? As the Queen’s Champion, I would like to make a formal request for assistance.”

And in that instant, the somewhat puzzled, unendingly amused weapons-smith vanishes. His expression hardens, his eyes lose their shine, his shoulders tense. “Wha’b’ye an’th’White Queen requirin’ o’me, Champion Alice?”

“Not only of you, but of anyone you feel might welcome the challenge.”

He nods once and she continues:

“It’s in the best interests of their majesties that two individuals be located as expeditiously as possible – a former viscount and lord I believe you were once acquainted with? Valereth and Oshtyer.”

“An’ wha’s bein’th’price on their heads, Champion?”

Alice holds up a hand. “There will be a reward offered to those who deliver either or both to Salazen
Grum or Marmoreal alive. However, should that task prove... impossible for one reason or another, information on their last-known whereabouts would also be welcome.”

Davon scoffs. “’Tis nae sword-work ye’re askin’ f’r, bu’ reconnaissance.”

“Exactly.” She steps forward and, eyes narrowed, informs him, “It’s not often the White Queen asks favors of her citizens, but when she does, she does not forget those who provide honest assistance. And the White Queen knows the value of good information well.”

“M’be so...” he drawls, a speculative gleam in his eyes. “Ye’re thinkin’ those twine slithy, shrifty greizin’-grommers’ll b’hidin’ sommere in th’White Realm?”

“I know they’ve passed this way before, about four years ago. From there, I do not know where their trail leads. But, they would have needed clothing and shoes... and had probably had to steal them. I’ll be checking the records of reported criminal acts at Marmoreal, but perhaps the thefts were so small the injured parties felt it was too much of a bother to file a claim...”

“Aye,” Davon agrees, squinting in thought. “An’ tha’will b’how we’ll find th’bastards. No’from th’records, bu’ from askin’about...” He glances out the open doorway of the tent toward the oddly quiet festival scene beyond. “While there’re so many here, I’ll b’gettin’started on those questions,” he tells her. A smile Alice recognizes from long, long ago curves his mouth upward. “An’ I’magine Argur’s feelin’ a mite bored wi’shipwork...”

“Choose anyone you think would be an asset to your quest. The reward will be distributed generously amongst your team members, no matter the number.” Alice pauses, then adds, “So long as it’s within reason. Send word to me as you learn it. I may be able to send assistance that will help you pick up their trail faster.”

Davon scowls. “Assistance won’b’necessary, Champion. We can—”

“Accepting the assistance I might send will not in any way interfere with the reward.”

“Ah... well, then, we’re in accord.”

Alice nods.

In the next moment, Davon’s eyes are twinkling at her again and he’s grinning at her with a complete and utter lack of hesitance despite the horrid condition of his teeth. “Are ye sure I di’nae answer yer riddle, Lassling?”

“I’m sure,” she replies flatly. She almost wishes him luck, but – in the end – decides it’s best not to encourage him. With a gesture, she invites him to leave and then Alice steps out behind him. It takes
only a few moments for her to locate Tarrant – still dressed in his trousers with his broadsword slung across his back. Although, from his position, she knows he’d been keeping an eye on their tent, his attention is mainly focused on the Irondirks’ display of wares.

“All done,” Alice says, coming up beside him.

“Ah, excellent.” He turns and gives her a relieved smile. “Shall we get changed, then?”

Alice wanders with him in the direction of the guest house, where they’d quickly stepped out of their tartans and thrown on their Marmoreal clothing for the journey to the Jabberwocky’s nest. Tarrant opens the door, then briefly surveys the inside before stepping back and allowing Alice to precede him.

The door closes and Alice feels Tarrant’s hands on her arms. But rather than pull her into his embrace, he steps into hers, wraps his body around hers, and presses his lips to her forehead. “Alice...” he murmurs and she recognizes that worried tone.

She sighs. “Do you happen to know of any other uses for jabberwocky blood?” she asks on a whisper, dreading the answer.

His arms tighten around her shoulders. “O’ly the one ye’re aware of, my Alice.”

The moment stretches taut as they both consider the fact that if someone were to feel a desire to travel somewhere within Underland, making the journey on foot would be far easier and far safer than stealing the blood of a jabberwocky. Unless, of course, it isn’t Underland a person wanted to travel to...

Her fingers curl tighter, wrinkling his jacket, and her fists press against his waist. Pressing her cheek to his shoulder, Alice says on a breath, “I don’t think Irondirk is going to find either Oshtyer or Valereth. I think there’s a reason they attacked Maevyn. I think...” Her throat suddenly slams shut and she stares into the darkness of the cottage.

Tarrant speaks with his body: curling his arms around her even tighter, pressing his jaw against her temple. In the darkness, they hold onto each other, hold back the oppressive pressure of the unknown, and try not to acknowledge what it is they’re really doing here in the dark: they’re waiting.

Chapter End Notes
A Glossary of Underland is available on my homepage (please see my profile for the link) if you are curious about any of the Underlandian, Outlandish, or Shuchish words used in this fan work.
And the Earth Moves

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mirana much prefers the tasks of motherhood to those of sovereignty. Alone in her woefully silent office – even Dalerian and Leivlan are oddly quiet in their bassinets! – Mirana leans her head in her hand and struggles through the wordy and phonetically spelled, curving and curling script typical of Galandonland correspondence. It’s a bit difficult to tell, but she thinks Hornsaver is requesting a renegotiation of their trade agreement with regards to Galandonland tea and Witzend wine. Apparently, Spring is not smiling upon them this year and their crop will be much reduced... Either that or Hornsaver is attempting to compare bumblebees and sunshine to ship sails and seas and is wasting her time with six pages of metaphors.

With the mood she’s in at the moment, Fates of Underland help the unicorn lord if he really had sent her a small novel’s worth of meaningless prose!

“Your Majesty?”

Mirana looks up and smiles. “Alice, welcome back! And, for the love of buttered fingers, how many times do I have to tell you—”

“Mirana,” Alice gently interrupts her with a sad smile.

The queen watches as Alice closes the door behind her and approaches the desk. “What’s happened, my Champion? Was the Gathering...?”

“Fine. The Gathering was a fantastic success.” Mirana watches as Alice slouches in her chair and fidgets. She can nearly see the storm of words that her Champion is fighting with through the windows of Alice’s eyes.

“Then tell me what has happened?”

“Maevyn spoke.”

Two words. Just two words, and yet Mirana finds herself utterly captured by them. In her chest, her heart feels as if it has stopped beating. “And...?”

“It was Valereth and Oshtyer. They took...”

“... the blood,” Mirana finishes, numb. As it has so many times before, the clock measures the passing of their silence and contemplation. “Alice,” Mirana finally gathers enough fortitude to say,
“we must...”

“I’ve already assigned Davon Irendirk the task of investigating their whereabouts. He’s to recruit assistance from amongst his former comrades and send word periodically. With your permission, I’ll ask the Bays to help sniff out their trail.”

“You’ve still...”

Alice nods. “Yes, I’ve kept their boots. If there’s a trail anywhere in Underland, Bayard, Bayne, Bayto, Bayshe, and Baylia will find it.”

“Yes, I don’t doubt they will.” If there’s a trail to be found. Of course, Bayelle has the most sensitive nose, but with her expecting the next litter of pups, it won’t do at all to send her out on long distance treks!

“Mirana, are you familiar with the Crafter’s Core?”

The queen blinks at the sudden change of topic. “Oh, yes, of course, Alice.” Seeing Alice’s irritated expression, the queen adds, “I’m sorry. That was a bit abrupt. Why do you bring it up?”

Alice draws a deep breath and Mirana braces herself for another round of Uplandian logic.

“The attack happened four years ago. Valereth and Oshtyer were banished three years before that. That’s a long time to go without shoes. And new clothing. And whatever other necessities they’d need. With your permission, I’ll ask King Dale to assist me with going through the records of thefts in the realm.”

The queen nods, following everything rather easily thus far. “And what does that have to do with the Crafter’s Core?”

“Well, if we find an occurrence of theft that seems as if it may have been perpetrated by Valereth and Oshtyer, I’d like to contact the rightful owners and, through them, learn who had crafted the stolen item so that they might—”

“Ah, yes! So the master might Call the item back to them using the Crafter’s Core! A brilliant idea, Alice!” Briefly, the queen debates instituting this practice for all reports of lost or stolen goods, but... no. No, it would be most unfair to the craftsmen to expect them to go galumphing about Underland in search of their customers’ misplaced property. Why, they’d never have time to craft another thing again! But, in this instance, when the consequences of not locating Valereth and Oshtyer might be very dire, indeed... Yes, perhaps this once...

“I approve completely. Please let Dale know your thoughts. He’ll be most happy to assist you in
whatever way he can.”

“Thank you, Mirana. However, we must also consider the possibility that someone might not go to the trouble of reporting a missing jacket or a pair of last year’s boots. And that’s where Irondirk will step in; I’ve asked him to visit villages and homesteads and inquire about missing items.”

Mirana frowns. “This quest... if there are no fresh trails for the Bays to follow... this may take quite an investment of time,” the queen acknowledges.

Alice nods and sighs heavily. “I know. Irondirk and his team will expect a reward for their efforts. I haven’t promised anything specific yet, but I’ve told them they would be generously compensated. I hope I haven’t...”

“No, no, that’s fine. Just fine. Perhaps they’d accept a title?”

Alice’s grin is wry. “I’m sure they’ve something much more... practical in mind.”

“Ah. Well, I shall ponder it and ask your opinion of whatever alternatives I come up with.”

Alice nods. After a moment, she says in a soft tone, “It makes sense to me now, the Crafter’s Core, I mean. Tarrant has always been so protective of his hat... Did you know his father made it? Even wove the fabric used on it? And his mother crafted the hatpins for it? It was a gift. For completing his apprenticeship and being promoted to your service.”

“Ah, I’d nearly forgotten,” Mirana replies, leaning back in her chair and smiling. “Eiam Hightopp was rather gifted with the loom. And Lezlia was one of the very best silversmithies in all of Underland...”

Alice continues, expression contemplative, “I always assumed Tarrant had made it himself. If that were the case, he would be able to find it anywhere were it lost or stolen or... borrowed. But he can’t can he? Only his father or mother would be able to use the Crafter’s Core to Call it...”

Mirana nods. “Yes, as I understand it, the connection that is formed between the creator and the creation is never passed on to others, even members of the same family or direct descendants.”

“So, if it were to be lost, he might never be able to find it...” she muses and Mirana watches Alice’s expressions.

“Are you perhaps remembering a time when Tarrant placed you on his hat and threw you across a river to safety?” Mirana dares to speculate. She knows the story of Alice’s return and Tarrant’s sacrifices for their – his – Champion very well.
Alice hums through a breath of laughter. “No, actually. I was thinking of a moment in which I returned it to him.” She shakes her head. “I couldn’t imagine him being without his hat, but I had no idea what it would mean to him...”

“Is it any wonder the man fell in love with you even more deeply, Alice?” Mirana replies. “How could he not? Not only had you returned to Underland, not only had you dared to attempt his rescue from the Red Castle, but you’d given him back the last lingering essence of his parents.” The queen smiles gently. “Whom, I know for a fact, he loved very deeply.”

“That’s the only way he knows how to love,” Alice whispers through a wide smile and misty eyes.

Suddenly, Mirana notices how far they’ve strayed into very personal territory... and without expressed permission from the person to whom that territory belongs! “Oh, I’m sorry, Alice. I should not have spoken so freely without Tarrant’s consent! Have I upset you?”

Alice shakes her head and presses her fingers to her eyes as if she expects that will push the tears back to where they’d come from. “No, no, it’s fine. I shouldn’t have brought it up, but I was so... affected by... and curious... and I didn’t want to make him think about the past... I’m sorry,” she says finally, drawing a deep breath before lowering her hands. “I’m fine. Just tired. The Maigh was...” She visibly flounders in search of an adequate description.

Mirana smiles. “Yes, so I’ve heard.” Then, clearing her throat, Mirana continues, “But, for now, back to the issue at hand.”

“Yes,” Alice agrees, sitting up straight. “Irondirk will be looking into it, as will I with the assistance of the king. I’ll send out the Bays as soon as they can be ready to go.”

“As always, an excellent plan, Alice. Thank you.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” the Champion replies, standing.

“And I thank you for that, Alice.”

Alice opens her mouth to reply but closes it again.

“What is it?” the queen asks her friend with curiosity.

“Something maudlin. Put it out of your mind,” Alice softly requests.

“Very well. I shall do my best.”
The queen stands as Alice moves toward the door. She drifts toward the bassinets and looks down upon her youngest sons, still sound asleep.

“Mirana?”

Looking up, the queen notes that Alice is standing at the still-closed door. “Yes?”

“Are there any other uses for jabberwocky blood?” she asks very quietly.

Mirana feels her heartache at Alice’s stressed expression and slowly shakes her head.

“And what does it do exactly? Will it give you anything you wish?”

“No. It does not give things. It bestows the power of Movement.”

“To other lands, other worlds?”

Mirana nods and then, hesitantly, adds, a warning in her tone, “And through Time itself, although that is a very closely kept secret.”

Horror follows Alice’s expression of comprehension. “Which is why, after I drank it – after slaying the Jabberwocky – I returned to Upland only moments after I’d left?”

Mirana nods. “I would expect so. As I’ve mentioned before, Time passes differently in Upland. And I doubt it would be so accommodating. Yes, I think you wished yourself back to that place and that time because, quite frankly, you hadn’t thought to wish yourself hours or days into the future.”

Alice’s mouth works for a moment.

Seeing the fear in her Champion’s gaze, Mirana hurries to assure her, “It would be nearly impossible for either of them to have learned of the blood’s true Power, Alice.” And if they had then it would likely be far too late to stop them from fiddling with Time at this late juncture. In fact, if they had chosen to travel into the Past, things would have already changed and Mirana and Alice would likely not be having this discussion at all!

The queen continues, “I will do whatever I can to help you and Irondirk locate Valereth and Oshtyer. But, please, Alice, tell no one that they may have used jabberwocky blood to escape.”

“I won’t say anything,” she promises thickly. Alice takes a deep breath and then opens the door.
Mirana watches her go and, turning toward her sons, muses:

It is a conundrum, indeed; what would have driven Valereth and Oshtyer to seek out the blood of a jabberwocky? And at such great personal risk? If they had intended to move through Time and into the Past in order to alter events in their favor, then the changes would have already been wrought! But what could they hope to gain by traveling into the unknown Future?

It must be a Place, then, that they’d intended to go to and not a Time. This thought is a more comforting one to contemplate and yet also not. For if Valereth and Oshtyer have used the jabberwocky blood to escape Underland, how could they possibly be a threat to the White Realm, to Shuchland, or to Galandonland now? But, then again, is it not her responsibility – at least in part – to ensure that Underlanders do not cause harm to Those in Other Worlds?

Mirana sighs. Yes, Valereth and Oshtyer must be located. Whatever trouble they are causing must be dealt with. She despises the thought of bringing them back to Underland – oh, how wonderful it would be to just ignore the issue entirely! – but she knows it must be done.

And if it must be done, then it will be done, which means...

Mirana reaches for the bell that will call her attendants. She’ll need help transporting her sons’ bassinets up to the Far South Tower, where Absolem still oversees the Oraculum.

*~*~*~*~*

This is my fault.

Alice slides the sharpening stone over the curved blade of her scimitar. The gravely, scraping noise cuts into her soul without leaving a mark on her skin. She ignores the singing birds, the enthusiastic breeze, the full-to-bursting bunches of blossoms weighing down the boughs and branches of the cherry trees, ignores the sounds of life from within the castle kitchen. Alice sits on a bench in the kitchen garden and considers all of the ways she is failing – and has failed – in her duties to Marmoreal and its queen.

I ought to be out there with Bayard and his pups. I ought to be helping Davon and Argur and the others. I ought to be doing something!

But she knows she can’t. She knows what Tarrant would say if she were to so much as look in the Bandersnatch’s direction. She knows he’d be right.

And, in all truth, there had been much to be done here, in the Hall of Records. She’d spent two
weeks with King Dale and Tarrant and Fenruffle and Nivens and – whenever she could spare the time – the queen, scouring the history of reported thefts in Underland looking for anything that might have been particularly desirable to a pair of banished members of the aristocracy.

At first, things had been promising: missing boots and jackets and knives of the highest quality had been investigated. The craftsmen and women who had created the objects had consented to Call them, but only one had been found: a pair of boots, worn beyond use, at the bottom of a compost heap at a Witzend farm.

Alice wishes she’d been able to accompany the cobbler on that particular quest, just for something to do, but Tarrant had suggested Leif be sent before Mirana could volunteer her. Alice had very nearly gotten angry with Tarrant over that, but his pleading gaze had stayed her objection. Luckily, no one had seemed to notice their exchange. And what with two banished former coup-leaders unaccounted for – and what with Alice being one of those to actively work toward their defeat – she knows Tarrant is only going to become more protective in the weeks and months (Alice suppresses a groan at the Thought!) to come.

During the first two weeks following the Maigh, reports had been coming in and orders had been sent out to Irondirk and his team with regularity thanks to the team of gryphon messengers the queen keeps on staff. Unfortunately, news – and it had been very old news at that! – had dried up rather quickly. Despite Davon Irondirk’s charm and cunning, he’d been unable to locate a single individual – be it person, creature, or plant – that had seen either Valereth or Oshtyer even once within the last four years.

The Bays, despite the scents provided by Valereth’s and Oshtyer’s shoes, had been unable to find any lingering trace of them anywhere and had returned to Marmoreal with nothing but exhaustion to show for their efforts.

Which has led Alice to the inevitable conclusion: the former viscount and lord are no longer in Underland. Just as she’d feared. And while there are, according to Mirana, many times and places they could have traveled to, Alice suspects she knows exactly which one: London, her London.

My very existence here in Underland would have made them think of Up There.

It would have taken just a single wish and a thought of Alice Kingsleigh’s home to take them to England. Alice, upon leaving the queen’s office on the day of her and Tarrant’s return, had sequestered herself in their apartment and had opened the looking glass for the first time since she’d visited her mother to say farewell. Her mother’s room, her father’s study, Margaret’s solarium: those rooms she’d managed to inspect and – eventually – her family members moving freely about them. Alice had even noticed the baby that Margaret had cradled in her arms, a baby which Alice strongly suspects is her niece or nephew... But the other rooms and their mirrors had been closed to her. Perhaps because those rooms had been changed and thus Alice had been unable to successfully build the image of them in her mind and will the portal to open between the two worlds. She had tested this theory on her old room in her mother’s house. It had opened easily and this room had also looked precisely the way she’d remembered it.
So, her sister and her mother (although Helen Kingsleigh had looked far, far older than Alice had expected) are safe. Still, Alice had had to forcibly remind herself that she could not travel through the mirror and return safely, not without someone on this side to keep it open for her. However, Alice is convinced that going through the looking glass and asking a few questions – oh, not to her family, of course, who believe her long deceased – is a viable option. If only she had the money, Alice could hire a solicitor or even a less reputable investigator to look for Valereth and Oshtyer! The idea had come to her fully formed and she’d asked the Royal Seamstress to make a few Upland-style dresses for her, just in case the queen had approved the idea.

She hadn’t.

“Let us wait a bit longer and see if any more recent reports of their activities come to light.”

But Alice knows there won’t be; there will be no more recent reports. Unless they come from London.

And Valereth and Oshtyer might not have thought to attack a jabberwocky and drink its blood and travel to Upland if Alice had never chosen to stay in Underland: if she had never suggested Chessur as a part-time parent to Krystoval, had never introduced Chessur to the Jabberwocky, had never participated in the Trial of Threes, had never promised Tarrant that she’d return, had never slain the Jabberwocky in the first place, had never allowed herself to be lured away from that horrid engagement party by a white rabbit in a waistcoat, had never...

She sighs.

You could be fretting over nothing. Perhaps they used the blood to travel to another place altogether...

Although, she doubts it. As with the knowledge that one might be able to travel through Time with the aid of the blood of a jabberwocky, accounts of the Other Worlds have been kept secret. Mirana had assured her that only the current Masters of Intentional Magic in each realm and their king and queen are permitted to know those things.

“Absolem,” Alice had said, guessing the identity of the White Realm’s Master of Intentional Magic.

Mirana had nodded. “Yes. And Magenka of Shuchland. There is another in Galandonland although I do not know much more than that.”

So Alice had arrived at the conclusion that were Valereth and Oshtyer to travel anywhere via jabberwocky blood, it would be to Upland, to Alice’s home, using her as a reference to get them there.
And what sort of damage could those two be causing in London, so close to Alice’s unguarded loved ones? Dare she hope those unscrupulous bastards had simply opened up a small shop and are even now concentrating on swindling people out of their pence and pennies? Still, even if that relatively harmless thievery were occurring, it would be her fault for it had been she who had led them there, who had made the journey possible, who had given them the very idea and the motivation... however indirectly.

Yes, it is her fault; she had allowed them to live, hadn’t she? Should she have killed them as she had Stayne? No mercy; is that the way it must always be when confronting a threat to the White Queen and her reign?

Alice shies away from that thought and the dark path that unfurls with it. No, she will not take that road; she will not consider it. Not yet. First, she must do whatever she can – whatever she must – to fix this mess. Had this happened a few months ago – before she and Tarrant had decided to conceive a child – Alice would have been out there or perhaps already Up There, hunting those greedy, cheating, opportunistic wastrels down. A few months ago, it would have been just as much her fault as it is now. But now...

It is her fault but not her fight.

“Th’rock ain’t movin’, ye wee bessom!”

Startled, she looks up and into Thackery’s twitching expression. When had he stopped banging around in the kitchen and wandered out here?

“No’ movin’!” he repeats, his ears flopping a bit with emphasis.

Frowning, Alice glances down at the sharpening stone in her grasp. “It moves,” she replies, demonstrating.

“No, no, no’ movin’ in th’ slightest!” he insists, blinking his left eye rapidly. “If ‘twere ye’d be sittin’ on it rather than it sittin’ on ye.”

Alice shakes her head, still not understanding.

“Oh, aye,” he argues. “No such thin’as a thoughtful rock, jus’ thoughts full o’ rocks!” Thackery nods and adjusts the basket over his arm. “Ye leave tha’ one be, Alice. Ye cannae move a rock tha’ doesnae wan’tae be moved!”

“I agree with the hare, Champion Alice.”

Alice sighs with resignation as Leif sits down next to her on the stone bench.
“Don’t huff and puff at me, Miss Champion,” he says smartly through a smirk. “If this is the thanks I get for trying to cheer you up, I’ll just let you enjoy that rock you’re wearing around your neck a bit longer.”

“Sure, let me enjoy the experience,” she grumbles, watching Thackery stride-twitch-stumble-stride-stomp-march-twitch away from them and toward the vegetable garden. “Builds character.”

“Breaks backs,” he rebuts. She refuses to fidget under his searching gaze; she resumes honing the edge of the blade.

“You keep that up and you’ll have nothing but a cheese knife with a fancy pommel,” he tells her.

Alice has to tighten her fingers around the stone to stop herself from flinging it in the general direction of the compost heap.

“Besides, if you don’t trust this Outlander to do the job right, what are you sitting around here for?” Leif challenges, misinterpreting the source of her quiet misery. “I’ve never seen you back down and take a seat when there was action to be done.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” she mutters.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Like listening to the Hatter?”

Alice glances up sharply.

“Oh, I figured that must be it. What did he say to keep you at Marmoreal? I know, I know: I know it’s none of my business, but tell me anyway. I’m dying of curiosity,” he informs her with a wide grin.

“Then get on with it and die already,” she snipes back, her mouth twitching in a tiny smile.

“Ah-ha! I got one! Right there. That twitch was a smile.”

“Was not. Go away and bother Thackery. Haven’t you been promoted to protecting the vegetables from slugs yet?”

“What makes you think they’d trust me with something so important?”

“A wild guess.”
“Hm. All right, I’ll take one,” he says, flipping her droll comment around on her and turning it into an offensive conversational gambit. “The Hatter told you to stay put or he’d never wear that kilt of his again, right?”

“Excuse me?”

“Now, calm down! Don’t try to hide how much you love it. We all know.”

“No, if you knew how much I love that kilt, I’d have to dispatch you.”

“Can’t keep secrets in this place. It’s no use, Alice.”

“I’ll bet you I could.”

“I’m sure you’d try. So, what do you think of me asking the Hatter to make me one?”

“Make you one what? One sorry excuse for a lion?”

He chuckles. “A kilt, of course!”

Alice shakes her head. “Don’t even think about it, Leif. Tails and kilts just... No.”

“But, you’ve thought about it. Quite obviously,” he crows with delight. “You had an answer all ready for that question, didn’t you?”

“Maybe I did, but not because I was spending hours of my life contemplating it. It’s just common sense.”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed yet, but we’re a little short on common sense around here.” Leif nods in the direction of the garden where Thackery is noisily trying to beat the potatoes out of the ground with a bucket.

“Can’t say that I have. Are you sure?”

“That bucket speaks for itself.”

Indeed it does, Alice agrees, listening to the poor object’s protests: “Put me – oof! – down you mad – ack! – March Hare! Ow! What you want – ouch! – is a spade! A spade! Gah! You’ve put the bucket before the – argh! – spade!”
“I suppose I ought to do something about that,” Alice muses.

“Oh? Are we Champions for the gardening implements now?”

“ Implements. Is that a new one for you?”

“How did you guess?”

“Wait, let me guess another one,” Alice continues, smiling broadly. “Tarra taught you that word over lunch today?”

“Lunch, actually. You can’t honestly expect me to remember a word that long for more than a couple hours, can you?”

“Actually, I’m continuously surprised that you manage to remember your own name.”

“Can’t take credit for that. If not for people shouting it at me at a dozen times a day, I just might.”

“Fates, your brain’s turned to cheese. Is this what happens to people when they befriend six-year-olds who think they can conquer all of Underland with a wooden sword and a screaming battle cry?”

Leif chuckles. “That would be Envy talking. Be strong, Champion Alice. Fight it.”

“I’ll do my very—”

Whether Alice had been about to promise to do her very worst or her very best to fight her baser nature is lost in the sudden rumbling that rolls over Marmoreal from the distance. Alice has just enough time to frown at Leif – who looks equally puzzled by the strange not-quite-thunder noise – before the bench beneath them begins to shake. Alice grasps it with two hands and braces her feet on the ground only to discover that it’s the ground itself that is shaking!

Shaking and shuddering, rolling, rocking, lifting, and thrumming with frightening strength!

The trees groan and shiver, releasing their blossoms in shock.

She looks up at what she can see of the steep mountains ringing the valley and watches as rocks are dislodged and tumble down into the rushing white river that encircles Marmoreal. She hears screams in the distance as people panic in the small village beyond the castle gates. And the castle itself...
Ear-splitting cracks and groans join the grumbling noise of the earth and marble dust rains down on Alice and Leif. She throws herself off the bench and backs away from the wall, dragging Leif with her. Turning, she gapes – horrified – at the way the walls ripple like a massive ocean wave above them.

There’s a shout from within, then a scream and the cry of a baby and—

—a moment of heart-stopping panic that envelops her heart, bakes it solid, then fractures it into jagged pieces.

*Tarrant! The queen! The children!*

As one, Alice and Leif dash toward the entrance of the castle. Just as they pass through the archway, suddenly, the earth quiets. The rumbling stops. The world is silent and still again. The Champions race up the dusty stairs and ignore the coughing and wheezing of the carpets. Alice turns down the hall toward the queen’s office while Leif rushes off in another direction.

“Are you all right?” Alice gasps, flinging the door open and taking in the sight of the queen, huddled in the corner and grasping her sons to her chest. Leivlan, it sounds like, is protesting the rough handling very loudly and Alice reaches out to take him from Mirana’s tight grasp. “They need to breathe a bit, Mirana. Please.”

The queen blinks her wide eyes. “Alice... what...? What was...? *Thacie! Amallya, Chestor, Tarranya* —Alicibeth!! *Where are they?*”

Alice, still holding Leivlan who is fussing a bit, but no longer wailing uncontrollably, grasps Mirana by her elbow and pulls her to her feet and toward the door—

—where Alice nearly runs into Tarrant.

“Alice!”

“I’m fine! *You?! Are you* hurt?!” He doesn’t look hurt, just startled and scared, but her heart is still pounding with both his fright and hers, and the clashing of their heartbeats is distracting.

“Yes, yes. Fine, fine. Come, Your Majesty, let’s locate your little ones!”

And, five frantic minutes later, the queen is sinking to her knees next to her husband who has his great arms full of confused and frightened children. Alice hands Leivlan over to the arms of a waiting nurse and pivots into Tarrant’s chest. She closes her eyes and swallows back the squeak of protest when his arms become painfully tight around her.
“What was that?” Leif demands, opening his arms for Tarra when the girl flings herself at him.

“I...” Alice says, hesitantly. “I think...”

Despite the fact that her voice is muffled in Tarrant’s jacket and she can’t move her jaw much for the spools of thread strung up and slung across his chest, it seems as if her voice echoes in the library where the king had been overseeing his children’s lessons and the nurses had been minding Amallya and Thacie.

Alice announces in a gruff whisper, “I think it was an earthquake.”

“A... what?” Mirana manages, her dark eyes still wide with shock.

“In Upland, we call them earthquakes. They happen sometimes. When I was a child, there was one in Italy that...” Alice swallows and rasps, “…killed thousands of people.”

Tarrant leans back and demands: “Th’ land Up There kills folk?!”

“Sometimes,” Alice replies.

The panic enflaming her heart renews and Alice reaches up to press her hands to his face before his irises can flash past yellow into orange. “Shush, now. I’m here. I’m not Up There. I’m fine. We’re fine.”

Tarrant struggles with his breaths, until they deepen and slow. Alice brushes her fingers over his cheeks and smooths his hair and wonders where he’d left (or dropped) his hat.

“Alice, do Uplanders know the cause of these... earth-quakes?” the king asks worriedly.

“’Twas I!”

Everyone in the room startles and turns their attention toward the doorway where Thackery is slumped on the floor, a picture of abject misery, with a dirty bucket grasped in his paws.

“’Twas I!” he repeats, his voice rising with alarm. “I shouldae use’th’ spade!”

“No, no, Thackery,” Alice replies, finding her voice first. “It wasn’t you or the bucket! No one knows why these things happen, but they do. In some places more than others.” She turns back to Tarrant. “It’s been over a hundred years since England experienced an earthquake. I was perfectly safe growing up there!”
The Hatter closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and nods. When he opens his eyes again, he’s completely calm, rational, collected. Alice turns back to Thackery and reaches out a hand to him. “It’s all right,” she says, leaning down to rub his shoulder.

After a moment, Mirana takes a deep, steadying breath and announces, “We’ll need to inspect Marmoreal for damage and make sure no one is requiring assistance.”

Alice nods. She tugs on Tarrant’s sleeves and leads him toward the door. “Come with us, Thackery. We could use your help.”

The survey of Marmoreal reveals a few fallen roofing tiles, some toppled water fountains, a broken window, and several dust-covered, panicky residents.

“Do... you think all of Underland felt that... earth-quaking?” Tarrant lisps as Leif leads the Queen’s Guard back toward the castle.

“I’m not sure,” Alice is forced to admit. “It came like a train roaring down the track. The queen’s messengers will be able to tell us for sure... I’d hate to think it was worse elsewhere...” For if it had been, certainly, there must be casualties far more serious than a shattered window and some overturned fountains!

As they pass through the gates, Alice blinks at the lines of white soldiers packed along the castle drive. “What...?”

“Oh, returned at last,” Fenruffle announces, stomping over to them. “The queen would like a word. She’s entertaining a... guest on the croquet pitch.”

“I see.” Although, in fact, she doesn’t. After years dealing with the Head of the Queen’s Household, Alice has learned not to expect much in the way of detail or explanation from him. “Thank you,” she replies despite the fact that the irritable gryphon has already turned away and is now snapping at a frog footman.

With a worried glance at Tarrant and Leif, Alice steps off of the paved drive and into the orchard. They circle around the castle along the meandering paths toward the croquet pitch, walking fast.

“Champions! Sir Hatter!” the king calls as they emerge from amongst the still-shocked and shivering cherry trees. He motions them closer and Alice takes in the sight of the queen conversing with the Jabberwocky. It regards Mirana seriously, its dawn-colored eyes narrowed in thought.

“What’s happened?” Leif asks, keeping a wary eye on the visiting creature.
“Krystoval has come with news. As keepers of the land, the jabberwockies can feel when it is damaged or unwell.” The king takes a deep breath and says softly to his Champion, “This earthquake, it’s worse in the south. Much worse.”

Leif’s eyes widen. “Shuchland?!”

The king shakes his head, his expression grave and tense. “It hasn’t been confirmed by the messengers yet, but…”

“I’m leaving with the army,” Leif announces.

The king places a long-fingered paw on his friend’s arm. “As am I.”

Next to her, Tarrant relaxes. Alice swallows back a sigh; with both the king and his Champion away Alice will have to stay in Marmoreal to protect the queen and her children.

“We’re recruiting everyone we can to assist us in the rescue efforts… if they’re required,” the king continues. “Mallymkun, Bayard and his pups, the Bandersnatch… We will do everything we can to help.”

Leif nods.

Alice just hopes the king and his Champion won’t encounter any difficulties in returning to their homeland, the land from which they’d been banished rather brutally. But Alice knows Mirana would not have agreed to let them lead this mission of mercy had she felt that their personal safety might be in jeopardy...

“Champion Alice!”

“Yes, Krystoval? Is your family all right?” Alice bows away from the king and approaches the Jabberwocky. Tarrant shadows her.

“No,” it replies shortly. “But that is an issue for later. At the moment, the land that has been torn asunder must be dealt with. I am taking Grofflie, Thoran, and Wavlert with me into the south. The healing will go faster with their assistance, limited though it will be.”

“And Maevyn?” Alice prompts.

“I have asked the White Queen if she would permit Chessur and Maevyn to reside here... for the time being.”
“And I have agreed,” Mirana hurries to assure Alice.

Alice nods. “We’ll look after Maevyn and Chessur.”

“Thank you, Champion Alice.”

“You may call upon us whenever you have need, Krystoval,” Alice reminds the Jabberwocky.

“And... if I might impose a small request?” the queen ventures. At the Jabberwocky’s nod, she continues, “In order to bring the injured aid as quickly as possible, I’ve spelled several large looking glasses, connecting them to the ones here at Marmoreal. They’re quite heavy and I’m concerned that they might slow down the army or break during rough journey...”

“I will deliver them to Shuchland,” Krystoval offers.

“Thank you. I’ll have them brought out and wrapped.”

The queen drifts into the castle to see to those preparations. Alice turns back to the Jabberwocky. “Why isn’t Maevyn going with you?”

“Maevyn is ill,” Krystoval replies, worry creasing its face and turning its expression into a fearsome grimace. “I do not know the cause. Nor has Maevyn been able to describe the symptoms clearly but claims to have been feeling poorly for some time now.”

“The queen and I will see if there is anything we can do.”

“I appreciate that, Champion Alice, but I ask that you not poison my offspring with your haphazard alchemedic attempts at a remedy.”

Appreciating the stern tone of a concerned parent, Alice replies, “Should we have any suggestions for treatment, we’ll send word before we act and wait for your approval.”

“That would be acceptable.”

And, with that settled and nothing else to do but wait, an uneasy silence surrounds them.

“Krystoval,” Tarrant says after a moment and the Jabberwocky turns its gaze toward him. “Do you recall any of these... earth-quakings happening before in Underland?”

Alice places a hand on her husband’s arm in appreciation. Of course the Jabberwocky would know!
It is very nearly as old as Underland itself! And with its memory...!

The Jabberwocky shakes its head. “I cannot speak for the three-and-a-third-years that I spent, time and again, waiting to be returned to Underland, but no, Hatter Hightopp. I have never witnessed an event such as the one that has occurred on this day.”

Tarrant frowns, his eyes paling with worry. Alice slips her hand into his. She struggles to find an assurance that’s not empty, and, after a moment, whispers to him: “Together.”

Yes, despite all that’s happened, they’re still together.

Tarrant looks up and offers her a shaky smile. His fingers tighten around her hand. “Aye,” he agrees. “Raven.”

And, for now, in these uncertain times, that is all they can give each other.

And, despite the fact that they still fear and worry and dread, Alice knows that they do so together. And, for now, that will be the source of their strength.

Chapter End Notes

1. I live in Japan, so I am well aware of earthquake safety procedures (e.g., taking shelter under a desk and being wary of aftershocks and gas fires), however, Alice (and everyone else in Underland) having never experienced an earthquake personally before do NOT know these things, hence the “odd” behavior. Well, standing around in a castle that had just been shaken about seems odd to me...

2. The earthquake in Italy is one that occurred in Naples in December of 1857 and according to the USGS Historic Earthquakes page 11,000 people died, so I'm pretty sure Alice would have heard of it.

3. The idea that there's a special "connection" or a significant "relationship" between a craftsman/woman and the thing that's created is not an original idea. If I'm not mistaken (and I very well might be), Karl Marx - yes, the "father of communism" - used a very similar point in his argument outlining the many injustices of capitalism: taking the "rewards of creation" away from the workers via the introduction of the evil assembly line and the division of labor. That's what I recall from my college days, but it's been a long time...

[After looking back through a few sources on philosophy, I found Karl Marx actually writes that, in capitalism wherein workers must sell their labor and (in the case of industrialism) often work on assembly lines where they only contribute a tiny piece to the whole of a thing, they lose control of their own power, their own labor. I suppose I
inferred from this that a craftsperson has a more satisfying sense of self as he/she is able to fully appreciate the final result of their labors. And from there I assumed a type of connection and that's how I came up with the Crafter's Core. My mind is a scary place, indeed, ey?]
Tarrant watches her as they all muddle through this dire and frightening time. He brushes his fingertips over her knee, unable to resist touching her despite the gravity of the queen’s lecture on basic healing arts. He can’t stop himself from studying her throughout the sleepless night spent preparing for their Shuchlander patients. His heart aches for her as she rather visibly resigns herself to merely making up the cots that now line the kitchen and throne room and dining hall instead of helping him and Thackery with moving tables. (“Can’t move ourselves, you know!” one particularly grouchy table had grumbled. “Oh, aye... can’t be bothered tae lose a pound ‘r twine, neither!” Thackery had huffed-and-puffed in reply, struggling to scrape his end across the floor.) Tarrant knows she wishes she could do more, be more, at least assist with brewing potions rather than simply fetch and carry potions ingredients! Yet, just those small tasks tire her. (His Alice needs rest! But there is no rest to be had this night!) And despite her obvious exhaustion, worry, frustration, and dread, Tarrant can see how beautiful, how precious, how rare, how utterly Alice she is.

And, if what she seems to suspect is true – if Underland had experienced an earth-quaking today – then the very land beneath their feet might have chosen to take her from him!

He cannot think about it without feeling his grip on calm, rational sanity start to melt away and dribble from his grasp.

And now is certainly not the time for that!

The kitchen is still quiet and empty of wounded; the mirrors against the walls are still dark and flat. At several long tables, the queen is directing frog footmen, fish butlers and her eldest daughters in the correct preparation of Pain Paste, Wound Winder, and Slumber Saver.

“Alice, could you fetch another jar of worm fat?” Mirana asks, peering into Lakerton’s simmering brew.

Tarrant watches as Alice takes a deep breath, holds it, steps closer to the tables and removes the empty jar from the cluttered collection of containers. Tarrant fetches a second jar from the cupboards and passes it to her. She sets the container of worm fat down on the table, turns and steps away. He watches – feeling unaccountably guilty – as she reaches for the small, leather pouch that she keeps around her neck, hidden beneath her shirt.
“Alice?” he asks softly, gently running his hand down her arm. He’d rather rub her back or her stomach as those locations would be much closer to the upset area itself. (The technique works on Underlanders, but not – according to Alice – on Uplanders! How frustrating!) He Hates that she often feels so ill!

Alice glances over her shoulder at the queen who is, indeed, very Busy at the moment.

“I’m fine,” she replies, placing a Himoha petal on her tongue. “It’s just the smell” is her whispered explanation.

“I Worry,” he confides.

She gives him a wan smile and he can’t help but wish she could have managed a brighter one. “I know.”

Tarrant is very grateful, however, that she does not ask him what it is that Worries him. He’s not entirely sure, himself. Perhaps it’s the fact that not only storms at sea, but those from underground tend to kill people Up There, up where Alice had lived, woefully unprotected and at their mercy! (How many times could he have Lost her and not even realized?! Or perhaps he’s concerned about what this frightening occurrence might mean for Underland: Will Alice and their child be safe Here? But if not Here, then Where? Certainly not in Upland! And how will he protect his Alice and their littlin’ from these sorts of foes? He cannot fight them with a broadsword and a pin nor avoid them with a bottle of Pishsalver and a teapot nor distract them with a powder puff and a bottle of perfume nor delay them with—!

“Tarrant,” Alice whispers, leaning close to breathe in his ear. He feels her hand on his and realizes he’s shaking.

Tarrant swallows and nods once. He is fine. He must be fine! Now is not the Time to not be fine!

“Come and help me with the pallets in the other rooms,” Alice invites, leading him out of the kitchen.

He follows her, clutching her hand. Never has he been so frightened. Not when he’d watched her duel – for he’d always Known he wouldn’t permit her to be gravely injured, the rules of conduct be damned! Not when he’d engineered his own capture by the Bloody Big Head’s Red Knights – for he’d had a Purpose and the sacrifice had all been part of the Plan! But now he has neither Knowledge, Purpose, nor Plan!

“I can’t do this, Alice,” he hears himself croak. “I can’t... Can’t Lose... What if... Does Underland... We should leave, but where to go? Where is safe for my Alice and our littlin’?”

More panic pours from him, tripping over his tongue, splattering against and echoing along walls of
the throne room, dripping down onto his hat and dribbling into his ears. He’s not sure what all he says or how long he speaks—squeaks—screams!

And then there’s Silence.

The Silence that comes from an Alice Touch. Her arms wind around his shoulders and her mouth presses against his and her tongue distracts his from the words he can only say and not Think. He pulls her roughly against him and kisses her back with the same madness that had taken control of his speech. And she replies. Yes, of course she does. His Alice has never backed down from his madness. Had never shied away from him. Not even in the presence of the Blackness.

The passion of this kiss affects him strangely, for there is desperation and fear and strength and persistence... There is heat and urgency and yet...

Tarrant squeezes his eyes shut and delves further into her mouth.

And yet he does not Need her. He does not Want her. He feels no urge to be Inside her. And yet... he does. No, no, he wants her to be within him. He wants to open up his body and tuck her inside, safe, kept. Like a pocket watch in a pocket – although not his pocket watch or his pocket-watch pocket, of course! Unreliable things, the both of them! In fact, he’s not sure if the pocket watch had broken the pocket or the other way round!

Understanding now what he Feels, Tarrant consumes her. And she meets that frantic hunger with her own. She Feels it, too, he knows: he can feel the cold, salty smears of her tears against his cheeks and jaw; he doesn’t wince when her sharp teeth dig into his tongue and lips; he doesn’t mind that her hips do not move against his. This is not Loving. This is Needing. This is Fearing!

It’s the taste of blood that finally reaches Tarrant through the storm raging inside him.

He pulls away, the rich salty tang of Alice on his tongue, his lips. Panting – divided by the feeling of his soul being immolated by shame and his body lusting for more of her blood, their blood, proof of her life, their life! – Tarrant cradles her cheeks in his hands, wipes her tears with his thumbs and stares at her split lip.

“I bit you,” he murmurs, his voice low and gruff, alien to his own ears.

“I bit you back,” she replies, lifting her hand to his mouth and Tarrant is surprised to see smears of dark blue on her fingertips when she pulls them away.

He feels his lips curve into a tentative smile. “Alice? What would you think if I told you I wasn’t sorry?” His voice wavers, wobbles, warbles in the white room.
“Hm,” she breathes on a smile, then leans up and delicately licks the blood from his lower lip. He reciprocates—cleans her—and then kisses her. Softly, slowly, for this kiss is for Healing.

With a final brush-taste-caress to his warm, now-thrumming mouth, Alice leans back. “Soon, wounded are going to be coming through the mirrors.”

His arms tighten at the Reminder. He doesn’t want to Think about it again.

Alice continues, “And I’ll be helping them. Maybe helping to carry them. I need you to trust me to know my own limits.”

Tarrant feels the edges of his mind fracture at the thought of his Alice bearing the weight of a fully-grown, muscled lion, her knees buckling, her body straining, and their littlin’...!

“That’s what Worries me, Alice.” His hands grasp her. His voice trembles. “Your limits are frighteningly muchy.”

She smiles. “I can do this. A little strenuous exercise isn’t going to hurt... us.”

Us. He shivers.

“Please, call for me if you need assistance.” Hearing his own voice, Tarrant knows he can’t pretend he’s not begging.

“I will call for you whenever I need you.”

He wraps her up in his arms again and burrows against her neck. And she Welcomes him. What would he do if, someday, she were no longer Here to Welcome him? The Thought Destroys him.

But before he can crumble at her feet, a soft sound in the hall just beyond whispers to them.

“Sounds like Algernon,” Alice muses softly, turning her face and kissing his ear... which makes Tarrant is very glad he’d tied his hair back today.

He straightens and steps back. “Don’t ever leave me, Alice,” he says quite Seriously.


And in the next instant, the fish butler is pushing open the door. “The mirrors have opened,” he announces flatly and then slither-swishes back the way he’d come. And there’s nothing for it but to
follow him.

And when they return to the kitchen, Tarrant flinches away from the noise. Normally, he doesn’t mind a noisy kitchen, for it’s usually filled with Children Noise and Friend Noise and Teatime Noise. But this...!

Tarrant absorbs the sight of the blood, oddly bent limbs, flaps of barely-connected skin. He absorbs the sounds of panic, of pain, of shock. He absorbs the scent of dust and sweat and sewage. He absorbs as much as he can take and then he shuts his Mind to it and gets to work.

“Alice, more bandages!” he hears at one point.

“Where’s the Wound Winder?!”

“My son! Have you seen my son?!”

“Hot water’s nearly gone!”

“Someone help me with this one!”

“Did you get my wife? She’s still inside the house!”

“I need a brace! Alice, hold him down!”

“Where’s my mumma?!”

“What happened? Why did the land break?”

“Tarrant! Your assistance, please!”

He gently presses the jar of Pain Paste into the paw of the young she-lion for the scrapes and bruises covering her broken arm and bloody leg. “Apply this and I’ll be back in a moment,” he says then bounds over to Alice where she’s doing her best to hold down a very furious-looking lioness.

“Princess Avenana, please! Calm down!” Alice orders her.

“My husband!!” she roars. “Where is he?”

“Please,” Alice says, meeting Tarrant’s gaze and nodding toward the bottle of Slumber Saver that’s
just beyond her reach. He fetches it and dribbles two drops onto the lioness’ forehead.

“No, no! Do not make me sleep! Not now! Not... not... no...”

“Thank you, Tarrant,” the queen says, her hands moving over the now-unconscious lioness’ hip. “Do you have her, Alice?”

“No quite.” Again meeting Tarrant’s eyes, she asks, “Take her left side?”

He does and then the queen braces herself, wraps her hands around the lioness’ thigh and pulls. There’s a horrendous pop! as the joint slides back into the hip socket. Even worse is the lack of reaction from the patient.

Tarrant fears he’ll have nightmares about that sound-and-then-silence.

The queen calls Pondish over and begins explaining how to apply a brace to the princess’ hip to relieve the pressure on the strained muscles. Alice arranges the lioness on the table then moves toward Tarrant. “Do you need help with that one?”

He turns back to the young lioness with the broken arm. “Aye,” he says and the nightmare continues. He loses count of the number of broken limbs he sets, the cracks ribs he wraps, the crushed tails and paws he has to refer to the queen herself for Advanced Healing. He suspects his hands will forever smell of the White Queen’s special Pain Paste.

White Knights escort injured creature after wailing child after hobbling, coughing, sobbing elder through the mirrors. Those treated are taken to rest in the throne room or dining room. Still, the Noise is deafening!

“My wife! Avenana! Where is she?! ”

A knot unwinds in Tarrant’s gut as the frantic he-lion rushes to his wife’s side. Algernon, who had been the one to point the creature in the correct direction looks rather miffed and resigned at not being given so much as a thank-you. But Tarrant can’t say his own reaction would have been any better.

D’nae think abou’yer Alice like tha’, lad. Injured... pale... unmoving...

Tarrant gathers up his things and moves on to the next patient. And just as Tarrant looks up from sealing a gash in a weary noble’s head, the mirror opens again. The looking glass on the far left ripples, reflecting back light and the misery of the room at odd angles, which – in and of itself – is not worthy of more than a moment’s attention, but the one who steps through it is!
A blood-soaked, blanket-wrapped form slung over his shoulder, Leif bellows, “Champion Alice!”

Despite the fact that Tarrant’s wife and not Tarrant himself had been Summoned, he tucks in the edge of the bandage he’d nearly finished wrapping around the man’s head and hurries to intercept the exchange between the two Champions.

“... need a private room for this one,” he hears Leif say very quietly.

“I know of one,” Tarrant offers before Alice can do more than open her mouth to catapult the questions he can See swirling in her eyes. With a nod, Leif follows Tarrant out of the kitchen and down the hall... to the room on the first floor he and Alice had used to treat her Hafflaffen poisoning, once upon a time.

Tarrant moves to the other side of the bed and strips the silk bed clothes from the mattress, leaving only the linen sheets. Leif lays the body down on the bed and glances at Alice as she reaches for the blanket covering the figure’s face.

“You’re not going to believe this,” he informs her with a warning look.

Frowning, Alice pulls back the edge of coarse fabric and reveals their newest patient.

Tarrant gapes at the figure – unconscious and badly wounded, bleeding all over the White Queen’s guest bed – and, twitching once, seeks out Alice.

Alice who is staring, pale-faced and bey-uriously, at none other than former Lord Oshtyer of Galandoland.

*~*~*~*~*

“Madame Mallymkun! Try this doorway,” Leif hears his king direct the dormouse. When he’d learned that she’d be joining their rescue mission, Leif hadn’t been too sure of how someone that small could be of much help. Now he sees the value of having a small size. He glimpses a swish of white as her tail slips through the crack in the fractured door and investigates the gloom beyond, looking for survivors.

“Nuthin’!” she cries after a few moments.

“One more down, about a hundred left to go,” Leif grumbles, surveying the rubble-strewn halls of Palace Avenfaire. Ahead, further down the corridor, Bayne is energetically sniffing, working his way toward them.
“Something... in this one...” the fully-grown dog announces between snuffles. Despite the blocks of sandstone and toppled lanterns and planters, Leif is by his side in a moment.

“Odd,” Bayne continues, obviously puzzled. “The scent is here, but no trail. Odd...”

Leif regards the crushed remains of the door and measures the gap.

“You won’t fit,” the bloodhound tells him factually.

Leif sends him a brief glare. “Your father will chew my tail if I let you go in there. He distinctly said —”

The dog snorts. “Yeah, I heard him, too. But I’m my own dog now. What’s he going to do? Carry me back home by the scruff of the neck? You’re too big and this needs to be checked out. I smell blood.”

And, without another word, Bayne slips into the room. Irritated, Leif stomps – rather ineffectually considering the jagged debris blocking his path – toward the rear doors to the throne room. He has to shift a pile of shattered rock that he thinks had once been a statue of Avengaff the Great Gifter (quite the generous king, or so legend claims) before he manages to haul the door open wide enough to admit him. And, when he enters, what he sees...

Leif stares at the utter destruction of the room. Had this been the origin of the earth-quaking? The storm that had exploded out of the land itself? It seems to be, for there is no room! There is only a wide, yawning hole surrounded by walls.

Thankful for the high windows and the coming dawn, Leif examines what he can make out in the gloom. “Bayne, watch out for that... hole.”

“Do I look blind to you? Relax.”

Leif sighs. Everybody wants to be a hero...

“We’ve got a live one here... Oh...! Dalmatians be damned. I knew I recognized this scent.”

Leif climbs carefully over the rubble near the wall, minding his footing, until he arrives where the bloodhound is glaring at a grubby, sprawled figure of a man. Leif takes one look and growls, “Oshtyer...”

“Should we just... leave him here, you think?” Bayne asks.
Leif closes his eyes, rubs his face – as if that would dislodge the grit in his eyes or initiate feeling in his long-since-numb cheeks and jaw – and replies, “Depends on if he’s still alive.” Nose wrinkling in disgust, he leans down and rolls the bastard over.

“Hnguuuh...” The weak groan escapes and it is a groan, despite how very much Leif would like it to merely be a dead man’s belch.

*Well, perhaps he’ll know where Valereth is,* Leif thinks.

“Not dead,” Bayne observes flatly.

“Go bring a blanket or something, would you?” Leif asks absently, studying the man’s odd attire.

“No kidding,” Bayne replies wryly. “I wouldn’t want to touch *that* more than necessary, either.”

Before Leif can decide if he cares to respond or not, the bloodhound has squirmed back out through the cracked and shifted doorway. Leif takes a moment to investigate the area. He steps a bit closer to the edge of the hole and peers down... and down... and down a bit more... but only the eternal blackness of a true abyss meets his gaze. Shivering, he turns away and sifts through the shattered and scattered tiles. He’s not sure what he’s looking for, perhaps something to explain how this banished waste of life had managed to not only *return* to Shuchland but *enter the Royal Reception Hall!*

The light gradually strengthens and fades from rosy mauve to golden as the sun rises. Leif glares from Oshtyer to the utterly *demolished* room and then looks up. Although Leif doesn’t have much of a reason for looking up, except perhaps to gauge the time, he does, nonetheless...

He’s frowning at an odd dark splatter on the high ceiling when Bayne returns with a folded blanket in his mouth.

“Gah. Wool,” he gags after dropping the bundle at Leif’s feet.

“Does that look like blood to you?” Leif asks, squinting up at the ceiling.

The dog looks from the ceiling to the man still lying prostate on the up-churned floor. “One can hope, I guess. But if it is... wouldn’t that mean that...?”

“He fell through the hole from... somewhere.”

“Hm. I guess it’s too much to hope the earth had kicked him up there?” Bayne wonders.
“Probably.” Unable to put it off any longer, Leif unrolls the blanket, wraps one side of it around Oshtyer and rolls the man up in it.

“What are you going to do with him?”

“Take him back to Marmoreal. I’ll let Alice and the Hatter have him. Never did get them a wedding gift...”

Bayne barks a shout of laughter. “I almost wish I could be there to see that.”

Grinning with less cheer and more... malice, Leif leans down and hauls Oshtyer’s body over his shoulder. Grunting, he begins to pick his way back to the rear door.

“Hey, what’s this?”

Leif pauses when he’s sure of his footing and looks back. He frowns at the odd, black... thing Bayne’s holding in his mouth. “I don’t know, but I don’t like the look of it. Just set it down there and I’ll come back for it.”

The dog does as he’s told. “Yeah. Smells weird, too. Some kind of metal and... something else. Pepper-y and smoke-y.” Bayne gives it a disdainful sniff before turning and trotting out of the room again, this time in search of more survivors within the ruptured palace walls.

Leif carries Oshtyer over to the door and lays him down on a patch of still-remaining floor before returning for the odd device Bayne had sniffed out. He looks at the thing, wondering over the wooden appendage and attached bulb of black metal and then the slender, hollow tube set at a right angle. Shrugging, Leif puts it in his pack of supplies – with the bandages, water, and pots of ointments provided by the queen – then gets on with it: he navigates himself around the hole for the last time, picks up Oshtyer’s still-limp body, and stomps – as effectively as one *can* stomp, that is – in the direction of the nearest mirror.

Just before he steps through the cool, calm surface, his mouth twists into a smirk:

*A wedding present for Alice and the Hatter, indeed!*

And he fully intends to hang around for the, er, “opening” of it.

Leif pushes through the glass, steps into the chaos of the kitchen-turned-infirmary, and roars, “*Champion Alice!***

Somehow, he’s not surprised when her husband answers the call, too.
And, somehow, Leif is equally unsurprised to watch the man effortlessly delay the numerous questions that are reflected in the eyes of the Queen’s Champion.

Again, somehow, Leif is not surprised in the slightest by their reactions to seeing this face again:

Alice pales, glares, and grits her teeth. In that order.

The Hatter looks up at her, takes the afternoon ship to the Isle o’ Madness, and snarls a welcome upon his arrival there.

It would be funny if it weren’t so... not.

“Hatter!” Leif announces.

The man twitches but his hands fist. And then Alice is there, her hand on his arm and her voice, strong and sure and sane, fills the silence:

“Where did you find him?”

Leif rolls his eyes. “In the bloody throne room of the palace, if you can believe it.” He describes the bottomless hole, the blood on the ceiling, and then: “Bayne found this nearby. No idea what it is or if it’s even Oshtyer’s, but since his clothes are just as odd...” Leif pulls out the black object and startles when Alice shoves her husband away from it.

“Don’t...!” Alice clamps her mouth shut, takes a deep breath and says, “Don’t move, Leif.”

He frowns, watching as she approaches him from the side and gently lays her hand over the alien thing. She lifts it from his grasp and, pointing the open end of the hollow tube away from herself and everyone else in the room, she fiddles with a switch attached to the metal bulb and it releases with a sharp click! Leif glances at the Hatter, who looks equally perplexed by Alice’s odd behavior.

“What is that?” he finally wonders aloud.

Alice ignores him and, fiddling a bit more with the thing in a manner which clearly demonstrates her familiarity with it, opens the bulb and inspects it.

“Alice?” the Hatter asks, his eyes narrowed with what Leif recognizes as suspicion and mad genius. “What is... Why do you... That’s dangerous, isn’t it? A weapon? From... Up There?”

She sighs and upends the thing, dumping five small, shiny oblong-shaped... well, things into her
palm before pocketing them in her vest and snapping the metal bulb back into place. “Yes,” she tells them. “It’s a weapon. From London.” She nods to the bed. “So are those clothes, if I’m not mistaken.”

And before either Leif or the Hatter can think to stop her, she steps up to the head of the bed and opens Oshtyer’s jacket and reads a small label sown onto the satin lining beneath an inner pocket. “I know this tailor. Quality. Expensive. My fam… my family uses them. Still, I think.”

“So…” Leif drawls. “Oshtyer was in London?”

“Yes.”

He frowns. “Which means the hole in the throne room is…”

“Aye,” the Hatter says, his eyes a murky yellowish orange. “‘Tis like th’ rabbit hole. It connects Underland teh Up There. O’ly, they made it from Up There teh Here… an’ no’th’ other way ’round.”

The Shuchish curse makes its way past Leif’s lips before he can think to stop it.

Alice looks up and gives him a wry grin. “Yes,” she agrees. She moves to tuck the black object in the waist of her trousers against her back.

“Stop!” the Hatter fairly shouts. “What’re ye doin’?! Ye said tha’s dangerous!”

“Not anymore. I released the hammer and took out the bullets. It’s just an empty revolver now. Worthless unless you want to beat someone with it.”

The Hatter twitches. “How d’ye know so much about… that?”

Alice sighs. “Can I answer that later? Oshtyer’s bleeding all over the place.”

“Let him bleed,” the Hatter growls.

“And let him die? He might be able to tell us where Valereth is. Or how they managed to dig a hole from Upland clean through to Underland.”

The Hatter doesn’t like it, that much is certain, but he subsides. His eyes still too yellow for Leif’s peace of mind, the man leans over and starts undressing the grimy, unconscious man on the bed.

“I’ll get some bandages and cleansing solution,” Alice offers.
“No amount o’ cleansing solution will help this slithy bastard,” the Hatter replies irritably.

Leif, quite entertained by the Royal Hatter’s agitation yet still unsettled by the implications of that... hole in Palace Avenfaire, accompanies Alice out of the room.

“Champion Alice...” he begins.

“No,” she replies and in a tone he recognizes. “I’ll inform the queen when it’s convenient.”

Leif acknowledges her unspoken request for secrecy with a nod and asks another question entirely. “Do you really think it’s safe to leave them alone in there?”

Alice blinks, her brows arching with surprise. “Tarrant knows I need... our guest to be able to talk. He’ll restrain himself.”

Leif coughs out a laugh. “That... wasn’t quite what I meant.” Actually, he’d been wondering if Oshtyer might somehow be a threat to the Hatter, not the other way around!

“I know,” Alice replies, her eyes sparkling. “How many times have I told you that you underestimate my husband?”

“I’ve lost count,” he answers, holding the kitchen door open for her and then, without a backward glance, steps up to and through the looking glass... and back into the hell that his homeland has become.

*~*~*~*~*

Once again, Alice discovers that she is the bearer of Very Bad news.

“Oshtyer?” the queen repeats. Her tone is disbelieving, but Alice can see the wrought-iron strength in her friend’s dark eyes. “Oshtyer is here?”
“Yes, and under guard,” Alice hurries to confirm and assure.

“Double it,” the queen orders in That Tone. The one she’d acquired upon conceiving her twin daughters. Alice aspires to be just as intimidating when it comes to Tarrant’s safety and the well-being of their child.

“Done,” Alice agrees.

“And Valereth?” the White Queen demands.

Alice shakes her head. “No news. As soon as Oshtyer awakens, I’ll be asking him.”

The queen nods, her face set in tense, angry lines. And then, with a frustrated huff, she turns away. “I wish now I had permitted the architects to put in a dungeon.”

Alice refrains from agreeing. “There’s more.”

The queen looks over her shoulder at her. “Of course there is, or you would have started in on the reassurances by now. Well, what is it?”

Alice feels for the queen, she really does. They’d finally managed to tend to the wounded from Shuchland, had actually begun sending many of them back through the looking glass with supplies and tents and other necessities, had finally managed a brief span of sleep themselves, and this is what the queen must deal with over the first cup of tea she’s enjoyed since the earthquake.

Swallowing a sigh, Alice tells her about Oshtyer’s clothing and weapon and injuries; and she tells her about the bottomless hole in Shuchland and the reported blood on the throne room ceiling. Mirana – no, the White Queen! – listens to Alice’s report.

“Well,” she says when Alice has exhausted her reserves of Terrible Tidings. “It seems as if you may yet be using those dresses you requested.”

Alice catches the gasp before it can escape. Part of her is elated to have a more vital role to play in this investigation – finally! – and part of her dreads telling Tarrant of the contribution the queen has asked her to give...

“Yes, Your Majesty. If Oshtyer doesn’t wake up by tomorrow afternoon, I shall go Upland and investigate. Both the origin of the hole and Valereth’s whereabouts.”

Mirana nods. “And I will speak to the leaders of the other realms and the Masters of Intentional
Magic about closing the hole as quickly as possible. And the other entrances as well. Just to be safe.”

Alice agrees, “Yes, what if Valereth managed to convince people that Underland is real? We can’t have Uplanders falling down here and...” Colonizing our world, Alice does not say.

“What does the Oraculum have to show about all of this?” she continues.

The queen looks away and Alice feels her own fingers dig into the padded armrests. The chair squirms a bit and she abruptly releases it with an apologetic pat.

“The Oraculum,” Mirana finally says, “refuses to unroll.”

“I’m sorry? It... refuses?”

“Yes. The last recorded day was the day before the earth-quake.”

“Why?”

Mirana sighs. “Absolem suspects it is because the fate of Underland is no longer driven by the Powers that created the Oraculum.”

“The Fates, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“So, what is affecting...” Alice begins, then stops as the answer comes to her. “It’s Upland, isn’t it? The fate of Underland depends on what happens... Up There.”

“That very well may be. Alice...”

She swallows as Alice at last feels the weight of this task settle upon her heart.

“I am not only asking you to investigate both the cause of the earth-quake and Valereth’s current activities.” And, in that moment, Alice sees true sorrow in Mirana’s face, the face of her dear friend. “Do you know what it is I’m asking of you?”

“I believe I do, yes.”

“I am sorry I must ask you to do this, Alice. I realize the thought of going back is an unsettling one...
and...” She frowns briefly. “And one that Tarrant will likely not be pleased with. But, I’m afraid I can’t send Nivens to London. That was one of the problems the last time, you know. You were in London and Nivens, being a rabbit...”

“A talking rabbit in a waistcoat, yes,” Alice agrees. “He would not have gotten on well in the city at all.” And in order to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible, Underland will need a Champion who can navigate an Upland city. But, no, not just any Upland city: London.

“Indeed. Hence, we had to learn your schedule, prepare the rabbit hole, and wait for you in the countryside.”

“It all worked out well,” Alice reminds her. “And it will again.”

The queen smiles sadly and with the Gravity of Sovereignty, formally issues the command, “Alice Kingsleigh, you are the only one who can accomplish this task.”

Yes, she agrees, her heart pounding. It must be Alice Kingsleigh, not Lady Alice Hightopp or Alice Lassling or Champion Alice who must face this challenge, complete this task...

“And I shall,” she promises.

As Alice sets out to address the queen’s requests – stopping by the tailor’s workroom to ask that the dresses be ready as soon as possible, then collecting four more soldiers for standing guard both outside and within Oshtyer’s room – she wonders how she is going to get Tarrant to agree to this, to letting her go. And she knows that if she can manage it, it will be an Underlandian miracle of the most miraculous sort.

Despite the fact that having not two but four guards in the hall outside Oshtyer’s room makes the area quite crowded indeed, the room itself is even more so. The Royal Midwife and Head Nurse, a Dodo bird and Uilleam’s wife, is looking over the bandaged man on the bed. Nearby, Tarrant stands at attention, ready and waiting for Oshtyer to so much as dare a twitch of hostility in his sleep.

“Must have been this bump on the head,” Othenia muses, inspecting the wound and rewrapping it. “Bumps on the head can do that sometimes.”

“Will he wake up?” Alice asks.

“That’s what I was just explaining, dear,” the Dodo replies. “He may not. Or he may. It’s up to the bump.”

She nods. “And the knife wound across his chest?”
“Nearly healed,” Othenia confirms. “Our queen certainly has a knack for medicinal remedies, doesn’t she?”

“Quite.”

Alice sees the Dodo out and, reluctantly, turns back to Tarrant. She can feel it through the heart line, simmering beneath her Heart Mark: his apprehension.

“Tell me what the queen said,” he says softly.

Alice nods and, holds out her hand to him. For this conversation, she does not want two rooks, a pawn, and a knight as witnesses. The hat workshop is closer than their apartment but Alice chooses the further of the two. It gives her more time to think, to gather her rationale, to compose her apologies. It also gives her more time to Dread.

This is not going to end well...

Tarrant opens the door for her and follows her across the threshold. She takes a moment to look around their apartment and wonder – rather pessimistically – if it will look different, be different, after this conversation is through. Or rather, after her stubbornness and Tarrant’s madness have finished with it...

She turns and is a little startled to find him very deliberately standing between her and the door with his arms crossed and his eyes – un-ignore-ably yellow! – narrowed. Alice closes her own eyes briefly, draws a deep breath, lets it out, and thinks: He Knows.

But of course he does!

Alice berates herself for committing the very sin she’d warned Leif about: underestimating Tarrant Hightopp.

He very obviously already Knows what the queen had wanted to talk to Alice about, but...

... but he says nothing.

Realizing that this might be her only chance to persuade him of the necessity of her task, Alice orders her arguments and evidence.

“Oshtyer came from London, through the hole in Shuchland,” she begins.
Tarrant stares at her then nods. Once.

“Somehow, Uplanders have managed to make a hole connecting the worlds.”

Again, another nod.

“We need to know how they managed it. And if they’re going to try again. And what they plan to do with it,” she continues softly, oddly fearful of upsetting the tension between them.

He stares. Waits.

“The queen needs someone who knows the ways of the people... Up There.”

His right eye twitches.

And, as they both know where this is going, Alice sees no reason to delay the inevitable: “I’ve been asked to go.”

“NO.”

“The queen has issued me a command,” she tries to reason.

“Then I will tell her why you cannot go.”

The deep tone and frighteningly perfectly enunciated words are the harbinger of the Blackness – as Tarrant had called it – that has not made an appearance since that afternoon in the hat workshop after Leif’s stupidly heroic rush to “rescue” Alice from a lifetime bound to Marmoreal’s Mad Hatter. Despite the reminder of That Time, Alice does not relent. “It won’t make a difference. There are no other Uplanders who can do this!”

“You are NOT GOING.”

“You can’t stop me!”

Tarrant’s eyes burn through yellow and approach orange. She watches his skin darken like a bandit’s mask around his eyes. “Alice,” he says, his inflection utterly commanding. “You are first the Queen’s Champion and second my wife. I have watched you – time and time again – put your duty before us. BUT NOT THIS TIME.”
“I don’t have a choice!”

“THERE IS NO CHOICE!” Tarrant’s hands, fisted, fall to his sides and his eyes flash crimson. For a moment, Alice wonders if the Blackness has truly regained control of his mind after all this time. She easily remembers what he’d done, what she’d allowed him to do, and she feels an instant of True Fear now. For now, with the baby, can she really permit him to do whatever the Blackness urges him to?

Swallowing, Alice focuses on her heart line, shoves her fear aside and concentrates on calming him. “Tarrant,” she tries, watching his tight fists loosen just a bit and his eyes fade back into orange. “You would have me choose to stay rather than to do what is right?”

And his tentative control snaps:

“Th’choice isnae yers teh make!” he screams and, despite his anger, Alice has never been so relieved to hear his Outlandish brogue. “Tha’s my littlin’ yer carryin’ an’ ye’ll no’ be goin’ ANYWHERE where th’ storms an’ land an’ these thin’s called revolvings HURT PEOPLE!”

Her relief evaporates, allowing incredulity to take its place.

She gapes at him. “You’re asking me to go against a direct order from the QUEEN?!”

“NAE! I’M TELLIN’ YE THA’ YE’VE GOT TEH STAR’THINKIN’ O’SOMMUN OTHER THA’YERSELF!”

“I AM!” she shouts back. “I’m thinking of Underland and you and our child and HOW CAN I CONTINUE TO DO NOTHING WHEN THIS IS MY RESPONSIBILITY?!”

“AN’ WHA’ O’YER RESPONSIBILITIES TEH US? D’THEY COUNT FER NAUGHT?!”

“UNDERLAND NEEDS ME!”

He rallies: “UNDERLAND D’SNAE REVOLVE ‘ROUND YOU, ALICE!”

Panting, Alice lets his shout be absorbed by the silence. Cleaning the slate, as it were. She has a point to make:

“Oh, yes it does!” she argues, taking a step toward him. “Or have you forgotten all the blasted ballads in my honor? Queen’s Champion, Slayer of the Jabberwocky! Come from the mysterious world Up There! Returned to Upland after the battle with the blood of the Jabberwocky!” She
shakes her head at him in bewildered fury. “Where do you think Valereth and Oshtyer got the idea to go to London from? Where could they have gotten the idea from if it hadn’t been FROM ME?!”

There’s a brief flicker – a moment of Logic – in his obstinate expression and then he presses, “So. Ye’re goin’ teh say ‘Brangergain i’tall’ an’ do this all on yer own? Like ye always do?”

“I do not—!”

“Yes, ye do!” He paces toward her, an accusation following each step: “Champion Alice and her Plan to save the White Realm from Jaspien, Valereth, and Oshtyer! Champion Alice and her Plan to save me from killing that blasted lion! Champion Alice and her Plan to keep our littlin’ a secret because she d’nae need help from ANYONE!”

Alice leans back and looks at him. “I...” She closes her mouth and studies his face, the pain behind the fury in his eyes, and realizes he’s right.

Well, of course, he is! This is Tarrant Hightopp. Her husband, Holder of her Heart. The man who has taught himself how to See into her Soul.

He’s but a snarling breath away from her and yet he doesn’t snap or shout. He whispers, “Mayhap I’m tae mad teh be remem’brin’ a-righ’ly, but I couldae sworn my Alice named me her Champion, once upon a ride on th’Bandersnatch.” His gaze burns into hers. “Or mayhap ye’ve f’gotten?”

Speechless, Alice turns and, shakily, sinks down into the closest chair. Yes, she remembers that late night journey through Tulgey Wood. Yes, she remembers naming him her Champion. How could she forget any detail from that night and the morning that had followed? How could she let herself forget – no, not forget but ignore! – the fact that Tarrant Hightopp had been saving her long before she’d ever been called upon to lift a sword.

How ironic that, years ago, he’d been one of those very people to insist upon that. How ironic that he’d had such immovable faith in her and her path to becoming the White Queen’s Champion. How ironic that she’d once resisted what she has embraced so blindly now. What had happened? How had she pushed him into his workshop so thoroughly? Had she done it to keep him safe or to...?

But, no, no! She would never go to such lengths to assert control over her un-controllable life... would she? She wouldn’t emasculate Tarrant to bolster her own strength... would she?

What have I done?!

The thought Consumes all others, leaving her mind numb, blank, empty.

After a moment, Tarrant moves from his place between her and the door and kneels down in front of
her. She watches as he collects her hands. “I shouldn’t have shouted, Alice,” he lisps. “And I shouldn’t have said those things.”

“Why-ever not. They’re true. They’re all true.”

“No, not entirely.” His fingers gently grasp her chin and lift her face to his. “Accusations without context. I ken yer reasons, Alice. Respect ‘em. I do... But please...” His Outlandish disappears and she hears Fear take control of his voice. “Try to understand. Can you imagine what it’s like to watch the one you love take up a sword and fight? Over and over again? You tell yourself you’ll always be there... to step in, if needed... And you can’t be anything but proud of that Champion, of her strength... And then somehow – unbelievably, miraculously! – she chooses to carry your child. Your child, Alice. And you realize there are things you cannot fight, don’t know how to fight, and any one of them might destroy everything that you hold dear. Both of them in a single instant! Can you imagine how difficult it is for a man to stand aside and watch his wife and their unborn child face such dangers?”

Even before he has finished speaking, Alice’s face is wet with hot tears. No, she hadn’t thought about it like that at all. No, of course she hadn’t. She hadn’t considered the Trust he had given her – is giving her! She hadn’t considered how unbelievably hard it must be to surrender control as he had done. (For he had Surrendered it, quite knowingly! Unlike the other times Alice had made the choice for him!) And here she is, throwing the very worst of his fears and nightmares in his face: his wife and their unborn child, galumphing off into the Unknown. No, she hadn’t really thought past his worrying nature and his aggravatingly protective tendencies, not to the source of it all...

“I’m—so—sorry,” she sobs.

“Shhh... shhh...” he croons, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and pulling her toward him.

Alice presses her dripping nose into his jacket. “I’m—so—selfish!—slurvis!—s-sorry!”

“Hush, my Alice, please!”

His hands move over her back, rubbing and soothing. Alice merely sobs harder, unable to stop the momentum of the utter disappointment she feels in herself.

“I can’t—can’t—”

“Shhh... ye d’nae hav’teh...”

She shakes her head. “No, no.” He doesn’t understand! “I have to—keep—keep this promise!” She forces herself to breathe deeply around the hiccups and tears. “I promised— the queen, Tarrant. I promised!”
He shakes his head and says softly, sadly, but firmly, “I cannae le’ye do it, Alice.”

She leans away from him and presses the offered handkerchief to her nose. “Are you... going to fight me over this?” she whispers, shocked and not a little betrayed.

“I am,” he replies.

She gawks at his assertion, at the resolution in his face. *He means it!*

And then he sighs. “I would. I want to.” He glares at her. “But you’d find a way to go anyway, I’m sure.” His hands tighten on her arms. “I’m sure!” he shouts despite the fact that he’s less than an arm-length away. “Naught fer usal teh try teh keep ye ‘ere, ye stubborn lass! But ye’re no’ goin’ teh leave me here again!”

And with that, he stands and marches into the bedroom. Flunderwhapped, she sits in the chair and watches his shadow moving through the open doorway.

“I d’nae like this! In fa’I hate it! But ye’re no’ goin’ Up There wi’out ME!”

Alice gasps as he steps back into the living room, clutching his broadsword in his hands. “No,” she says, standing and moving toward him.

His eyes flash again, back to red in less than an instant. “D’nae tell me tha’I CANNAE, ALICE, FER I WILL BE GOIN’ WI’YE AN’ THERE’S NUTHIN’ YE CAN DO TEH STOP ME!”

She closes the distance between them and presses her hands against his face. “You’re not going to London –”

And she hurries to press one hand over his mouth as the madness and pure Fury roll through him.

“– not with that broadsword!” she tells him. “You’re right! I need you! I need you! I need you to come with me, to look out for me, to protect me. Protect us. I can’t do this by myself and I’m not a Champion Up There. Up There I’m just a woman and... and... things are different Up There. And I need you.”

The anger leaves him and Alice finds herself gazing into green eyes. He lifts a hand, grasps her wrist, and pulls her hand gently away from his mouth. He hovers over her, his stare speculative and weighing. “You need me,” he repeats. It is not a confirmation or a plea. It is a fact. As is the statement that follows it: “I’m going with you.”
He allows Alice to take his broadsword from his grasp. She can sense him following her into the bedroom where she replaces it in its corner and, opening the wardrobe, removes something he will be able to use.

“You’ll need a new suit. In a dark, somber color. And the trousers will have to cover your ankles. Matching stockings would be a good idea...” She turns back around and presses his leather gauntlets and throwing knives against his chest. “And we’ll have to find a knife you can wear under your jacket so that—”

And then she can’t speak for the lips hungrily kneading her own. She shuffles back as Tarrant pushes forward and exhales in surprise as her back meets the closed wardrobe doors. Tarrant reaches between them and the gauntlets are tossed aside somewhere – she’ll check later! – and his hands are delving beneath her now-untucked shirt.

“Alice...” he gasps between hot, feverishly mad kisses. “You need me, Alice. Say it.”

She moves, arches, stretches helplessly as his rough palms chafe up her bare sides. “I need you.”

He presses against her and rubs his whole body against hers in one surging motion. “To protect you,” he growls against her collarbone.

Dimly, Alice notices that several tunic buttons have come undone. Had they undone themselves or had Tarrant somehow...? She watches as his tea-stained teeth scrape against the fabric and, with a swift bite and jerk of his chin, another button is released.

Oh... she muses, breathless.

“Say it, Alice,” he reminds her, moving downward and working her vest open.

“Protect us,” she whispers.

He pauses long enough to look up at her through his brows and Alice marvels at the royal blue of his eyes: love and passion in equal measure. “I will,” he promises and nuzzles the shirt open just enough to breathe against her breast. “I will, Alice, I will.”

And how can she refuse him that promise? How can she when she wants so desperately to undo the hurt she’s caused? How can she when she does want him by her side in London? How can she when she wants – more than anything – to be his equal and not merely a Champion?

“I need...” she gasps, struggling with coherency as his mouth steals her breath.
“What, my Alice?” he asks on a faint lisp. “What do you need?”

She gently but firmly pushes him away from her bared breasts and struggles for focus. “Many things,” she says, “that only you can give me.”

“Tell me.” His rough, hot hands slide around to her back and then down to her hips.

“I’ll need...” She leans closer, unable to resist the silent siren’s call of his much-kissed lips. “... a hat.”

“A hat,” he echoes, his brows twitching in surprise, confusion, and bewilderment. She almost misses the flash of excitement and satisfaction in his expression.

She nods, brushing her lips against his. “Yes. Please, Hatter. Make me a hat.”

And then his hands are in her hair and his lips are on hers again and she’s glad she’d gotten that request out while she’d still been able to remember it because...

... because if she’d expected her request to dilute his passion or distract him from his purpose, she would have been monumentally mistaken.

Chapter End Notes

1. The handgun found near Oshtyer is a revolver from the mid-1860s made by William Tranter of Birmingham, England. This particular gun holds a maximum of five bullets. And just where would Alice have learned how to handle one of those? That will be touched upon in future chapters.
“Where’s your hat?”

Tarrant turns, exceptionally happy to have an excuse to look away from his reflection in the workshop looking glass, and feels his burgeoning grin fade as he absorbs the sight of the woman just entering the room.

“Alice?” He frowns thoughtfully at his wife. “I don’t wish to upset you, but that... that garment is...

Dreadful, he thinks, studying the utterly unremarkable and overly conservative lines of the... dress? Yes, it must be a dress, although he’d always thought dresses were worn so that a lady might enjoy the experience of wearing it. This creation – whatever its purpose – provides no such luxury. The color is utterly uninteresting – a dark slate blue. The style is unforgivably conservative – a high collar, long sleeves, and unadorned skirt, the hem of which brushes the floor with every step. How very... blah!

If he hadn’t Known better, he’d assume that the woman in the dress is equally dull and unimaginative! The Injustice! Luckily, he does Know better, but that doesn’t change the fact that the garment makes Alice appear horribly conservative, severe, and aloof. Yet he Knows she is none of those things. Well, not without considerable provocation!

“I know,” Alice replies. Her gaze moves over him as he models his Uplandish suit. He knows what she sees: the dark and dour grey, the restrictive cut... His own reflection – a man with long, wavy auburn hair in utterly unremarkable and oppressive clothing – depresses him. “Your suit as well,” she says with an apologetic smile.

Tarrant sighs. “I don’t think I shall enjoy this Upland London you’ve spoken of, Alice.” He tugs at his unembroidered cuffs and boringly straight lapels.

Still, it’s a small price to pay for the progress he’s made; finally, he will not be relegated to the curb, to the periphery of the battle while his Alice confronts the challenges she must face; finally he will stand beside his Alice!

Her Champion.

Her Champion in an utterly unremarkable and oppressive suit, but her Champion nonetheless!

“Likely not. Although you might find the complete boorishness of it amusing to mock.”
“Is that how you survived fashions like these?”

“Absolutely. When in doubt, imagine the men in dresses and the women in trousers.”

Tarrant snorts out a frantic laugh. “I shall keep your suggestion in mind.”

Alice links her arm through his and turns both of them toward the mirror. “We look like a perfectly normal couple from London Society,” she muses with resignation. “Well, except for my hair. Too short. But there’s no help for it.”

“The queen could brew an elixir for it,” Tarrant says, turning to press a kiss to her temple.

“No, it’ll be all right.”

Tarrant swallows a sigh. They’ve already argued this point: Alice cannot ask the queen for any sorts of potions without revealing the fact that she’s carrying a child. Despite Tarrant’s opinion on the matter – that it’s high time Alice made the announcement! – Alice had insisted that revealing the truth now wouldn’t help the situation at all: as the only Uplander in Underland, Alice would still be required to go, but now the queen would have a whole new weight of worry to bear.

After a moment more of contemplating their uninspiring disguises, Tarrant watches as Alice turns away and surveys the workshop. “Where’s your hat?” she asks again.

Tarrant nods toward his usual chair at the tea table in the room. Alice strides over and picks it up. He leans toward her when she returns to his side and places his top hat upon his head. He feels himself smiling – quite broadly! – and his heart swells at both the gesture and the memory it calls forth.

Alice remembers, too:

“There. That’s better,” she tells him, brushing her fingertips against the worn edge of the brim.

“It makes the suit look even more morose,” he tells her, still smiling. “I think it’s best if I leave it here,” he concludes, reaching up to remove it.

Alice’s fingers wrap around his wrist and stop him. “No, don’t do that,” she says, surprising him. “Your father and mother crafted that for you. They’re... part of it. So that makes this hat part of our... family. I don’t want you to leave it behind.”

He aches at the sheer quantity of uncertainty encapsulated in those simple statements: What will happen once they leave Underland? Will they be able to return soon? Will there be an Underland to
Tarrant doesn’t know what to say, so he says nothing. The hat remains where Alice had placed it: upon his head. And the heartache remains where it had taken root: deep within his chest.

“I have something for you,” Tarrant somehow manages despite his aching throat. “Your request.” He turns away and removes a singularly unique piece of headwear from a featureless mannequin. A soft smile stretching his lips, he gently settles it upon Alice’s head. “Is it sufficient?” he asks, knowing it is that and so much more.

He studies his wife in the unique creation. It’s a study in contradictions: a cloche with a wide brim varying in width, reminiscent of a fan-tail yet conceals more than it reveals, a whimsical piece with a veil that appears from beneath a trio of down-and-forward sweeping feathers on the left and flutters mysteriously beneath the brim before gathering up beneath an assortment of ribbons on the right. Meandering brass beads and golden scripty-scrolling-stitching against the indigo cap create a midnight sky in motion.

It is, undeniably, an Alice hat. And it is also one of Tarrant’s most skillful creations to date. No one will notice the face beneath this emerald-and-mint striped brim and the smoke grey veil that drapes beneath it. No one will wonder if the eyes of the woman who wears it match the shimmering sapphire-and-emerald feathers or the bronze daisies peeking out from above and beneath the puffed, silk hat band.

Yes... a very Alice hat. A very Alice Hightopp hat!

“Alice? Is it sufficient?” he repeats when the silence has gone on for longer than he’d bothered to count.

“You... made this... just this morning?”

“No,” he giggles, enjoying the adoration in her tone. “I made my suit today. Your hat...” He can’t resist trailing his fingers along the feathers. “... I made yesterday evening.” It had come to him in a vision as she’d described the sort of hat she would need, the sort that would enable her to move about freely in a society that considers her a ghost. Oh, he always has several Alice hats in mind, just in case she should ever ask him to make one for her. It had been a dream come true to hear those words from her.

“Make me a hat...”

And now, something from his Mind and his Hands that she had Invited into Reality touches her intimately, shelters her, illustrates both her possession of him and his devotion to her.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to make hats for you, my Alice,” he murmurs. “And, if you’ll permit
me, this and your Hightopp top hat will not be the last of them.”

“I adore everything you create. And this is... exquisite,” she murmurs. But as she studies her reflection her smile dims.

Tarrant swallows back a sudden surge of panic at the sight of her disappointment. “What is it?” he forces himself to ask. Does the scent of the feathers make her nose itch? Perhaps the lining of the cap itself is too warm? Or maybe—

“Everyone will notice this,” she replies sadly. “It’s so lovely it’s impossible not to.”

And suddenly he understands what troubles her. “Alice,” he replies, his chest feeling as if it’s cracked open with relief. “You are entirely correct. Everyone will notice your hat.” He pauses. “Instead of you.”

Alice blinks at him and then she smiles, laughs, relaxes. “You’re right. It’s the perfect disguise. Thank you, Tarrant.”

“You are most welcome, my Alice.”

And so, with them both of them hatted properly in Hightopp haberdashery, they leave the workroom. Tarrant closes the door behind them and tries not to wonder when he’ll be back.

Their trunk – already packed – and Alice’s valise are waiting beside the mirror in the queen’s office. They’ve already safely stored the potions Mirana had prepared for them: the Pain Paste and Wound Winder and Pishsalver and Upelkuchen. Tarrant’s gauntlets are on his wrists and the knife he’d found to suit him tucked against his ribs with the aid of the special buckles he’d fashioned on the inside of his coat. Oshtyer’s revolver is in Alice’s valise with a small bundle of odd, paper money Alice had recovered from their guest’s pockets. He’d made a face at the currency, but Alice had been quite adamant about taking it along.

They make a detour past Oshtyer’s room on the way to the Royal Office, but the guards report that there’s been no change in the man’s condition.

“That bump may do him in yet.” Tarrant murmurs, momentarily distracted from their journey by the odd combination of relief, disgust, and trepidation that assails him at that moment.

Alice sighs. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter. We probably couldn’t have trusted anything he would have said.”

“Aye,” Tarrant concurs.
They head back up the stairs and with every step they take in the direction of the queen’s office, Tarrant feels his shoulders tense and Alice’s hand tighten on his arm. At the door, they both draw a deep breath. Tarrant reaches for the door handle, pauses, then sweeps off his hat, lifts Alice’s veil out of the way, ducks beneath the brim of her hat, and kisses her. Thoroughly.

He presses his hand gently against her stomach and rubs small circles against the drab fabric of her dress.

*I’m frightened,* he doesn’t say.

*I’m worried,* he doesn’t confess.

*I can’t be without you,* he doesn’t remind her.

But when he pulls back and Alice reclaims his hat in order to set it upon his head again, he sees the acceptance in her eyes. No, those words had not been spoken, but they had been revealed to her nonetheless.

“Are you ready?” she asks and he notes she does not ask him if he’s sure. He is not more sure of anything else in this moment: *I must be with you, wherever you go.*

“Yes,” he replies and opens the door.

Within, the queen, the king, and the King’s Champion are waiting. The mirror, a large, free-standing piece that does not require Pishsalver to pass through, shows the interior of what seems to be a young lady’s bedroom.

“Good afternoon, Tarrant, Alice,” Mirana greets, smiling through her worries.

“Your Majesty,” he returns, closing the door behind them.

They don’t have to tell her that Oshtyer has not yet awakened. Had he done so, Mirana and Dale would have been immediately informed. The queen renews her smile and manages a steadying confidence this time. “Alice, Tarrant, I have something for you.”

Tarrant approaches the desk and gazes down at the objects to which she’d gestured: two small compact mirrors.

“I’ve connected these looking glasses,” the queen explains, “and I’d like you to keep one of these with you as we’ll be able to use it to send correspondence.” Mirana doesn’t say that they’ll also be a
means of escape should something Very Bad happen, but Tarrant hears the unspoken words. Alice! Th’ littlin’! Tarrant fears he would not be able to withstand the pain should something Happen to either of them. He covers Alice’s gloved left hand with his own and squeezes her fingers.

“Thank you, Mirana,” Alice says, reaching for one of the silver-set mirrors and moving away to tuck it into her valise.

“Krystoval sent something along for you,” Leif says, moving toward Tarrant. He feels his heart suddenly race at the sight of the purple, viscous fluid filling the vials in the lion’s hand. “As a last resort.” And then the lion grins and shrugs. “Those aren’t Krystoval’s exact words; that Jabberwocky really enjoys drama and doom, I’ll say that much, though.”

“What were Krystoval’s exact words?” Alice asks.

Leif huffs. “‘For use in the event that the circumstances you find yourselves in become unbearable...’ I think. That’s pretty close.”

“Drama and doom, indeed,” Alice agrees and Leif chuckles.

Tarrant accepts the vials and tucks them into his best pocket with a nod. Having jabberwocky blood in his possession makes his skin crawl and his heart ache and his mind whirl with painful memories, but he feels Alice’s touch through the heart line and it loosens the grip of his panic enough to allow him to breathe.

A last resort. To escape unbearable circumstances.

Yes, yes, that would have to be the case for Alice to drink the Jabberwock’s blood. It’s anyone’s guess what could happen to the littlin’ if she were to attempt to travel that way. And it would have to be an inconceivably urgent set of circumstances for Tarrant to even consider drinking his own vial and leaving his wife and child behind!

“Has the Oraculum unrolled at all?” Alice asks, sliding her hand into the crook of his elbow again.

Mirana shakes her head.

Alice lets out a gusty breath. “And Absolem’s task? Has he started...?”

“Yes. We are not sure how long it will take to strengthen the earth between Underland and Upland, but – through Intentional Magic – we hope it will be soon.”

Alice nods. “We’ll send you word through the mirror as often as we can.”
The queen smiles. “And I shall leave the connection open so that you will have no trouble doing so.”

With that reassurance, Alice bows to the king then gives Leif a wry smile. “I can’t believe I’m leaving you here to cause trouble by yourself.”

He grunts out a chuckle. “Maybe I’ll surprise you and behave myself.”

“Surprise’ would hardly be apt, in that case,” she counters. Tarrant studies her expression – concern, anxiety, guilt. Yes, he knows Alice feels guilty for leaving Underland when there is still so much that needs to be done. Magic to be Awoken and Woven, homes to be rebuilt, earth to be healed, people to be organized and calmed. Tarrant resists a sigh: how could he have ever doubted Alice’s nature? How could he have ever thought that a single promise would have been strong enough to mold her temperament into a Champion’s? No, his wife has always been a Champion... and – he expects – she always will be.

“Well, then, it’s time to be underway,” the queen says, stepping forward. Tarrant feels Alice’s hand leave his arm and then the queen and her Champion are locked together in a tight embrace. “Fairfarren, Alice. Be safe.”

“And you, Mirana,” Tarrant hears his wife manage thickly.

Pulling back, the queen immediately shifts her attention to Tarrant, “Fairfarren, Tarrant. Be safe.”

He nods. “We’ll send a note as soon as we’re through.” He gestures to the small mirror still resting on the queen’s desk.

“Yes,” she agrees. “And you’ll hear from me very soon.”

And, Tarrant realizes, that everything that had needed to be said has been. He reaches for his wife’s hand and interlaces their fingers. “Together,” he reminds her.

“Together,” she agrees, her eyes shining with unshed tears. She accepts the valise from him and he lifts the small trunk by the handle. And then Tarrant steps up to and through the looking glass.

*~*~*~*~*

Alice had expected Tarrant to be curious about (and then, unavoidably disappointed with) the world she’d been born into. She just hadn’t expected him to examine every object in her old room as if it were some sort of strange puzzle whose solution were as necessary as his next breath of air.
While they’d waited for the house to empty for the day – Alice’s mother, who she could hear speaking to the housekeeper downstairs, to her charity functions and the staff to the daily shopping and other errands – Tarrant had amused himself (mostly silently) with the artifacts from Alice’s childhood.

He’d been particularly taken with her collection of kaleidoscopes:

“How does this fascinating object work?” he’d lisped from where he’d lain across the foot of her somewhat dusty bed.

Alice had looked up from the note she was sending to the queen through the compact looking glass and had explained about lenses and mirrors and colored glass and Tarrant had giggled and peered into one tube after another.

When he’d exhausted his curiosity over the single framed photograph of her family – taken when her father had still been alive – and the dolls she’d played with as a child, he’d carefully pried open the wardrobe door and had very nearly exclaimed – despite the lingering presence of others in the house – over a pair of ice skates that Alice had completely forgotten about.

“What sort of terrain requires one to outfit oneself in a pair of shoes that have blades fitted to its underside?” Tarrant had muttered, nursing the new cut on his finger that he’d acquired when he’d tested the blade’s edge despite Alice’s hissed warning.

Even though he’d whispered protests about wasting ointment on so trivial an injury, Alice had massaged a bit of Pain Paste onto the cut.

“You can’t go around bleeding here,” she’d reminded him as she cleaned up the smears of blue. “If anyone sees that blue blood of yours, they’ll cart you off the some laboratory for scientific study!”

And how on earth would she rescue him if that happened?

*That would most definitely be an occasion for jabberwocky blood...*

Not that she would dare drink it herself... not that he’d ever dare to leave her here in London alone. Not that she *can* drink it, even if the occasion calls for it.

Alice passes her hands over her stomach and, not for the first time, wonders at the miracle she and Tarrant are creating, wonders at her own abilities to see this choice through, wonders at her own capabilities as both a Champion and a mother and she wonders at the fact that she is here – in her mother’s house in London – now – married, with child, intent on saving an entire world. And she has to admit to herself that *not once* had she ever imagined that the circumstances of her return to Upland would be anything like *this.*
“Alice?”

She turns at the sound of his worried lisp. “Raven.” And then she smiles through a pair of tears as he enfolds her in a warm, secure embrace.

According to the clock, two hours pass before the front door opens and closes one last time. Alice moves quietly – just in case! – to the door and cracks it open. She’s just stuck her head out into the hall to confirm the emptiness of the second floor when Tarrant giggles.

Frowning, Alice looks over her shoulder and sighs as he unabashedly inspects a drawer full of her unmentionables. “All of these stockings look never-before-worn!” He lifts out a pair that had, undoubtedly, been meant for the legs of a girl of no older than ten. “Your dislike of the things has been rather life-long, hasn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so,” she answers and then gestures for him to follow her.

They encounter no one as they carry their things down the hall and descend the stairs. She knows Tarrant wants to linger in the house and investigate everything but he restrains himself and – moments later – Alice is leading him out the back door, through the tiny garden, past the gate and into the narrow alley behind the house. Thankful for her hat and veil – “I can remove the veil if you’d like... later,” he’d offered and Alice had never appreciated his optimism more! – Alice steps out onto the coal dust-coated main street. She warns Tarrant to watch where he steps and starts looking for a cab for hire.

Pressing a handkerchief to her nose and mouth, Alice moves toward the next major intersection. Beside her, a bright flash of color alerts her to Tarrant following her example. She glances at him and notices his eyes are the color of disgust and she’d have to agree with him. Already she misses the clean, invigorating air of Marmoreal. At least her stomach doesn’t protest too badly, thanks to the Himoha she’d packed for the trip.

A cab is procured and their things stowed within. They rattle along the streets toward the hotel Alice had named.

“Where are we going?” Tarrant asks, his voice muffled by the handkerchief.

Alice smiles as he leans toward the window, his wide, peridot-green eyes and curious gaze taking in the passersby and residents. The shop mongers call out tempting prices and promises to entice customers to purchase a bouquet or an orange or a good shoe-polishing. Beggars shuffle out from alleys to ask for a pence or some other pittance. Children struggle to keep up with their mothers. The lucky ones shout and holler as they race each other through the crowds, unencumbered by a parent.

“It’s very crowded here, Alice,” he observes, sitting back a bit, his knees brushing against hers in the small space.
“The hotel we’re going to should be more comfortable.”

“Hotel?” he asks.

“Oh, um, an inn. Of sorts.”

He frowns. “Is that where we’ll be staying? Not with... oh, of course. Not with your family. No, no, of course not. Sorry.”

Alice smiles to show him that the apology had been completely unnecessary. Yes, it hurts to know her mother is so close and yet Alice must avoid her: their first priority is Underland, after all. And Alice had made that choice a very long time ago. Still, it stings.

She glances out the window and blinks back tears. Frustrated with herself and her overbearing emotions, Alice forces herself to continue in a neutral tone, “If they have a room, yes, we’ll stay the night at the hotel. It’s near the ferry wharf... well, near the passenger port. Mostly, travelers pass through there. Strangers.” And with Alice’s “death” to consider, strangers would be the best sort of company to be amongst.

Tarrant nods and glances back out the window. A moment later, he gasps. “What is that?”

Alice leans across the space between the benches and follows his gaze. “Oh, that would be Big Ben.”

“I can see it would be quite impossible to kill Time here,” he mutters weakly. “Not with a veritable monument to him looming over everyone!”

Alice laughs. “Londoners are slaves to Time,” she agrees.

The cab lurches a bit as it goes around a corner, then lurches a bit more and the driver shouts at someone who hadn’t been quick enough stepping up onto the curb and out of the muck of the street. Tarrant twitches and looks up, in the direction of the loud, angry voice.

“Alice?”

“Yes?” she replies, guessing what’s coming.

“Can we... that is, if possible... as soon as possible... could we...?”

Alice reaches for his hand and winces when he grabs her fingers and holds them very tightly. “We’ll
be back home before you know it. Just a bit longer, Raven,” she assures him.

He relaxes at the familiar words and the beloved endearment. “Thank you, Alice.”

“Thank you for coming with me,” she counters. With us, she corrects herself.

His smile is weaker than she’d hoped for, but it is heartfelt, she can see and feel that much at least. “I couldn’t not, my Alice.”

The cab ride is a typical one in London in the middle of the day and, when the cab pauses for a moment at an intersection, she throws propriety out the window and slides from her seat onto the bench next to Tarrant. He threads his arm through hers and clasps her hand hard, sighing with relief. There is more jostling and shouting from the driver, all completely normal in a city this size, but with each unfamiliar noise Alice feels her husband tense beside her. Not only Tarrant is relieved when the carriage finally halts and the driver calls out their destination.

They descend and Alice gestures for Tarrant to take her hand and help her down, which he does. She gives him a smile and a wink, then turns and pays the driver with a few of the pennies she’d found forgotten in her jewelry box in her old room. When she pivots back around she has to stifle a giggle at the sight of Tarrant’s slack-jawed amazement.

“An... inn, you said, Alice?”

She takes his arm. “A hotel,” she corrects and urges him up the steps of the massive brick structure. She has to admit it is rather impressive. Not in the way Marmoreal is, of course. There’s no grace to be found here, simply a solid, massive example of masonry.

The doorman ushers them inside and Alice navigates Tarrant through the lobby to the welcome desk. They procure a room – and Alice is very happy that Oshtyer had been carrying a sizable bundle of paper pounds on him when he’d fallen through to Underland. She knows she’ll have to visit the bank to change a few bills into smaller, more useful denominations, but manages to exchange one quid for shillings and pennies before the porter – a lad no older than twenty – arrives to escort them up to their room. Alice has to nudge Tarrant before he’ll relinquish their trunk to him. Frowning, he does so and they head up the stairs. On the fourth floor, they enter their room and Alice slips a penny into the boy’s palm.

Tarrant closes the door, his brows drawn together in an expression of puzzlement Alice expects she’ll have to become used to very quickly here. Before he can ask, she says, “It’s appreciated when services are rewarded.”

“With coins?” he confirms.

“Don’t worry about it,” she replies, lifting off her hat and setting it carefully on the hall vanity. She
pulls off her right glove and brushes her fingertips over Tarrant’s brow and down past his cheekbones. “You’re in Upland now. I’ll take care of the details, if you’ll take care of us.”

His arms come around her and he presses a kiss to the side of her neck. “Tha’s what I promised ye, Alice, an’ I will. Th’ twine o’ ye.”

They spend an hour in the room: Tarrant investigates the odd fixtures and amenities and Alice explains the purpose of a shoehorn and coal scuttle (the name of which Tarrant finds highly amusing: “Scut! Scuttle! Scuttler!!” he snickers).

“This... coal substance,” he murmurs, serious once again. He considers the black, dusty mass, “is burned often for warmth? Why is it so cold here? Or do Uplanders use the hearth for other reasons?”

“England is generally cool. And rainy,” she allows. “The seasons are different here,” she adds, reflecting on the odd phenomenon of a sunrise and sunset one can set one’s timepiece by in Underland... all year round.

Tarrant frowns. “Why don’t Londoners have several days at once then? It’s warmer that way. Especially in the winter. But I suppose that would make it two or three times as wet, wouldn’t it...”

Alice blinks, surprised. “Two or three days at a time...? Wait, is that why Marmoreal is always buried in snow in winter but never frightfully cold?”

“It’s different here?”

She marvels at how honestly shocked he is by the concept of only one day occurring at a time. “Yes. It’s different.” And before he can ask yet another question, one she’s sure will require quite a bit of doodling and possibly some visual aids, Alice says, “If there’s time before we leave, I’ll take you to Brompton Boilers.” Brompton Boilers, officially known as the South Kensington Museum and home of London’s wealth of scientific knowledge and industrial technology. Well, outside of a university, anyway.

Tarrant’s eyebrows arch with inquisitiveness and Alice sighs through her smile.

“I’m sure we can find answers to many of your questions there.”

He grins the grin of a delighted school-age boy. And when her husband wears a grin like that, she can’t resist a quick kiss and a tickle.

“Merrianglin’!” he accuses her on a high-pitched giggle and she laughs with him.
“Come on,” Alice says after they’ve wound down on a sigh. “Let’s get something to eat downstairs. I need to check today’s date.”

Alice wonders if Tarrant’s amazement at his surroundings will ever cease to entertain and enlighten her. Of course she enjoys seeing an utterly flunderwhapped expression on his face – she doesn’t have the opportunity to witness it often what with his familiarity with everything Underlandian and his genius and intuition constantly at the forefront of his mind. And, as Alice studies his impressions, she finds herself seeing London – and all of Upland Society – in a new light. Growing up, she’d often disagreed with the social conventions and the expectations that others had had of her, but she’d never really seen London from the perspective of a foreigner. And, despite his perfect command of the English language, Tarrant is a foreigner. He hadn’t played in these streets or sung the rhymes that Alice had grown up chanting. He hadn’t heard the stories or learned the history or science that Alice had. With a slight start, Alice realizes that, for the first time, she has the opportunity to be his teacher of Upland rather than his student of Underland.

Perhaps a visit to Brompton Boilers is in order before they return to Underland...

*Just as soon as we sort this out,* she reminds herself and requests the menu and a newspaper.

And with their orders placed and Tarrant giggling at his place setting and the assortment of triplicate forks, duplicate spoons, and knife – which is precisely the same in Marmoreal as it is here in London, interestingly enough – Alice reaches for the newspaper, gapes at the date and gasps.

“What is it?”

She glances up. “The date. Today’s date.” Her mind refuses to produce a more comprehensive thought than that.

“Yes?” his prompts in a worried lisp. “What is today’s date?”

Alice stares into his peridot-green eyes. “It’s... it’s only been twenty-three months since the ship... Since you...”

He scowls. “Time,” he grunts and it is both an answer and an accusation. “The queen told us he wasnae teh be trusted when travelin’ be-twix Up an’ Under.”

“How is this possible?” Alice wonders aloud.

Tarrant fiddles with his salad fork. “Perhaps it’s all those combined winter nights? Lingering moments and such? They’re quite frequent in times of peace...”

She shakes her head, closes her eyes, and decides she simply cannot spare the energy to think about
it now. Perhaps later. If she has absolutely nothing else with which to occupy her time. Rousing herself, Alice unfolds the newspaper and once again bids farewell to her peace of mind:

**DEMOlITION A SUCCESS – NEXT STOP IS EARL’S COURT**

Alice forces herself to read the article rather than skim irresponsibly through it as she had with the Thrice-a-Vow. Surely, she’s learned her lesson since then! Still, it’s hard to keep herself from reading ahead of the printed words.

“Alice?”

Even after she has finished reading the article, she can’t look away from the paper. Dear Fates, but it had been easy to discover the source of Underland’s earthquake and the gaping hole in the throne room of Palace Avenfaire. Frighteningly easy. *Dealing* with the source of the trouble, however...

Alice swallows. Or tries to, anyway.

*This is impossible*...

“Alice?”

And because she very much needs to hear Tarrant tell her that things are impossible only if you believe they are, she meets his gaze and tells him, “I think I know what caused the earthquake.”

He leans over his place setting, eyes wide and eager. “What was it?”

“This,” she replies, nodding to the paper. “A new train system in London. An underground train system.”

He considers that concept; his full attention is bent on the task. Alice hurries to give him all the information he needs to understand the situation:

“This isn’t the first underground railway they’ve built in London, but yesterday was the first time they used dynamite to excavate the station.”

“Die-name-it?”

“Dynamite,” she repeats and struggles to explain it. “I... it’s...” She flounders.

“Is it dangerous?” Tarrant asks, cutting to the heart of the matter with his usual skill.
“Very.”

“And could it create a hole, cause an earth-quaking?”

“I can’t think of anything else that can. Not so efficiently and quickly.”

“And they used this... die-namite yesterday? Which would have been several days ago in Underland?”

“Yes. To clear the way for a train station with three platforms.”

Tarrant’s eyes flicker and his brows twitch with his thoughts. “Are they planning on using die-namite again?”

Alice nods. “In a little over two weeks. They’re going to... to blast again. A different station. A bigger one.”

“How much bigger?” he asks softly, apprehensively.

“Twice as large.” She meets his wide-eyed and horrified stare. “And that’s not the end of it. Because yesterday’s demolition was a success, they’re considering using dynamite on more future underground construction.”

Alice ignores her table manners, braces her elbows against the tabletop and covers her mouth with her hands... as if she could somehow re-trap the words she’d just spoken. As if she could somehow make them less true. Less real. Less utterly terrifying.

When Tarrant gestures for the newspaper, an obstinate expression on his face, she relinquishes it without an argument. He stares at the article while she indulges in a few minutes of very un-Champion-y, mind-blanking panic.

“How am I supposed to fight this?” she hears herself whisper on a half-choked breath. There are no swords or garrotes that can conquer this foe. For even if she could somehow eliminate the chairmen of the London Underground project, she knows only more will take their place. Alice is not dueling a suitor, battling a jabberwocky, or facing off against mercenaries... She is fighting progress itself!

“Alice!”

With a start, she focuses on Tarrant. “Sorry. I’m fine.” Thankfully, he ignores the bald-faced lie.
He clears his throat. “This article says this station is owned by –” He glances down to confirm his recollection. “– the Metropolitan District Railway.”

“Yes...” Alice agrees after a moment of expectant silence.

“Well... isn’t that a... business of some kind?”

“Yes...”

Tarrant tilts his head to the side. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Alice, but you know a thing or two about business, don’t you?”

“Oh... a thing or two. I utterly failed at it when I was an apprentice with the trading company.”

Tarrant considers her with narrowed eyes. He shakes his head. “No, no... You offered Valereth’s mercenaries land and opportunity to sway them. Can’t you sway this company from using dynamite again?”

“Even if I could, what good would it do? This is the trend of the future: underground earthworks. Underland won’t be safe forever.”

He taps his fingers against the edge of his plate. She recognizes the rhythm: the Waltz of the Tumtum Tree. “Wha’ d’ye ken abou’ Intentional Magic?”

“About as much as you know about Upland weather patterns.”

He cackles, snorts, and clears his throat. “Ah, well, it’s very strong magic as it comes from the intentions of those who believe in it.”

“Three butterflies are going to have to employ quite a lot of muchness to accomplish much of anything at all.”

Tarrant shakes his head at her. “No, no, Absolem and the others are the Masters. It’s the intentions of everyone in Underland that gives the magic its strength and...” He glances at her through his brows. “I think we can assume that everyone in Underland is hoping for the same thing right now...”

“You mean, with everyone focused on keeping Underland safe from Upland...?”

“The Masters will be able to stop future dynamite-quakings.”
Alice feels a tentative smile form on her lips. “Can they do... or prepare... whatever it is they have to within two weeks’ time?”

“I wouldn’t know... But, if they can’t?”

She bites her lip. “I have no idea how I could delay that project.”

Tarrant hesitantly offers, “I know I’ve only been here a few hours but... this London... money’s important here?”

“Very. It’s arguably the most important thing for most people.” Yet another reason why she loves Underland so dearly.

“We have money,” he reminds her.

She sighs. “Not nearly enough. I’d have to be one of the wealthiest women in the whole city to even approach them successfully. Convince them to delay. But I’m no one here. Not anymore. Everyone thinks I died at sea almost two years ago...”

Alice sits up straight with a gasp, eyes wide and staring.

“Alice?”

Her hands begin to shake as her path – his path, their path – comes to her, one inconceivable step at a time.

“Raven?”

She blinks and focuses on him. “I have to...”

“What?” Tarrant’s fingers clutch the table edge.

“I have to write a letter to Mirana.”

He nods, watches her, waits.

“And, tomorrow morning, I have to talk to my former employer.”

“Lord Ascot? Why, Alice?”
Her lips compress into a thin line. “It’s a good thing you can remove that veil from my hat because, after tomorrow, I don’t think I’m going to need it.”

“You won’t?” he asks. His hands relax their grip. His eyes sparkle with Plans and Plots and Possibilities.

“I won’t,” she confirms, her stomach knotting with tension and uncertainty. Her smile wobbles alarmingly. “Because, after tomorrow, I don’t believe I’ll be dead anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

1. If you would like to see images of the hat Tarrant crafts for Alice to use in London. Please visit this entry on my Live Journal: Book 3, Chapter Seven Notes and Illustrations.

2. Yes, they did have kaleidoscopes in Victorian England. Invented in 1816.

3. And yes, there was some Serious Air Pollution in London during this time period. Sewage + coal fires + unwashed masses = Gag to the Nth power

4. By 1870, several London institutions had been built: Big Ben, the South Kensington Museum (a.k.a. "Brompton Boilers" - industry and science), the Victoria and Albert Museum (art), the Crystal Palace, and Trafalgar Square to name a few. I checked. (^__~)

5. "Scut" is Outlandish for "a person's rear end" – Check out the "Glossary of Underland" tag, Walt Disney's Glossary of Underland, entry: Guddler's scut. A "coal scuttle" is the bucket or decorative box that holds coal in a household.

6. I'm American. My husband is Japanese. So when I write of Tarrant's fascination, curiosity, and amusement at funny coincidences and Alice's rediscovery of a world she's always taken for granted, I'm basing a lot of these details on the sorts of moments that really happen in an international exchange friendship or an international marriage.

7. Regarding the passage of time in Underland and Upland, I'm using the concept from Through the Looking Glass (found in Chapter 9) which states that several days or nights are had two or three at a time. According to the Red Queen, "Now here, we mostly have days and nights two or three at a time, and sometimes in the winter we take as many as five nights together – for warmth, you know." So, generally speaking, Time passes more quickly in Underland. (But not always! He's a temperamental fellow! Remember in Book 1, Mirana explains that if Alice goes through the looking glass without someone to hold it open, a moment, a day, or a week might pass in Underland during the course of one afternoon in Upland? Finicky guy, Time...) But, as Tarrant suggests, in times of peace, there are a lot of Lingering Moments and Several-Days/Nights-At-Once (as peaceful ones are easier to stack than action-filled ones!)
which is how seven years in Underland equals about two years in Upland. (Which
would also mean that between Alice's first visit when she was six-and-a-half years old
and her return when she was nineteen several decades may have passed in Underland!
No wonder everyone was so obsessed with her being the "right" Alice and destined
slayer of the Jabberwocky!! So, how does that work with everyone not aging? Well, I'm
sure you've heard the saying: "You're only as young as you feel." And that just so
happens to be exactly the case in Underland! And the reason for why Tarrant has been
looking "younger" lately. I guess being happily married can do that to a person!)

8. Regarding Alice's absence from Underland (while she was apprenticing with the
trading company) and the fact that three years passed in both worlds...? I haven't
forgotten to explain this! More on that in later chapters! (Although I've given enough
hints in Book 1 for you to be able to make a very good guess.)

9. For the purposes of this plot, I did some very BASIC research on the London
Underground. While both Mansion House Station (comprised of three platforms) and
Earl's Court Station (comprised of six platforms) were opened for operation in 1871
(Alice and Tarrant travel to 1870 London) there is no evidence that dynamite was used
in their construction. Case #1 of Abuse of Artistic License, m'kay? And I'm sure it won't
be the last...

10. Dynamite was patented in 1867, so it would have been available to those who could
afford to purchase it. It was also vastly safer to work with than other known explosives
of the time period.

11. This is my husband's plot bunny. Oh-so-innocently, he wondered aloud, "Maybe
Underland is in danger from London's subway..." And then, later, when I panicked just
like Alice over how to confront the problem, he said (he's so smart!!!), "How about
negotiating?" OMG, I LOVE YOU, SWEETIE!!!
Leif stares at the looking glass, dark again, and frowns. It amazes him that with a single footstep Alice and the Hatter had somehow passed into another world, another realm.

Upland.

Despite his curiosity of the place, he can’t say he envies the Queen’s Champion and the Royal Hatter their quest.

“Leif, why don’t you stay for dinner before you head back? You look as if you could do with a rest,” the queen invites.

Looking away from the mirror, he gives her an apologetic smile. “If I only I could allow myself the privilege, Your Majesty, but I really must be getting back to Shuchland.”

Mirana sighs.

Dale smiles, “Well, you can spare a few minutes, can’t you? Tarra’s been asking for you. And, last I heard, she was pestering Thackery about hosting a tea party for you when you get back.”

Leif chuckles at the thought. “Well, then I shalln’t keep Her Highness waiting. Where do you suppose...?”

“The kitchen, undoubtedly,” Mirana says. “Thackery was there when you came through, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, setting his pots and pans to order.” The hare had looked rather pleased about finally having all the injured and stressed strangers out of his kitchen.

“Well, no doubt he’s told Tarra that you’re here, or she’s found out somehow. I’m sure you’ll be accosted the moment you open the door.”

Grinning, Leif replies. “I look forward to it, then. Good day, Your Majesties.”

Letting himself out of the office, Leif heads down the hall to the stairs. He knows he shouldn’t take the time for something as frivolous as a tea party of all things; there’s so much to be done in Shuchland!
Just ten minutes, he promises himself. Just ten minutes and then I’ll go back through the looking glass.

Taking a deep breath and steels his resolve for the battle of wits he knows is coming, Leif opens the kitchen door...

... and has to cover his mouth to hide the snort of amusement.

“There! Now you look perfect, Thackery!” With a nod, Tarra steps back to admire her work.

Thackery, his fur groomed flat and glossy, has never looked so... sane. His collar has been straightened and his vest pulled down to cover the waist of his trousers. His jacket is pristine of shed fur and a snowy white towel is draped over his trembling arm.

“Ar!” he exclaims, looking up at Leif’s entrance. Again, Leif has to bite back a laugh at the pure relief the hare exhibits in his expression.

“Leif!” Tarra shouts and streaks across the kitchen toward him.

“There ye are, laddie!” Thackery twitches as Tarra flies into Leif’s arms and he scoops her up in an often-practiced move. “Yer missus ‘as been waitin’ tae long already!” And when Leif doesn’t immediately rush to the table, the hare shouts, “Well? Where’s yer manners, lad! See yer missus teh th’table!”

“I missed you!” Tarra informs him with a scowl. “How come you had to stay away so long? Are you hungry? Thackery made scones. Not my favorite kind though. He says he has too many berries, so they’re Thrambleberry scones. I don’t like Thrambleberries. They make my toes itch. Let’s have some tea!”

Leif sets her down and holds out her chair for her, which she clamors into with much fluffing of petticoats and the occasional flash of a bare knee.

What happened to her stockings? he briefly wonders and then decides he probably doesn’t want to know. Well, only as long as Tarra hasn’t tied anyone up with them and, say, left them in a bathtub... like he’d discovered a few months ago. He sighs at the memory. Poor Chestor. But at least he’d learned his lesson: do not play “Champion to the Rescue” with Tarra so close to dinner time. A single growl of her tiny stomach is enough to make her forget undone heroic deeds, her schoolwork, and even her shoes. Although Leif suspects she rather intentionally forgets her shoes. And her stockings as well, it seems.

He slides into the seat opposite her and lets Thackery serve them, moving his arms out of the way when a tray of scones is plopped on the table followed by a bowl of sugar cubes that wobbles on its
edge precariously before Leif reaches out and steadies it.

“It’s hard to balance the sugar bowl on edge. I’ve tried. It’s really hard,” Tarra informs him. She swings her legs beneath the table and kicks him in the knee with her shoe. (So she had remembered to put them on today, after all!) He calmly pours the tea rather than wait for Thackery to dribble it into their laps in a mockery of service.

“Yes, but how often have you practiced?” Leif inquires. “No one can learn to balance a sugar bowl in a day!”

“I learned to balance my sword! You wanna see?” And then she’s scrambling out of her chair and fumbling for something on the floor. When she stands up again, a triumphant smile on her small face and her pale hair tangled and her dress askew, she announces, “Watch me, Leif!”

He raises his hands to applaud when she – true to her word – balances the blunt tip of the wooden blade on the palm of her hand. Just as he claps, she glances at him which breaks her concentration and Leif’s reflexes save the teapot from a rather unfortunate collision with the plummeting weapon.

“That was very well done, Tarra,” he says, holding the sword. “But why do you have this with you? You should leave it in the cabinet near the pitch.”

“You and Alice don’t leave yours there!”

He opens his mouth to argue...

“And he wanted to have tea with us today. It gets awfully lonely in the cabinet with no one to talk to.”

“He?”

“Barnaby.”

“Barnaby the... wooden sword?”

“No!” She rolls her eyes at him. “Barnaby the Blade! My bestest friend… except for you, but you’re gone a lot lately so I needed a new one.” She holds out her hands for... Barnaby.

A bit reluctantly, Leif returns the sword to her. “And Barnaby... talks?” he clarifies.

“All the time! Well, not all the time because you’re here and he’s shy, but he talks to Thackery, doesn’t he, Thackery? Thackery said Barnaby wants me to eat my carrots, but I think Thackery
heard him wrong because Barnaby doesn’t like carrots, either.”

“Is that so?”

“Uh huh. Leif... how come you’re gone all the time now? Mumma says it’s because you’re busy, but you promised me you wouldn’t be busy. Remember?”

He does. Months ago, he’d promised a very distressed princess that he would always make time for her. He’s still not entirely sure what had caused her distress, but it might have had something to do with the brief trip he’d taken with the king to oversee the plans for the Orash orchard near Salazen Grum...

“I remember.” He sighs. “But I have to help people now. You remember the earth-quake and all the people you helped your mumma make potions for?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, they live far away and they need my help.”

“But I want you to stay!”

“I’m sorry, Tarrash-rya, I can’t.” The endearment slips out and Leif is startled to hear his own voice name this girl as the other half of his soul.

“Well, then I’ll come with you!” she continues.

Deciding it would be best to chastise himself later, Leif shakes his head. “No, you have to stay here with your mumma.”

“How come?”

“Because you’re a princess.”

“Well, maybe I don’t wanna be a princess! It’s not fair! I wanna go with you!”

Leif sighs. “I know. Promise me you’ll stay with your mumma?” He reaches across the table and gently combs out her messy hair with the tips of his claws. “Please, Tarrash’rya?”

Damn it! Not again! Where is your head, Leif?!
Her small hands grip his monstrously large, furry one and she nuzzles his palm with a giggle. “All right...”

“You promise?” he checks.

“I promise.”

“All right, then. Thank you for the tea, Princess Tarranya, but I have to go now.” He removes his hand from her grasp and stands. As expected, she scowls.

“It’s not the end of teatime, yet,” she argues. “Because I killed Time. Barnaby helped me. And Thackery showed me how, didn’t you, Thackery? Thackery’s killed Time before,” she whispers conspiratorially.

“No, I di’nae!” the hare shouts from within the pantry. “Seen it done, never done it meself! ‘Twas th’Hatter who killed Time fer his Alice!”

“Yes!” Tarra shouts with excitement. “And Thackery says you and me’re just like Champion Alice and the Hatter! ‘Cept you don’t make hats.”

Leif gapes at her. Just like Alice and the Hatter? What in all the realms of Underland is that supposed to mean?

No, he decides. I’d rather not know.

Luckily, he’s distracted from asking. He looks over his shoulder at the kitchen door as the sounds of hurried footsteps advance... and then rush past. Tarra beats him to the door.

“What’s going on?” she asks the doorknobs lining the hallway.

Before any can volunteer the information, the queen appears and lays a hand on her daughter’s head. “I’m not sure, squimkin. Your papu is checking...”

The queen lifts her gaze to Leif – still framed in the doorway – and gives him a worried frown. He follows the slight inclination of her head down the hall in the direction of Oshtyer’s room. Now scowling as well, Leif brushes by the princess – who is rather oblivious to the fact that she’s standing squarely on the threshold and blocking the comings and goings to and from the kitchen. He reaches the bedroom door just in time for Dale to emerge, a somber expression on his face.

“Is he dead?” Leif asks in very quiet, low tone.
“Yes. We’ll have to alert Alice and the Hatter.”

“Hopefully they’ll have news for you as well. Better news, anyway.”

“As do I. Hope, that is.”

Leif sighs. “With your permission, sire, I’ll be returning to Shuchland now.”

Dale nods and gives his Champion a brief pat on the arm. “Fairfarren, Leif.”

“You’re going now, aren’t you?” Tarra accuses as he strides back down the hall toward the kitchen door.

“Yes,” he tells her, reaching for the doorknob. “Are you going to see me off or shall we say our good-byes here.”

She huffs. “Well, I’m a princess, aren’t I?”

He grins as she stomps back into the kitchen. The queen smothers a giggle and Leif follows his... lady over the threshold and over to the large mirror. Reaching it first, Tarra pivots and scowls at him, hands on her hips. “Fairfarren and don’t get any sand up your nose,” she tells him.

Leif struggles to keep his beaming grin from curving his mouth. “To you as well. May you protect the queen just as Alice would.”

She blinks and smiles tentatively. “Does that mean you’re gonna make me a hat?”

He laughs. “I’ll make you into a hat if you don’t behave yourself. A Tarra Cap.”

Her lips purse and she glares up at him.

Relenting, he crouches down and opens his arms. After a moment of glaring and a flick of her eyes which tells him she’s seriously considering kicking him in the knee again – only intentionally this time! – she moves toward him and presses her forehead against his shoulder.

“Remember your promise; stay with your mumma and I’ll be back again soon.”

She sighs. “I know.”
He presses a kiss to the top of her head, stands, tickles her beneath her chin, and then steps through the looking glass. He feels a gentle tug on his tail before he can pull it free completely and glares over his shoulder at the rippling glass.

“It’s about time!”

Leif turns at the irritated huff. “What is it, Bayne?”

The bloodhound snorts. “What else? The Jabberwocky, of course. Wants to talk to you... again.”

Leif frowns. “What for?”

“Said he has a message for the queen.”

“Well, it would have been nice if he’d mentioned it a bit sooner. Say, before I’d left?”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I missed out on dessert for this. These Shuchlanders sure know how to toss cookies.”

“Wait until the Autumn Bake-off,” he mutters.

Bayne narrows his eyes. “If the Jabberwocky interrupts that for me, I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

Leif would very much like to express his desire to see that, but as he expects he’ll be calling upon the bloodhound’s nose again in the near future, resists teasing him. With a sigh, Leif tramps out over the still-torn-and-tousled ground, in the direction of the brightest plumes of white-blue flame. Despite the fact that he’s pretty sure the Jabberwocky could obliterate him with a single breath, Leif decides that a discussion is in order. Apparently, Kystoval is unaware of the fact that “message delivery lion” is not part of Leif’s job description. And if the creature continues treating him as such, the two of them are going to have a problem!

*~*~*~*~*

The first order of business following breakfast the next day, according to Alice, is a visit to the site of the future Mansion House Underground Station. It had sounded like a rational next-step: confirm the existence of a hole from London to Underland. Or, at least, it had sounded like a good idea until they’d considered the necessary mode of transportation.
“Another cab?” Tarrant frowns at himself, at the wimbling quality of his whisper.

“I’m afraid so. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he mutters and resolves to quit acting like an over-anxious cheese-maker’s apprentice on his first day in the barn. He is a Hightopp, for the love of crystal buttons! And it’s high time – but not nearly high tea time, according to the lobby timepiece – he started acting like one! So Tarrant opens the door for Alice, holds her hand as he helps her into the rented carriage and does his best not to startle at every shout and slam as they roll through the streets again.

Alice sits beside him but he can’t see her face beneath the brim of her hat. He considers the looks they’ve gotten since arriving in this odd place; women have stared at Alice’s hat and men have sniffed rather dismissively at Tarrant.

“People can tell we’re... I’m different,” he says over the clatter of the wheels against uncommonly clear paving stones. “They stare.”

Alice sighs. “I know. It’s your hair. I wasn’t sure when we’d arrive or what the fashions would be. Your suit and my dress are plain enough to be taken as traveling clothes, but, apparently, long hair is not the fashion here for men.”

“I could cut it,” he muses. “Overdue, really.” Since the White Queen had returned to the throne, in all honesty.

Alice’s hand tightens over his. “That’s not necessary. We won’t be here long.”

He frowns. “But if we’re judged harshly because of my appearance...”

“It doesn’t matter, Tarrant. The fact that you’re a bit... out of current fashion might actually go a long way toward explaining why your wife is so opinionated and fancies herself a businesswoman.”

“I... what?”

Alice sighs. “Women in this world do not...” She searches for her next words. “Do not meddle in what is thought of as men’s business. The trading business, I mean. Imports and exports. If I’m going to bully my way into it again, having you with me might make things a bit easier.”

“I don’t see how...”

Her tone is a bit sad when she explains, “Most likely, my male colleagues are going to look at you, take note of how unconventional you are and blame you for my unseemly brashness and very
unladylike character. They’ll say, ‘Well, with a husband like *that* looking after her, what can one expect?’ And then, hopefully, they’ll tolerate me a bit more than they...” She huffs out a breath. “It’ll be fine,” she says, abruptly closing the topic.

Tarrant pries it back open. “Tolerate you more than... what?”

He feels Alice draw in a deep breath and let it back out, *slowly*. “Than before. When I was an apprentice. And an unattached female without a father to rein me in.”

“Rein you in?” He blinks. “You are not a horse, Alice. And even then, I’ve met a fair share who took exception to the practice!”

Alice snorts with laughter that sounds more like a sob than actual humor. “Well, the horses – and the women – don’t have the ability to complain about it here.”

“But... that would mean that men command all aspects of life here and, correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you once tell me that this Upland London has a queen?”

“It does. Queen Victoria. But you’re still right; women have very few rights in this world. Especially those of my family’s station. The higher one’s position in society, the more strict and suffocating the rules and restrictions.” She leans her shoulder into his and confides, “I’d much rather be a hatter’s wife in London than a lord’s. At least then I might be able to keep a shop or wear trousers in the market or even listen to a joke from a stranger on the street.”

“That sounds utterly...”


He leans his cheek against the cap of her hat and lets out a long, deep breath. “I’m so very sorry, my Alice.”

“Whatever for?”

Closing his eyes, he tells her, “I admit, all these years with you, I’ve feared you might one day leave and return to the place where you were born. I didn’t understand. You’d never *abandoned* this place... you’d *escaped*. And... I’m sorry.”

She pets the hand still held in her grasp. “No, I’m sorry. I’ve given you the wrong impression. Women from wealthy families can and do lead rewarding lives as mothers and wives. Still, to my knowledge, my mother has never cooked a meal for her family or sewn a dress for her children or even repaired a pair of stockings. All of those things that *matter* when you have a family to look after are done by cooks and tailors. There are housekeepers to clean up your messes and a butler to
answer the front door and some say that’s the way a life of leisure ought to be...”

“It’s a cage,” Tarrant concludes.

“I’ve often thought so, yes.”

Tarrant shifts and passes his gloved thumb over the back of her gloved hand, over and over again. Although the carriage ride to the Mansion House Station site is not silent – not with the grimy, bustling city thrashing-nearly-bursting just beyond the carriage windows! – not another word is spoken.

The site itself, they find, is closed to curious passersby, but Alice manages to charm a young man selling newspapers on the corner into recounting the demolition.

“Yes, there was a great big hole there!” he says with energetic gesticulation, preening at the sounds of amazement and awe Alice murmurs. “Cover’d i’ tup quick-like, though.”

“Did they fill it in?”

“Wouldn’know, yer ladyship, but I don’ think they did...”

Tarrant watches as Alice overpays for a newspaper and then he escorts her back to the cab. “I wish I could see it with my own eyes,” she grumbles. “But that would mean coming back after nightfall and sneaking in and...”

He reaches for her hand. “Alice,” he pleads. “Don’t frighten me with thoughts of you... you both!... going back there through these streets, in the dark, near such a hole...”

“I won’t,” she hurriedly assures him. “I didn’t mean I was thinking of doing it. It’s just... How do I know that’s the hole that Oshtyer fell through? How can I continue to advise the queen on all of this if I can’t even confirm that? True, I sent her a report last night but, what if I’m wrong?”

Tarrant doesn’t have an answer for her.

She sighs.

He struggles for something helpful to say. “Is there another recent hole in London that might be the hole in question?”

“Doubtful.”
“Then, despite the lack of confirmation, we should proceed with your plan, which I have a very good feeling about, I don’t mind telling you. After all, there’s the next demolition in a fortnight’s time to consider.”

Alice nods, takes a deep breath, and sighs heavily. “Well, as I still haven’t come up with any better ideas for dealing with this, I suppose now would be a good time to pay a visit to the company.”

“Your father’s company?” he confirms, although he’s sure that’s the one she’s talking about.

“Yes. I hope Lord Ascot is still heading it.” He can hear but cannot see her wistful smile due to the brim of the hat and the veil that conceal her expressions from him. “He believed in me like no one else. Not since my father passed.”

Tarrant curls his fingers around her hand. “I’m very much looking forward to meeting him.”

Alice lifts his hand and he can feel her lips press against his wrist. Before he can brush his fingertips against her veiled cheek or touch his own lips to the top of her hat, Alice stands in the carriage, raps her knuckles against the roof and shouts a new destination up to the driver.

*Kensington, East Venture Trading Company*

Tarrant suppresses a shiver.

He can’t help but wonder what sort of place this will be. Oh, he’s seen many a shop, workshop, and stall in Underland, but here they have things called companies and factories and institutions! In fact, Tarrant is feeling far too overwhelmed to be of much use as a protector at all. He swallows back a hard knot of uselessness and desperation, wincing as it settles in his gut. Oh, how he wishes the queen had sent more than a quick note through the looking glass last night in reply to Alice’s report:

*I will inquire to the Masters as to how much time they will require to secure Underland. Please continue with the plans you’ve outlined. You have my full support, such as it is at this distance. I cannot thank you enough for embarking upon this undertaking, Alice. Please give Tarrant our regards.*

He frowns, considering the queen’s letter. It had been so short. Brief. And, in that regard, very strange. Tarrant suspects that something else has occurred in Underland since their departure, but he doesn’t mention it. Alice has far too much to worry about now and, besides, the queen’s next letter might very well explain the source behind Tarrant’s unease.

“Tell me about the company,” Tarrant suddenly requests, startled to realize he’d never asked Alice about it and, under the circumstances, it might be quite advantageous to both know precisely what she’d done there and have a rough understanding of the general operations of the business.
Next to him, Alice relaxes a bit – ah, so she’s nervous, too! But of course she is! She’ll be revealing herself to those who’ve thought her dead for nearly two years! – and he can hear the note of relief in her voice. He can’t comprehend the scale of the business, for that he’d have to know what this *China* and *India* and such things are and he doesn’t – but he’s happy to finally be of *some* service to his Alice, even if that means simply distracting her from the coming meeting.

“This could all be for naught,” she says suddenly. “Lord Ascot might be out of the office today, at the docks overseeing some shipment passing through the customs office. Or perhaps he’s taken the day off. Maybe he’s out visiting a potential investor or a client or he might even be aboard a ship and sailing off to Hong Kong and—!”

“Alice,” Tarrant says softly, sliding his arm over her shoulders and pulling her into an embrace.

“Thank you.”

The brim of her hat is crushed between them, but she doesn’t let go of him. And he’ll be damned if he’ll be the one to release her first! They rock and sway with the carriage and every time the vehicle begins to slow, Tarrant clutches Alice all the tighter, wondering if this is it: the end of their journey. The end.

Tarrant doesn’t like the sound of That at all! But, in a way, it *is* an end. It must be. It feels as if it is. It feels as if he’s about to watch her disappear right in front of his eyes again. In a way, perhaps she will; this world – this Upland London – has not been able to lay claim to Alice since she’d returned to Underland, since she’d bid her mother good-bye and had chosen *him*. Despite his niggling worries over their future, she has been Underland’s Alice for seven wonderful years.

After today, that won’t be the case anymore.

After today, her family and her former colleagues will know she’s alive. They will have Expectations and Questions and, possibly, Demands and **what will he do if those things** *take her away from Underland?! FROM HIM?!*

*Nauw, d’nae be actin’ like a fumptwat, lad! Ye’ll stay wi’ her an’ yer littlin’, o’course!*

Yes, yes, of course he will. He’d do anything, go anywhere, be anyone for his Alice and their littlin’. And if she needs him to become a *London* hatter, he will!

Both the Resolution and Alice’s warmth calm him. He focuses on the heart line, feels her own simmering anxiety and, gathering his strength, sends her his support and a whisper of confidence. (He wishes he had more of the latter to spare, but he simply doesn’t. What little there is comes from the knowledge that he will be *with* her no matter where they are or whatever happens.)
“Hatter?” she asks as the cab begins to slow again.

“Yes, my Alice?”

“Why is a raven like a writing desk?”

He smiles through the pain in his chest; dear Fates of Underland, but he loves her so much it hurts sometimes! “Because they’re together, my Alice,” he whispers back.

Alice takes a deep breath and when she speaks, he hears Muchness: “Yes, we are.”

And it’s excellent timing because the carriage does not pick up speed again. This time it pulls over to the curb and rolls to a jerking halt.

They alight. Alice pays. And then she slides her hand through his arm and they turn toward the elegant office front. Tarrant reads:

---------------------------------------------------
East Venture Trading Company
---------------------------------------------------

Beside him, Alice lets out a breath. “He’s still chairing the company,” she murmurs. “Thank whatever Powers that be. Any other man would laugh us out of the office.”

Tarrant feels a gentle nudge against his arm from Alice and takes that as the signal to move. They cross the walkway and Tarrant opens the door for her. He’s unable to break the connection between them completely and finds himself brushing his gloved fingers against the small of her back. But then they’re within a very comfortable – if utterly boring – lobby.

“May I assist you with something, sir? Madam?”

“Yes,” Alice says, striding forward. “Lord and Lady Hightopp,” she continues in an imperious tone Tarrant doesn’t think he’s ever heard from her before. Not even when she’s had to deal with that thrice-damned, lickspittle Irondirk! “We have business we’d like to discuss with Lord Ascot, if he’s available.”

“May I inquire as to the nature of that business, Lady Hightopp?” the clerk asks in a neutral yet courteous tone.
“It concerns a former apprentice of East Venture Trading. A young woman by the name of Miss Alice Kingsleigh.”

If the clerk finds that to be an odd statement of purpose, he shows no sign of it. He gestures to the sitting area. “I’ll be but a moment. Please make yourselves comfortable.”

Tarrant finds it an admirable suggestion despite the fact that he cannot possibly comply with it. He presses his hand against Alice’s lower back again, unable to go a moment more without some sort of physical connection to remind him that everything is fine, despite the unsettling thrumming along his heart line. *Their* heart lines. Which means the sensation is actually originating from...

“Alice,” he whispers in the plush room. Against the wall, a magnificent clock measures the seconds with lifeless ticks and droll tocks. Time here is, apparently, utterly regular and predictable. A machine. The thought disturbs him.

“I’m sorry. I’m nervous,” she replies equally softly.

“I know.” He smiles and hears her quiet huff of laughter.

She turns away to study various items spaced throughout the room. Pointing she says, “That is a teapot from China.”

Tarrant follows her gesture and regards the thing. “Too small,” he comments. “How is one to accommodate more than one guest with something that size? Unless each guest is given their own personal tea pot?!” For a moment, he’s thrilled by the idea.

Alice chuckles. “I know,” she replies to his unvoiced enthusiasm. “Quite the idea, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is!”

“And this is from India.”

“It looks very much like our mutual friend’s scimitar, doesn’t it?” he muses, studying the jewel-encrusted brass sheath.

“Perhaps more ornamental than functional, however,” she allows.

“Quite right! However would one hope to duck and dodge with that thing clanking and clattering against one’s leg?!”
Tarrant feels Alice place a hand on his upper arm and just as she moves to direct his attention to yet another item, the clerk returns and clears his throat.

“If you’ll wait but a few moments, Lord Ascot will be with you shortly.”

“Thank you,” Alice replies and Tarrant feels her fingers relax against his arm: her fear that her former employer would be unavailable today is quashed soundly.

Alice moves toward an odd sphere in the room and Tarrant wonders at what dastardly sort of person would have dared to scribble over a perfectly good object... whatever it’s purpose might be. Alice motions him closer.

“Yes,” he murmurs back, squinting at the unfortunately abused sphere. (Globe! he reminds himself.) He realizes the scribbles are in fact writing... names of... places just as Alice informs him:

“This is London. Where we are. And this shape –” Her fingertip circles the yellow area. “– is England. The country ruled by Queen Victoria. Here is Europe. And when I sailed to China, we took the ship around this way on the Atlantic Ocean, down past...”

Tarrant gapes at her as she illustrates her journey. He can’t quite get past the first two sentences: This is London. Where we are.

“Alice?” he whispers, chokes, coughs. “This tiny, miniscule, insignificant ink splatter... is this great city that I’ve yet to see the boundary of?”

“Yes,” she replies. “The world Up Here is a very big place.”

He intends to agree with her but only an odd sort of gurgle makes it up past his numb throat and useless mouth.

“Here is India,” she tells him, gently rotating the spherical map in its masterfully carved wooden cradle and pointing to another yellow-colored mass of land. “And China. Halfway around the world. And it is goods from these places that this company deals in.”

Although Tarrant appreciates the explanation of what sort of business a trading company does, he cannot fathom the fact that Alice – his Alice! – has traveled to these places across not one but a half-dozen oceans that must be far greater than the Crimson Sea, the only sea he’s ever known.
“Alice... I...”

“Lord and Lady Hightopp?”

Alice gives Tarrant’s arm a gentle squeeze before turning back to the clerk. “Yes?”

“Lord Ascot will see you now. If you’ll follow me?”

When the lad’s back is turned, Tarrant gives himself a good shake. “I’m fine,” he says in reply to Alice’s patient gaze.

“Yes, you are,” she agrees and despite her anxiety, Tarrant feels a warmth in his chest – a hug from Alice via the Heart Mark. He returns it, places his hand on the small of her back again and they follow the clerk down the hall in the direction of the offices, ready to face whatever awaits.

Chapter End Notes

1. I tried my best to find out precisely where a trading company office might be located in Victorian London but after nearly wearing out Google, I just settled for being vague. If anyone has a great resource site for Victorian London, including topographical maps and such, please let me know!

2. I have no idea what the name of Charles Kingsleigh's company had been called, so I made one up. Also, I have no idea what Lord Ascot's given name is. Just so you know; don't take those points as gospel, m'kay?

3. The "map" Alice shows Tarrant in the parlor of East Venture Trading (the abused, scribbled-upon sphere) is a globe of the Earth, m'kay? (Yes, they were used during this time period.) Tarrant hasn't seen a globe before because Underland isn't globe-shaped... really. I imagine it as an inverted globe or perhaps just a plain-ol' inside-of-a-globe... how does that work with there being a moon and sun and stars? Gah, I have NO idea. Maybe there's an extra-dimensional portal or something in the "sky"... I just write this stuff. I don't rationalize it! (P.S. Looks like all those StarTrek TNG marathons have paid off, eh? Extra-dimensional portal! Swe~et!)
The office looks *precisely* as she recalls. In fact, the moment she steps over the threshold, the scent and sight of it crashes into her, stopping her in her tracks with a wave of recollection so complete she despairs of bursting into tears on this very spot.

“Lord and Lady Hightopp, I presume?” a familiar – but unexpected! – voice drawls from the left.

Alice tears her gaze away from the map-lined walls and assortment of smartly-displayed brass nautical instruments and stares at the man sitting in Lord Townsend Ascot’s Italian leather chair.

“Hamish?” And, without a doubt, it *is* him! That long, pale face and soft chin and red hair and blue eyes and... yes! *That* look! She knows that look. Condescending, superior, pompous, *lordly*—!

“Hamish Ascot, Esquire,” he corrects her stiffly and somehow manages to look down his nose at the pair of them despite the fact that his bum is still firmly planted in that overpriced chair.

“Reginald indicated that you have information to share regarding the disappearance of Alice Kingsleigh.” His gaze sweeps over them, taking in their well-made but hardly remarkable clothing then lingering first on her distinctive hat and then her husband’s careworn and battle-ravaged one. “It is my regret to inform you that the reward for information regarding Miss Kingsleigh’s whereabouts has been withdrawn.”

He turns away and reaches for a bit of paperwork, clearly attempting to look far *too busy* to be bothered with them. “I’m terribly sorry you’ve come all this way for nothing,” he continues, blithely. “Reginald will escort you out and hail you a cab.”

Alice’s right hand fists. Oh, what she wouldn’t give to be within striking distance of him! “Hamish Ascot,” she says, each syllable weighed carefully before it leaves her mouth. “Haven’t you ever imagined what it would be like to fly?”

He pauses, frowns, looks up at them again. “I beg your...”

“Or what women would look like in trousers and men in dresses?” As she speaks, Alice reaches up and removes her hat. She can’t stop the smirk of satisfaction stretching her lips and lifting her brows. In fact, she doesn’t even *try.*

“... pardon...” he breathes, openly gaping.
Alice refrains from speaking not because she’s being generous and allowing him to pull himself together and apologize for his rudeness but because she’s enjoying his flabbergasted astonishment far too much to end it.

“You’re...” Words, apparently, have escaped him.


“Alive,” he differs.

“Yes, I had noticed that.”

He scowls. “Indeed.” With sudden purpose, Hamish stands and begins to move around the desk toward them. “And just where on Earth have you been for the last two years?!”

Alice feels Tarrant’s arm across her back. His right hand settles over her right hip, ready to pull or twist her away from Hamish’s blustering indignation.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” Alice informs him and she’s relieved that, for now, she is still able to speak truthfully. Oh, she knows the lies and half-truths will come. They must. But for now...

“You’re not—at—!” The man visibly gropes for the words with which his vastly overpriced and privileged education had supposedly equipped him. “No!” he shouts suddenly. “No, Alice Kingsleigh, I’m afraid you must find the liberty to say because I’ll be damned by Lucifer himself if I let you just waltz your way back into this city without so much as a by-your-leave! Not after what your disappearance—” He sneers the word. “—has done to my father!”

Despite the tightening of Tarrant’s fingers against her hip and her own rising indignation, Alice freezes. “Lord Ascot...” she chokes out around the fist crushing her heart. “What’s happened to him?”

Hamish arcs a brow. “Oh, so do care after all? How kind of you to inquire!”

“Cease this infantile behavior at once!” she replies through her teeth.

“Infantile?” he echoes, his blue eyes narrowing. “Oh, I suppose it’s infantile of me to actually expect you to follow through with one single thing in your life?”

In the midst of drawing a breath to rebut, Alice stops, pauses, and glares. She realizes he is not talking about her un-completed apprenticeship. This discussion has grown... personal.
Of all the ridiculous...! It’s been years since she’d refused his proposal! And she’d done him a favor in refusing! Why, he...!! Alice is a heartbeat away from opening her mouth and accusing him of something far worse than infantile behavior when she Remembers:

No, Alice, do not let him destroy your plans, she chastises herself. Alice closes her eyes and takes a deep, burning breath. When she opens them, her pride is a seething mass of indignation in her gut. “Hamish, I will apologize at length and at your convenience for... that, but will you please tell me what has become of your father?”

He relents marginally. With a sniff, he draws himself up to his full height and informs her, “Father suffered a non-fatal episode of apoplexy after learning of the loss of the ship, the crew... and you.”

It’s painfully obvious that Hamish despises the implication that his father had valued Alice so highly. She doesn’t permit herself to dwell on that. “Has he...? Is it possible for him to fully recover?”

“For the most part, he has. As much as he ever will, in any case. However, his constitution is much weaker than it had been. He stays at the country manor on the physician’s recommendation.”

With a sigh, Alice leans back against the arm still resting across her back. “I’m truly sorry, Hamish.”

He lifts his non-existent chin. “Yes, well. It was quite some time ago.”

It’s the closest thing to an apology this son of a lord will ever give her for his unseemly outburst and irrational anger.

Only... Alice knows his anger isn’t irrational: I could have come back – or at least sent a letter! – and reassured everyone that I was alive.

Yes, she could have. But she hadn’t.

Think on it later, Alice! Focus now!

She clears her throat and announces into the strained silence, “Lord Ascot, please allow me to introduce my husband, Tarrant Hightopp, Esquire.”

The introductions are fully as awkward as possible. She can see that Tarrant has put all the puzzle pieces together – Hamish’s bruised pride and resentment and the derisive, dismissive once-over he gives Tarrant – and has realized that Alice and Hamish have some considerable shared History. The smile Tarrant offers over their brusque handshake is one she’s fairly certain he’s Borrowed from the Bandersnatch.
Brangergain i’tall, she swears. As if she needs yet another thing to explain to him about her past!

The meeting becomes dominated by civility – painful civility. There are offers of comfortable chairs in the sitting area (which is not bisected by a massive mahogany desk). There are offers of tea and luncheon. Before Hamish can move on to tastefully inquire if they are in need of funds, Alice interjects.

“We’ve only just arrived and I’d be much obliged if you would consider explaining our arrival to my mother... if she’s... that is...” The pained expression on her face is entirely sincere, if for a slightly different reason than the one she gives. “If she’s still... in good health.”

For the first time since their arrival, Hamish’s expression reveals the briefest flicker of compassion. “Yes, she is well. She keeps in touch with my father and mother. Last I heard she was keeping herself busy organizing a charity for young, career-minded ladies, much to the consternation of several prominent figures in Society.”

Alice squeezes her eyes shut and takes a calming breath. The thoughts – all sorts of thoughts – very nearly choke her: Why would her mother start such a charity? Had she changed? Is this the result of regret at not being more supportive of Alice’s dreams? Is this her way of dealing with the grief?

Oh, Alice! Why did you decide to let her believe you’d died? How could that have been the right decision?!

Tarrant’s fingers brush against her elbow and she’s reminded of why she’d done what she had, but still...

Later, Alice!

“I wouldn’t want to... shock her with our arrival,” Alice whispers roughly. “I realize it’s an inconvenience, but would you mind terribly explaining the situation to her?”

Hamish considers her request, petulance dripping from his features. “Would that I actually knew what the situation is.”

“It’s not a tale I particularly relish in telling,” she says flatly, already exhausted by the weight of her own guilt. “If you must know, then you’re welcome to stay and hear it when I tell my mother.”

And, with that bargain struck, Hamish agrees to accompany them to Helen Kingsleigh’s residence. He leaves to request the carriage be readied and brought around, and in those moments – alone in Lord Ascot’s office – Tarrant turns to her and studies her carefully. He doesn’t ask her about the past. He doesn’t even ask her what she’s going to say in explanation to her mother. He withdraws his handkerchief – bright blue! – from his pocket to dab under her teary eyes.
“Later,” he assures her. “Tell me later.”

“I will.”

After the briefest hesitation, he continues, “And, in the meantime, Alice, could you please remember one thing?”

She tilts her head to the side in inquiry.

*Underland needs you,* she imagines he says.

*I need you,* she reads in his green eyes.

*Our littlin’ needs you,* his fingertips express where they rest against her side and his thumb brushes just within the curve of her hipbone.

“Us,” he finally whispers and, somehow, all of those things are encapsulated in that single word.

“I haven’t forgotten,” she whispers back on a smile.

And when the heart line warms and throbs once along her skin, she knows that he believes her.

Alice shamelessly accepts the strength in the gesture and uses it to comport herself (as a woman of her station ought) from the office to the carriage. The horse’s shod hooves clatter and the coach sways through the bustling midday streets. She forces herself not to think about how very much she’d like to be sitting beside Tarrant at the moment. (How odd that she’d been the one to throw convention out the window in order to comfort him but now, when it’s *she* who craves his presence, she does not dare invite him to take the empty seat beside her!) In fact, she’s relatively sure that with the merest twinge along the heart line, Tarrant would climb over Hamish, who is stiffly seated beside him, and take his usual place at her side!

The image amuses her, bouys her, and she is able to endure the isolation. She focuses on the gentle brush of his knees and shins against her skirt.

The journey lasts for an eternal afternoon, and yet is over with startling brevity. As the carriage rolls to a gentle stop, Hamish leans toward the door. “Wait a few minutes before you come in. I shall make sure your mother hears the news gently and comfortably.”

“Thank you, Hamish.” And, for that consideration, for that evidence of the fact that there *does* exist a gentleman beneath the spoilt disposition of a rich man’s son, she might have embraced him.
The instant Hamish steps out of the carriage, Alice moves from her bench seat and settles next to her husband. His arm has already been lifted and outstretched; Tarrant is waiting for her when she seats herself beside him. The house they’d arrived within only yesterday afternoon stares at them through the carriage window, through the nearly-drawn curtains, and Alice shivers.

“I never thought I’d be here again. Like this. I thought...” *I thought this life was over,* she doesn’t say. She’d said her good-byes, she’d closed the mirror to this world. In the last seven years, of course she’d wanted to check on her family, but she hadn’t. Really, what could she have done for them if they’d needed her? She’d sworn herself to Underland, to the White Queen, to Tarrant, to their future. And she’d quickly realized that it would not have been fair to live half her life in one world and half in the other. Alice had not known how to divide herself between two lives, two Alices.

Oh, she’d hidden behind reason after reason, both valid and invalid: her mother never would have approved of Alice’s lifestyle or Tarrant; she wouldn’t have believed in Underland and her daughter’s place in it; Alice would only have been delaying the inevitable break between them; it had been better to leave her mother with the impression that she’d died on some glorious adventure rather than force the woman to wonder where her daughter was and if she was safe... The list goes on. And on.

And now, here she is: moments away from a reunion with her mother and, undoubtedly soon thereafter, her sister and now all of the fears and reasons and doubts that have kept Alice so firmly entrenched in Underland will be churned up and if she’s not ready to swim through them, she may just drown.

“Alice,” Tarrant whispers and his breath causes the veil to flutter against her face.

She swallows. “This is harder than suffering through that damned wedding proposal.”

“Proposal?”

Oh, brangergain i’tall, *why* had she just said that? Irritated with herself, she explains, “Just before Nivens found me and brought me back to slay the Jabberwocky, Hamish proposed.”

Given the sudden, icy sensation emanating from her Heart Mark, Alice reflects that perhaps now hadn’t been the best of times to mention that bit of ancient history.

“I turned him down,” she hurriedly says. “I told him he wasn’t the right man for me.”

“Di’ye?” Tarrant rumbles.

Alice reaches up and presses a hand to his cheek, turning his face toward hers. With a frustrated huff, she pushes her hat back. “Yes, at the time, I’d already had a certain Outlander in mind.”
And his eyes – sparking with orange temper – fade back into green.

“That was –” he begins.

“– a rhyme,” she finishes with a wry grin.

Unfortunately, she doesn't earn a delighted giggle for her efforts. “I’m sorry, Alice. I shouldn’t be... that is, I’m supposed to be assisting you...”

“You are.” She leans forward and kisses him gently, brushing his parted lips with her tongue and he reciprocates with a delicate, hot touch.

“What’s going to happen now?” he murmurs.

Alice sighs and toys with his still-straight cravat. “A lot of tears, more explanations...”

“And... after we’ve done what we’ve come here – to this Upland London – to do?” he asks with obvious reluctance.

Alice frowns. “We’ll go home, of course.” Seeing the relief in his face, she scolds him, “Hatter, don’t tell me you were worried that I’d prefer this to our life in Marmoreal?”

“Prefer? No, no, but I thought... you are a very duty-ous woman, Alice...”

“I am,” she confirms. “And I choose us.”

She’d almost like to feel angry with him over his lack of faith in her, but she knows that’s not the issue at hand. Here sits a man who has lost everything that he has ever held dear. Everything and everyone... gone in the blink of an eye, in the span of a nightmare. Here sits a man she had left behind on the battlefield after he’d interceded on her behalf – distracted the Jabberwocky – and after he’d Futterwhackened and opened his heart and unveiled his soul and asked her to stay and had accepted her refusal and watched her disappear. Here sits a man for whom pain is not an occasional inconvenience, but a way of life. How can she allow herself to lose her temper over that?

He leans his forehead against hers on a sigh, their hats falling away. “Forgive me for worrying.”

“Never,” she replies with heat and kisses him again, forcefully this time.

His arms tighten around her and his mouth counters her. Her gloved hands bury themselves in his hair as he slants his head and his breath rushes over her cheek, hot and urgent and she wonders if she truly dares to defile the Ascot town carriage with an interlude with her husband, her wonderful, beautiful, giving, passionate husband...
He decides for them; gently, Tarrant pulls away.

“Mayhap we should go in?” he murmurs.

“Yes,” she replies on a gusty sigh. “We should.”

She holds still while he replaces her hat upon her head and then reaches for his own. They descend the carriage and once again find themselves crossing a very Significant stretch of sidewalk.

“Everything will be a’right,” he whispers and if the front door hadn’t opened at that precise moment, she very likely would have kissed him yet again for that.

“Lord Ascot said to expect you,” Mr. Brown, the Kingsleigh’s lifelong butler, intones as he steps back and allows them into the house.

“Your hat, sir? Madam?” the man continues, holding out his hand.

Tarrant glances down at it as if Brown’s hand is encased in jabberwocky droppings and not pristine Egyptian cotton. And Tarrant mutters something that sounds suspiciously like “greizin’-guddler” to Alice’s ears.

“We’ll keep them for now, thank you,” she manages through a – thankfully – veiled smile.

“Very well. If you’ll follow me?”

Brown opens the door with a flourish and then, after they’ve moved within, closes it in a manner he no doubt believes to be unobtrusive. Both Alice and Tarrant look over their shoulders in the direction they’d come.

“You know him,” Tarrant murmurs on a frown. “And yet he did not recognize your voice?”

“Perhaps if Mr. Brown were known for his imagination he might have made the connection,” she replies quietly.

Tarrant sighs and Alice steps closer to him. He lifts his hands to her arms and gently rubs his thumbs back and forth over the drab fabric.

“I don’t think I’m ready for this,” she tells him.
“Neither am I,” he admits. “But Underland needs us...”

And they don’t have much time.

And this is the path they’ve chosen.

And it’s too late to turn back now.

And everything is about to Change...

Alice holds still as Tarrant lifts his hands to her hat. With the flash of a small pair of silver scissors and a flurry of too-nimble fingertips, first the left side of the veil and then the right (along with the collection of draping ribbons) are lifted away. Alice watches him tuck the sheer fabric away in his pocket. His expression is tense. She fears her own is even more so...

The sound of the door slamming open startles them both. Looking over at the door, Alice sees her mother pushing her way into the parlor, her pale face drawn with hope and fear and worry and disbelief.

She has but a moment to reassure Tarrant, but he manages to surprise her.

He gently cups her elbow in his hand and, tightening his fingers, murmurs, “Together, Raven.”

And then Helen Kingsleigh is there, her thin hands curling around Alice’s arms, and she bursts into tears at the sight of her daughter.

“Alice!” she gasps between sobs.

Smiling, Alice returns the embrace despite the uncomfortable interference of her mother’s stiff and layered dress. Alice closes her eyes and savors the scent of her mother’s perfume.

“You’re home!”

Alice blinks through her tears; now the untruths and evasions will begin, for – even though she should – Alice doesn’t have the heart to correct her.

*~*~*~*~*
Tarrant cannot recall the last time he’s seen Alice shed so many tears. There’d been their Argument not so very long ago – has it only been three days since then? – and he recalls the moment at the Maigh, when she’d realized that one day they’ll be kissing and embracing the parents of their son or daughter’s new spouse... But those tears had been brief and the cousins that had attempted to follow them had been easily coaxed back into their hidey holes, wherever those might be. (Presumably somewhere on the other side of his Alice’s beautiful eyes. He can only speculate!) But today, the tears slide and leak and drip and fall and Tarrant is very glad he’d thought to wrap the two vials of jabberwocky blood in yet another handkerchief or he might be caught in an awkward and kerchief-less position otherwise!

He watches as Alice sits on the sofa beside her sister and occasionally tickles her nephew (who is seated but wiggling with impatience on Margaret Manchester’s lap). His bright blue handkerchief is an even darker – damper! – shade than it had been in the parlor (and it had begun dampening then!) and Tarrant allows himself a moment of Contentment despite Alice’s continuing tears: even though he is not seated beside her – he has gotten the Distinct Impression that being in close proximity to one’s wife in the presence of Others is not Done here – something of his is with her, being held onto in her gloved hand.

A bark of laughter draws Tarrant’s attention to the sideboard where Lowell Manchester (Alice’s brother-in-law) is indulging himself with more of that foul-smelling concoction. (Although, really, with a name like “Brandy” it’s hard to imagine the liquor being any more pleasant than the frumious and similarly-named Bandersnatch!) Lowell and that enpuffed, boggletog-ish fumptwat Hamish Ascot are apparently engrossed in a discussion of Tarrant’s shortcomings. Well, more accurately, Lowell is engrossed (if that cruel gleam in his eyes is any indication) and Hamish is manfully enduring the lecture provided by his inebriated conversation partner. And, for that very reason, Tarrant finds he cannot loathe Alice’s former Intended nearly as much as he’d like.

Tarrant allows his eyes to narrow, to simmer with hostility at the useless excuse for a member of the male gender (that is, at Lowell!) before he turns pointedly toward the bookcases lining the study, giving Alice as much time as she needs to be with her sister and mother.

A Compendium of Surgery, he reads then moves on to: Anatomae, A Guide to Biological Systems, and Common Remedies for the Home. He briefly toys with the idea of asking Alice if they might give the latter volume to the queen as a sort of souvenir. He’s sure she’d be most interested in Uplandish remedies...

“Lord Hightopp?”

Tarrant turns and inclines his head. The gesture allows him to hide his surprise at the fact that Alice’s mother has crossed the room with the specific purpose of speaking to him! “Madam Kingsleigh,” he lisps nervously. “You have a lovely home.”

He almost winces at the triteness of the comment but Alice’s mother seems pleased.

“Thank you, young man. The interiors are a bit out of style now,” she comments factually, “as I’ve
yet to bring myself to change anything since Charles – my husband – passed."

Tarrant’s heart throbs at the Thought of living in a world though which Alice has... passed. Never to return. "Some say Change is unavoidable, but I rather enjoy avoiding Him as much as possible,” he replies.

Mrs. Kingsleigh looks a bit startled by this, but her expression softens quickly. “If it wouldn’t be too forward of me to make an observation, Lord Hightopp...”

“Tarrant, madam, please... If it pleases you.”

Her pale lips, so often weighted at the corners with the long-term companionship of Grief, lift a bit. “Tarrant, you have the most charming way of speaking. Very odd, of course, but... something about you reminds me of my late husband.”

Tarrant smiles. “Perhaps he might have also felt a bit like a sugar cube in the cream pitcher in this Up —ah, city of London?”

Her smile strengthens. “Yes, I think he often did. A fish out of water, we say.”

He considers that. “A very dangerous position for a fish to be in.”

“Quite,” she agrees. “I much prefer your proverb.”

“Thank you, madam.”

“Helen,” she insists. “Call me Helen, Tarrant.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“I have an observation I wish to share with you, Tarrant,” she continues abruptly. “And I would very much appreciate your honesty in return.”

Rather than promise to comply, he nods for her to continue.

“Alice has always had an... alarmingly active imagination, which has gotten her into a fair number of inexplicably odd circumstances in her youth. Unfortunately, when asked about those circumstances, she has never been very forthcoming with details.”

Tarrant waits.
“What Alice spoke of: your countrymen finding her and taking her back to your country, her role in assisting the rightful queen in returning to the throne... Although I do not doubt her sincerity despite the fantastical nature of such an adventure, I sense there is a great deal my daughter is not telling me.”

Tarrant feels his brows arc upward with incredulity and his eyes dart toward Alice. Suddenly, he’s very nervous about where this conversation is leading. Oh, he’d never been more proud of Alice for bending and blending the truth together in such a way that could be believed and accepted by her family, but it’s been years – since that moment of heart-shattering panic! on his knees before the Bluddy Behg Hid! – since he’s had to weave and twist words in such a way!

“I’m sorry, Helen, what is it you would like to know?” Best to confront this hat-on or he’ll reveal too much! His tension and anxiety, when coupled with words and sentences and fleeting thoughts, has often landed him in Trouble’s Territory, which is a decidedly Unpleasant place to be!

Bluntly, she asks, “Did my daughter participate in a war?”

And, seeing no way around that question, Tarrant replies, “Yes, she did.”

“How could you – or anyone for that matter – have permitted that? Alice is no soldier!”

He almost giggles right in her face. Almost. “That’s true, she isn’t.” No, she’s a Champion! “And, as for the why... well, I’m afraid things are quite different in our—er, in my land. There was a prophecy, you see...” Oh, a rhyme! “And my countrymen are very... devoted to our prophecies. Alice’s coming gave us all the hope and strength we needed to continue with the Resistance.”

“And did you participate in the fighting, as well?”

“I did,” he says, and feeling daring, continues, “And when others would have called upon Alice to take up arms, I stepped forward in her stead. Despite the prophecy, I could not in all conscience...”

He lets the sentence fall away. It’s true, if horribly misleading.

“So, you see,” he continues, “despite the circumstances, there is no need for you to worry over the past. Although, as her mother, I fully acknowledge that you have that Right.”

Helen sighs. “Yes.” Her tone is stiff but not with irritation and anger. Perhaps with other Strong emotions. “And I’m exceedingly good at it.”

“I can see that! Our Alice does tend to uncover Trouble in the most unlikely of places, does she not?”
“She does. Which leads me to another issue I shall also require a frank answer to.”

Again, Tarrant nods in acquiescence.

“Are you, in fact, fully capable of looking after my daughter? Have you the means to ensure her future is a happy and comfortable one, Lord Hightopp?”

The question is oddly unexpected. Of course, he should have anticipated this, for he would demand the same of any spouse he and his Alice’s child would choose – will choose! might choose? could choose?

He feels his cordial expression slowly dim and he knows he cannot circumvent the Truth. Not to his wife’s mother. Not about this.

“The title,” he begins quietly. “Should not be mine. Would not be mine had my family not been killed by the Ja—um, in the war. Hightopp Village was destroyed and although the land has recovered, it is uninhabited. Through the grace of the queen, I have been permitted to begin rebuilding although I do not expect to enjoy prosperity there for... some time.”

Helen frowns. “And how do you support my daughter if not through your lands?”

“I apprenticed in a trade, as a boy. Now I’m Hatter to the queen. Alice and I reside in the palace...” Tarrant stops, sighs. He feels his shoulders droop with defeat. “I know it’s not much. I know that I don’t have much to give Alice. Her ring even...”

“Yes,” Helen says. “I had noticed. A bit of an unconventional design, isn’t it?”

He nods. “It was fashioned from a hat pin my mother had made.” Tarrant’s eyes flicker briefly in the direction of his hat, which he’d sat upon a chair next to Alice’s. “When I say I have nothing, Mrs. Kingsleigh, I speak the truth. As a reward for my loyalty and service during the war – and also for my hat-making services now – the queen provides for us.”

She sighs. “It does not please me to hear this, Tarrant. I would much rather you were a man of your own means and wealth. However...” At this point, Alice’s mother places her hand on Tarrant’s arm, nearly startling him. “I trust my daughter to choose well. And I can see that she has.”

Tarrant feels a smile wobble its way onto his lips. “I most wholeheartedly thank you, Mrs. Kingsleigh.”

She gives his arm a firm squeeze and replies, “I believe I asked you to call me Helen.”
“So you did. My apologies.”

“And you will tell me if my daughter ever wants for anything?”

“I most assuredly shall,” he agrees, happy to make this promise. “And, likewise, should she express a desire for anything at all to you, if you would encourage her to speak of it to me, I shall do all that I can to make it so.”

“I believe you would.”

Tarrant exchanges a relieved smile with her.

“Mother? What *are* you two whispering about?” Alice asks, as she crosses the room.

“You, of course,” Tarrant replies at the exact same moment that her mother says, “An Alice of our mutual acquaintance.”

Startled and charmed, he glances at Helen, who gives him a brief, humor-filled smile.

“Oh, botheration. Margaret decides to gossip at me for fifteen minutes and the two of you have already formed the Committee for the Regulation of Mad Alices.”

“Oh, Alice, you are not mad,” her mother huffs with fond exasperation.

“I must also object,” Tarrant replies. “There’s only one of me so there shall only be one Alice whom I intend to care for, be she wonderfully mad or regrettably sane.”

Alice laughs. “Well, now that we’ve got that all sorted out...”

With a startled jerk of her chin, Helen regards the clock. “Oh, goodness. It’s nearly time for dinner and the three of us aren’t dressed yet... Hamish, dear, you’re welcome to stay for dinner if you like,” she offers from across the room.

“Thank you, Mrs. Kingsleigh, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. I’ve a standing engagement at the country estate.”

“Oh, very well, then. A safe journey to you and I hope to see you again soon,” Helen says, moving toward him to give him a motherly pat on the shoulder.

Tarrant smiles at the gesture. He can see where Alice gets her warm nature from. Her curiosity and
wondrous logic, however, he assumes are from her father.

“Alice,” Hamish says upon bidding Margaret and Lowell farewell, “might I have a word?”

“Of course. I’ll see you out.”

Tarrant brushes his gloved fingertips across her spine as she passes in front of him. Yes, he Knows she’s his wife, but still...

“I’m sure your things have been brought from the hotel by now if you’d like to get freshened up?” Helen says. “I’ll show you upstairs to the guest room.”

Tarrant nearly asks if Alice will be joining him there, but bites his tongue. Surely, that is not A Question to be asking the mother of one’s wife! He climbs the stairs and pushes open the door Helen indicates and then sighs with relief at the sight of both the small truck and Alice’s valise sitting beside the door.

“Dinner is at seven. Alice will show you where everything is, but of course you can ring for Brown if you require assistance with dressing.”

“Thank you,” he replies and then – with the soft sound of the door settling back into its frame – he’s alone.

Tarrant glances around the boringly comfortable room before choosing the best place to rest their hats (which he’d brought up from downstairs) for the evening and then sits down on the edge of the bed. But then, noticing that the windows of the room overlook the street, Tarrant stands and strides over to one. He pulls back the curtain and looks down but can see neither his wife nor that Hamish fellow from this angle. The carriage is waiting, though – the one they’d taken from the trading company earlier in the day – so he knows the creature hasn’t left yet.

And then, just as he thinks the thought, Hamish trots down the steps – alone! – and swings himself into the carriage.

Tarrant lets out the breath he’d been holding.

No, he hadn’t expected or thought or even dreaded that Alice would go somewhere without him – or go somewhere with that fellow. In fact, he’s not sure why he’d been so tense and now so relieved.

But then again, yer mad, aren’ye, lad? A bit o’ oddness is teh b’expected!

He imagines so.
Tarrant turns as the door opens and Alice enters. “What did he want?” Tarrant hears himself grumble.

“To ask if we’re free to visit his parents tomorrow for afternoon tea. I hope you don’t mind that I accepted. I really do need to speak with Lord Ascot...”

“It’s fine.”

Alice smiles. “Thank you.”

He approaches her and brushes a kiss against her cheek. “For what?” he asks in her ear.

“Many things,” she replies, teasing him with the memory of that interlude in Marmoreal, of the request for a hat, of the passion that had followed it. “But, at the moment, I’m thanking you for charming my mother.”

He leans back and regards her with surprise. “You didn’t think I could?”

“No, I was certain she wouldn’t permit you to, but she did and she likes you and everything’s fine.”

The sparkly sensation of Prideful Accomplishment twinkles under his skin and on his fingertips before the Future revisits him with a mournful crash! “Aye, e’rythin’s fine ‘til ye’re ready teh leave... an’ then wha’will yer mam do?”

Alice lays her cheek against his shoulder and sighs. “She already knows we can’t stay.”

Arms wrapped around his wife, Tarrant inquires, “An’ jus’ how d’she know tha’?”

“I introduced you as Lord Tarrant Hightopp. Lords have responsibilities to their sovereigns and lands and – in some cases – companies and investors. She knows you can’t stay here.”

“B’tha’ d’snae mean she won’ ask ye teh—”

“No,” Alice tells him. Firmly. “She would never ask me to leave the man I love, so put it out of your mind.”

He presses a kiss to her tousled curls and endeavors to comply with her directions.

After a moment more of soaking up the warmth and security of the embrace, Alice takes a deep
breath and reaches for her valise. “I should check to see if Mirana has contacted us.”

Tarrant turns toward their trunk and begins searching for a fluffier and more elaborate cravat to wear to dinner. As he only has the one suit, he resigns himself to enduring it for the rest of the evening.

Just as he stands, cravat in hand, and turns, Alice’s gasp echoes in the room.

“What’s happened?” And in an instant, he’s there, sitting on the bed beside her with his knee pressing against hers and the unmistakable roll of Sheafment parchment between them. She holds it out to him and he reads:

My dearest Champions,

I’m afraid I have some worrisome news. The first is that nothing helpful shall be forthcoming from Oshtyer; he passed yesterday without ever regaining consciousness. I am sorry this resource, however dubious, has been lost to you.

Also, I have spoken with the Masters and they have been unable to predict when Underland will be safe from these disturbances you’ve reported. Perhaps a fortnight will be sufficient, perhaps not. The only way we will know for certain is if the Oraculum once again permits itself to be opened to reveal future predictions.

This leaves me in a quandary. I’m sure you know that once a pair of looking glasses, one in each world have been connected, Time matches Time. With our correspondence mirrors open, Underland will only have a fortnight to prepare for the next attack. I fear Underland will need more time to protect itself from this threat, which would mean closing the mirror and hoping we might use several days and nights together to stretch Time. I do not wish to close this mirror, for if I do all correspondence must necessarily stop. You will still be able to return to Underland using the blood of the Jabberwocky, however, so you will not be abandoned completely.

Before you make a decision with regards to this, I must also mention one other issue which pertains to Maevyn. As you know, the little one is ill and has felt so for some time. Maevyn’s illness became more pronounced following the earth-quaking and Krystoval believes the cause has made itself apparent: the moment you arrived in Upland, Alice, Krystoval also began to feel very unpleasantly. We believe this is due to the fact that, as guardians of the earth, jabberwockies are very sensitive to the land in which they reside, and as you, Alice, have ingested Krystoval’s blood before and are now walking about in a world where the land is ill-treated and ill-cared for Krystoval is affected. Krystoval, as a mature jabberwocky and as a recent sufferer of this affliction, can function sufficiently well despite the discomfort. However, we fear that Maevyn, exposed for so long through Valereth and Oshtyer’s presence in Upland, will weaken further if Valereth is not found and returned to Underland as soon as possible.

I am sorry for such somber news, my Champions. I wish there were more Time to consider our options, but I fear a decision must be made soon. The mirrors must be closed as quickly as possible. I know it is too soon to hope that you have discovered a solution or implemented a plan to stop
future attacks from occurring. It saddens me greatly to think that Krystoval and I will have to ask you to remain Up There, alone, so I will not ask. Alice, I release you from this task. Should you decide to be on this side of the looking glass when it is closed tonight, please know that I will welcome both of you home. Both of you have served me with loyalty and passion that surpasses all expectations and I will not ask this unforgivably difficult thing of you. Come home and we shall prepare Underland for the next assault as best we can. It will be enough. I have faith in that. Please do not feel bound to do this; we will protect Underland first and, after that, we will open the mirrors and seek out Valereth for Maevyn’s sake.

Please send your replies as soon as you can.

Your devoted queen and friend,

Mirana

Tarrant leans against Alice, numb.

“What are we going to do?” she asks quietly.

Tarrant closes his eyes at the sound of the Strength in her voice. Her Champion’s voice.

“The Masters need time. Maevyn needs to be cured...”

He nods, rubs his cheek against her hair.

“If we return, it still might not be enough time. Maevyn might weaken and die...”

Yes, he knows. He’s already experienced those thoughts himself.

“But if we stay...”

Yes, if they stay, they are trapped, imprisoned, confined, isolated, alone! If they stay, they will not be able to use the Jabberwocky’s blood to return. They will have to wait until the queen can open the mirror again. And there is no way to know when that will happen.

Yes, he’s frightened. So, very, very frightened.

But he thinks of Underland, Marmoreal, the queen and her little ones, his and Alice’s life together, their child’s future...

This is the hardest decision he’s ever... no, he and Alice have ever had to make. The greatest risk
they’ve ever taken. There are no guarantees, no vanishing Cheshire Cats to hoodwink the enemy, no mystical swords with which to slay the beast. If they stay... No, Tarrant cannot even Think of the horrors that might befall his Alice and their littlin’ here. But if they leave... What guarantee do they have that Underland will survive the next demolition? And the one after that? And the one after that?

The world is crumbling around them when only a few weeks ago it had be bright and blossoming with Promise.

“Alice,” he whispers. “I love you.”

Her fingers, resting against his forearm which is draped across her belly, curl tighter. “And I love you. More than anything.”

Tarrant squeezes his eyes even more tightly closed to stop the tears, for he knows she means it. She Means it. And if he were to ask her to go back to Underland right now, she would. She would do that. And not because he’d asked her to, but because she loves him more than anything!

They’re the hardest words he’s ever spoken and even as he speaks them he can’t believe his own ears:

“We’ll stay.”

Chapter End Notes

1. "Apoplexy" is the antiquated term for "a stroke." And although the source I consulted seemed to indicate that this was usually fatal (before the advent of modern medicine) I decided to whip out my Artistic License again! (^__~)

2. Alice’s rationale for not keeping in touch with her mother, for not trying to divide herself between two worlds, is something I can relate to very intimately. I’m married to a Japanese man. I live in Japan. Every time I contact my family in the States, I have to perform a paradigm shift of sorts. It takes a lot out of a person... and there are no Jabberwockies to slay or queens to protect in my situation. In fact, I still twitch when I think of all the books I’ve abandoned in my mother’s house. I’m very much the sort of person who devotes herself completely to whatever it is she decides to do and I think Alice (post-recovery-of-muchness) would be very similar in that regard.

3. OK, so returning to the point I brought up in Note Number 8 of the massively detailed Chapter Seven Notes: why did three years pass in both Upland and Underland while Alice was off doing business stuff? Well, because the White Queen kept a mirror open and watched Alice nearly every day. When the worlds are connected by a mirror
(in my Alice universe) Upland Time and Underland Time merge and become One, so three years in Underland had equaled about three years in Upland. (Also, this would have been a good idea with regards to the Hatter. If Alice had spent three years Above, ten or more years might have passed in Underland and I'd hate to think what sort of shape Tarrant would have been in then!)
An Apprentice Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s hard to believe the energetic, robust man who had instructed her in the art of negotiation, had taught her how to hold her own in a card game of considerably high stakes, and had showed her how to operate both a revolver and a pistol is now limited to a wheelchair. Her heart breaks at the half-man he appears to be: the left side of his face is slack and his left shoulder slumped. His left arm is curled up in his lap, his hand loosely fisted, useless. Alice hadn’t seen the ruins of the Shuchish royal city, hadn’t walked through the debris of Palace Avenfaire... and yet she can’t quite imagine how the sight of that destruction could be more powerful – could bring her more completely to her metaphorical knees – than the man who sits before her now.

She takes note of his high spirits, however, as Lady Ascot sternly reminds him to stay put and not strain himself during their visit. “Helen and I will be across the hall. Just ring if you need anything.” He agrees easily enough and then the study door closes behind Alice’s mother and Lady Ascot, leaving her and Tarrant alone with her former employer, a man who is – by the sheer force of his will alone – unbroken despite the ravages that had been wrought upon his body.

“Alice! My dearest apprentice! How wonderful it is to see you again!”

Smiling, Alice leans down and gives Lord Townsend Ascot a kiss on his whiskery cheek. “And how wonderful it is to see you, again, sir.”

Alice leans back but keeps her hand on his arm as she’s unable to give him a brief embrace while he’s seated in that horrid chair. He smiles broadly up at her, his eyes twinkling.

“And you’re looking quite beamish today,” she informs him, belatedly realizing she’d used Outlandish.

He laughs. “Beamish? Well, why wouldn’t I be?” he replies. “It’s not every day I find a misplaced apprentice and have the pleasure of meeting her husband!”

At the prompt, Alice steps back and reaches for Tarrant. He moves closer, his hat held before him. “This is my husband,” she says, enjoying the thrill she gets from saying the words. As everyone in Underland knows precisely who he is and precisely who she is, introductions are a rare event, indeed! “Tarrant Hightopp, Esquire.”

“Hightopp,” Townsend muses as he shakes Tarrant’s offered hand. “What a remarkable name. It suits the man.”
“Thank you, sir. I endeavor to do it justice.” Tarrant hesitates for a moment, his green eyes shifting toward Alice. She nods in response to the look and the pulse of mild inquiry that vibrates from her Heart Mark. Yes, Tarrant can be himself with this delightfully open-minded man.

He continues, “And if I might be permitted to boldly say, sir, a name such as your own, which illustrates a fascinating fabrication of fabric, would be most Welcome, indeed, in our country.”

Townsend chuckles warmly. “I don’t believe the name Ascot has ever received observational insight to equal yours, Lord Hightopp.”

Tarrant grins mischievously. “Thank you, sir.”

“And this country you speak of intrigues me. Alice, my dear, as Hamish was frustratingly brief on the subject, I shall expect a full description from you. What sorts of commodities is it best suited for?”

Alice holds up a hand. “None of that, sir. I’m afraid we won’t be discussing trade opportunities today. We must keep the best interests of such a modest nation in mind... and I haven’t forgotten who taught me how to produce a credible bluff at the card table.” She winks despite the alarming thought of Lord Ascot approaching Mirana over a trade agreement. Dear Fate, but the man would eat her alive in a business negotiation!

He laughs. “Well, I suppose that must be the reason behind East Venture’s solid performance of late.”

“Without a doubt, sir. I was taught by a master.”

He sighs, his eyes twinkling with the dancing light of humor. “Well, if business opportunities with your mysterious nation must be crossed off of the agenda, then perhaps you’ll consent to a discussion of a more personal nature.” He waves them toward the nearby wingback chairs, between which rests a very accommodating tea service. Tarrant helps himself.

Alice nods, “If I can, I would be most happy to satisfy your curiosity.”

“Curiosity!” he blusters with mock outrage. “Whoever heard of such a word!”

“Inquisitiveness?” she counters, falling into their old game.

“My dear! That’s hardly any better! I’ll have you know businessmen of my caliber do not entertain such fanciful faults.”
Tarrant giggles softly, no doubt at the sudden appearance of words that noticeably begin with the letter F...

“Forgive me,” Alice continues, sending a twinge of humor out to her husband. “For I fear I’ve forgotten myself.”

“For shame,” Tarrant mutters behind his cup.

“Foolhardy,” she agrees.

Townsend Ascot laughs. “Oh, my dear. I must congratulate you; you have indeed found the one for you.”

“Fortunately, yes. Thank you, sir.” She smiles at Tarrant before turning her attention back to her father’s former business associate.

He sips his tea and a contemplative light enters his eyes. “Returning to the subject at hand, Alice, why-ever did it take so long for you to find your way back home?”

Alice resists heaving a sigh. She knows what he really wants to ask: Why didn’t you write us ages ago, young lady? “Did Hamish mention the civil unrest that was occurring at the time of my rescue?”

“He did, indeed. And something about a prophecy?”

Alice nods. “As you know far better than most, not all of the world is as ordered and logical as England. In many places, mysticism still commands the hearts and minds of the people that live under its spell. Tarrant’s homeland is one such place. I could not return before now for two reasons: first, I was needed; and, second, I could not in all good conscience abandon the people who had saved my life.”

Lord Ascot digests this for a long moment. “But Alice... two years and not a single word from you during all that time...?”

She winces. “This country I cannot speak of is unknown to the world and I was asked to keep its location a secret. How could I write when I knew a letter would...” Alice pauses, thinks furiously, struggles to explain. “If you’d received a letter from someone claiming to be me, claiming to be alive, would you have been satisfied with that?”

“No, I can’t imagine I would have been.”
“You would have sent someone to search for me. But I’d made a promise, sir. They’d saved my life at sea. The least I could do is keep their secret. I had to wait until I was able to make the journey in person. I’m just so sorry it’s taken so very long.”

In the moment of silence that follows, the warmth of Tarrant’s approval and pride settles over her heart. She reaches for her own cup of tea to have an excuse to meet his very impressed gaze and let him coax a smile out of her.

Townsend sighs, “Yes, I had rather thought it would be something like that. I imagine transport would have been rather the gamble to take during a civil war.”

Alice inclines her head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

“But you’re here now and that’s all that matters!”

Her tentative smile widens.

He lifts his cup and murmurs in a significant tone: “And, dare I hope you might be willing to once again take up the mantle of your apprenticeship?”

Alice’s smile freezes. “My apprenticeship?”

A tendril of worry whispers within her chest before Tarrant manages to recall it.

“Yes, dear Alice. I can’t tell you what it would mean to me to know you’re with the company again. I need someone of sound imagination and vivid judgment at the helm. Hamish is a wonder with accounts and negotiations, but you, my dear, have a gift for inspiring others. A very useful skill I’ve yet to find a way to incorporate into the company training programme, I’m afraid.”

Alice clears her throat. “A most flattering and intriguing offer, sir,” she begins and is startled by Tarrant’s momentary panic and then forceful resignation. Oh, he’d expected something like this, had he? Well, then...

Alice sets the record straight, “I’m afraid this is only a temporary visit. We have obligations awaiting our return.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Tarrant’s shoulders relax and his hand lowers his teacup to his thigh.

Townsend doesn’t look terribly surprised by the news. “Yes, I understand. I can’t say your refusal wasn’t expected, but I had hoped there might have been a bit of the old sparkle in your eyes when I
made the offer.”

Alice briefly debates her next words before deciding their interests will be best served by being forthright with her former mentor. “Well, if it’s sparkle you’re looking for, a rather odd circumstance has caught my eye.”

“Oh?” he asks, genuinely interested. “What might that be?”

“The recent use of dynamite in the city to excavate the new Underground line... to Mansion House Station?”

He scowls. “Fools, the lot of them. Only concerned with expediency and expense. Never mind the integrity of London proper! Why, one would think we care nothing for our heritage here what with the way everyone is clamoring for clouds of dust and bits of mud and mortar falling from the sky!”

“Hm,” she agrees. “A very disturbing trend, is it not? I should like to look into that while I’m here. I’m sure there must be another solution. Something less... invasive.”

Townsend sets his cup and saucer aside and rubs his fingertips against his whiskery chin. Thoughtfully, he observes, “Loathe as I am to allow you to refuse a position with the company, I loathe these recent practices even more. Of course, Hamish neither has the time nor the necessary... poise and diplomacy something like this would require. I, myself, have toyed a bit with the idea of making the trip into town just to see what a bit of clout might accomplish. However...”

Alice nods. “Yes, Hamish mentioned the physician’s recommendations with regards to your health. And I have to say you’re fortunate to be spared the fumes and stink, sir.”

He very nearly snorts at that. “Diplomatic as always, Alice. Well, when the situation warrants it.”

“I aspire to that very objective, sir.”

“And you also aspire to disabuse those fools at the City Planning Commission of their illusions of great explosions and dramatic blasts?”

“I feel very passionately about this,” she says truthfully. “Despite no longer residing in England, I cannot bear the thought of things being blown up willy-nilly. That’s not the sort of thing England stands for, is it?”

“No, indeed not.” Townsend sighs. “Well, I suppose – were you to consent to this undertaking – I’d be seeing more of you. And perhaps you’d be extending your stay?”
“I dare say we might,” she allows. She happily makes the concession knowing where this conversation is going and delighted at the victory.

“However, I doubt very much you would be able to get very far with the Metropolitan District Railway, dear Alice. Not even with your charming husband at your side.” He taps his forefingers against his bearded chin. “At the very least, you would require a letter of introduction.”

“At the very least,” Alice agrees. “I don’t suppose you would know anyone of sufficient... clout who might be kind enough to write me one?”

“I know a fellow who might be interested, for the small price of requesting afternoon tea with the two of you upon occasion.”

Alice’s grin is wry. She lifts her teacup. “So that you might continue to fill our heads with the glories of the trade business?” She takes a sip.

Townsend laughs. “Quite, my dear. Quite.”

“Agreed,” she replies easily. Truly, spending time with her former mentor will not be a hardship at all!

“Excellent! Now, let us talk of more pleasant things while we wait for the solicitor to arrive.” Glancing at the clock, Townsend observes, “He’s late – again! – but he’d better not try to bill me for his horse throwing a shoe or the driver taking the wrong turn!”

“The solicitor?” Alice inquires, wondering if she ought to be worried.

“Oh, yes, of course,” he replies. “We can hardly expect a deceased woman to be taken seriously at the MDR Office, now can we? No, no, I’m afraid there’s no hope for it, Alice; you’ll have to be resurrected.”

“Ah. Yes, I imagine that will make things easier. Most especially for the delivery of the post.”

Townsend laughs. “I can always trust you to have your priorities in order!”

For a moment, Alice feels guilty at manipulating this man. No doubt she’ll be dipping into his fortune as well, or at least waving it around in the faces of the railway company. It’s not right that she has to play these shadowy, questionable games in order to secure Underland’s future. (And then, of course, there’s the chance that none of this will be enough to sway the engineers from their chosen digging method!) The ends do not justify the means. Or, at least, it doesn’t seem right that they ought to!
“Calm, Alice, please...” she can almost hear resonating from the mark along her arm, curving over her shoulder, and embedded in her heart.

She takes a deep breath and manages a shaky smile.

Luckily, Townsend has turned his attention to Tarrant. “It occurs to me, young man, that you aren’t properly accessorized for a business meeting of the magnitude that Alice will no doubt and all too soon be in the midst of.”

“That’s troublesome news,” he admits, although Alice finds herself entertained by the fact that he doesn’t identify which point is the more troublesome: the lack of proper accessories or the conferences he’ll have to endure. After a beat of silence, he continues, “I’ve always prided myself on being accessorized to match the occasion.”

“Well, then, we shall have to find you a good walking stick!” Townsend decides. Then, with the twinkle reappearing in his eyes, he nods toward the little bell placed on the table near his elbow. “I doubt this is what she had in mind when Lady Ascot left this here, but... let’s give it a try, shall we?”

Abruptly, Lord Ascot lifts the bell and, holding it high above his head and pointed in the general direction of the door, rings it most vigorously!

Alice covers her mouth with her hand to stop the snorts of laughter. Beside her, Tarrant has to set his cup down lest his convulsive cackling manage to upset the milky tea within it.

And when Lady Ascot bursts into the room, only to be met with the request for someone to please fetch his old walking sticks, the three of them do their best to look quite innocent and unassuming. It’s a hopelessly mad proposition, however. One that Alice had certainly not expected to encounter Up Here!

*~*~*~*~*~*

The sound of the pen scratching over the watermarked stationary tells Tarrant one thing: Alice is still working. In fact, she’s done nothing else other than sleep – too briefly! – and eat – too quickly! – since they’d returned to the Kingsleigh residence with a thoughtfully-provided copy of the Earl’s Court Project Plans tucked under her arm.

Tarrant pauses and reconsiders his thoughts. One in particular: “thoughtfully-provided.” Yes, they had been. But only after Alice had imperiously offered Lord Ascot’s letter of introduction had the man at the office even bothered to pay attention to what Tarrant’s Alice had been saying in very plain English:
“I’m here as a representative from Lord Townsend Ascot of East Venture Trading, who has expressed an interest in possibly contributing to Metropolitan District Railway’s most recent enterprise.”

And, at that point, Alice had paused, bravely refrained from glaring at the man who had been smiling down at her in a rather patronizing manner, and had removed the letter from Lord Ascot from her satchel.

It still enraged him to not only think of the horridly superficial views men here have of women, but to see those views in practice! He regrets not stepping in and grabbing that insufferable, useless lout by his starched ascot and shaking a good bit of sense into him.

Should have...

Yes, he should have.

Ye’ll b’ready next time, won’ ye, lad?

His left hand curls into a first. Yes, he will!

But at the moment, there are no annoyances here, in this room – the guest room in Alice’s mother’s house. Tarrant sighs, picks at his cravat, glances at the window and frowns at the increasingly familiar, uninspiringly smoke-grey, overcast sky beyond.

He is bored.

“You could help yourself to something in the library downstairs,” Alice says from the writing desk.

He looks up and gives her a sheepish grin. “Sorry.” The heart line had given him away again. He ought to keep a non-wandering thought or two on his own emotions!

Alice leans back and turns. She props her elbow up on the back of the chair, and smiles. “Or I suppose you could fetch your wife a cup of tea?”

“For her tired eyes or aching head?” he clarifies, already debating the best sort of Tea to bring her.

She gives him a self-depreciating grin.

“Ah, both, then,” he replies. “I shall make myself satisfyingly useful!” Alice is still chuckling in response to his declaration when he closes the door behind him and trip-tap-toddlies down the stairs to the kitchen. He knocks before entering – for it would never Do to enter a chef’s Territory without
permission! – but finds that the room is encouragingly vacant. He busies himself with putting a tea tray together, musing over tea trays themselves and the songs and rhymes he’d once sung about them, back in during time when teatime had been the cloak he’d pulled around himself to hide his role in the Resistance.

He’s glad that teatime is now merely for tea again. As it should be.

And, speaking of things that Should Be... and Should Not Be...

Tarrant hunts for the sugar bowl and creamer as he contemplates the letter from the queen and the now-dark mirror tucked away in Alice’s valise.

The queen should not have given them the choice to stay or return. For even through he’s aware of the unfairness of the situation, Tarrant knows the better strategy is for he and Alice to stay, to try to change the course of the future, which would be most impossible from the other side of the looking glass.

And, he can see why the queen might have asked them to remain Here: having met Alice’s mother and thinking of the littlin’ his Alice now carries, Tarrant understands the queen’s Desperation, which is quite different from her Duty. Mirana would do anything, ask anything to protect her children. Even ask the impossible of her Champion. Tarrant understands this. And yet, despite that all-consuming impulse, Mirana had not been able to order her friends to accept their fate, possibly give themselves for the Greater Good of All.

Still, it had been unbearably cruel for her to ask them to bear the weight of that decision themselves. Suppose it is the wrong one? Suppose their efforts somehow bring about the destruction of Underland that much sooner? Suppose—

“Tarrant?”

He startles but, thankfully, the empty cream pitcher in his hand doesn’t slip through his fingers and crash to the floor. “Good afternoon, Madam Kingsl—er, Helen,” he replies, flustered. “I was just making up a tea tray for Alice.”

“She’s still working?”

“As hard as ever,” he replies. “I wish I could comprehend that Business Language of hers and Lord Ascot’s. Or, at the very least, loan her a fresh pair of eyes.”

“I know the sentiments you speak of intimately,” his mother-in-law responds, moving toward an odd, up-standing wooden box and opening the door. She removes a decanter and returns to the tea tray he’s assembling on the table. He watches as she fills the cream pitcher. “It was also my husband’s business, you know. I was never able to speak that language, either.”
“From the look of Alice, it doesn’t lend itself to being Read, either,” Tarrant observes, sorting out the cups and saucers. “A more unsociable language I’ve yet to encounter!”

Helen’s laugh sounds like a sigh.

Tarrant reaches for the water kettle, which had just begun to hiss upon the stove, and wonders aloud, “Might... might I impose upon you to ask a... personal question, madam?”

“You may.”

Tarrant swallows down his anxiety and gathers up his muchness. “I realize that I am not... an ideal spouse for your daughter and that I am lacking in many ways—”

Helen pats his arm, interrupting him gently yet firmly. “Perhaps I should have made my position more clear earlier.” She takes a deep breath and glances at the tea tray, which is ready to be delivered. “Why don’t you take that up to Alice and I’ll prepare tea for us?”

He does. Alice is still engrossed in the intimidating manuscript, so he pours and prepares her tea, sets the cup on the corner of the desk, brushes his fingers through her short hair, and then returns downstairs to keep his appointment with Mrs. Kingsleigh.

Tarrant finds her in the library, already seated. He pours tea for the both of them and serves the richly-hued, butter-yellow cake. When he takes his own seat and looks up, Helen is smiling. He wonders about that smile, but before he can ask, she speaks, “I’ve gotten the impression that things are quite different in your country. Quite different from England, I mean.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “Many things. For instance, this odd idea that somehow women are not suited to business. With a queen – as in Und—ah, my homeland – I would have expected women to hold more prominent positions in society.”

Helen tilts her head to the side in much the same way that Alice does when in agreement with something. “I can only imagine how strange our ways may seem to you.” She sighs.

“This family enjoys a solid standing in London which comes from generations of success and respectable deeds. Social standing is quite important here as it will either guarantee the future of a family or ensure its ruin. When Lowell –” Tarrant is intrigued by the sour expression on Helen’s face as she says her son-in-law’s name. “— asked for Margaret’s hand, I could not have been more thrilled, more relieved. The Manchester family has a long, proud history and social standing even higher than ours. It was a most advantageous match. However...”

Tarrant feels himself lean forward and hides a smile at the thought that he must be borrowing Alice’s Curiosity for stories and tales.
“As a son-in-law, he leaves much to be desired. The drinking, the... indiscretions...” She shakes her head. “That you appear to be a man quite apart from his ilk, I am very thankful for.”

Tarrant feels himself blush.

“And, what’s done is done. Alice has chosen you. And, as I said the other day, I believe she has chosen well. I shall have to trust you not to disappoint her, as Lowell has disappointed Margaret.”

“I will not,” he swears. In truth, it would be quite impossible for him to! “But... I know you... that is, did you not choose the younger Lord Ascot to be her husband at one time? Or approved of the... match?”

Helen finishes her tea and Tarrant attends to her cup, refilling it and then fixing it as he’d noticed she’d taken it. Again, that satisfied smile appears on her thin lips. When he sits back, she picks up her cup, takes a sip, and her smile widens.

“You’re quite familiar with the mechanics of tea,” she observes.

“I pride myself on it, madam!”

Helen sets her cup down and, her smile fading, answers his question: “Yes, at the time, I had thought Hamish would be a good choice for Alice. Charles had recently passed. The company had been sold. I knew I would have to be very careful with our funds.”

She looks down into the depths of her sweetened tea. “The death of one’s spouse brings to light how very... fragile and uncertain life is, despite the order we impose upon it. One day, when I am gone, who will look after Alice? I would not be able to provide for her after my death and no mother wants her children to be destitute. That was my main concern, you see. Hamish could see my conundrum and offered to...”

Tarrant winces at the thought of another man looking after his Alice.

“Of course, I’d underestimated how very stubborn my daughter is,” Helen continues with a smile. “But of course a conventional life would never fit her. Of course she would choose the unmarked path. And, in the end, it was the right decision.”

He releases the breath he’d been holding and offers his mother-in-law a trembling smile. “I’m beyond relieved to hear you say that. And thank you for the confidence.”

Helen tilts her head again, acknowledging his appreciation. “I ask only one thing of you, Tarrant.” She looks up at him, a hard light in her eyes. “Do not force me to regret it.”
“Although,” she continues before he can open his mouth to reassure her, “I have faith that you won’t. This teatime with you has spoken volumes of your character.”

“And, you have enjoyed what it’s told you?” he dares to confirm.

“I have indeed.” She sets her cup aside and stands. Remembering the courtly manners Alice has been leading him through since their arrival, Tarrant stands as well. “And now I think it is time to prepare for dinner. We’ll be dining at the Manchester House tonight with Margaret and Lowell. I trust you’ll find a way to separate Alice from her work and make sure she’s ready to go by six-thirty?”

“You can count on me, madam.”

“I am, Tarrant. I most assuredly am.”

*~*~*~*

The problem, Alice reflects, is not so much the dubious comprehensibility of the project plan itself (although that is a rather irksome obstacle to be dealt with) nor is the problem her lack of recent experience in the world of business (and this endeavor is demonstrating how very ill-suited she is to such pursuits); the problem is the lack of alternatives she can offer the railway company in lieu of the very effective application of explosives to aid in tunnel excavation.

Alice wanders the halls of London’s museum of natural science and modern technology (all housed within a depressingly industrial building known as Brompton Boilers), her hand on Tarrant’s arm and her mind all the way across town, still seated at the writing desk in the guest room. She is aware that her mind is quite obviously Elsewhere when it ought to be here, participating in this outing with her mother, sister, nephew, and husband. Alice would have felt painfully guilty over her distraction if the issue that has her mind so preoccupied weren’t of the most Vital Importance. For how is she going to answer her queen’s hopes if she cannot even formulate one strategy for delaying this abomination of a project?

Tarrant senses her preoccupation and he respects it. He leaves her to her thoughts and lingers over placards, studies printed explanations and directs his questions to either Alice’s mother or sister.

She still marvels at the fact that Tarrant had somehow managed to develop a easy rapport with her mother. And the glimmer of wonderment in Margaret’s eyes might have left Alice feeling rather proud of herself for her choice of husband if not for what her sister’s reaction implies:

Whenever Tarrant poses a question to her elder sister, he considers her reply carefully and with both complete sincerity and his complete attention. It’s quite obvious that Margaret is unused to this sort of frank and genuine exchange, which means that Lowell rarely asks for or listens to his wife’s
thoughts. It saddens Alice that her brother-in-law is such a waste of a human being. And it saddens her even more to think of the experiences, the joy, the life he’s wasting by neglecting Margaret so horridly.

Alice attempts to turn away from those thoughts as Margaret warms to her explanation of the Earth’s seasons and why the north and south hemispheres vary in their patterns. The briefest glance shows Tarrant to be utterly absorbed in the lecture. Margaret glows under the attention.

Oh, how Alice wishes there were something she could do to help her sister with her marriage, but that is not why she and Tarrant are Here. They had not come through the looking glass to enlighten Margaret to her husband’s shortcomings nor to help her try to change him (an impossible task if there ever was one!) but to save an entire world.

Focus on that, Alice!

She does.

She turns her thoughts back to the Earl’s Court Project Plan and the excavation methodologies outlined therein. It’s beyond frustrating that she must wrestle with unnecessarily esoteric engineering prattle. And the worst part of it all is that, as a man, Lord Ascot would have been permitted to demand a clear explanation of the terms used. But, as a woman, Alice knows should she make the same undeniably reasonable request she will be regarded as stupid, unprofessional, and an annoyance.

The unfairness of it all is enough to drive her truly mad!

“Alice,” Tarrant whispers in her ear, beneath the brim of her hat, and she focuses on drawing a deep, measured breath.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Will you tell me what’s troubling you now?”

Alice sighs and, exhausted from struggling with this all on her own, relents. “Clayey silt, fill loads, settlement values, soil consolidation...” she lists a few of the more mystifying terms she’d encountered in the plan. “If you happen to know what any of those mean, I’ll Futterwhacken right here!”

Tarrant snorts, giggles, and smiles. His green eyes are luminous as they are wont to be whenever Alice manages to charm him unexpectedly. “I truly regret the loss of the opportunity to see you Futterwhacken for me, my Alice, but I’m afraid I haven’t the slightest idea what any of those things are.”
He covers her gloved hand, resting in the crook of his elbow, with his own and squeezes her fingers. “However, I do have an Idea...”

Alice feels her brows lift with surprise.

With a crafty smile, Tarrant turns his chin away and calls, “Pardon us, ladies!”

Just up ahead her mother and sister are murmuring over a display of exotic birds from the South Pacific. They look up at Tarrant’s just-loud-enough announcement.

“Might we make a detour to assist Alice with a few vexing engineering terms?”

As Helen helps Margaret get Winslow’s child carriage turned around, Tarrant leads Alice over to the museum guide map which had been posted on the wall nearby. “It’s lucky I asked what was troubling you as we passed by this helpful feature, isn’t it?”

“Quite the coincidence,” Alice agrees, a suspicion beginning to form in her mind.

“Hm. Yes. Now, let’s see...” He leans close to the framed building layout and studies it with singular intensity. “Perhaps the department of geology? If I’m not mistaken, one of those pesky phrases had sounded a bit clay-ish. And then... yes! Here.” He taps the glass with a be-cottoned fingertip. “Perhaps the London City Earthworks Exhibit will assist with a few of the others?”

Alice knows she’s gaping at him when, with a brief nod of satisfaction, he turns away from the museum guide.

“Alice?” he asks, obviously Entertained (but trying very hard to look Puzzled) by her silent ogling.

“I... adore you,” she confesses. Now she understands why he’d insisted on visiting Brompton Boilers today!

Tarrant blinks, smiles, and indulges in a brief giggle. “So you approve of today’s distraction after all?”

Alice feels ashamed of herself for her notably less-than-enthusiastic agreement over his suggested plan-for-the-day this morning. It hadn’t been the destination that had irritated her – she’d been planning to bring him here eventually, after all! – it had been the timing! But now she sees that, true to form, Tarrant’s timing is, in fact, utterly Perfect!

She aches to remove her gloves and press her bare hands against his cheeks and kiss him soundly.
She settles for: “You are, without a doubt, the most saganistute man alive, Tarrant Hightopp.”

He preens; she can see it in his incandescent smile and abundantly fluffed cravat. Even the unimpressively straight lapels of his jacket seem to stand at attention!

She muses aloud, suspicions nearly all confirmed now, but wanting to hear him Admit it: “How did you know I was struggling so badly with that report?”

He admits bashfully, “I took the liberty of looking over your notes last night.”

While she’d been in the bath. Of course. She wraps her other hand around his arm and leans closer. “Well, I’m very glad you did. Nosey Parker.”

His bushy eyebrows fly up toward the brim of his hat and his bright green eyes blink owlishly. “No, no, I’m afraid you’re mistaken. No Parkers here, Alice, only Hatters.”

“A wonderfully wise, incorrigibly curious, munificently mad one,” she agrees.

Only a man possessed of a genius this mad would have thought to drag her away from her questions to the one place where she’ll be able to educate herself on the solutions! Only a man so used to and accepting of her innate stubbornness would have formulated this plan and implemented it without pressing her to reveal her frustrations before she was ready!

Smiling now, Alice chats with her mother and sister as they make their way to the geology exhibits... where Alice gets a much better idea of what clayey silt actually is! And then they tramp across the building to the civil engineering exhibits and Alice finds herself staring at a display dedicated to the 18-year-long construction of the Thames Tunnel.

Alice devours the information on the display, her smile widening.

“Raven?” Tarrant murmurs, no doubt feeling her excitement buzzing along his heart line.

Alice tightens her fingers around his arm and whispers back, “I know what to do next.”

She looks up, feeling as if her entire being has been remade from pure hope.

Tarrant beams. “Then, what are we waiting for?”

And with that, Alice turns toward her mother and sister and makes their apologies for their abrupt and hasty departure.
1. Yes, walking sticks were quite "necessary" for Victorian gentlemen to carry around with them. Phallic symbol, much? (^__~)

2. The civil engineering terms I use in this chapter (which Alice lists for Tarrant) are modern terms I grabbed from the following article abstract on ASCE (American Society of Civil Engineers): "Preloading at the South End of Conignon Tunnel" by Rene Marche, Alain Menoret, & Philippe Mayu. This was gibberish to me, so I figured it would be believable gibberish to Alice. Although I highly doubt these terms were used by Victorian Era British civil engineers. Yup, whipped out my Artistic License again! I'm sure getting' a lotta mileage outta this baby!

3. More Artistic License Abuse: I'm blatantly overlooking the construction of the Tower Subway (which had been going on during this time: 1869 – 1870) in order to borrow a few historic figures in civil engineering in the following chapter.

4. Yes, there were baby buggies/prams in the Victorian Era. (Thank you Wikipedia!) They were called "children's carriages" or something along those lines rather than baby buggies or baby prams.
Tarrant still has no Idea what these things called “patents” are, despite Alice’s explanation.

Alice had been frustratingly vague during the cab journey, talking in circles about these mysterious objects they seek:

“Patents are a record of a person’s valuable ideas,” she’d said, matter-of-factly. “To ensure the rights of the inventor’s intellectual property are respected.”

Tarrant had focused on the first point (of many) that he’d felt required additional clarification: “What sort of record?”

“A written one.”

“An Idea on paper?”

“Yes.”

“Alice...”

“Yes?”

“Ideas reside in the Mind. Necessarily.”

“I know.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about that now,” she’d gently insisted. “The real question is how to find the Right Idea.”

“I see...” But he hadn’t.

Alice had continued, “Of course, the logical course would be to go to the Metropolitan District Railway offices and simply ask if they’re aware of the idea we’re looking for.”
“And... they would tell us?” he’d wondered aloud, trying to follow his wife’s Logic.

Alice had smirked. “No. I don’t think they would.”

Tarrant had frowned in confusion which Alice had interrupted with a pat on his arm.

“It’s my turn to be brilliant. Have a little faith, Hatter.”

“I have considerably more than a little!” He’d actually been a bit miffed at the implication that his devotion is somehow not absolute.

“I misspoke,” she’d quickly admitted, possibly because his sudden irritation had raced along the heart line. Yet another Emotion had Shared itself, and again without his consent! But, in his defense, it has been years and years since Tarrant has had a reason to keep his feelings to himself! He’s simply out of practice!

‘Twouldnae be b’cause ye’re terrified o’ this place wi’out yer Alice at yer side?

No, no, of course not!

So, ye’re no’tryin’ teh remind her teh keep ye in mind, on her mind, at all times?

Well... um...

Tha’s what I thought... In seven years, ye hav’nae come as far as ye thought ye had, eh, lad?

Remembering that brief, internal discussion, Tarrant sighs: he supposes not. He Depends upon Alice far, far too much sometimes. For more than just his sanity.

“What I meant to say,” Alice had thankfully continued. “Is to have a little more patience.”

“...Oh.”

Oh, indeed. And it’s patience he truly needs!

Was that...? Yes, I believe it was: iambic pentameter!

It’s a shame he can’t share it with Alice at the moment.
He glances at his wife as she shakes her head at yet another small-ish card she’s presented with. Perhaps this is the patent? But, no, it can’t be, as it’s not the One they seek... Still, it would be helpful to know what the blasted thing is supposed to look like! Imagine an Idea on paper! He huffs.

*Are patents the paper or the Idea? How can an Idea be confined to a few scraps of paper at all? And what has an inventor’s Rights anything to do with the number of thimbles under the pincushion?*

Although the concept escapes him (but, when Time allows, he’ll be sure to capture it later!) and even seems to escape the junior clerk who had been relegated to assisting them, Alice appears to have the situation well in hand.

“No, no,” she insists with a thinning patience Tarrant can sense – itching! – along his arm beneath his layers and ever-present glove. (At least he’s not the only one with difficulty corralling wayward emotions!) Her voice, however, remains pleasant enough. “I require civil engineering patents. Regarding subterranean tunnel construction.”

The clerk fumbles through the long, thin, wooden drawer containing countless small cards. “Um, here’s one for tunnel drilling,” he says uncertainly, lifting out the card for Alice to read while he holds its place open between its fellow cards with his index finger.

Tarrant bites down on a giggle: Indexing with one’s index finger! Of course!

Alice leans forward and scans the card. “No, this looks like ore extraction of some sort. I believe we must be looking in the Mining Section.”

Flustered, the young man replaces the card and fiddles with the contents of the drawer. He draws out a few more cards, seemingly at random, and then turns back to the absolutely intimidating wall of similar, small, wooden drawers and selects another.

“Are these patents?” Tarrant can’t help but whisper to Alice when their... helper’s back is turned.

“No. These are reference cards with brief descriptions of the patented ideas.”

“And are the Ideas themselves here?”

“Yes, but only expressed on paper.”

*Again with that odd insistence that an Idea must somehow be connected to paper of some kind!*
Tarrant sighs and watches the Concept race over and beyond the horizon of his comprehension.

It takes the excavation of five more drawers, the careful examination of at least two dozen more cards, and three more attempts by Tarrant to define exactly what the nature of these Upland Ideas is before the first tingle of satisfaction dances against his heart.

“Ah...” Alice sighs. “This looks to be the right drawer.”

The clerk looks easily twice as relieved as Alice. Tarrant wishes he could participate in the moment of enlightenment.

There’s a bit more shuffling and sifting through the cards and Tarrant idly wonders what time it is. The large office they’re in is rather rudely lacking in both windows and time pieces. Tarrant muses that perhaps he should have brought his pocket watch along with him today after all, despite it being stubbornly broken – In fact, the thing is quite possibly more stubborn than his Alice is! And that’s quite the distinguishing point! – if he’d had it in his pocket-watch pocket, it would have given Tarrant something to legitimately fiddle with every few minutes or so. That’s the least the usual-naught bit of rubbish could do, he’s sure! (Although it would probably complain at being disturbed so much. Still... he’ll be sure to keep it with at all Times from now on!)

“Here, these!” Alice says suddenly, holding out five cards to the clerk.

Tarrant experiences the inexplicable urge to shout “Trump!” He refrains, but – thinking of Thackery, confetti, and hairy toes – giggles. Luckily, the clerk had already vanished through a door behind the long counter.

“Entertaining yourself?” Alice murmurs with a tired smile.

Tarrant tilts his head to the side. “A bit. ‘Hare’ and there.”

“I’ll ask you to explain that little nugget of amusement later.”

“And I shall, in exchange, ask for a comprehensible description of these patents we’re seeking.”

Alice’s spine stiffens. If not for the tightening at the corners of her lips – to circumvent a smile! – he’d think she was Upset with him. “My explanation was perfectly sound. You can’t hold me accountable for the fact that your brilliantly mad genius refuses to integrate utterly mundane and tedious, short-sighted Uplander rationale.”

Tarrant grins at her. He’s still horridly confused... however, he doesn’t feel quite so Bad about it now.
The clerk returns and Alice looks over the patents. Tarrant squints at them but he can’t find anything particularly extra-ordinary about them; no, no, they appear to be quite normal sheets of paper with plain black ink. Although perhaps they’re Special because of the abundance of carefully-drawn illustrations and various dimensions provided for each aspect of the figures shown...?

Alice inspects the fourth patent more carefully than the others. Tarrant dares to lean over her shoulder a bit and glimpses a strange diagram of men digging a tunnel while standing on some sort of suspended platform within the very structure they’re excavating.

Alice reads the description of the... Idea carefully. (Hm... perhaps that’s what a patent is? But then, why would an Idea need a description on paper? Could it be because Ideas are wont to come and go as they please? Must be... Oh! That had very nearly been a case of iambic pentameter! Perhaps if I...)

“If you would be so kind as to supply me with this inventor’s information,” Alice says, interrupting Tarrant’s thoughts. “Oh, pardon me. Inventors, plural,” she amends when she flips back to the first page. “I’d greatly appreciate it.”

“My pleasure, madam.”

Tarrant doesn’t doubt it. The lad looks ready to break down in tears of exhaustion from attending to Alice’s demands. Tarrant keeps his thoughts to himself (Thoughts regarding Alice and her wonderfully Demanding tendencies!) as the clerk pens the names and addresses of the inventors credited with the patent. When finished, Alice accepts the card, thanks the lad, and doesn’t wait for him to see them out.

As they step out onto the dusty, smoggy, gritty, soot-blackened street again, Alice raises her arm to hail a passing cab.

“Alice?” Tarrant asks as he helps her into the carriage.

“Yes?”

“Did we find the patent you were looking for, then? Because, I’d just like to point out that, if you were intending to take it with us, we’ve left it behind.”

Alice smiles and reaches out a hand to him. He grasps it and climbs into the carriage after her. As the cab lurches into motion on its way to the Kingsleigh residence, Alice assures him, “We found it. And, while finding the patent was very important, what we really needed were the names and residences of the inventors.”

Tarrant considers this. “And now we’ll fight the use of dynamite?”
“Yes,” she says. And then, will a sly, sideways smile, compliments him, “I enjoyed that lovely iambic pentameter, Hatter.”

He giggles at her answering verse. “For your delight, I’d rhyme with all my might.”

“Writing desk,” she replies, beaming.

“Raven,” he agrees and, collecting her hand, removes the glove with delicate and deliberate tugs. She watches him. He watches her. And when he lifts her left hand to his lips, he catches the evidence of her sharp inhalation despite the clatter-clamor-cacophony of a London cab ride that steals the subtle sound from him. “I’ve missed you, my Alice,” he whispers, softly enough for her to ignore... should she wish.

She doesn’t.

“There’s still time before dinner,” she assures him.

“But what of the inventors, my Alice?” he forces himself to ask.

He watches as she removes her hat. She leans in and murmurs against his ear. “There’s even time before we arrive...”

Tarrant shivers. “H... here?” he gasps.

“Now,” she confirms. “If it pleases you, m’laird.”

“It does,” he whispers, reaching for her and pulling her onto his lap. Alice and he share one Mind on this and her skirts ride up as she straddles his knees. Gloves are tossed aside and eyes close and mouths seek their counterpart.

“We shouldn’t...” he admonishes himself on a breath.

“I know,” she agrees and rocks her hips against him.

He groans into her ear, nuzzles down her neck. He hates-despises-loathes this overly-concealing garment she wears. He wants to taste her wherever he wants, not only where he is permitted! “Mine,” he growls, his teeth nipping at the edge of her collar.

“Tarrant...” she breathes in agreement. Her hands move beneath his jacket to his vest. She easily works through the buttons and around the concealed knife he wears at all times until his skin is hers.
for the taking-tasting-claiming. And, oh, how she does!

The carriage rolls on as Alice savors his neck, his collarbone, his chest in near-absolute silence. His fingers work through the layers of her skirt and undergarments.

“No stockings...” he thanks her.

“Hm...” Her hands settle over his trouser fastenings.

They pause, pant, pulse with unfinished passion.

“Do we dare?” she whispers at this moment: the moment of Decision, the moment from which there will be no Turning Back.

Tarrant doesn’t hesitate one more moment; he leans forward and locks his mouth on hers. He lifts her up and slumps further down on the bench seat, then tucks her knees up by his hips. She’s more careful with the openings of his trousers than he is with her undergarments. One decisive tear later and another moment of shifting so that Alice can push his trousers down his hips and then she’s...! He’s...!

“Inside you, Alice,” he moans as softly as he can manage.

“Ngh...!”

The carriage rocks them, sways them. Tarrant braces a hand on Alice’s thigh and around her waist and Moves Up as Alice Meets him Down.

Alice presses her hands against the top of the seat, leans over him, closes her eyes and becomes beautifully Lost.

He Finds her again and again and again and...!

“Tarrant...” she warns him and he feels her tensing, clinging, embracing him from Within.

“Don’keep me waitin’, mogh’linyae...” he burrs against her neck.

She doesn’t.

He leans back and drinks in the sight of her gasping above him. The sight of her – of her Completing him! – undoes him. As she slumps against him, he curls his body toward her, grasps her hips in both
hands and, pressing his lips against her neck, Reaches for the miracle she’d just shown him.

She turns her head toward him as he Moves her, moves himself, moves them. He’s nearly... nearly... so very close...!

Her breath on his neck...

Her tongue on his pulse...

Her teeth on his skin...!

Tarrant gasps, clutches her closer, his hips twitching. “My Alice...” he shouts on a whisper as the heat rides through him, burns him, flees from him and into her. His wife. His Alice. His.

She kisses him, keeps him breathless and dazed for an immeasurable moment more. And then, leaning back, she informs him: “I’ve been wanting to try That for days.”

Tarrant blinks at her, and then as the meaning manages to meander its way into his mind, he snorts. Cackles. Laughs. Above him, she answers his laughter with her own.

Reaching for one of the many handkerchiefs he’s taken to carrying with him – just in case, although, he has to admit This had not been one of the cases he’d considered! – and hands one to her, then helps her sit back down on the opposite bench. His handkerchief disappears beneath her skirt and Tarrant absently attends to himself with a second.

Across the gap that provides the carriage’s leg space for its passengers, Tarrant answers Alice’s sly, naughty grin with one of his own.

“Here,” Alice beckons with the hand that’s not... beneath her dress, pressing the scrap of fabric he’d given her to... “Your eyebrows have gotten a bit...” She giggles as he wiggles them at her, and then, as she’d requested, he leans forward and lets her smooth them down.

“Alice?”

“Yes, Raven?”

“I’ll tell you a secret.”

She waits.
“I’ve been wanting to try That for days as well!”

And after Alice finishes laughing, they tidy themselves up so that, upon their arrival, two respectably attired passengers will be seen alighting from the cab. He moves to sit beside her and holds her in his arms until that time comes. And, when it does, neither of them bother to chase the smiles from each other’s faces. They pay the driver and trek up the steps and ring the bell. And, luckily, as the man utterly lacks any imagination whatsoever, Mr. Brown suspects Nothing at all.

*~*~*~*

“And you feel these young men may have a viable solution?” Lord Ascot inquires shrewdly.

Despite the fact that Tarrant is sure Lord Ascot’s study has not changed since their previous visit, there is something Different about it now. He draws in a deep breath, spies the flash of Muchness in his wife’s eyes and decides the Difference he senses must be the scent of Victory. Yes, Alice appears far too confident and pleased with herself for him to assume otherwise: one way or another, Underland’s Champion is going to use this discovery against the fiends who would carelessly destroy their world. And when that threat has been countered...

They’ll return home -- to Marmoreal -- together, and everything will be perfect!

Tarrant smiles at the Thought.

Alice nods, “After speaking with the Misters Greathead and Barlow at length over dinner last night, I’m sure of it. Not only is it completely undisruptive of existing structures above the tunnel site, but – considering the frightful price of dynamite, it will be less costly as well!”

Tarrant thinks Lord Ascot might have clapped his hands in glee if the man had been capable of using them both.

Alice leans back a bit, her expression taking a turn for the hesitant. “But before I go into the details on the process, I’d like to make a suggestion, sir.”

“Yes, my dear?”

Tarrant watches as Alice gathers her thoughts and explains, “Given the considerable upheaval we might be causing to the project plans, I’m sure the project planners will require a considerable amount of... placating before they’ll agree to seriously consider implementing a new tunneling method, and one that’s been developed by a pair of young, inexperienced, assistant engineers.”

Townsend frowns. “Pardon me, Alice, but it sounds as if you have some doubt regarding the
method."

“No,” she replies with absolute conviction. “I believe this will work brilliantly, sir. However, I believe we will hear that particular objection more than once over the next few days.”

“Hm... I’m sure you’re right. So, let’s return to the topic of your suggestion. What ought to be done about the resistance we’ll no doubt encounter? You aren’t about to suggest I throw even more money at them, are you?”

Alice grins. “Only after a fashion. I think they might be sufficiently swayed to your way of thinking with a bit of flattery.”

“Such as?”

“A soiree. Commemorating the accomplishments of those involved with the underground railway.”

Lord Ascot throws back his head and laughs. “My dear, you are a wonder, aren’t you?”

“Do you think you and Lady Ascot could organize a function of that magnitude so soon? Perhaps before Saturday?”

“Alice, dear, Lady Ascot organizes the utterly civilized and bloodless coups of major London charity societies in her sleep!” The image that conjures in Tarrant’s mind is vivid. “A soiree will be sorted out over dessert tonight!”

“However,” Townsend continues with a measuring look at both Alice and Tarrant, “you do know what would be required of the both of you should we continue with this mad plan to woo the un-woo-able city commissioners and railway administrators?”

Alice sighs. “I do. I’ll have the appropriate garments ordered right away.” She turns to Tarrant and he feels his brows draw together in concern at her remorseful expression. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to force a tailcoat on you.”

“A... what?”

“A jacket of the foulest sort,” Townsend contributes cheerfully. “As are the trappings made to be worn under it. Meant to force a man’s body into the figure and form the queen most admires. Thank the saints I’ll have the excuse of this bloody chair to explain my lack of participation in that trial!”

“And, I’m afraid...” Her gaze flickers aside to his hat which is resting on the sideboard beside hers. (No, he still hasn’t permitted any butler to relieve him of it!) She sighs with regret.
“It’s fine, Alice,” he hears himself say. “I wouldn’t want the other hats to feel out of place were mine to attend.”

Townsend laughs and Alice gives him an apologetic smile. Tarrant almost feels encouraged enough to allow one of the bland and inferior creations of the Upland haberdashers to touch his head. Almost. Perhaps he won’t wear a hat at all...

When the discussion turns toward the project plan and Greathead and Barlow’s engineering innovations, Tarrant excuses himself:

“I think I’ll step across the hall and see if I might intrude upon your mother and Lady Ascot for tea, Alice.”

Alice pats his arm. “I’m sure they’ll be able to tell you all about the typical tortures of a soiree. You’ll be sufficiently horrified by the time Townsend and I are finished here.”

Lord Ascot laughs. “How true, Alice, how true! And, Tarrant, if you would mention Alice’s suggestion – the soiree, I mean – to Lady Ascot and let her know I’ll discuss it with her later?”

Tarrant nods and – a bit reluctantly – quits the room in order to pay a visit to the ladies across the hall. He has to admit that he’s a bit nervous about this soiree event – whatever that is! – but he doubts Helen will frighten him all that much! Well, not intentionally! She might use that threatening gleam in her blue eyes to warn him against disappointing her daughter, but he doesn’t think she’d be cruel purposefully...

“But, Helen, just look at the man!”

Only a step away from the door to the conservatory, with his arm extended toward the latch, Tarrant pulls himself up short. (Or, rather, tall. One generally grows taller when effecting a sudden stop rather than shorter!) He stops and discovers he can do little else other than listen to the sounds of teatime and obvious disgust and derision. (A very unflattering combination, he notes!)

The thin door is no barrier at all to Lady Ascot’s harsh and relentless criticism: “That horrid hat! And his hair?! What sort of society permits men to wear their hair in such a barbaric fashion while allowing young ladies to chop theirs off! Why, Alice looks as if she’s sold that beautiful hair of hers to a wig-maker for a shilling!”

“Geraldine...” Helen attempts.

“Now, I realize that you’re thrilled to have your daughter back after all this time, but honestly Helen, how can you have that man in your home? He can’t possibly be at all suitable for a woman of Alice’s bloodlines! Some standards must be observed if you hope to keep your daughters above the
“Gerry, while I appreciate your... suggestions. My daughters’ standings in Society will climb or fall not because of Tarrant Hightopp but because of that blighter of Margaret’s!”

“Good gracious, Helen. Whatever is wrong with Lowell? He’s charming; he’s wealthy; he comes from a long line of highly respected—”

“One can only trade on the blessings of one’s forefathers for so long,” Helen replies wearily. “Lowell is quickly wearing through his.”

Lady Ascot sighs. “I thank the Lord every day that Townsend and I were blessed with our sensible Hamish. I do not envy you that barbarian for a son-in-law!”

“Geraldine! How many times do I have to tell you?! Tarrant is a man of unsurpassable character. He dotes on Alice, which is far more than Lowell is capable. Not all of us are concerned with wealth and titles! A man is merely a man and his title merely that, a title, and cold comfort during the hardships life is wont to throw at us! Do try to keep that distinction in mind!”

Realizing he’s not only still standing beside the closed door but also eavesdropping on a private conversation, Tarrant backs away with no thought in his head aside from avoiding the active loathing in the conservatory. He glances toward the study door and winces. If he returns now, he’ll have to explain to Alice why he hadn’t been able to join her mother and Lady Ascot for tea...

“It’s hard to believe they’re the closest of friends, isn’t it? Or, they are when they choose to be, rather.”

Tarrant turns with a start and sees none other than Hamish Ascot, attired in what must be the Upland version of active wear, standing only a few paces away. He studies Hamish’s expression – resigned, exasperated, haughty – as the man considers the closed door.

“It’s the way of well-bred women to provide an animated account of a man’s faults,” the man who had once asked Tarrant’s Alice to marry him continues. “An obligation, even.”

The man’s watery blue eyes focus on Tarrant, on his unremarkable suit and long hair. “In your case, you could only benefit from the criticism.”

Tarrant’s eyes narrow. “Maybe so,” he replies, struggling against his inclination to burr and brogue at the man. Alice had explained to him that Outlandish would not be looked upon Well at all Up Here. “It should be every man’s ultimate goal to emulate a fine gentleman such as yourself.”

Hamish blinks at that.
Tarrant is almost proud of himself for having successfully beaten down the sarcasm and snarl that had tried to claw their way out of his throat. His only thought as he’d done so had been the hopeful avoidance of causing a Scene in the home of Alice’s former employer. He might not be sure about a lot of things Up Here, but he knows how disappointed Alice would be in him were he to embarrass her here.

Still, despite the effort, he hadn’t expected the younger Ascot’s shoulders to un-tense or his expression to un-freeze. Odd.

With a look that is more considering than patronizing, Hamish muses, “Perhaps it would be my duty to assist you with that goal, then.”

Tarrant struggles with forming a refusal that is bland enough to satisfy the minimum requirements of common decency. It’s a far more difficult task than he’d thought it would be.

Hamish breaks the awkward silence. Abruptly, he says, “I’m just now heading out to the range. Would you care to join me, Hightopp?”

The invitation is a surprise and that is the only reason Tarrant doesn’t refuse it outright. And it’s a lucky thing he doesn’t, for when the shock wears off an instant later, Tarrant receives a surprising visit from Rational Thought:

Given his other available choices, Tarrant concedes that spending an hour or so in the company of Hamish Ascot might not be the worst decision he could make. “If I won’t be intruding,” he manages.

“Not at all,” the man replies in that insufferably superior air of his.

Swallowing down a sigh, Tarrant falls into step beside him.

_The Range_, Tarrant discovers, is a wide yard some distance from both the manor and the stables. The journey is accomplished in stiff, awkward silence. As they approach a scenic spot – a small cottage with a wide veranda and a tea table with three chairs circling it – Hamish removes the large, wooden case from beneath his arm. Tarrant watches him set the thing down on the wrought iron tea table.

“Have you any interest in hunting sports?” Hamish asks.

As the man opens the lid, Tarrant sees something that sets his heart racing. Within, somehow obscenely nestled in fine, dark green velvet, is an object which – despite the Wrongness of its shape and size – reminds him of the revolving (no, no _revolver!_ That’s the correct name for it!) that Alice insists on carrying with her in her business satchel.
“... No,” Tarrant hears himself reply on a strangled whisper. He clears his throat. “The hunting of others is not encouraged by my queen.” Nor should it be!

Hamish lifts out the stretched-too-long revolver-like item. Perhaps it’s an older, warped cousin of the gun in Alice’s bag...

“It’s the mark of a superior mind to recognize one’s place in the world. And it’s a man’s duty to assert his will over nature,” Hamish lectures as he opens the... thing in his hands and slides a single slender, brassy object into it. “Many prefer to use pistols in games using targets, but I find the rifle a better fit.”

Tarrant watches him pat the thing wedged in the crook of his arm. “A more... noble instrument, requiring fortitude and discipline to master. Anyone can lift and shoot a pistol,” the man says with a slight sneer, “but few have the patience and temperament of mind to develop any skill with a rifle.”

With a tight nod, Hamish pivots on his heel and steps out from under the veranda. Tarrant follows him warily. They circle around to the back of the too-beautiful cottage and Tarrant finds a counter set up along the length of the structure. Hamish steps behind the long, high table and reaches up toward the cottage’s eaves. There, he grasps an old bell and rings it forcefully. Tarrant resists cringing as the racket echoes across the lawn and into the forest beyond.

Hamish must have noticed the confusion Tarrant had manfully kept from voicing because he says, “It alerts any and all in the immediate area that the shooting range is in use. It would be most irresponsible to allow an accident to occur.”

Tarrant nods.

Hamish gestures down the length of the yard then, toward the edge of the forest. “Our targets are there.” Tarrant leans over the high table and peers at three covered bales of straw. The fabric stretched over them has a smallish red spot in the center of each.

The sound of the rifle being snapped back into its long, straight shape draws Tarrant’s gaze back to Hamish. The man lifts the object to his right shoulder, aligns it with the targets beyond, peers down the length of it, cradles it in much the same way the newlywed lads had accepted the hand and arm of their new brides when they’d danced the Wedded Step...

BANG!

Tarrant jumps as the thunder clap destroys both his musings and any similarity of this ritual to the one most sacred to all Outlanders.

Hamish lowers the rifle, a satisfied smile on his face. “You see there? A good shot. Not my best, but it’s been too long since I’ve made time for a bit of practice.”
Fisting his hands to stop the unsettling shiver that trembles just beneath his skin, Tarrant glances across the field at the targets and can just barely make out a small, dark point very near the red spot on the taut, white cloth. For a moment, he doesn’t know what that signifies...

But then...

Then...!

Tarrant looks from the rifle in Hamish’s hands to the small box of brass objects – “bullets” Alice had once called them, he remembers! – to the black hole in the target and...

*It’s a Weapon*, he realizes. Of course, he’d known it was dangerous! He’d known by the way Alice had treated the revolver that such things were dangerous. He’d *known* both this rifle and the revolver were weapons, but... but...

*Ye di’nae realize it coul’kill ye dead in naught but an instant, di’ye lad?*

No, no, he hadn’t.

Dear Fates, the Power of these machines! The **terrible** Possibility they embody...! Why, one would not even need to look one’s enemy in the eye to kill him. And so ruthlessly, *callously, coldly*...!

“Don’t have firearms in your country, do you?” Hamish assumes more than asks.

“No, and *that’s* a lucky thing,” Tarrant admits. Or, dearest Fates, what would have happened on that *Frabjous* Day? Would there have even *been* a Frabjous Day at all with a weapon like this under the command of the Bluddy Behg Hid and that monster, Stayne?

Hamish objects. “*Lucky? How do you imagine that, sir? Why, without firepower, how do you defend your country? With sticks and stones?’*

Hamish’s sneer pulls a snarling grimace out of the Place within him where Tarrant had locked up all those hotheaded Reactions. In the next instant, Hamish’s rifle is tumbling to the table and Tarrant has the man spun around with the knife from Marmoreal at his pale, quivering throat.


Tarrant closes his eyes, forces the memories of battles fought long ago back to the depths of his
mind, and allows the concerned warmth he feels from Alice to calm him. In the next breath, he’s himself again; he replies to her, reassures her, and apologizes for interrupting her meeting.

He takes a step back from the still-frozen form of Hamish Ascot and tucks the knife away. Yes, he knows he ought to apologize. But for what? Hamish Ascot had tried to Impress him with that rifle. Tarrant had reciprocated in his own fashion. However, it seems they’d only succeeded in terrifying one another.

Tarrant gives the startled man a wry grin and says in a droll tone, “And that’s how we fight wars where I come from.”

“Barbaric!” Hamish declares, reaching for his familiar security crutch – that blasted rifle!

Tarrant snorts a brief giggle at the pun.

“You’re mad!” the man declares in reply to Tarrant’s inappropriate humor.

“Absolutely!” he agrees, grinning with delight.

He almost expects Hamish to threaten him with the rifle or stomp off toward the house, but he does neither. He blinks like a flunderwhapped borogove.

“Mad...” Hamish muses and then his expression sours. “I suppose that’s what she sees as one of your better qualities!”

Tarrant feels his right eyelid twitch. Alice. This man is talking about my Alice! Tarrant replies with as much self control as he can scrape together with his clawing, imaginary fingers, “She’s told me just that on countless occasions.”

Hamish’s hands tighten around the rifle, but Tarrant doesn’t worry about the fact that the man’s still holding it. After all, Tarrant still has his knife and in such close quarters, he’s fairly confident that his dagger gives him an advantage over Hamish and his long-barreled firearm. But it won’t come to that, he’s sure.

Are ye?

Yes.

“You’re just as utterly mad as Alice is,” Hamish informs him. His sour expression tightening, the younger Ascots declares, “Which I suppose means you manage to waste valuable time contemplating gentlemen in dresses and ladies in trousers!”
Tarrant giggles. Hamish looks completely offended by the sound. Tickled to his toes, Tarrant tells him, “Not only that, but when the occasion calls for it, the men of my homeland don the skirts, and the ladies the trousers!”

Hamish’s grimace smooths away and Tarrant is shocked to hear a snorting, nasal-y chuckle squeak out of the man. “That must be a rather remarkable occasion, Hightopp.”

“It was,” Tarrant replies, remembering Frabjous Day, his kilt, Alice’s armor, the sounds of battle...

“I’m sure Alice was thrilled to take part,” Hamish interrupts the dark parade of memories. “She enjoys any excuse at all to indulge her contrary nature.”

Tarrant can’t disagree with that, oddly enough. Alice’s contrariness transcends Worlds. Contrary to her core, his Alice is! “Yes, and I believe she always will.”

Hamish looks up and Tarrant finds himself on the receiving end of the man’s evaluating stare. Tarrant can only guess what the man sees in his expression, for if it reflects what Tarrant feels, then there must be love, devotion, respect, admiration, frustration, and acceptance written on his face for the world to see.

And, perhaps, Hamish does see all of those things. The man seems to relax completely for the first time in Tarrant’s presence. “You really are the right man for Alice,” Hamish says softly and Tarrant thinks he sees the lingering pain in those watery blue eyes evaporate. “It’s just as she said,” he concludes.

A little puzzled, Tarrant watches as Hamish turns away and looks out over the range. He sighs and Tarrant imagines a great weight leaving him. The man sets the rifle down on the table and, suddenly, turns back toward Tarrant with a real smile.

“I never congratulated you, sir, on your nuptials.” Hamish thrusts out his right hand. Tarrant gapes. “My best wishes for your future, Lord Hightopp. For both you and your wife.”


Hamish nods once in that uniquely decisive manner of his, as if something of great importance had been settled... finally. “Now, as we’ve tramped all the way out here, can I interest you in a try with the rifle?”

Before Tarrant can reply, Hamish soldiers on. “You’ve Alice to look after, you know, and as effective as your skills may be in your country, here we use firearms. You wouldn’t want to be tested and found lacking when I’m offering to educate you free of charge, now would you?”
Well, when it’s put that way...

“That would be unforgivable,” Tarrant replies.

Hamish beams.

“And, should you discover the curiosity for it, I should be pleased to show you what to do with a broadsword, a claymore, or a knife, Ascot.”

The man barks out a laugh. “Perhaps I shall take you up on that, Hightopp.”

And then he places the rifle in Tarrant’s hands and begins his lecture on the proper handling of it. Tarrant ignores the way his skin crawls at touching such a beast of a machine. He focuses on Alice, on his promise to keep her and their littlin’ safe... protect them. Even the prideful note in Hamish’s voice serves as a good distraction and Tarrant finds a smile tugging at his mouth.

Yes, oddly enough, Alice’s former Intended is not nearly as intolerable as Tarrant had first thought.

It must be the nature of Uplandish things, he muses, sighting as Hamish had instructed him. Nothing is what it appears to be...

And when he pulls the trigger and the butt of the weapon nearly knocks his shoulder out of its joint, Tarrant can’t help but feel an odd sense of satisfaction...

... and he wonders if this sensation is anything like what Alice feels as she continually discovers the mysteries and complexities of Underland.

*~*~*~*~*

Alice stares at Hamish. Or perhaps she gapes. Gawks.

“What?” he asks with a defensive sniff, taking the seat opposite her in the carriage and closing the door firmly.

The driver slaps the reins and the horse steps into the street. Still, Alice can’t quite gather her thoughts. “What’s happened between you and Tarrant?” she manages.

Surely, that... that display in the foyer of her mother’s home had not been... real! In no conceivable
version of events would Tarrant and Hamish speak to each other in perfectly civil, friendly tones and then giggle like naughty boys at the mere mention of the word “skirt”!

Or, at least, she’s pretty sure that had been the catalyst. What had she said? How had Hamish started it? Oh, yes:

“Alice, you’d better not indulge in any fancies regarding the commandeering of today’s meeting. We can’t know that these stodgy businessmen have the fortitude to withstand such a shock.” He’d held out his hand. “I’ll review your notes and make sure they’re addressed in due course.”

With a resigned sigh, Alice had handed them over.

“Alice?” Tarrant had wondered aloud, blinking at her.

She’d shrugged helplessly. “Well, he’s right; I’m the one in the skirt, after all!”

What had been so blasted funny about that?

“Hamish,” she prompts him. “Why are you and my husband sharing jokes now?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. He’s an amiable sort, once you acclimate yourself to his oddities.”

“I... you... he...” Alice exchanges her stare for a glare. “When did you decide oddity was amiable. Last I knew, you barely tolerated it!”

Hamish leans back against his seat, radiating smugness. “We spent an hour out on the range the other day.”

Alice is back to gaping again. “The day before yesterday, you mean? The other day at your father’s country estate? The shooting range at your father’s estate?” She can remember hearing the muffled sounds of rifle fire. Lord Ascot had dismissed the racket with a word: “Hamish.”

“Yes.”

“You taught Tarrant how to use a GUN?!”

“Goodness, calm down, Alice. We’re supposed to comport ourselves as professionals this morning!”

She slaps aside his scolding. “Well, we’re not there yet, are we? Plenty of time to be upset and
“unreasonable!”

“Just as long as you recognize your own faults,” he comments.

“No, I’m upset. You’re unreasonable! A gun, Hamish?!” The very idea of Tarrant holding such a foul, ruthless, underhanded piece of weaponry in his hands offends her!

He gives her a stern look. “The man needed to know, Alice. He’s too innocent for this world. Carries a bloody knife around under his jacket. What good will that do against the weapon of choice in this country? Honestly! I thought you would have seen to that during the voyage here if not before!”

Alice shakes her head, unable to understand him. “Why would you bother? Has Tarrant managed to endear himself to you as well?”

Hamish harrumphs. “Of course not! However, between your husband and that useless lush of Margaret’s, I can bloody well see which one would step forward to protect you and your mother and sister. You and I both know Lowell would never raise a hand to fight for anyone but himself. And yet Hightopp, who has enough decency to make an effort on your behalf, isn’t aware of half the dangers out there!”

“Crime is very uncommon in the city,” Alice counters weakly, her mind working furiously at the implications of Hamish’s fierce opinions.

“It only needs to happen once for it to be too late,” he argues back obstinately.

Alice studies him as he determinedly glares out the window at the passing scenes. Finally, she says, “Thank you, Hamish. For showing him how to protect us.” She has to fist her left hand to keep it from settling over her stomach.

He gives her a bland smile. “I understand that the duty will never be mine, but I am not so low as to deny Hightopp the means to fulfilling his obligations to you, Alice.”

“And I appreciate that.” And, after she finishes with this bloody business meeting today, she’ll be asking Tarrant why he hadn’t mentioned this to her earlier!

Again the interior of the carriage is as silent as it can possibly get while in use on London’s streets. After a few moments, the void of words seems to be too much for Hamish.

“I’m sorry for my behavior, Alice, when you arrived at the office.”

She turns back to him, surprised. “It’s fine,” she tells him. “You’d just suffered a terrible shock.
Looking back on it, I feel ashamed of myself: what if your father had been there and I’d given him heart failure!”

“Still,” Hamish continues, easily as stubborn as she is herself. “I should not have... said those things... accused you of not finishing... things.”

*Ah, the proposal. We come to it at last,* she muses. “Hamish, I am sorry for how I handled that. Truly, you’d deserved much better from me.”

“Yes, I had,” he agrees a bit pompously. Alice lets it go, however. “Just as you deserved better from me. In my defense, I can only say that I hadn’t understood.”

“Understood what?” her curiosity makes her ask.

Hamish fidgets with his gloves and inspects the head of his walking stick for blemishes. “I hadn’t understood that your refusal had nothing to do with... a lack of merit on my part.”

“No, of course it hadn’t! Oh, Hamish...” She sighs. “I meant what I said then: you are a fine gentleman. Why do you think I even stepped up into that gazebo with you at all, knowing what was about to happen? I knew you were a fine gentleman. With many admirable qualities.”

Hamish smiles. “Just not the ones you were looking for.”

“Precisely.”

He chuckles and Alice marvels at the sight of his mirth. It transforms him and suddenly she’s sharing a carriage with a young, carefree, charming gentleman. The spoilt, petulant, snobbish boy-man she’s grown so used to seeing is oddly... absent. At least for the moment.

“Thank you, Alice.”

“My pleasure, Hamish.”

The Hamish Ascot of old reappears, however, as the carriage slows and pulls over. Alice doesn’t have to twitch aside the curtains to know they’ve arrived at the Metropolitan District Railway’s head offices.

“Are you ready for this, Lady Hightopp?” he drawls, his hand on the polished door latch.

She considers mentioning the fact that she has a revolver in her leather case along with the precious project plan. In the end, however, all she says is: “Whenever you are, Lord Ascot.” In some things,
Alice assumes, ignorance truly is bliss.

This careless thought revisits Alice moments later when, upon being ushered into the meeting room to greet the railway’s executive committee, she sees a face that makes her heart race and shock-fear-dread-rage-urgency-bloodthirst! scream down her heart line:

Alice finds herself face-to-despicable face with none other than Underland’s former Viscount Valereth.

Chapter End Notes

1. The patent office: No idea where it was or what system was used or if anybody could just come in off the street and look something up. There went that Artistic License again!

2. The tunneling technology Alice finds actually exists and was developed and patented in 1870. Until this time, a method called cut-and-cover was employed for digging most tunnels. (Cut-and-cover basically means, they knocked down whatever was standing over the tunnel site, dug a big trench, reinforced and lined it, then built the "ground" back on top of it. A timely and costly technique.) In 1818, a technique that allowed for tunneling under bodies of water was created by Sir Marc Brunel and it was called tunnel shielding. This was used in the construction of the Thames Tunnel (1825-1843) but in 1870 two assistant engineers by the names of Peter Barlow and James Greathead redesigned the system and drastically improved it, making it faster, cheaper, and safer. This became the tunnel shielding system called the Barlow-Greathead Shield. Using this method, the Tower Subway was built beneath the Thames river from 1869-1870 (but, as I mentioned in the previous chapter's notes, I'm ignoring this). So, tunneling technology improved big time (from taking 18 years to less than two!) and it is this Idea that Alice uses to counter the proposed use of dynamite to speed up the cut-and-cover method.

3. Men in the Victorian Era were actually required to wear a kind of corset, too. (Perhaps the precursor to the cummerbund?) It was a very Uncomfortable Era for EVERYONE.

4. And I just gave Lady Ascot a name (Gerladine) since I have no idea what the woman's first name actually is. *flashes The License*

5. OK, so, I was all set to just let Hamish "fade into the background" of this story when, suddenly, something Happened:

Manny: [busily typing away]
Tarrant: [pitter-patters over and taps on Manny's shoulder] Excuse me, mistress?
Manny: Yeah? What now? More "quality time" with Alice?
Tarrant: Oh, would you? [gets hearts in his eyes] That would be wonderf—! Oh, er, ahem. Yes, please-and-thank-you! But you see, there's something else, er, that is... [glances over his shoulder and Hamish shows up] Hamish and I would like to be... friends.
Manny: ... friends? [Looks at Hamish]
Hamish: I would not be opposed to a mutually beneficial acquaintance with Hightopp here.
Manny: ... (O.o)... uh, really?
Tarrant: So, can we?
Manny: Um, can you what?
Tarrant: [huffs] Be friends!
Manny: Um... if Hamish promises to behave himself, I... guess so...
Hamish: How dare you insinuate that I would be anything less than a perfect gentleman!
Manny: Buddy, I'm the Writer. I'll Insinuate all over your lily white be-hind if I feel like it!
Tarrant: She will. She really will. Don't make her angry.
Hamish: Fine. I'll agree to act true to my perfectly proper character if you make sure Hightopp here doesn't go berserk on me. I don't care if he's mad; I'm not touching his face to calm him down! It's just not Done!
Manny: Agreed. OK, boys, congrats. You're buds now.
Tarrant: Fabulous! Fancy a cuppa, Hamish?
Hamish: If there's a dollop of brandy in it, perhaps.
Tarrant: You enjoy that Bandersnatch bile?!
Hamish: Hightopp, if you can't use the Queen's English I shall have to rethink this male bonding nonsense you've gotten me to agree to!
Manny: [watches as they wander off] Those two better not make me add any more chapters... [goes back to typing] ...
Courage and Calm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The joint presentation Mr. Barlow and Mr. Greathead conduct regarding the tunnel shielding they had recently patented is going to be a success.

At least it seems likely at the moment.

Not that Alice is capable of truly paying attention.

She’s pretty sure Hamish had botched the introduction she’d written for the engineers’ speech and had mutilated her arguments in favor of the new system, but she can’t be bothered to give a thought to that now. Not with that wretched wastrel Valereth – oh, no, it’s Mr. Valerey Rethbourne now! – sitting across the long table and three seats down.

Oh, what Alice wouldn’t give for even one of her throwing knives. Right. Now!

But no. No!

\textit{Kill him here and now and what happens to the negotiations? Kill him here and now, with no way to send his body back to Underland and no way to communicate with Mirana, and how will you know if you do Maevyn any good at all?!}

Alice forces herself to take a deep breath. Calm. She must be calm!

But knowing she must and actually managing it are two very different things!

In response to her desperate, disjointed thoughts, Tarrant Reaches for her. She can feel him. The heart line warms, simmers. He’s anxious. She’s frustrated; oh, how she wishes should just speak to him with words! How can she possibly explain this situation? Here she is, in the same boardroom as Valereth with no acceptable way of disposing of him ONCE AND FOR ALL!

\textbf{Calm, Alice!} she scolds herself as Tarrant’s anxiety heats to true Worry.

She takes another deliberate breath. She thinks of the revolver – for the thirty-times-third time! – and forces herself to leave it where it is. She considers Calling Tarrant; she can imagine him at this precise moment, properly hatted and standing on the stoop of her mother’s house, watching the cabs
roll past, wavering, waffling, wondering if he ought to be hailing one and...

Tarrant gives her a Pinch and Alice feels a measure of control return to her, meager though it is.

She knows he’s worried, but she doesn’t Call him. There is nothing he can do here except bury that finely crafted example of Irondirk excellence in Valereth’s gut. And that would be the end of the negotiations. And perhaps the end of Underland.

But if she doesn’t Call him... when he learns of Valereth’s presence – here, in this room, at this meeting! – he will be furious! Beyond furious! Bey-urious!

Alice examines her options once more: it’s not possible to withhold the fact that she’s found Valereth from him – it wouldn’t be safe to do so – which leaves her with telling him. If she tells him after the meeting has ended and Valereth has slunk off to wherever it is he’d come from... that would be... Bad. Very Bad. But if she Calls him now... it could be Worse. Worse for Underland, anyway.

She fists her left hand. It’s time to make a decision. The presentation is winding down which means luncheon will be starting soon and then there will be the panel discussion which might take thirty minutes or three hours depending on the young engineers’ abilities to thwart concerns and counter troublesome questions. And with London’s traffic being what it is, it might take nearly an hour for Tarrant to get here... If she’s going to Call him, now would be the moment to do it.

She bites back a sigh.

It all comes down to Trust.

You named him as your Champion, she reminds herself.

Indeed, she had. And now, when he ought to be here, she will instead keep him away? How can he keep his promise to her and their child if she doesn’t allow him to?

Their child...

Does Tarrant not have equal responsibility in protecting their child as Alice? Is that not one of his duties, as a father, just as it is hers, as a mother? Would she really deny him that?

But nothing can be DONE!

A voice that sounds very much like Tarrant’s rebukes her: He can be there, Alice. That’s not “nothing.”
No, she supposes it isn’t. Still...

*Why are you a-gyrin’ and a-gimblin’ over this? Didn’t you already have this discussion with Tarrant? Before you left Underland?*

Yes, yes, she had. The subject had been screamed, shouted, discussed, and decided. Which leaves Alice with only one un-regrettable choice.

Before she can change her mind, Alice briefly closes her eyes, focuses, and Calls: *please-need-come-soon-fear-rage-hopeless-frustration-trust!*

His Answer is immediate and final: *strength-love-resolution-now!*

She’s a little startled by how... simple that had been. How quickly he’d replied.

He’s coming.

She just hopes her faith in him will be enough to keep the Worst from happening.

*You still underestimate him, you know.*

Yes, she does.

*He’s more than a mad hatter.*

Yes, he is. It is that *more*, however, that has her worried. Tarrant is a husband, a will-be-father, and a warrior of incomparable skill, resourcefulness, and passion. Despite the fact that the stain of murder does not mark him as it does Alice, she doubts he’ll bother to restrain himself as he has in the past!

Alice answers his periodic, whisperingly soft inquiries with reassurance. She knows he’s trying not to distract her, interrupt her meeting, but she knows he *needs* this connection. As does she.

“*Are ye still all righ’?”* she can Feel against her heart.

“*I’m fine; please come,*” she Sends. There is no impatience or irritation in these answering messages, not like there had been at the Maigh when – in the midst of her bath – Tarrant had Called her not once but twice! She’d been a bit offended then that he’d worried over what sort of trouble she might find at a *festival* of all things! But now she can’t find a single spark of aggravation within her at his overprotective tendencies. (A distinction she’s sure he’s noticed as well.) Now he calls
every other minute and she cannot thank him enough for his diligence and attention.

Mr. Barlow concludes the presentation. There’s a polite round of applause. A few questions are posed to clarify various points that had been mentioned in the presentation itself. And then luncheon is announced.

Downstairs, in a very fine dining room with high windows and lace curtains that somehow make the coal-stained dreary day beyond a bit more cheerful, Alice locates her seat, noticing that the name card on the place setting to her left is Hamish’s and the name card to her right... is a Mr. Rethbourne’s. Gritting her teeth to keep herself from screaming her frustration and rage at Tarrant, she allows one of the servers to seat her.

She’s not foolish enough to ignore Valereth what with him sitting so very close, but she does not engage him in conversation. Or, at least, she tries not to...

“Although I must confess, I am confused as to why a new tunneling method is necessary. Has the current one not sufficiently met the expectations of the company and its investors?” Valereth directs the question to the table in general once the cold soup course has been cleared away.

Hamish counters with typical pomp and circumstance, “I believe Misters Barlow and Greathead will be kind enough to describe both the financial benefits and efficacy of their new method this afternoon.”

A bit further down the table, both engineers nod in agreement, confirming Hamish’s assumption.

“However,” he continues, “those advantages aside, there are those who are concerned for the preservation of our historic city. The integrity of London’s fine, upstanding neighborhoods must be considered.”

“I agree most ardently on that point. London’s fine institutions must be left untouched by progress,” Valereth replies in a droll tone. “However, no one is suggesting constructing tunnels beneath the queen’s palace!”

“Well. I should hope not!” Hamish blusters. “Still, it’s the idea, sir. If we can so easily destroy and replace on a whim, we fall into a practice that does not bode well for the future. As I’ve mentioned, it’s a concern.”

“Hm,” Valereth counters. “I admit to wondering who these numerous concerned citizens are aside from yourself and the senior Lord Ascot. I was under the impression that many quite enjoyed the show of the demolition.”

Alice cannot stop herself from addressing him directly: “And in the days of ancient Rome, the citizens gathered to watch criminals and traitors being eaten by lions and other beasts for
entertainment. Are you suggesting we might consider reinstating those practices as well? For the enjoyment of the masses?"

In response to her barbed rejoinder, Valereth’s lips curl into the semblance of a smile, however there is no mirth in the gesture at all. “What an interesting suggestion, madam.”

“’Interesting’ is not the word I would have chosen in this instance, sir.”

His smile widens, grates on her nerves.

“’Alice? All right’?” Tarrant queries again.

She composes her answer from uneasiness. “I... I’m trying to be.”

His replying urgency is both gratifying and frightening. A rush of strength, of courage, fills her heart. She can clearly remember the times in her life when she’d felt his strength so intimately: Frabjous Day – although how she’d managed it that time, without the aid of the heart line, she doesn’t know! – and again, on several occasions, within Causwick Castle. Once more, Alice finds herself borrowing her husband’s considerable muchness. And not a moment too soon.

Valereth turns his attention toward her and Alice curses herself for rising to the bait he’d set; she’d opened the air between them, so to speak, invited continued conversation...

He says in a flat, inflectionless tone, “I’ve been wondering when I’d be given the honor of meeting Charles Kingsleigh’s daughter... I’m very gratified to have my patience rewarded at long last, Lady Hightopp.”

“Have I kept you waiting, sir?” she answers, gathering herself and Tarrant’s muchness for a battle of wits. “If that is the case, I must apologize for the... oversight on my part.” Oh, how she wishes she hadn’t overlooked him all this time! How she wishes she’d let Bandy tear him limb from limb on the battlefield!

“’Alice?’”

She replies to Tarrant’s frantic worry with forced calm flavored with anxiety: “I can do this.” And she can. She will. She must. Later, she will marvel at her reaction to this confrontation. Later, she will wonder when and how she had come to depend so completely on Tarrant. Later, she will muse if she’d lost her ability to be a true Champion over the years of peace. But, in all fairness, Alice knows she no longer fights for only the White Queen and there is so much more she can lose now besides her home, her friends, Underland... Her hand fists in her lap, over the linen napkin, in close proximity to her belly and the life within.
Tarrant’s response to her determination is too jumbled for her to truly translate, but she imagines he must be trying to reassure her that he’s drawing closer...

Valereth continues, “Ah, it so pleases me to hear your reassurance, madam, that you would not have kept me waiting intentionally. However, I have found that many things are all the sweeter for the wait one must endure beforehand.”

“And what might one of those things be, sir?”

He appears to consider his response carefully. Alice doesn’t believe the display for a moment: she knows this man, had struggled under the oppressive weight of his iron control and chilling ambition, had escaped him, had turned against him, had outwitted him. She knows that this fight – on this battlefield (the city of London) – will be a hundred times harder to win than the last. Valereth is not a man who falls flat on his face and yet does not take careful notice of the errors that had lead him to that ignominious position. She knows he’s studied his strategy, mastered his mistakes, become a pupil of perfection. His plan, whatever it is now, is as close to unconquerable as is possible.

*I’m still undefeated,* she reminds herself.

Still, that’s no reason to relax her guard.

She waits for his answer: What is best enjoyed after a long, arduous wait?

And, his dark eyes gleaming maliciously, he says in a tone carefully voided of emotion, “Oysters. Yes, one mustn’t... harvest them before it’s advantageous to do so.”

Alice narrows her eyes. *Oysters or a certain Oshtyer?* she doesn’t ask. She doesn’t have to. She suddenly suspects that she’s conversing with a murderer at this very moment. The fact that, were they to both reach for the salt at the same moment, their elbows would brush is not a comforting one.

She says, “I’m sure I wouldn’t know. But I shall keep you in mind, sir, should I come across that particular issue in the future.” Is there any point in trying to deny her knowledge of Oshtyer’s sudden return to Underland? She doesn’t know, but it can’t hurt to try...

“I doubt you will,” he answers, his lips curling into a brief, satisfied sneer. “I’m sure a lady of your considerable talents would have already realized that.”

With those two obscure sentences, she knows it had been Valereth who had inflicted that knife wound on Oshtyer’s chest. Had perhaps even pushed the man down the hole and back to Underland. Why? But, no, that thought must be considered later!

Alice answers as best she can: “Then I should think we won’t meet again.”
“But, I’m sure we will, madam. After all, I’ve merely named one of the finer things best savored slowly.” He inclines his head in her direction, a gesture of respect if not for the decidedly nasty grin curling his thin lips. “I’m sure there will be an occasion for me to introduce you to one more. At the very least.”

“I shall be on my guard until then,” she replies, unable to choke back the steely quality of her tone. “But, a man of your disposition should not discount the possibility that I may yet teach you my own answer to that conundrum.”

His eyebrows arch and he smiles, conceding the war of words... for now. “I shall look forward to it, Lady Hightopp.”

Alice leans to the side as a server places the next dish in front of her. She can smell it, see it, but it doesn’t seem real even though her stomach rolls in response to it. She’s on the verge of excusing herself from the table when Tarrant Speaks to her again. This time the prevailing emotion is satisfaction.

She struggles not to sigh in relief. She waits as Tarrant wrestles with impatience and then a server leans between her and Valereth.

“Lady Hightopp?”

“Yes?”

He offers her a small, folded note upon a tray. “From a... gentlemen who has just arrived.”

“Thank you.” She takes the note, flicks it open and reads the single line that had been hastily scribbled on the fine stationary:

I’m here.

Alice folds the note and nods to the server.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I must see to this. If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen?” she murmurs at her dining companions. Alice doesn’t wait for their permission. She’s out of her seat and out of the room before they can reply. She struggles not to pick up her skirts and run toward the parlor, where visitors of the railway office are accommodated until they can be seen.

Now Alice wonders at her sudden and strong reaction to discovering the very man she and Tarrant would have been hunting had the fate of Underland not demanded their complete attention. She tries to justify her reaction: she had not expected Valereth to be an active member of the Subway
committee; she had not anticipated having to be civil to him; she had not imagined having to sit in such close proximity to the man; she had not anticipated the possibility that he’d intended to murder and then had tossed Oshtyer down the hole and back to Underland. And, as for his reasons for doing that, for admitting to it, and for hinting that he’s been waiting for her... No, Alice’s initial deductions in response to that information are not encouraging at all!

“Alice!” Tarrant whispers, stopping in mid-pace as she slides open the door. She manages to close it behind her before he sweeps her into his arms. “Tell me,” he says and his tone is Commanding.

She does: “Valereth is here.”

His reaction is as disturbing as she’d anticipated. “Here? Nauw?”

Alice tells her husband, the man who is her Champion, “Yes. He’s a member of the committee. In charge of logistics, I believe.”

She doubts Tarrant had even heard that last bit of information. She doubts he’d heard anything past the word “yes.”

“Where is he?”

Alice takes in the furious orange of his irises, the blackening eyelids and shadows beneath his eyes, and grasps his upper arms. “Stop,” she replies in a firm, low voice. “You can’t. I can’t.”

“Why. Not?”

Alice confronts the utter fury in her husband’s eyes and struggles to keep both him and herself calm. She places her hand over the place where she knows his Heart Mark to be and says, “We’re so close to getting the committee to agree to the new tunneling method. We can’t throw that away now. Please...”

She watches as he raises his hands to grasp hers, closes his burning eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Of course. Of course. You are entirely correct, Alice,” he lisps.

Her elation at his calm, controlled reply is dashed, however, when he frowns suddenly. Tarrant opens his eyes, but the verdant green she’d been hoping for is still a distant dream. He studies her and she can see his mind working.
“Ye di’nae Call me righ’away,” he states. His eyes burn through yellow and approach orange again.

“I know,” she answers. Really, what else can she say to the truth? “It won’t happen again.” And because he can read the Promise she offers him in her open expression, his anger and frustration and fury subside.

“Bu’ ye did Call me,” he continues, his voice softening with forgiveness.

“I promised I would,” she replies.

And before she can object, he leans down and kisses her soundly on the lips. “Thank you, my Alice.”

She shakes her head. “I named you my Champion,” she replies on a breath, wary of who might be on the other side of the thin doors, listening. “And I meant it. I’m just sorry there’s nothing to be done at the moment.”

“There’s plenty to be done,” he argues, brushing his fingertips through her hair. “Watching, waiting, listening...” At this point, he spears her with a meaningful look.

She nods. “I will Tell you immediately if he behaves in a suspicious manner.”

*Like hinting at murder and mayhem?* In response to the reminder, Alice bites her lip and, of course, Tarrant notices. His fingers tighten around her gloved hands.

“Tell me,” he directs.

She shakes her head. “Not here. Later. I promise I will. *Later.*” This is not the Place to be delving into Valereth’s motives, machinations, and misdeeds.

“Has he threatened you?” he whispers, cutting to the heart of the matter.

“No.” She forces herself not to add to that, to negate the reassurance with too much justification.

Tarrant relaxes. Marginally. “I cannae accompany you,” he burrs out of frustration. “Bu’ tell me where ye’ll be so I can find ye as hastenly as possible, should ye call f’r me.”

Alice describes the locations of the dining room and the boardroom. “Tarrant...” she says, struggles for words, strives to describe how infuriated she is that she cannot fulfill her duties as Queen’s Champion today and *be done with it all!*
Still holding her hands in his own, he lays them against his chest, pressing her palms against his jacket. Even through all the layers of fabric she thinks she can feel his warmth, the rhythm of his heartbeats...

“Aye?”

She takes a deep breath. “I don’t... I don’t like feeling scared, powerless, frustrated.”

His expression softens despite the bright, anxious peridot green of his eyes. “I know.”

Yes, she imagines he does. Every time she’s picked up a sword in the name of the queen, she imagines this is how he’d felt. Feeling utterly wretched, Alice blinks back sudden tears.

Tarrant gently tilts her face up to his with a gloved knuckle. “Alice, my Alice, you are a Champion... an’ I wouldn’ae change tha’ f’r anythin’.”

She smiles, overwhelmed. He leans down again, brushes a kiss against her cheek and Alice leans into the touch. The moment is interrupted, however, by the sound of the door sliding open. Luckily, the uninvited guest is merely Hamish.

“Alice, what in the world...?” Hamish stops short at the sight of Tarrant in the parlor. Alice can see the confusion and curiosity in his blue eyes, but he manfully refrains from demanding an explanation. Instead, he announces, “Lunch is nearly over. Will you be returning to the meeting or shall I make your excuses?”

“I’ll be there. Just one more moment, please, Hamish.”

“Very well.” He nods in Tarrant’s direction. “Hightopp.”

“Ascot.”

Alice watches him turn on his heel and quit the room. “That reminds me: I’m curious as to how you managed to charm Hamish of all people...” Is there anyone he can’t charm?

Lady Ascot comes to mind.

“I promise to explain in detail as soon as circumstances permit.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”
“Ye b’careful, Alice. I’ll b’expectin’ ye teh b’fully capable o’ holdin’ me teh more th’n jus’ an expl’n’ation later.”

“I will.”

She does. The latter half of the meeting goes as she’d expected: budget concerns and time schedules are smartly addressed and the committee adjourns with the intention of reviewing the complete report provided by the young and enterprising engineers. Alice shakes hands and imparts Lord Ascot’s hopes and best wishes for a more advantageous direction in the construction of the Earl’s Court tunnel and station.

Alice is the first to excuse herself. She glances at Hamish, who nods once, agreeing to be his father’s eyes and ears in her stead. After all, she doubts she’ll be invited into the drawing room for cigars and brandy, where Serious discussions are inevitably held. Despite the desire to see this thing through to the end, to the moment when an agreement is reached and a contract signed, Alice knows that will not be possible. Not for a woman. Not in this World. Her role in this business is nearly over. Were the circumstances different, she might have actually let that bother her.

Not now, however.

Tarrant meets her in the hall as she opens the door and escorts her from the building. He hails a cab, helps her into it, and wraps her up in his arms. Alice takes his hand and, wordlessly, presses it over her stomach beneath her own. For a long moment, neither of them speaks.

“I wish we could have him followed,” she muses aloud.

Tarrant shakes his head and presses his cheek against the top of her hat. “He won’t be going anywhere. He’s built a life here. He’ll fight for it.”

Alice leans away and looks up at him. His yellow-green eyes are narrowed as he stares at the ribbons of light that sway with the imperfectly drawn curtains.

“You’re right; he’s not going anywhere, but not for that reason...”

“What did he say to you?”

Now that Alice has Tarrant’s undivided attention and they’re surrounded by convenient noise – rather than a silent house wherein her mother or those under her employ might be listening – Alice says: “I believe he injured Oshtyer and sent him down the hole himself.”

“And?” he prompts when she pauses to give him a moment to consider the implications.
“And I can’t help thinking how easy it was to get us to come here: the jacket with the London tailor’s mark, the quid in Oshtyer’s pocket...” She wonders about the gun. Why would Valereth have permitted them a gun from the outset of this game?

Tarrant’s arm tightens. “And?”

Alice wishes she could soothe his impatience and worry in this instance, but she finds herself afflicted with the same emotions. “And he did not seem surprised to see me. Or even to see me there. At the meeting. He hinted that... he’s been waiting for our arrival.”

For a long moment, Tarrant’s body is tense, a solid figure carved from stone wrapped around her.

Finally, he states, “The bastard planned this. All of it.”

“It would seem so. And he’s in favor of continuing to use dynamite in the construction of future underground lines.”

Tarrant nods. “I expect he would be.” He pauses. She watches his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. “Alice...”

“I know.” Her hands tighten on his arm and thigh. “I know.”

Their quest has become... no, has twisted into so much more. Now they realize they’re playing a game – a deadly game – with a man who has masterfully drawn them into a labyrinth of his own design.

And they have only two options open to them: flee to another, safer, part of Upland, or fight their way through, play by his rules, master his game.

But, in the end, Alice knows there is no choice:

There will be no retreat to Underland, for they have chosen exile in the hopes that they might change the future, save their world. Even now, with Valereth actively working to destroy the world Down There, they cannot even withdraw to the British countryside. They must stay. They must fight. And they must quickly find a way to win... before the maze becomes too convoluted and leads them to the end that Valereth has no doubt prepared for them with painstaking attention to detail.

Yes, if things go the way Valereth hopes for, Alice will no longer be a Champion for Underland. And then there will be nothing standing in the man’s way. Nothing to stop him from wreaking destruction and vengeance upon the lands and people who have cursed him to the half-life of exile.
Alice shivers.

Tarrant’s arms tighten.

They don’t speak of Valereth or his plans again. They don’t have to. They’re both well aware of what his goals are and what he will do to accomplish them. They’re both well aware that there is nothing to be done except try to stop him. They’re both well aware that they’ve trapped themselves Up Here and there is no way out... except Through.

*~*~*~*

The remaining days of the week are utterly nerve-wracking in their insufferable tedium. Alice resents being forced to apply valuable time and resources to preparing for the soiree she’d advised Ascot to host and regrets the suggestion most heartedly now!

“Alice is coming with us,” Tarrant announces to Hamish when the man shows up to escort him to a reputable gentleman’s tailor.

“Hightopp, you won’t need your wife to help you choose fabrics. I assure you the man I use has the latest fashions well in hand.”

“She’s coming with us, Ascot.” And Alice has to hide a smile: that tone could only belong to The Hightopp. She finds it a rather satisfying experience to be meeting him at long last.

At the tailor’s Alice relinquishes the pounds and shillings required in payment for Tarrant’s evening wear and rush service. In silence, she regards a display of bland top hats as Tarrant replaces his vest and jacket once the measurements have been taken and despairs at their dwindling funds. There’s no possibility of having her own dress made (and most especially not in the few days that remain before the soiree!) with the money that remains. In fact, she’s still not sure how long she and Tarrant will be staying in London nor what sorts of resources they’ll have to use against Valereth or what those might cost! In the end, there’s only one thing she can do: Alice appeals to Margaret for a dress. Luckily, her sister comes through for her.

“Alice, are you sure you wouldn’t rather have your own dress made?” Margaret checks. “I would be happy to put it on my account at Madame Millister’s...”

Alice hides a cringe at the thought. No, if she goes to a London tailor’s she’ll end up trussed up in a corset and stockings and while she might find the fortitude to suffer through an evening in stockings, she is not subjecting the child she carries to a corset!
“I’m sure. I just hope you don’t want the gown back. I’m afraid it’ll be altered beyond recognition by the time we’re done with it.”

“We?”

Oh, botheration! She hadn’t meant to let that slip! Since her return, she’s managed to keep Tarrant’s means of earning an income out of the conversations she has had with her mother and sister. Thus far, she’s let everyone assume that he supports the both of them through his lands and other family holdings, like the lords of Britain do. Now, however...

Alice does her best to salvage the situation with misdirecting truths: “I meant the tailor, of course.” Which Tarrant is! “I’ll just take it into town –” Where her mother lives! “– to have it altered and...”

Margaret narrows her eyes and Alice curses her childhood tendency toward telling creative truths. “No, you didn’t,” her sister accuses. “Who’s going to help you with this dress, Alice?”

She sighs. “Tarrant,” she admits, giving up. Hopefully, they won’t have to remain in London too much longer... “He’s a milliner by trade.”

“Oh. I... see.” Margaret’s stiff tone speaks far more eloquently than any words could have. “Well. I imagine his skills will come in quite useful in this instance.”

Alice has no illusions about her mother remaining uninformed of this fact, so she doesn’t hesitate to show Tarrant to the sewing room in her mother’s house where she puts on the too-large, too-long gown and models it for him later that evening.

Tarrant examines the piece with a critical eye. “Well, the color’s not a total loss,” he says referring to the soft violet hue. Unfortunately, that’s the only complimentary comment he pays the garment. Alice can’t help thinking that it’s a good thing the neckline manages to cover the Heart Mark, but lets the observation go unvoiced.

“I’m sorry,” she says, brushing his hair back over his shoulder as he kneels to get a better look at the stitching at the waist of the gown. “I know it’s a lot of work for you. If we had more time...” And more money...

Tarrant smiles up at her. “Don’t be sorry, my Alice. Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to make you a dress? Admittedly, this is not how I’d envisioned going about doing so, but it has been on my mind for... a long time.”

Alice bites back another apology – how many times has her stubborn self-reliance hurt him in all their years of marriage? – and summons a smile. “First hats, now dresses? What’s next, Hatter? My very own chaise lounge?”
He giggles. “Don’t be silly, Alice. If it’s furniture you desire, I shall have to commission something from the Setteesons!”

Alice tilts her head to the side and squints. “Would Master Setteeson be the one with the blond beard and the eye patch?”

“Yes, he would.”

“Is it a very dangerous occupation? Furniture making?”

“Not at all!”

“Then how did he lose his eye?”

“His eye? Well, as far as I know, he still has both of them!”

“But the eye patch...?”

Tarrant shakes his head. “The fool thinks it makes him look roguish.”

“Hm,” Alice replies, considering. “The button nose and that round belly of his tend to ruin the effect, I think.”

Tarrant giggles. “As do I, my Alice.” He places his hands on her hips and, clearing his throat, asks, “Now, what are your requests with regards to this spiritless garment?”

“No corset.”

“Well,” he replies, his hands moving over her lower stomach, “that goes without saying.”

“Then do as you will with it,” Alice replies and is rewarded with a bright grin and an even brighter pair of green eyes.

“And I shall!” he promises.

Alice keeps him company as he snips and sews. She sits on the other side of the wide sewing table dressed only in her underwear and a dressing gown she’d snuck out of her old room. She wiggles her ankles in time with his humming and, occasionally teaches him a song from her own childhood. They’ve moved on to “Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat” before Tarrant declares the dress ready for
another fitting.

She dons it again and lets Tarrant fuss a bit more over the improvements to it.

“Could use a bit of embroidering here and here,” he mumbles. “Ribbon trimming...” Alice holds various spools of thread and bits of ribbons that he’d unearthed from the depths of the sewing cabinet and smiles as he works out the conundrum that the dress presents to him. Finally, his plan of action set, Tarrant empties her hands and, kneeling, begins fiddling with the too-long hem.

Perhaps, considering Valereth’s appearance and the threat he presents, Alice shouldn’t be enjoying something so frivolous as watching Tarrant tear apart and remake a dress that had probably cost Lowell a tidy sum. But, considering the fact that it’s Lowell’s money they’re snubbing, perhaps Alice ought to enjoy the experience!

Her bare fingers move through his hair when he’s kneeling within reach and he tilts his head into her touch. She wonders if he does so on purpose or if it’s an unconscious gesture. Her mind is occupied with this highly important debate when, suddenly, the door opens.

“What on Earth... Alice?! What are you doing in here? And... Tarrant?!”

“Good evening, mother,” Alice replies for both of them. “Is it time for dinner already?”

Her mother ignores the question and gapes at Tarrant who is still kneeling, although no longer pinning away at the hem of the dress. “Tarrant, what are you doing?”

He reaches up to remove the pins from between his lips and Helen gasps.

“Your hand!” Rushing forward, she frets, “Here! Let me see that! Oh, dear! You’re going to bleed all over that dress! How did you manage to do that to your... self...”

Tarrant looks up at Alice just as she looks down at him. Helen stands with Tarrant’s left hand in her grasp, gaping at the blood-red heart line stretching across his skin.

“What... is this?”

Alice pulls her left arm behind her back as unobtrusively as possible. Oh, the one time they’d taken their gloves off outside their room would be the one time her mother would barge in and see...!

“Mother, it’s fine. I’m sure I mentioned that the... customs are different where Tarrant comes from.”

“But... this...”
“Tattoo, mother,” Alice supplies, her heart breaking at the gross over-simplification. “Don’t worry; no one else has seen it. Tarrant has been very careful.”

Her mother allows Tarrant to remove his hand from her grasp. Self-consciously, he tucks it behind his back and, moving to stand in front of Alice’s left side, clears his throat. “It’s my understanding,” he lisps a bit desperately, “that Margaret has given Alice this dress for the Ascots’ soiree. I was merely attempting to make it suit Alice’s tastes.”

Despite the answer to Helen’s original question, Alice’s mother doesn’t appear to take any interest in it or Tarrant’s role in the proceedings. “Yes,” she replies slowly. “You’ve always worn gloves, haven’t you?” And then the Unthinkable happens: Helen focuses her shrewd, blue eyes on Alice. “As have you!”

Tarrant does an admirable job of discreetly blocking Helen from grabbing her daughter’s arm, but Alice recognizes the futility of the exercise from the outset.

“Stop,” she Sends along the heart line and, laying a hand on his arm, gently holds him still. Alice steps out from behind him and, with a sigh, extends her left arm.

“Yes, I have one, too.”

Helen gapes at the dark blue heart line and pushes the flared, violet lace up to Alice’s elbow, where the fitted sleeve ends and the trimming begins. “Dear Lord...” she gasps. Alice winces as her horrified gaze lifts from the twisting design. “How far does this... this... abomination reach, ALICE?!”

“Mother! Stop it!” Alice pulls her arm out of her mother’s grasp.

“Did he make you do that to yourself?!”

“No, Tarrant has never forced me to do a single thing!” Alice ignores his guilty fidget; after seven years he should have already forgiven himself for initiating the Thrice a-Vow without her consent! “This was my choice.”

“Your choice,” Helen echoes. “Of course it was. Only you would so foolishly defile your body with something so outrageous!”

“How is this any different from a wedding ring, mother? Those are also meant to be permanent, are they not?”

Her mother throws up her hands. “I don’t know why I bother to try to reason with you! You’ve never paid attention to the conventions that don’t fit your preferences. Do as you will. Have ink work
done on your face, if you like! It’s not as if I’ll be able to stop you!”

Alice watches her mother storm out of the room. Tarrant’s hands settle on her shoulders and she leans back against his chest.

“Bloody bulloghin’ brangergain!” she sighs.

“I’m so very, very sorry, Alice,” he whispers, kissing her ear. “Perhaps if we explain...”

“Explain that you’re a hatter by trade? Half-mad to boot? That without this mark hat-making would eventually rot your mind? That I bound myself to you knowingly, despite that? That our hearts are tied each to the other for all time?” Alice takes a deep breath. “Yes, I’m sure that would make things much better. Let’s lay our secrets bare because, of course, my mother will be willing to believe in the magic of a place she has no idea exists at all!”

“Alice...”

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I...”

Tarrant circles around to stand in front of her. His hands are warm on her arms. He waits for her explanation.

“I just... this isn’t a good time for more complications. I’d hoped we could get through this without...” Alice shakes her head. “Never mind. We’ll wear our gloves and she’ll pretend she’d never seen our heart lines and everything will be... fine. We won’t be staying much longer anyway. Any day now, Mirana will open the mirror and we’ll be able to go home.” Alice doesn’t add that the journey home will only be possible with Valereth in their custody. She doesn’t have to. She knows that Tarrant understands.

“Alice, my Raven,” he murmurs against her ear. He collects her hand and presses it over his Heart Mark. “My Calm.”

She leans her forehead against his shoulder and fights back tears. Yes, that four-pointed star on his chest is the symbol of all that she Gives to him through the heart line: calm and control.

She reaches for his hand and places his palm against the somewhat wobbly ellipse that decorates her chest.

“Tarrant, my Writing Desk,” she replies, her lips brushing his throat. “My Courage.” Yes, her courage and muchness and more.
She thinks of her mother, the soiree, the subway, Valereth and his nefarious plans... And Alice has the distinct feeling that both she and Tarrant are going to be in desperate need of these qualities before all of this is finally over.

Chapter End Notes

1. With regards to the Heart Marks, please don't feel discouraged from your own interpretation! For the purposes of the coming chapters I've merely pointed out ONE FACET of the marks! That being: the Heart Marks are (at least in part) the manifestation of what each partner brings to the bond and how they support each other. In my mind (which should not be taken as an authority on the subject, despite me being the author!) the four-pointed star symbolizes order and calm. The fact that it's a star rather than a square hints at creativity and curiosity. As for the ellipse: while a circle would symbolize perfection or the ways of nature or the organic world, an ellipse is just a bit... off-center, which I think reflects the eccentricities of Tarrant's uncorrupted mind. (Uncorrupted by greed and stereotypes and such.) Alice's Heart Mark is further described as an imperfect ellipse; this is due to Tarrant's madness. But, nonetheless, a round shape symbolizes strength, a shield, and enduring courage, and those are the things Tarrant gives to his Alice.

HOWEVER, I ADORE HEARING WHAT OTHERS THINK THESE MARKS MEAN, SO PLEASE DON'T SQUASH YOUR IDEAS WILLY-NILLY! SHARE THEM! (^__~)
This chapter contains violence, gore, and death.

The Ascots’ country estate illuminates the night, glowing like a beacon of salvation and purity against the shadows of the distant forests and expansive lawn. Once upon a time, Alice would have thought it a lovely sight. Now, she can only think of Marmoreal, of the natural luminosity of the stone and the sweetness of the ever-blossoming cherry trees.

“Alice?”

She struggles with her heartache. “I’m sorry. I’m just... homesick, I suppose.” She chuckles dryly. “And over-emotional.”

Tarrant’s arms are warm around her and his chest solid against her shoulder. The Kingsleigh carriage rolls slowly up the drive, conforming to the orderly line of similar vehicles waiting to release their occupants to the brightly lit main entrance of the grand house. She pets the sleeve of his new jacket.

“I’m sorry about the tailcoat and... other things,” she murmurs, hating the fact that she has allowed this World to make Tarrant even more uncomfortable, that he’s had to acquiesce to these pointless and nonsensical customs. At least they’d managed to get the tailor to leave a bit of give in the coat so that Tarrant wouldn’t have to go without the knife, especially at a function where they expect Valereth to be present.

“It’s only for one evening, Alice. I will survive.”

She smiles. “Thank you for the dress.”

“Twas my pleasure, Alice.”

She knows it had been. Even after her mother had barged in and discovered their heart lines, Tarrant had been unable to dwell on the sudden discord between themselves and their hostess. He’d lost himself in something familiar and soothing and Alice had allowed herself to become lost with him. It had been a relief to escape their worries for even a few hours. But Alice senses there’s more to it than just that; they are that much closer to returning home.
“I suspect the committee will announce their decision tonight,” Alice whispers. “One way or another, we’ll know if our plan has worked.”

Tarrant shakes his head. “Your plan, Champion Alice.”

“Our plan,” she insists. “You haven’t forgotten that I couldn’t have done any of this without you, have you?”

He presses his lips to her hair and Alice feels his mouth curve into a smile against her scalp. “It’s nearly finished, isn’t it, Raven,” he muses.

“Yes.” And then all they’ll have to do is figure out what to do with Valereth until they’re able to travel home through the mirrors.

At the reminder, Alice wonders how Maevyn is, if the little jabberwocky is still fighting the sickness, if Mirana has found a way to help the creature through the healing arts and alchemy. If Krystoval has permitted it.

“You’re worrying,” Tarrant observes. “I can feel it, you know. Your thoughts are too heavy and too fast for regular Alice thoughts.”

She sighs but doesn’t deny it. And then the carriage is drifting to a halt in front of the manor entrance. Alice sits up and moves to the opposite bench, where she picks up her father’s black satin top hat and settles it on Tarrant’s head.

She smiles at the picture he makes. Tarrant smiles back.

“No hat?” she’d asked that afternoon over tea.

“I think not,” he’d replied, glancing at his distinctive hat where it had been keeping Alice’s company. “The very thought of one of those unremarkable, lifeless creations in the shops is...”

“And what about a hat worn by a man who often believed in as many as six impossible things before breakfast?” she’d wondered aloud.

Tarrant had been surprised, but had given her a delighted, gap-toothed grin. “I would be honored to wear the former hat of such a saganistute man, my Alice.”

Looking at her husband now, in the moment before the carriage doors are opened for them, Alice says, “You give life to that hat again. Thank you for wearing it for me.”
“My Alice,” he replies, reaching for her gloved hands. “You’ve never asked me to wear anything for you before. Not even my clan colors.” He brushes a kiss across her knuckles and lingers over the silver ring she still – always! – wears on her left hand. “Ye ken I’d be proud teh wear whate’er ye’d like.”

She shivers. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

And then there’s a smart rap on the door – a warning – before the brass handle is turned and suddenly, Alice is being guided out and into the light. Tarrant steps out and stops just behind her. He offers his arm with an easy motion. She smiles at him, his borrowed walking stick in hand and hat tilted rakishly on his head. She’s struck suddenly by the utter masculine beauty of him.

Uncaring of the next carriage pulling up behind them, Alice says, “I’d say you’ve never looked more handsome, except I’m sure you have.”

He beams. “Forgetting me, Alice? Naughty.”

She laughs and he guides her toward the stairs. In the moment before they pass through the open doorway, Tarrant leans toward her ear and whispers, “For certainly, I shall never forget how entrancing you look tonight, my Alice.”

“And have I entranced you, my lord?” she teases back.

“Why do you think I call you my Alice?”

“Hm. Would it be because your every thought – and even your very being – is bent upon my every whim and happiness?”

His smile is brief and brilliant, but then he schools his expression into one of grave sincerity. “It would. Utterly, my Alice. There is no me without you.”

Oh, what she wouldn’t give for a private moment to thank him properly for those heart-melting words, for the Truth of them she can see in his eyes and Feel from his heart. The only reply she can give him is a silent one:

Love-mine-want-need-yours-always-devotion-forever.

His breath catches in his throat.

“I beg your pardon, sir. Your invitation?”
Alice startles. “Oh! I beg your pardon.” She opens her small handbag and, reaching around the revolver she still carries with her everywhere, removes the envelope that displays the Ascot crest.

“Very good, madam.” The doorman accepts the invitation with a bow and then escorts them within. At the entrance to the ballroom, Tarrant relinquishes his hat and walking stick. Alice clutches his arm and endures the announcement of their names. Thankfully, they don’t hover on the threshold for very long.

“Alice! Tarrant! How good of you to come! And on time,” Lord Ascot enthuses from a nearby table.

“Good evening, sir. You do that suit a good turn,” Alice compliments him. “And I shall have to find your wife to praise her efforts; this is a truly lovely event!”

With the pleasantries and handshake with Tarrant taken care of, Lord Ascot motions Alice closer with a crooked finger. “Your plan is working perfectly, my dear.” Townsend nods inconspicuously in the direction of several MDR men who are entertaining the attentions of lords and ladies with their chests noticeably puffed up.

“They certainly look amiable, sir,” she agrees on a laugh.

“That they do. We shall see an end to this dynamite business before the evening is out. You can count on that!”

“I look forward to it!”

Townsend nods. Then, directing his attention over Alice’s shoulder (which is easy to do as she’s still leaning down), he demands of Tarrant, “Now, get your lady out there and show me how they dance in your country, Lord Hightopp!”

“With pleasure, sir.”

And it is. For the first time in memory, Alice actually enjoys a dance at an Upland event. She follows Tarrant’s lead, not caring that their Underlandian waltz draws puzzled looks. They follow the music and Alice finds herself laughing at the thought of creating a tiny whirlwind of Underland here between the two of them with nothing more than their arms and feet and a bit of breeze.

It appears hats and dresses aren’t the only things her husband is capable of crafting masterfully on a moment’s notice.

“Are you less homesick now, my Alice?” he murmurs, stepping closer and gently spinning both of them around.
“Much less. Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“And,” she can’t resist wondering aloud, “just how far would you go for your wife’s pleasure?”

“To the ends of both Worlds, my Alice.”

“And would you kill Time again?”

“Without a second thought!”

“And how would you address one of her mad whims?”

“With madness of my own, of course!”

Alice laughs. Uncaring of the crush of dancers around them, she inquires, “How is it possible I can love you more every day when I’m sure that I’d reached the pinnacle of such a phenomenon the day before?”

She feels Tarrant’s heart skip a beat. “Perhaps your heart grows larger with each day to accommodate a bit more?” he replies softly.

“It must be,” she agrees. And then tilts her head to the side and smiles, “How is it you so quickly found an answer to my riddle, Raven?”

On a whisper, he confides, “I’ve been experiencing the same phenomenon myself.”

“For very long?”

“Only ten years, approximately.”

Alice counters, “And what do you think our prospects are for the next ten?”

“Promising,” he quickly answers. “Our prospects are very promising, my Alice.” He doesn’t have to glance down toward her belly – only just recently beginning to change, to curve outward by the tiniest increment of measurement – for her to read his Mind.
Alice is about to remind him that they still haven’t thought of names yet, when Reality slams into her, making her stumble and forcing Tarrant to hold her up while dodging a waltzing couple.

“What is it?”

“Valereth’s just arrived,” she murmurs, trying not to stare over his shoulder at the entrance to the ballroom. Alice echoes Tarrant’s frustrated breath.

“Perhaps we should address the refreshments table? We haven’t introduced ourselves properly yet,” he suggests. And, because it will give them a good excuse to stand around watching the other guests (and one in particular!), Alice agrees.

They ignore the stares and sniffs and scandal-laced whispering that follows in their wake: yes, Alice knows her dress is not conventionally fashionable; yes, she knows her husband’s hair is outrageously long and hers startlingly short; yes, she knows they hadn’t managed a proper waltz. Sighing, she wonders why they’d even bothered to leave their hats at home or procure a new suit for Tarrant.

Lord Ascot is a rare breed of man, indeed, for no one else in this room will give them the time of day due to their Otherness.

Tarrant brushes a curl behind her ear. “Stop,” he whispers. “Let them think what they will.”

And, summoning a determined smile, she does.

Tarrant fills a plate for both of them and she collects a glass of champagne, not for drinking – no, the very thought of fermented beverages makes her stomach churn, Himoha flower or no – but for something to hold and, if necessary, something to throw. Her lips curve as she remembers dousing those two blustering fellows at the Wooing Rites Banquet.

Tarrant remembers as well.

With a giggle, he gently lays a hand over her wrist. “Now, Alice, as much as I would love to see how that rude fellow over there would suit –” Tarrant glances down at the flute in her hand. “– yellow Wassailin...”

“I know. There’s nothing to stop me from imagining it, though.”

“Nor me!” He holds out the dish. “Something to...” He frowns at the collection of unfamiliar appetizers. “… eat? Well, presumably.”

“You presume correctly,” Alice assures him, lifting a dainty fork and stabbing a spinach puff. When
her stomach doesn’t object to the smell of it, she nibbles a corner and scans the crowd for their wayward Underlandian.

“Speaking to the older gentleman with the handlebar mustache and utterly unimaginatively tied cravat,” Tarrant tells her, poking a dollop of pâté with his own fork. Alice offers him the spinach puff.

“Little steps, love,” she tells him. “Save that one for when you’re feeling more daring.”

He giggles. “I can always count on you, my Alice. Even for introducing me to Upland soiree foodstuffs.”

“I’m happy to help. My assistance is especially invaluable when it comes to dealing with maypoles,” she mutters.

Tarrant snorts and cackles, drawing more attention to them, but Alice doesn’t care. “Do you think Thackery might be able to make spinach puffs for us? Or should I ask for the recipe?” she says, coming to his rescue.

He calms and samples the pastry, his eyes widening slightly as his low expectations are more than exceeded. “Not bad,” he agrees. “I suspect a recipe won’t be required. It’s a relatively straightforward sort of taste to describe, isn’t it?”

“True.” And a recipe would probably only confuse the poor hare, what with the ingredients being listed before the actual cooking preparation... It still escapes Alice how food in Underland can be passed around before being cut, cooked before the ingredients have been prepared...

They don’t dance again. They poke at the edibles on the plate, Alice with restless energy and Tarrant with blatant suspicion, as they track Valereth’s movements in the room. The evening wears on and then as the orchestra strikes up the tune for the quadrille, Alice watches as Hamish gathers up the subway committee members and escorts them toward the ballroom doors.

“Alice, should you be going with them?”

She shakes her head. “They’ll be going to the gentlemen’s parlor. To drink and smoke and talk business.” And even if the smell weren’t capable of making her gag, she wouldn’t be all that enthusiastic about gaining entrance.

They watch as their quarry follows the younger Lord Ascot’s lead. Alice scans the crowd for Townsend but, not finding him, assumes his son must have already helped him into the drawing room to greet the guests.
“It’s happening now, isn’t it?” Tarrant asks quietly.

“Yes. Lord Ascot is determined to resolve this tonight.” She smiles. “And when he’s made up his mind, there’s no other possible outcome.”

Tarrant reaches for her hand and squeezes her fingers. He sighs and Alice hears the sound of relief. Even her heart line seems quieter, lighter than it has in weeks. Alice can’t help but agree with him: one impossible problem settled. And only one more to be addressed: Valereth. Not that Alice imagines for one instant that the blighter will cooperate with them. Or be civil. No, at the luncheon, the air between them had been heavy with malice. He is Planning something. And Alice knows neither she nor Tarrant will like it. No, not at all.

She frowns. “Tarrant...”

“Yes?”

A trickle of Anxiety escapes her heart before she can contain it. “As there’s a very good chance the committee will vote in favor of changing their construction methods...”

“Yes?” She hears less curiosity and more nervousness in his tone now.

“We’d better keep an eye on Valereth. He won’t want to give up his plans so easily.”

Tarrant’s eyes narrow. “Of course. Responsible for logistics, you said?”

Alice nods, surprised that he remembers that detail.

“No doubt has the dynamite already, or knows where it is. Might even know how to use it...”

“Which means he could use it at any time, provided he has the opportunity to do so.”

Their gazes meet and agree: there will be no rest for them until Mirana opens the mirrors and they can force Valereth back through it to where he belongs.

“I’m sure he has a plan,” she continues. “If only we knew what it was!”

Tarrant agrees by way of his silence.

They dissect the pâté and the blue cheese. They watch the dancers but don’t dare join in again, knowing that Valereth could easily slip past them if given the chance. Alice worries that, upon
hearing the committee’s decision, the man will escape them, head back to town, and set off the explosives himself.

Feeling tense and fidgety, Alice straightens Tarrant’s cravat instead of attempting to shred the lace cuffs of her sleeves. She decides his cravat can’t be improved because it had unfortunately been perfect to being with, but gives him a pat on the chest nonetheless. However, when she does so, her hand encounters something small, hard, and cylindrical through the fabric over the lapel pocket. Two somethings.

She pats his chest again. “What are those?”

His gaze – nearly yellow with anxiety – meets hers. Yes, they both can Feel that Something is going to happen tonight. “Krystoval’s gift,” he tells her. “Didn’t think ‘twas a good idea teh leave i’tin th’room...”

“No, you’re right. We can’t have one of the maids finding them.” Dear Fates, the heart lines had been hard enough to explain, but an iridescent purple substance? What would she say to justify that?

Just as tense, awkward silence settles over them, Alice turns at a tap on her shoulder. “Hamish! You’ve escaped the cloud of tobacco already?”

He grimaces. “Gladly. I’m sure it’s an acquired taste I’ll... acquire when I’m good and ready for it.”

Alice smiles.

“In any case, I’ve come to tell you the good news: father’s agreed to waste money on that ridiculous subway project and the committee has agreed to institute the tunnel shielding method of Barlow’s and Greathead’s immediately.”

Tarrant’s fingers tighten around hers. She enthuses, “That’s wonderful news! Are they signing over it?”

“Done and dry,” he confirms, referring to the ink on the parchment. “And now that you’ve saved our fair city from overenthusiastic demolition crews, what will you do next?”

Alice is a little surprised to notice that this question had been directed to both her and Tarrant. She glances at him out of habit. “I’m not really, sure. We have yet to determine how much longer we’ll be able to stay...”

“Well, when you do, I’ll expect to be informed. We can’t have you running off without a proper good-bye,” he informs her. And then, “Hightopp, would you mind if I borrowed your Alice for a dance?”
Tarrant’s face, as well as his heart, holds an interesting mix of possession and amusement. “That’s up to Alice,” he says instead.

Hamish turns toward her. “What do you say, Alice? One dance?”

“As long as it’s not the quadrille.”

Hamish stifles a bark of laughter behind a stuffy expression. Still, she enjoys the twitch his face makes with the effort. “No, I believe they’re playing a schottische at the moment, but if you’ve forgotten how...”

“I’ll be sure to break all of your toes.”

He smiles and holds out a hand. “I’ll risk it.”

Alice feels fingertips against the back of her neck. She turns and smiles as Tarrant presses a kiss to her forehead. “Go let your feet enjoy themselves,” he bids her.

She laughs and, turning back to Hamish, says, “You don’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

He gives her a martyred look as she accepts his hand. “Well, it’s too late to withdraw the offer. I shall have to resign myself to my fate and endeavor to learn from my mistakes.”

“Good luck with that,” she replies as he swings her around and they join the whirling, kaleidoscope of dancers. The threat of broken toes does the trick, however, and he doesn’t dare pull her too close, for which she’s very thankful. Every few steps, she glances in Tarrant’s direction. Sometimes he’s watching her right back (which induces a delightful shiver down her spine) and sometimes he’s scanning the crowd, presumably for Valereth.

“You seem a bit distracted tonight,” Hamish observes.

“Because I haven’t pointed out the gravy stain on your cravat?” she asks impishly.

Scowling, Hamish glances down at the garment. He doesn’t even break stride as he does so. “You’re having me on. There’s nothing there, Alice.”

“If you say so.”

He huffs. “Tell me what’s on your mind, Alice. I shan’t ask again and then we’ll be forced to endure the rest of this dance in awkward silence.”
“Threats, Hamish? That’s new.”

“Whatever it takes, madam.”

She sighs, glances at Tarrant, who is watching her at that precise moment (which means Valereth still hasn’t reappeared although she can see several men from the railway once more enjoying the party and Lord Ascot’s brandy). “Just tell me your father’s not alone with Mr. Rethbourne.”

“No, he isn’t. If you must know, he’s ensconced in his office with his solicitor, trying to figure out a way to reel you back into the company with an offer of a partnership.”

“What? No! Now you had better be having me on, Hamish.”

“I’m not,” he grouches.

“Botheration,” she growls. “That partnership ought to go to you. You’re the one who worked for it.”

Hamish seems mollified by her assertion. “Thank you, Alice. It’s kind of you to say that.”

“It was an observation, not an opinion. Treat it as such, would you?”

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

He glances down at her with a speculative gleam in his blue eyes. “So you have no interest whatsoever in staying with the company?”

“I’m afraid not, Hamish. I love your father dearly, but I can’t stay. Tarrant isn’t the only one with obligations waiting in—”

“Yes?” Hamish prompts. “What was the name of that delightful nation you’ve come from? It seems to have slipped my mind.”

“Yes?” Hamish prompts. “What was the name of that delightful nation you’ve come from? It seems to have slipped my mind.”

“Hamish, you rotter, I never told you its name and I’m not about to. Tarrant and I are under obligation to the queen to keep the country’s name and location a secret.”

“A pity. I should think if that hat you’d arrived wearing and this gown are any indication, it’s a country full of people with grand imagination and vision. A trade agreement would have been most
“Welcome.”

“One more mention of trade and I’ll start breaking toes, Hamish.” His lips twitch into a reluctant smile. Alice sighs. “But you’re right. They are a people of great imagination and vision.”

“Which is why you can’t wait to return,” he finished. “I understand, Alice. So will my father. But... he will miss you.”

_Holy Grail_? she doesn’t ask. Alice replies, “I’ll miss him, too.”

Hamish glances at her expression, sees the knowing gleam in her eyes and the Mona Lisa smile on her lips, and relaxes. “That will be a comfort to him, I’m sure.”

A peace Alice hadn’t expected to feel (and, least of all, with Hamish Ascot!) settles over her. When Alice glances up again in Tarrant’s direction, she blinks in confusion at the empty space on the wall. Had she looked in the wrong direction? Gotten turned around on the dance floor? (Oh, a pun!) Frowning, she scans the crowd.

“Alice? What is it?”

Still not seeing Tarrant, Alice Calls to him but only a slight stab of aggressive irritation answers her. “I’m so sorry, Hamish, could we cut this dance short?” Meeting his unhappy expression, she offers, “I’ll still owe you one later.”

“Well... I suppose so then,” he answers agreeably and then disengages them both from the throng. Even before they’ve moved completely off of the dance floor, Alice is glancing around for Tarrant.

“Looking for Hightopp?” Hamish comments.

Alice gives him a Look.

He chuckles and nods toward the terrace. “I happened to notice him heading outside. Perhaps he simply needed a breath of fresh air. These sorts of affairs _do_ tend to get a bit stifling. I’m sure he—Alice?!”

Squeezing through the crowd in the direction of the terrace, Alice waves a distracted farewell to Hamish.

“Tarrant?!” she Calls, worried at his sudden absence and the rumblings of frustration along the heart line. Clutching her handbag, she manages to elbow her way toward the open doors and onto the wide balcony overlooking the yard.
She squints into the darkness, willing her eyes to adjust. From this vantage point, she can see the edge of the forest, the gazebo where she and Hamish had suffered through that wretched proposal, and Lady Ascot’s high-hedged, maze-like rose garden...

The rose garden!

There!

Alice squints at a flash of movement deep within the hedges. She’s moving down the steps before she even composes her next heart line message:

“*I’m coming!*”

But then: “**NO! STOP!**”

Baffled, she stumbles to a halt at the base of the stairs. In the shadow of the terrace, Alice considers the situation: Why had Tarrant come out here? Is he truly all right? If he weren’t would he admit it to her? His pregnant wife whom he’s supposed to be protecting?

“But then..."

“Stubborn Outlander,” she mutters, striding toward the roses.

But then...

Then...!

Alice gasps as someone roughly grabs her arm and swings her about. She can’t stop her momentum – aided by the determined strides she’d taken in the direction of the maze – and brings up her arms just in time to keep her face from smashing into the stone wall beneath the terrace.

“*Champion Alice.*”

Alice’s heart sputters in fear at the satisfaction in Valereth’s soft voice.

“Well? Are you a Champion or not? Turn and face your foe, Lassling.”

The name, spoken in *his* voice, in *that* tone, summons forth a storm of memories and before she can trample them down, before she can even *remember the existence of the revolver in her handbag* she turns.
And flinches at the heat.

Heat and an odd numbness in her stomach.

She twitches, gasps, and looks away from Valereth’s face to the long, slender blade buried in her body.

“Why, Champion Alice... no corset? I don’t believe you’re properly dressed.”

The words, patronizing with the hint of a sneer wash over her. Thinking only of the child – *their child!* – Alice’s fingers scrabble at the slick, bloody blade, soaking and slicing open her gloves. She pushes herself back until she hits the wall, grabs and pulls at the blade.

But Valereth is stronger.

Alice has no idea what message her heart line is sending now. She cannot recognize Tarrant’s reaction to it. Her mind is blank with panic-fear-terror-desperation-STOP-NO-NO-NO-NO-NOT-REAL-NOT-HAPPENING!!!

She barely feels Valereth’s hand at her throat, knocking her head against the wall, she barely registers the pain of it, barely sees the white stars exploding across her vision. The blade – long and slender, typical of those concealed within a gentleman’s walking stick – stirs, slices, tears.

Her frantic hands are no match for it.

*NO-NO-NO-NO-NO!*

She thinks of the child, the yet-to-be-named child in her belly just bellow the hot, aching, biting pain in her guts.

“Die, Champion of Underland,” a voice commands in her ear. “But, please, not too quickly.”

And then Alice falls. Lands. Her fingers curl into the turf before she finds the strength to move her arm to her abdomen. But no... no... there is nothing she can do about the gaping wounds. He’d run her through. There’s no point in trying to hold herself together. She is not Humpty Dumpty and not even her queen, a woman of considerable skills in the healing arts, will be able to save her now.

“And now for Hightopp.”

Her pain-turned-hopelessness-turned-despair sharpens and twists and *snarls.*
She opens her eyes, stares as Valereth turns toward the rose gardens. Any moment now Tarrant will come barreling out of there... and right into Valereth’s sword!

NO!

Alice grabs for the only thing within her power left to do. The only gift she can give her husband. The only way left for a fallen Champion to fight... and win!

*~*~*~*~*

He’d made a choice.

When he’d glanced away from the sight of his Alice twirling around the dance floor with that harmless, sometimes-amusingly-arrogant fop, Hamish, scowling at him and no doubt threatening his future ability to walk successfully in a straight line (although why anyone would bother to walk in a straight line, Tarrant isn’t sure)... when he’d glanced away and had glimpsed that slurring urpal slackush scrum wending his way through the crowd toward the terrace doors... when he’d seen the restrained scowl on the man’s face and the air of determination about his being... when he’d seen that, he’d made a choice. A choice between being Alice’s husband and being her Champion.

He’d left her safe in Ascot’s care, had steeled his heart, and had followed.

Through the crush of perfumed-yet-perspiring people, onto the terrace, down the steps, across the lawn, and down a path formed by towering hedges of red roses.

His mind had reeled slightly at the sight:

_Downal wyth Bluddy Behg Hid!!_

But a flash of a tailcoat disappearing around the bend had saved him from the madness, from alerting Alice to his quest. No, Alice need not know. He’ll deal with this. This time – this _one time!_ – he’ll save her!

He’d made another choice. A right turn, then another, then a left, and then... and then...

Just as he realizes that the tailcoat and the man wearing it had disappeared, Alice Notices his absence in the ballroom.

He winces at her Alarm. Is this what the sensation feels like when he worries for her? If so, he’s
surprised she’s never complained about it before: it feels bloody awful. Massaging his chest with his left hand, long-bladed knife in his right, Tarrant Replies.

“Everything’s fine! Stay where you are.”

Irritated with himself for losing the blighter, he turns and begins making his way back the way he’d come. He breathes with care and steps with soft, deliberate motions. Valereth is out here still and he must be wary of sudden attack. With rational stealth, Tarrant moves through the maze, ignores the color of the roses – ignores the roses entirely! – and pauses at each juncture to listen before crossing the intersection. He’s just beginning to marvel at how very far he’d wandered into the maze when another message from Alice sears his heart.

Determination-stubbornness-rash-temper-now!

But, no! NO!! He Shouts his denial back to her. She must stay in the ballroom where it’s safe! Where there are people! Where Valereth would not dare harm her!

He looks up, in what he believes to be the direction of the terrace, and scowls. He damns the too-high, too-thick hedges. He damns the filtered, listless sounds of the party that seem to scatter and echo around him, coming from all directions.

He prays he hasn’t gotten himself turned around in this bloody maze because if he has then...!

Then...!

Panic-fear-confusion-NO-shock-numb-what?-NO-damnation!

Tarrant gasps. “Alice!”

He Reaches for her, opens up his heart as he rushes forward, no longer concerned with stealth or silence. He Reaches just as a chillingly familiar, but long-unfelt, sensation settles over the heart line: madness. Alice’s madness.

His breath catches and tangles in his throat. He grabs at the rose bushes to help steady himself as he rushes around corner after corner. His hands come away wet. It does not occur to him that it’s blood.

The moment of Silence – of cold, absolute, mad Silence – that had settled over his heart shatters, breaks, explodes with panic and terror and disbelief and betrayal and desperation so thick and sharp Tarrant gags on it.

“ALICE?!” he Calls.
She doesn’t answer.

The madness has gone and the bitter tang of her panic dulls, un-focuses, rambles and whirls. Her denial is the strongest emotion left now and the others begin to fade, as if she does not have the strength of will to support them all.

“ALICE?!?!”

Still, she does not answer. Tarrant lunges around the corner and comes to a stop in front of a wall of thorns. For a moment, he gapes at the hedge. The hedge where the exit should be! Had been! But IS NO LONGER!!

Despair...

Tarrant turns around, retraces his steps, tries to blank that emotion from his thoughts, from his mind. He does not want to Think about what that means. What it must mean. What might cause his Alice to Despair...!

Determination!

Yes, yes, that’s it, Alice! Fight! Fight just a little longer!

Tarrant finds his wrong turning and corrects it. Nearly there! He. Is. NEARLY. THERE!!

BANG!

The sound – that’s a gunshot! – upsets his balance and he stumbles over his own feet, but he doesn’t lose momentum. Tarrant is in sight of the exit now... so close! So Very Close!

He emerges in time to see Valereth slump to his knees on the grass, his eyes unfocused in shock and his face devoid of expression, of intent, of thought. The thin, sword-like blade in his grasp drops to the ground, glinting in the light from the party above.

It glints silver... and red.

Red.

Tarrant looks across the lawn to the shadows beneath the terrace, to the fair, curling hair of a woman. A woman lying on the ground.
“ALICE!”

He crashes to his knees beside her. His knife is tossed away, forgotten. Her hands – red, red, red! – reach for him and he lifts her, curls his body around hers, cradles her on his thighs, in his arms.

“Alice...”

He looks her over now: Her poor hands! (Had she tried to fight against Valereth’s blade with merely her fingers??) And then he sees the spreading stain darkening her tattered dress, the dress he’d altered for her, crafted for her...

In disbelief, he places his hand over the ruin of her belly.

“Alice...”

She struggles to keep her eyes open, to look at him, to see him. Her hand lifts and her poor, poor fingers claw at his lapel pocket.

“Jabber...” she whispers.

Without a word, he removes his hand from the torn fabric-and-flesh and grabs one of the vials, opens the cap, presses it to her lips.

She closes her mouth, turns away. “You,” she says.

“No,” he replies. “I’m nae leavin’ ye. Drink it. Think o’ th’ White Queen. She’ll—”

With a strength that surprises him, she wrestles the vial from his grasp. “You. Drink. Move through Time.”

He gapes and struggles to keep Alice from going all blurry and fuzzy on him. “What? Time? Slayed the bastard ages ago. For you, Alice. For you! Ye cannae LEAVE ME NAUW!”

“Time and Place,” she insists. She grasps his hand and presses it against her belly, lower than her wounds. “Move through Time and Place,” she repeats. “We need you.”

An odd, broken sob echoes against the stone wall of the terrace. He drags in a breath, blinks his useless eyes.
“Choose us!” she grates out, her voice is barely a breath, the scraping of a twig over autumn leaves.

“Alice. Alice. Alice. Alice...”

Then a *Slap!* comes through the heart line, startling him, shaking him free of the tears and panic and desolation and hopelessness and...

*Slap!*

“So sorry!” he gasps.

“We need you,” she repeats and he can see it’s the last of her strength. “Move through Time. Choose us.” She lifts the vial to his lips.

Beneath his hand, within her belly, something stirs. A flutter of motion. *Our littlin’s first Futterwhacken!* he thinks through the blindingly hot sting of tears.

“Us...” his Alice whispers. “...drink...”

He does.

Chapter End Notes

1. The part about food being passed around and served before being cut and so on comes from *Through the Looking Glass* when Alice tries to cut a plum pudding to share with the lion and the unicorn (and others) but is unable to do so. She’s advised to pass it around first and then cut it, the exact opposite of what is logical. And the part about food being cooked before the ingredients have been prepared comes from another fanfic - one of my very favorite Hatter POV stories! - Stockings by [wanderamaranth](#).

2. In addition to the waltz, several other dances were popular during the Victorian Era: the schottische (a country dance of Bohemian origin), the mazurka (a Polish folk dance), and – believe it or not – the polka!
This chapter contains violence, gore, and death.

It is a beautiful plan.

Without the long-term satisfaction of business partners to concern him, Valereth had come upon the most elegant, most vicious, most *perfect* plan.

And none of it would have been possible without Alice.

He smiles and watches from the shadows of the hallway just beyond the ballroom doors. Alice glides past in that unfashionably colorful gown, in the arms of that pale and utterly unremarkable Ascot buffoon. Soon, it will be time for Valereth to make his move.

He almost regrets ending the game now. He rather would have liked to have strung Hightopp and Marmoreal’s Champion out a bit longer, heightened their fear, played with their anxieties. But that is not his way. He will take his revenge here. Tonight. On the night of their "victory" with the commissioners, he will savor his own. Perhaps this is the only reckless portion of his plan, but it is too poetic to let pass. A man is surely permitted a few small enjoyments in life, is he not? Not *everything* *must* be done impersonally. And Valereth will take *great* pleasure in seeing to this matter *personally*. Really, this is the way it must be. For it is the *best* way. And his way *is* and has *always* been the *best*, the *surest*, the most *likely to be met with success*.

Jaspien and Oshtyer had not understood that. But it hardly matters now.

He deliberately does not think about Jaspien and the advice – valuable advice! – Valereth had given him on the eve of the Champions’ Duel against the White Queen. If he had taken it, they might have fought and won another day. Instead... *Instead...*!

Exile.

The thought turns his tongue to ashes in his mouth.

And for those first few years, he had been without hope of ever regaining anything of value, of ever
exacting revenge upon Underland and the Queen’s Champion. But then... Then...!

Valereth smiles.

Yes, then he’d heard the rumors as he’d sat in the back of dingy Grobben pubs, hiding disgracefully in the shadows: the Jabberwocky had spawned and, suddenly, there had been hope once again. It had been a short conversation, indeed, that had secured Oshtyer’s cooperation. They’d watched the nest, tricked the young one, taken its blood, and followed their dreams of Alice Up Here. To London.

Oshtyer’s... efforts had been instrumental in establishing themselves. The man’s natural inclination toward cruelty had lead them to boxing matches and opium dens and brothels. Within a few weeks, the man had opened an... establishment of his own. And, with Valereth’s business acumen, they’d begun accruing funds. Enough funds for Valereth to purchase nice clothing, secure a modest residence, make useful friends. He’d left Oshtyer to his dens, advising him on his finances – their finances, at the time; Valereth’s finances, now! – as he’d sought to find a way to bring Underland to its knees.

And then he’d read of the recent use of dynamite in a mine somewhere in the country. Dynamite. Now all he needed to do was put it in the ground where it would do some good! The optimal location would be beneath Buckingham Palace, for he was sure no Upland Palace would have allowed itself to be built anywhere except upon the same hallowed ground as the greatest of Underland’s castles: Marmoreal. But, it had been easy to see how disappointingly impossible that would be. Still, there had been other options. And he’d taken them!

Instead of destroying Marmoreal in one strike, he’d chosen to employ several. Would the terror not be greater, in the end? And, the end itself, would that not be the same? He’d worked his way onto the subway committee, had lobbied for the use of dynamite, had invested considerable sums in its procurement personally!

Of course, Oshtyer had objected when he’d discovered the fate of their hard-earned funds. But it had hardly mattered then. Oshtyer had served his purpose well enough.

Oshtyer had been lured to the recent demolition site, to the still-gaping hole. A sound knock on the head with a brick and a slash of the blade from Valereth’s walking stick (which had been quite satisfying, indeed!), a roll of pounds in his jacket pocket – and Valereth had been sure to hand the man that jacket on their way out the door, the jacket with the name of London’s finest tailor sewn into the lining – and a push... And that had been the end of Oshtyer and the beginning of the final phase of Valereth’s plan.

He’d expected Alice to follow the trail: check the coat, use the quid, and with Oshtyer dying before being able to impart any valuable information, he’d expected her to arrive blind, not knowing the name of the man she sought or the cause of the devastation that had rocked Underland.

He’d also expected her to come alone.
His initial panic at seeing not only her but also a man exiting the Kingsleigh residence had startled him. But only for a moment. For, when he’d recognized the man, he’d relaxed. Tarrant Hightopp, Marmoreal’s Mad Hatter, would be no match for a mind like Valereth’s. No match at all.

The timing of their arrival had been impeccable. The newspaper article about the recent demolition had kept the two of them occupied on stopping further destruction rather than discovering Valereth’s whereabouts and new identity until...

Valereth smiles.

Until the invitation had arrived. And by then, it had been too late. They had all been invited to the glorious occasion.

Yes, this glorious occasion.

For tonight, Alice will die by the blade. But not quickly. No, no, no quick, easy death – not for the Champion of Underland.

And then Hightopp, he’ll be a simple matter to be dealt with. The death of his bond mate will drive him completely mad. Perhaps Valereth won’t bother to kill him at all. Perhaps he’ll sell the man’s drooling, catatonic shell to a scientific establishment. Yes, he could use the funds to recover the losses of the most recent dynamite purchase.

Not that those explosives will go to waste. Oh, no. They’ll be put to good use.

Very good use.

And his revenge will be complete.

Valereth moves out of the shadows and into the ballroom. Within, Alice is still dancing. Hightopp is still watching.

Watch me, he wills the hatter, schooling himself into the form of a desperate man.

Watch me destroy your life, your world, your existence.

Valereth fights a smile.

His tongue no longer tastes like ash in his mouth.
Now it tastes like honey... and blood.

*~*~*~*

He makes a choice. When he swallows the oddly tasteless, iridescently purple, watery substance, Tarrant Hightopp chooses his wife, their littlin’, their future.

“Move through Time and Place,” she’d said. He Clings to those words as he Clings to the fading warmth along his heart line from Alice.

Alice.

His Alice.

His Alice is dying!

And, at her insistence, he Leaves. Before her final breath, before his mind is utterly destroyed by the sensation of the heart line turning to dust, before the Anchor that she is and has always been is cut.

He Leaves, for that is the choice he’d made.

Move through Time.

He doesn’t understand, but he doesn’t need to. He Believes in her. He Trusts her. He will Follow wherever she Leads him.

He imagines her.

Not broken and bloody and... and... (Her poor hands!) and rattling breaths and... and... (Their child dying beneath his hand – one twitch of Life before the arrival of Death!) and...

Futterwhacken!!

He shakes himself and Remembers her. Dancing with Hamish Ascot, just across the crowded ballroom. He imagines her there, scowling up at the man, threatening his toes, and looking so utterly, incomparably lovely and alive and wearing the dress he’d fashioned for her, HIS-AND-ONLY-HIS ALICE!!
He Recalls that moment, Reaches for it with all his might.

*Take me There!* 

The warm body in his arms lightens, fades. A wind that is not wind – is not anything at all! – engulfs him. Pulls him.

Pulls him Downward.

*No!!*

He resists the siren’s call of Underland. He can feel it opening to him, beckoning, awaiting his return. For the briefest moment, he hallucinates: he imagines he’ll find peace there, happiness, his Alice.

But, no. *NO!!*

He fights the draw of the blood, the blood’s living owner, the land of Under itself.

He fights for Alice.

*Alice!*

He Envisions her smile, the golden light from the gas lamps of the ballroom illuminating her hair, the animation in her gaze as she looks at him over Ascot’s shoulder...

*ALICE!!*

Every want he’s ever had, every desire he’s ever felt, every need he’s ever tasted is encapsulated in Her Name.

And suddenly, the wind-that-is-not-wind stops.

The pull evaporates.

The music resumes.

Tarrant shudders, swallows, opens his eyes, and blinks at the scene before him.
He’s once again standing in the crowd, against the wall. The very wall he and Alice had stationed themselves in front of in order to keep watch on the entrances and exits of the room.

*Alice!*

He scans the whirling, twirling crush of dancers, searching, searching...

And *THERE!*

He catches sight of Hamish’s red hair and then a flair of violet skirt and then...!

“*Alice...”* Tarrant very nearly crashes to his knees. *She’s alive! Still! Yet!*

He grabs for the nearest object with which to steady himself. His palm slams down, connecting with something solid – the buffet table! – and shakes it, nearly upsetting a tray of petit fours. Stumbling a bit, forcing his knees not to tremble, Tarrant glances down and gasps at... at...

*Red-red-red-red-red!*

He closes his eyes, shakes his head, blinks them open again...

And stares at his perfectly pristine cravat, waistcoat, and shirt.

*Ye’re imaginin’ thin’s, lad.*

Yes, he is. He is not covered in Alice’s blood. He frowns.

*Is* he imagining things? Perhaps that scene, that horrible scene and that unthinkable event – he can’t even Think it without feeling his grip on sanity begin to slide away from him – had merely been a nightmare?

A nightmare that he remembers with painful, terrifying clarity.

*But look!* he tells himself. *Alice is fine!*

So that means that unthinkable thing had not happened to her and their littlin’. That means her hands – her poor, *poor* fingers! – had not been mutilated in the struggle with a blade and her belly had not been—!
Tarrant shakes his head, looks up, finds Alice again, takes a deep breath.

*Ye see, lad? Th’lass an’ yer bairn ‘r’ jus’fine.*

Yes, yes they are.

He doesn’t think twice about sending her his love, sharing it along the heart line.

Only... only this time, something’s wrong. The message disintegrates before he feels it burn across the mark from his heart into hers. It falls dead from his fingertip.

Tarrant startles, stares at his gloved left hand, struggles with the sudden and inexplicable feeling of *Aloneness, Abandonment*...

What in the name of Underland is *going on here*?

He struggles to focus – a task that should not be *quite* so difficult! – but his thoughts are scattered, swirling, random.

What is he doing just standing here? Why had he let Alice dance off with her former Intended? He hates gloves. The heart line is a secret – *their* secret. And a memory: Alice’s hand pressed over his chest and her voice promising him, “I’m your secret, Tarrant...” The flash of swords: *Fight Alice!* *Don’ le’him draw ye in!* Where is her sword now? No, now she has a revolver...

*BANG!*

*“It is a man’s duty to assert his will over nature...”*

*“Tarrant has never forced me to do a single thing!”*

Tarrant shudders as the memories and thoughts and questions pile on top of one another, layering and swirling and swelling...!

With a brief flash of Alice’s naked belly, just beginning to curve, beginning to grow full with their littlin’, Tarrant shakes himself sharply.

*“Futterwhacken!”* he shouts.
He blinks, ignores the startled glances he’d drawn from nearby party guests. He relishes the moment of Quiet in his mind.

His mind...!

The heart line...!

And he Knows: it’s no longer working.

He fists his hands at the thought: he’s Alone. For the first time in years, his Alice cannot Feel him, just as he cannot Feel her and he is Alone with the madness and it never really left and he was never really healed and every Bad thought and memory had merely been waiting for this moment, waiting for him to be cut loose from his Alice so that they might drown him in the darkness and despair and the darkest of nightmares...!

Alice!

Her poor fingers!

No, ‘twas jus’ a dream!

Their littlin’!

Is fine!

The blood: red, red, red, red, red...!

There is nae any blood nauw, lad!

He shivers, closes his eyes, turns away from the cacophony of the melee.

And he sees a familiar face. It wears an expression that would have been bland if not for the scowl of fury tightening the muscles just beneath the skin.

Valereth.

Tarrant watches as the man crosses the room, his body tense with suppressed purpose.
Alice’s recent words of Concern come back to him in that instant: “He won’t want to give up his plans so easily.”

Tarrant’s eyes narrow.

“No doubt has the dynamite already, or knows where it is. Might even know how to use it...”

Which means the man could use it at any time... “Given the opportunity,” Tarrant murmurs.

He follows.

Each step feels Fated, somehow. He finds himself fighting a chill, swallowing down his anxiety, pushing aside his thoughts.

No, he cannot allow the madness to distract him now! Not now!

He passes over the threshold and moves onto the balcony. Turning, scanning, he just notices Valereth disappear into the looming hedges across the lawn.

Something pulls Tarrant in that direction. Warily, he begins descending the stairs. And yet, with each step, he grows colder, shivers harder.

Something is Wrong.

Halfway down the flight of stairs, he stops. He places a hand over his unfeeling heart...

*Why is the Heart Mark so silent? Broken?*

... and frowns at the soft sound of hollow glass tinkling out of his lapel pocket. He reaches in and pulls out the vials of Jabberwocky blood. The first he grasps glows purple in the dim light of the party behind him. The second...

He stares. He can feel his brows twitching, his mouth trembling.

But for a few drops clinging to the interior of the vial, the second is completely *empty.*

*Empty.*

Tarrant’s hand fists around the vials as his memories – those soul-destroyingly-devastating
recollections of his Alice dying in his arms – revisit him. Sear him. Strip the sanity from his mind.

*It was REAL!*

Not a nightmare. Not a delusion. Not a night terror of the foulest sort. Not...!

He slumps against the wall, his knees giving out completely, and he slides to the cold, stone steps. He buries his head in his hands, suffers through the sensation of his entire being blurring with the need to scream, to sob, to shout, to give in to the sickness within him.

*Alice!*

He Calls, but he knows she does not Hear him. How can she hear him? This mind from an unbearable future is trapped within a body that has not yet lived it! He is not One with his Alice because Time has Separated them! *This* mind knows not *this* heart line!

Time forgets Tarrant there, on the stairs – a rhyme! – until the shadowy hint of motion catches his attention:

Valereth. Crossing the lawn toward the terrace, returning to the party. But, no, not returning.

Tarrant watches as the man’s form melds and disappears into the shadows at the base of the terrace wall. Waiting.

For what?

And then another flutter of activity, much closer. Tarrant looks up as Alice steps out onto the terrace. “Tarrant?” she calls.

The sound of her voice, so utterly *Alice*, destroys his strength and his reply disintegrates in his chest.

She turns – turns away from him! – and begins jogging down the steps – the steps curving down to the lawn from the right side of the balcony! Tarrant watches from his position – still sitting – on the opposite set of stairs and suddenly...!

Suddenly!

He begins to *Understand!*

Tarrant glances in the direction of the maze, watches a wispy recollection of Valereth striding toward
and then entering the hedged path without a backwards glance. And then, a moment later, Tarrant remembers... himself following after him!

Tarrant gapes, gawks, struggles to comprehend...

*Ye’ve gone back in Time, lad.*

So... so that’s...?

*Aye, ‘tis ye. Th’ mem’ry o’ th’ one o’ye who was stupid enough teh leave yer Alice unprotected.*

Tarrant feels his hands fist, his expression harden. He won’t be making *that* mistake *this* time!

“Stubborn Outlander...” his Alice whispers and he hears her Fear!

He scrambles to his feet. *ALICE!*

He grasps the railing and pulls himself up to the edge of the stairs, sees his Alice pause at the base of the staircase opposite. A few paces away, in the deepest dark of the shadows, a figure stirs.

*Valereth!*

Tarrant backs up a step, reaffirms his grasp on the railing, and sends himself flying over the edge!

*~*~*~*~*

Alice sighs heavily and surveys the Ascot’s finely groomed lawn. There’s the gazebo – she ignores the memories it stirs as if they are merely a tiny cloud of harmless, buzzing insects – and she sees the rose garden, of course – another irritating memory! – and beyond both, the edge of the wood wherein she’d fallen down the rabbit hole...

She considers her options.

She takes a deep breath. *The rose garden,* she decides, suddenly anxious not only over the alarming cessation of Tarrant’s presence in and around her heart, but also over something else... Something she can’t quite...

Alice shivers, wonders at the inexplicable *fear* gripping her. *Tarrant? Where are you?*
And, for that matter, where is she? Where is the Champion she has become? Shouldn’t she be stronger? Braver? Muchier than this?

Her hands tremble. Her breaths pant.

*Oh, why had Tarrant wandered off now?* And why can’t she Feel him? And where is he? And why did *he* leave her alone?

“Stubborn Outlander...” she mutters but the sound of her own voice – wavering, warbling and otherwise distinctly lacking in the frustration she’d meant to flavor it with – gives her no comfort.

The fear is almost enough to drive her back up the stairs, but the thought that he Needs her... The knowledge that if she wants answers, she’ll have to Seek them herself... Each takes a hand and pulls her forward.

She takes a hesitant step in the direction of the rose labyrinth, pauses, turns back toward the steps and sees...!

“Champion Alice.”

Alice swallows back her surprise. “Valereth,” she answers evenly, happy to be out of his reach but very *unhappy* to see the long, slender sword in his hand. “I’ve thought up another answer to your riddle,” she hears herself say.

His lips twitch in a brief expression of amusement. “As have I.”

He lunges. She stumbles back, trips over the hem of the long skirt, falls.

Lands.

Rolls away.

And stops at the sound of metal striking not flesh, not stone, but... *metal*?!

Alice jerks her head up and feels her eyes widen, for *there* is Tarrant, standing between her and the sword, his much shorter knife being employed to block Valereth’s advance.

The very sight of her *husband* so close to mortal peril nearly breaks her, but no. NO! That will not help Tarrant now!

Later, much later, she will wonder why she hadn’t considered screaming for help. She will chastise herself for that, for her foolish self-reliance. For risking Tarrant’s life so rashly. It does not even
occur to her to call for help. She reaches for her sword and then remembers why she isn’t wearing it.

Brangergain i’tall!

Tarrant has Valereth’s sword arm in his grasp and Valereth has locked his fingers around the hand that holds Tarrant’s knife. There’s a flurry of feet – kicking and scraping – and then both of them are losing their balance, falling! They roll away from each other and stand, begin circling. Valereth’s much longer blade is trained on Tarrant. Tarrant, whom she can no longer Feel, but if that look on his face is any indication, has completely lost himself to his madness...

Alice shivers and tries to think!

The revolver!

Of course! How utterly stupid of her not to have reached for it sooner! She dives for her handbag, tears it open, pulls out the gun and snaps the bullet-filled cylinder into place. She braces herself against the balustrade, pulls back the hammer, aims and sights...

And growls as Tarrant steps in her way. The knife and sword flash in the darkness, gleaming with hidden light that must be coming from the stars because the gas lamps are throwing nothing but long, black shadows over this patch of the estate.

Tarrant sidesteps a lunge, slashes with the knife, but his reach is too short and Valereth’s too long and if this goes on much longer, the man will send that blade right through her husband’s belly!

She’s mad-scared-frustrated-frightened-angered-terrified enough to scream!

Scream... she thinks.

And then she does.

Affecting her best imitation of Thackery’s Witzend accent, she hollers, “Ye’re late f’r TEA!”

Out of a long-ago-learned reflex, Tarrant ducks.

Valereth swings with the cane sword.

Alice pulls the trigger.

BANG!
Tarrant flinches and rolls out of the way.

Had Valereth’s hand not suddenly gone lax, allowing the sword to wobble uselessly, had the gun not fired correctly, Tarrant would have... would have...

She doesn’t think it. She won’t think it!

Valereth stumbles to his knees.

Alice rushes forward and, grasping her husband’s elbow, helps him to his feet.

“A gun...” Valereth murmurs, his hands pressing against the hole in his chest.

Alice takes in the flash of numb surprise in his eyes and, finally, the last puzzle piece fits into place. “A gun, a gift from Oshtyer,” Alice says, although by the unfocused state of the man’s eyes she doubts he can even hear her. “Who understood Uplanders far better than you ever could.”

Tarrant wraps his arms around her, nuzzles her hair, but Alice doesn’t turn away from the man dying at their feet. She watches as he sits back on his heels, lists to the side, and tumbles to the lawn. She forces herself to watch as the light leaves his eyes, forces herself to listen as the breath rattles from his lungs.

Champion Alice.

Yes, she still is that.

Finally, when her duty is done and the man is utterly dead, she closes her eyes, drops the gun, fights back the wave of nausea, and buries her nose in Tarrant’s jacket. Where she smells his fear and perspiration and the clinging scents of gas smoke and invasive cologne. She smells him, but, still, she does not Feel him.

Leaning back, she frowns up at him. “Tarrant, what...? Why can’t I...?”

She’s startled into silence by his eyes. Aqua. Rich, deep, glowing aqua. He smiles and it is utterly mad.

His knife is gone and his arms are around her, but one uncurls, reaches for his lapel pocket and lifts out...

Alice is puzzled for a moment at the sight of the vial of glowing Jabberwocky blood. But then
Tarrant moves away from her, uncaps it, leans over Valereth, forces the man’s mouth open and upends the contents into it.

“Back teh where ye b’long, ye wretched waste o’ a man,” he Commands.

Alice can do nothing but watch, flunderwhapped, as Valereth’s body begins to fade and then... disappears completely.

“I don’t underst—”

She gasps as a sensation that is not a snap, not a punch, not a crashing tidal wave, but all of those things and so much more...! smashes into her chest. Into her heart.

Alice struggles to breathe and then Tarrant is there. He is There! And she can Feel him again and his madness is so hot and desperate and Real and she can barely breathe through his Love and frantic Desperation and...!

“Alice!” his whisper is a scream, a sob, a prayer in her ear. His body is warm and solid and shivering around hers. She clings to him, still not understanding: Why had the heart line broken and then mended itself so suddenly? What...? Why...? How...?

“Tarrant?”

He leans back, aligns his mouth with hers, but suddenly pulls back. Before she can protest, she feels his hand – hot and large – press against her belly.

He says nothing, but his silence is more filled with eloquence and meaning than any words could possibly impart. And then...

Alice gasps as something... moves. Flutters. From within her.

She blinks through the sudden blurring of her vision, focuses on Tarrant’s overjoyed and devoted expression through the heat burning behind her eyes and the feel of...

Their child.

Tarrant leans closer, his breaths are sighs of relief and love so fierce he can’t contain the emotions and Alice is overwhelmed by them.

“Futterwhacken,” he murmurs against her lips and, finally, kisses her.
And it is a kiss like none other they’ve shared. He does more than taste, savor, worship, give, take, need... He is. He exists in her, with her.

“There is no me without you."

Had he only whispered those words a few hours ago? Had she foolishly thought she’d understood them then?

She understands now.

They kiss until the taste is lost, until their unique flavors are thoroughly mixed and their tongues have become numb to the nuances of it. They kiss until there is only soft, wet warmth here in the darkness.

“Alice,” he murmurs, pulling away to drink in the scent of her hair, her throat. “I chose us, Alice. Us.”

As the words register through the haze of awakening passion and lingering relief, Alice opens her eyes.

Straightening and reaching into his lapel pocket once more, Tarrant removes the second glass vial of the Jabberwocky’s blood.

It’s empty.

“I chose us... my Alice... our littlin’... Us.”

His mind is still chaotic, she knows, but looking at that vial, she thinks... perhaps she can imagine... Alice closes her eyes and wraps her arms around her stomach.

Yes, she can imagine what set of circumstances – unbearable circumstances! – might have motivated Tarrant to drink the Jabberwocky blood, to travel into the past, to change the present.

I must have told him... she muses. I must have sent him through Time myself.

“You saved us,” she answers. “Protected us.”

His arms are tight around her again. “I promised ye I would.”

“Thank you.” The words are so inadequate, but she can think of nothing else to say in their place.
She Sends her answer instead.

She feels tears against her ear, gulping breaths in her hair and against her neck. Somehow, she finds herself in possession of the empty vial, the vial that had contained the jabberwocky blood that Tarrant had drunk. The jabberwocky blood that had – she is sure! – saved her life, their child’s life, Tarrant’s life!

*Thank you, Krystoval,* she thinks, returning her husband’s grasping hold. *And thank you, Oshtyer. Thank you both for these precious gifts...*

A resolution.

And a second chance.

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**Chapter End Notes**

1. Again, I had help from my husband with this chapter. We had a chat about time paradoxes and I was trying to figure out how to manage two Hatters when he suggested I return the future-Hatter’s mind to past-Hatter’s body after drinking the Jabberwocky blood. Just rewind Time but allow Tarrant to keep all his memories. And, because it was utterly brilliant and meshes well with Alice's own experience with Jabberwocky blood, I snitched it. We're married, after all. His ideas are my ideas, etc. etc. (^_~)

2. When Tarrant drank the Jabberwocky blood and went back in time, it shifted (for lack of a better word) the heart line out of alignment. Tarrant's mind had not been able to "connect" with the heart line until he'd lived through the events and allowed time to catch up with him, so to speak. Gawd, I hope that makes sense...

3. If you still have questions about how Tarrant figured out how to send Valereth's body back to Underland, please be patient with me. He and Alice will discuss all this thoroughly in the next chapter.

4. How many of you remember this little exchange from Book 1, Chapter Ten: The Sixth Suitor?

   Mirana: "Tarrant would never let anyone kill his Alice."
   Chessur: "Just so, Your Majesty. He never has, and I dare say he never will."

   Just thought I'd point that out. (^__~)
Several people had heard the gunshot. Alice is sure of it. However, as is often the case, they had convinced themselves that they could not have possibly heard what they’d thought they’d heard (A gunshot? Here? At an Ascot soiree? Not likely...!) and had gone back to their champagne and sherry and brandy and cognac.

No one had bothered Alice and Tarrant in the shadow of the terrace.

They’d sat in the darkness, leaning against the stone, their weapons cleaned and stowed safely away. They’d left Valereth’s cane sword right where it lay. A groundskeeper or a gardener would find it later. (And, perhaps, keep it for himself.) Alice hadn’t cared and Tarrant had refused to look in the thing’s direction.

“Was I... dying?” she’d asked softly, unable to not confirm her suspicions.

“... aye.”

“And I told you that the Jabberwocky blood could...”

“Ye tol’me teh Move through Time.” He’d sighed then. Heavily. “Were ye ne’er goin’ teh tell me tha’ th’ blood o’ th’ Jabberwock coul’do tha’?”

“I’m sorry. Mirana confided it in me. It’s a powerful secret.”

“An’ we’ll keep it,” he’d promised.

Alice had nodded and then huffed out a humorless laugh. “Yes. What’s one more?” She’d leaned away from him then and had declared, “I’m ready to go home now.”

He’d kissed her for that. And because their hearts had been entwined once more, the connection as strong as ever, he’d known she hadn’t been speaking of her mother’s house in London. No, the deep throb in her chest will only ever belong to Underland.
In the carriage ride home, Alice had asked, “What happened to our heart line earlier?”

And he’d explained this theory, his brogue thicker than ever and she’d taken his hand to ground him, to ground herself: “Aft’r I drank th’blood o’th’Jabberwock, I thought o’ye, dancin’ with Ascot an’ aft’r a spell, I found me-self there, watchin’ ye... again. O’ly, ‘twas nae right. This mind an’ tha’ body were nae meant fer each other... I s’ppose I had teh catch up teh Time again. Teh th’moment o’ my drinkin’ th’blood...”

“And Valereth? You were able to send him back... How did you know to do that?”

He’d clutched her to him with all his considerable strength. “B’cause I felt it, my Alice. Aft’r I drank it, I could feel Underland callin’ teh me. Callin’ me back. Withou’ ye. It felt so... natural, easy teh say ‘aye’ an’ follow tha’ Call, an’ I had teh fight against it.” Her heart strains with the pulse of Tarrant’s remembered panic. She rubs his back and he calms. Continues: “Valereth, bein’ dead...”

“Wouldn’t be able to fight it.” She still wonders at that. Even though the man had been dead, the blood had worked. How is that possible? Doesn’t the drinker have to choose where or when to go...? Or... could it have been some other power at work? Had Krystoval commanded the man’s return somehow? But if so, why hadn’t Maevyn been able to do that before?

In the carriage, Tarrant had somehow managed a weary chuckle. “Ye’ll b’able teh ask yer questions soon, lass.”

“Yes. Soon.” Soon, the mirrors will be opened. Just as soon as Valereth’s body is found, Alice is sure Mirana will want to check on them and will open the small mirrors in order to do so.

Upon arriving home, Mr. Brown opens the door for them, collects the walking stick Tarrant had accepted from Townsend and then takes Charles Kingsleigh’s top hat from him. Alice keeps one arm wrapped – unseemly, her mother would say! – around her husband’s waist. They nearly make it to the stairs (and she can feel his body trembling with exhaustion and shock and what she suspects must be the endless loop of a memory so horrible she can’t even begin to fathom it) when Helen’s voice stops them.

“How was the gala?”

Alice stares at her, mind utterly blank. Images flash through her mind: unbridled dancing, the poking of appetizers, Hamish’s threat of awkward silence, Valereth’s blade, Tarrant’s body moving between hers and that villain’s, the gun, the Jabberwocky’s blood...

“I... It was...”

Very softly, Tarrant sobs out a shuddering sigh. She tightens her arm around him. It draws Helen’s
disapproving gaze – *Botheration!* Now her mother will think Tarrant is *sloshed!* – but Alice soldiers on: “Fine. It was fine. A success.” The words are not only for her mother. “It feels as though we’ve done what we’ve come here to do. We hope we won’t be imposing on you for much longer, mother. Thank you for your hospitality.”

She turns back toward the stairs and urges Tarrant to step up.

“Alice...?” Helen asks, her tone hurt and confused.

Alice sighs. “May we discuss this tomorrow?”

“Oh... yes... of course... Good night, dear. Tarrant.”

And, bless him, Tarrant manages a perfectly enunciated and clear reply: “Thank you, madam. And a pleasant night to you as well. We apologize for keeping you up so very late.”

Alice glances over her shoulder, notices her mother’s surprised and speculative look, and gives her a tired smile. *That’s right, mother, he’s not drunk.*

“Something at the party must have disagreed with him,” Alice murmurs and Tarrant shivers.

Her mother nods, her gaze softening. “Shall I put some tea on?”

Alice smiles, *beams!* “That’s very...” Generous, forgiving, understanding... “... kind of you...”

Tarrant takes a deep breath and turns toward Helen. “Yes, very kind, madam. Thank you, but I’ll be... that is, I’m sure this will... Tea would only... Pass,” he decides, “it will pass... when it’s ready to do so. And I’m afraid tea won’t hurry it along.”

Helen nods in reply. “In that case, rest well... and as long as you like. I’d like you to consider this your home as well.”

Alice fidgets at the reminder of her hasty promise to vacate the premises. She doesn’t doubt that the subject will be brought up again on the morrow. Alice hopes that, by then, both she and Tarrant will have gotten a good night’s sleep.

They don’t.

Once in bed, in the darkness and relative silence of mid night, Tarrant clings to her, shudders. He tries to control the sobbing breaths his recollections force out of him, but can’t.
“Tell me?” she requests more than once.

“I cannæ. Please, Alice. I cannæ” is all he says in reply.

Time passes, exhaustion takes her away into sleep. Tarrant follows her and she knows this because his nightmare wakes her before it does him. Terror and desolation and pure denial pull her into wakefulness and her hands are pressed against his cheeks before she knows it.

“Tarrant! Wake up! Wake up!”

And when he does – gasping, shivering, sobbing – he clutches her to him. He checks her hands, kisses her fingertips, massages her stomach... She suspects he would have moved down in bed and nuzzled it if not for the fact that he’d have to release her to do so.

“I wish I could share that memory with you,” she whispers into his hair, hating that he’s so alone in that moment that had happened-and-then-had-been-undone.

“No, Alice,” he croaks into her shoulder. “No, I couldn’t bear it if you Knew what I’ve seen... I wouldn’t...!”

“Shush...” she croons, rubbing his back, his sides, his shoulders, and hates that he’s forced to bear yet another Tragedy. Even if it’s only permitted an existence within the realm of his mind. “Shush. I’m here. We’re fine. We’re both fine. You saved us, my Champion... my Champion...”

And the night wears on. He urges her to sleep yet refuses to release her. Sometimes she manages to drift off in his warm, sometimes-shifting embrace. And she’s awakened by his panic, both when he’s awake and asleep.

It’s one of the longest nights of Alice’s life.

And the next day isn’t much better.

They spend the morning in bed.

“Help me think of names,” she asks at one point, eager to distract him from the memories. “What do you think of Freya or Persephone if it’s a girl? Orion or Gabriel if it’s a boy?”

Tarrant places a hand over her belly. “Alice, ye ken ‘tis impossible fer me teh help ye think.”

“I believe in impossible things,” she reminds him and earns a weak giggle.
Alice manages to coax him into the bath and he looks better for it after the lingering scents of the party and... other events washed away.

“Sometimes I still see it,” he whispers when it’s her turn to bathe and he’s helping her rinse her hair – a much less arduous task than it is in his case. “When the light falls just so or your hands move and tilt just like...” He shivers. “I’m mad, Alice.”

She catches his hand in hers. “Maybe we both are. What do you see?”

“Yer blood, Alice. Red...”

“There’s no blood now.”

“I know... but...”

Alice sighs.

She’s brushing Tarrant’s mostly-dry tangled hair – after he’d admitted to being far too tired to bother with it himself – when the small looking glass on the table, the one Mirana had given them, shimmers and a small scroll rises up through it then flops over and rolls across the vanity. Neither of them are at their best so it takes a moment for Alice to really understand what had just happened.

She reaches over his shoulder and picks up the note. Opens it.

And reads.

*~*~*~*

Tarrant Hightopp knows his limits. He’d found them once – Horvendush Day! – and again – Frabjous Day and Alice fading into nothing before his very eyes! – and again – the duel against that slithy Oshtyer! – and again – the Trial of Threes and seeing her there, at the mercy of the Jabberwock – and again...

There are too many to count. Too many times he’s lost or nearly lost the only people – no, the only person – he loves. Tarrant Hightopp knows his limits.

And he’s reached them yet again.
All night, his mind had been pushed and pulled between the memory that hadn’t come to pass and the sight and feel and scent of his wife in his arms, safe! And he’d realized that he would do – will do! – anything to keep his Alice. Keep her alive, safe...

Even...

He sighs.

“Tarrant?” He doesn’t look up as the bed dips – when had he moved here from the dressing table bench? He can’t recall... – and a warm, Alice-weight rest against his arm. “Did you hear what I said?” she asks with a worried frown.

*Worried.* His Alice is *worried!* About *him!*

*Ge’yersetself tehgether, lad!*

He shakes his head smartly. “I’m so sorry, Alice. No, I didn’t. And I’m afraid we’re all out of Jabberwock blood so I can’t go back through Time to listen to what you’d said the first time.”

“It’s all right. I don’t mind saying it again: they found Valereth; Maevyn is already feeling better; and we can go home anytime we want.”

He considers that information and, looking up at Alice again when he believes he’s assimilated and stowed it all properly in his mind, asks, “Has the Oraculum unrolled, then?”

“Not yet. Mirana says that’s because they’re not deep enough yet. Whatever that means.”

“Ah... Ingenious. The Masters are moving Underland.”

“Moving it *where?*”

“More *under.*”

“Oh... But that’s fine, isn’t it? We can go back now. Mirana will reopen the mirror in my old room and then...!” She beams at him and despite the heaviness in his chest, Tarrant feels his own lips twitch helplessly in response. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

“I... yes, yes, it is.”

She leans back a bit and frowns worriedly again. He looks away, glances around as if seeking
something that might whisk those worrisome worries away.

“But you’re not pleased,” she informs him.

His fingers curl until his hands are fisted on his thighs. He knows if he allows them to remain open one moment longer, he’ll be reaching for her and with the intensity of his emotions right now, he fears leaving bruises in his wake.

“Talk to me. Please,” she begs. *Begs!!*

*Jus’ look a’wha’ye’re doin’ teh yer Alice, lad!*

She gently cups his jaw in her hands and turns his face toward her. He’s scaring her. He can Feel it. “I’m so sorry, Alice. I don’t mean to... I don’t wish to... I’m so sorry.”

“What?” she prompts.

He hesitates. Wonders if Now is the time to speak of the Thoughts he’s been considering during his waking moments, ever since... in the shadow of the terrace... when she’d... and he’d... and they’d felt their littlin’s Futterwhacken and then...

“Alice?”

“Yes?”

He winces at her over-eager tone. He feels truly Guilty for worrying her, waking her at all hours – *all his fault!* – but this is not the Time for berating himself! (That will come Later!) Right Now, there is something... something more important than even that!

He clears his throat, stares at his still-fisted hands, and says, “Alice... how far would you go for...”

“For what?” she urges when his voice mysteriously fails him.

Tarrant turns, looks her in the eyes. “For me.”

She rubs her thumbs against his skin and then pushes her hands gently into his hair, bracing his neck between her palms. “I would do *anything* for you.”

“An’,” his voice warps around the knot in his throat. “If’n ‘twas sommat ye di’nae wan’tae do yersel’?”
“Tell what you need.”

_Need..._ He closes his eyes, swallows. Once again, his Alice’s choice of words is uncannily accurate. “I need ye teh be all righ’, Alice. E’en if it means...” Tentatively, he lifts his hands to hers and holds her touch against his skin, begs her not to let go of him, pleads with her not to stop holding onto him. He repeats, “E’en if it means stayin’ere. Wi’yer Mam an’ sister. ‘Til our littlin’s born.”

“I... what?” She had not expected That. He can see it in her expression, Feel it in his skin.

Tarrant looks away, clears his throat, lisps, “I know you want to go home, Alice.” _So do I!_ he doesn’t say. “But, I can’t lose you... again. And this birthing business,” he briefly struggles against the Burning he’s been trying so desperately to hold back ever since the Thought of this monumental Risk had occurred to him. He struggles... and he loses: “Our littlin’s birthing could be _dangerous!_ And what if you need a _doctor_ or you start _bleeding_ and what would I be able to do to _save_ you and what does the queen know about Uplanders and what if I _lose you both, Alice, and I can’t lose you both! Not again!_”

He grits his teeth, struggles against the returning tide of memory, of Alice’s blood and her weakening breaths and evidence of their child’s life and her _dying in his arms and he couldn’t stop it AND...!_”

“...please.” That’s all he trusts himself to say.

Her fingertips stir, massaging the corded muscles beneath the taut skin at the base of his skull. “All right,” she says.

For a moment, he can’t believe it had been that easy. He looks into her eyes. “All right?” he confirms.

She nods. “Yes, but... where will you be?”

The hesitance in her voice pulls a pang of panic from him. “With you!” he fairly shouts back, startled and upset.

She relaxes, releases a long-held breath.

“Alice...” A dry sob escapes his lips before he even feels it coming. “Ye think I’d let ye... stay _Here_ wi’out _me?_”

He hauls her onto his lap and shakes his head against her shoulder. Her arms wrap around his neck. Her palms draw circles against his back. “I cannae be wi’ out ye, Alice. Ne’er ask it o’me. If’n ye do, I’ll no’be able teh do it.”

“Nor could I.”

Her voice, so soft yet full of Everything, shores him up. He’s not fool enough to believe that he’s healed – that he’ll ever be healed completely – but his Alice sustains him, gives him the will to do what must be done, gifts him with the sanity necessary for doing it.

“So we’ll stay,” he decides. “Until the littlin’s born.”

“I want Mirana to come through the looking glass for that,” she bargains. “Just in case.”

“Aye. Agreed. An’ we’ll have an Upland doctor here ‘swell.”

“Ugh. I hate physicians.”

“Alice...” he says warningly.

She sighs. “All right. A physician and Mirana.”

He presses his lips to the fabric covering her heart. “Thank you.”

She combs her fingers through his hair for several long moments. “Of course, this means we’re going to have to tell Mirana about the baby...”

“Aye,” he agrees and then hears himself giggle. “I’ll leave that teh ye – ye can explain why ye waited so long teh tell her.”

Alice huffs. “I suppose I deserve that. Are you sure you don’t want to be there? Just to watch?”

“Mayhap I will, seein’ as how ye’ve just invited me teh.”

She snorts and pinches him under the arm.

He yelps.

And then, “Tarrant... could I ask a favor of you?”
He leans back and waits.

She draws in a deep breath. “You realize we’ll be here for... months. Waiting?”

Tarrant nods.

“So, in that case, I think you’ll need something to occupy your time. During the day.”

“What do you have in mind?” he asks slowly, the brogue disappears right long with his playfulness.

She smiles. “Well, after the baby’s born, it’s going to be a while yet before I can resume my post as Queen’s Champion. I’ll need a temporary replacement.”

“Will you?”

“Um hm. And he’ll need to be in fit condition.”

“Is that so?”

“And it might be nice if he spent his time learning a new skill to teach me when I’m ready to start training again.”

“Like what?”

Alice smiles. “I’m sure Hamish will have a suggestion. When he makes it, say ‘yes’, all right? For me?”

Tarrant grins. “I suppose I can do that. But... Alice?”

She answers his suddenly somber expression with a worried frown. “Yes?”

“You would... trust me to look after the queen for you?”

Alice blinks at him and he feels a twinge of surprise deep within his chest. “Tarrant, I’ve been meaning to ask you to for... a while now,” she replies. “But, if I understand events correctly, I have already trusted you with the life and wellbeing of our child.” She regards him very seriously. “Name one person who is more important than that.”
“I can’t,” he admits, smiling again.

“That there’s your answer,” she concludes and he accepts her brief kiss as a reward.

And when she leans back, he sees her eyes are sparkling with mischief and her lips are stretched into one of his favorite smiles: the smugly victorious one.

She informs him: “You’re going to be a father. It’s high time I started letting you enjoy that, don’t you think?”

He feels his eyebrows twitch upward and can only imagine the hopeful look on his face. It must be rather Something because Alice laughs, kisses him again, and declares in capital letters he can Hear quite clearly:

“Starting Right Now.”

*~*~*~*~*

“Tarrant, have you quite recovered from last night?”

“Oh, yes! Thank you, madam. As Alice suspected, one of those suspicious food items must have Disagreed with me.” And, had they been creations of Thackery's they very well might have Disagreed with him! Most vehemently and on a variety of topics! Noisy things, a March Hare's Appetizers for Special Occasions!

“They tend to do that” had been her surprising agreement.

“Now, Alice. You can’t seriously be considering going back to wherever it is you’ve come from!” Mrs. Kingsleigh had blustered by way of a proper greeting. “You’ve only just arrived and, quite frankly, I’m not prepared to start missing you again!”

“All right.”

“And another thing, young lady, I—!” Helen had paused, backed up a step and continued, “I beg your pardon?”

“All right. We’ll stay if you’ll still have us. We talked about it and...” Alice had glanced at Tarrant who had given her an encouraging nod and a smile that had been so wide he could feel it stretching his cheeks. “We have something to tell you, actually.”
“Yes? What is it?”

Tarrant had taken his cue and pulled out her chair. “Perhaps you’d like to sit down first, madam?”

*Watch that grin, lad. Ye’re goin’ teh smile yerself right inteh a Fit...!*

Mrs. Kingsleigh hadn’t made it as far as the chair before – having taken one look at Alice’s lopsided grin and a second at the beamish expression Tarrant could feel (*still!* on his own face – guessing the very news they’d been about to impart: “You’re expecting!”

“*Yes! Alice, your mother is most talented at guessing Things!*” Tarrant had heard himself crow in delight. “I suspect she’s who you get it from! How do you suppose she knew?”

Fighting a smile, Alice had replied, “It couldn’t *possibly* be from that huge Papa Grin on your face, could it?”

“Huge Papa?” he’d echoed. “Alice, I assure you, I am of quite average height.”

And then Alice had laughed and Tarrant had Known that everything would be all right.

And, for the most part, everything is.

Questions had been asked:

“*What month are you?*”

“Have you seen a physician yet?”

“You’ll be staying until both you and the baby are strong enough to travel, won’t you?”

“Just where is this country you’ve come from, Alice?”

And answered:

“Oh, um, nearly to the fourth month, I suppose...”

“Er, yes, I have seen a physician...” Tarrant had held his tongue at the lie. But, no, Alice hadn’t *Lied* for they’d “seen” a physician at the Ascots’ country estate, on his way out as they’d arrived for the
second meeting with Townsend. Still, that had not been what Mrs. Kingsleigh had meant at all!

“Well, actually, the journey back isn’t very arduous…”

“Oh, it’s here and there. Couldn’t possibly be found on a map, so don’t bother with the atlas, mother, please.”

And Others had been Notified:

“Alice! You’re...! But your husband can't even properly support you!” Tarrant had overheard Margaret object. Yet again, he’d found himself eavesdropping on a private conversion of which he had been the topic of discussion.

“His trade already places a heavy burden on you financially and socially...!”

“No, it doesn’t. Not where we live. Tarrant is very fortunate in his position. He's employed by the queen’s court and, for the most part, the work is light. He’s well-compensated for his efforts.”

“Court?” Margaret had echoed and Tarrant had briefly debated whether or not to take offense at her obviously startled tone. But then he’d reminded himself that the only examples of his work she’s seen are Alice’s hat and his own. “So that’s why mother didn’t look upset when I...”

Alice had allowed the guilt from her sister’s admission to fill the room. “Told her that Tarrant’s a milliner? I expected you would mention it to her.”

“But she already knew.”

“Tarrant told her himself.”

“He didn’t have to. He could have left her to assume that his title was...”

“But it’s not and he wouldn’t lie about that. Not to his wife’s mother.” There’d been a long pause and Tarrant had wondered if he might be able to (finally!) interrupt tactfully and announce tea, but... Alice had whispered, “He’s the last of his family... well, the last surviving adult.” He’d imagined Alice’s hand pressed against her belly then. “At the moment. But, one day, when we’ve managed to rebuild Hightopp Village, we’ll have those responsibilities to deal with. And... I must admit: I’m not looking forward to that... change.”

Somehow, the silence that had followed had been filled with hope, confidence, promise. “You’ll do fine, Lady Hightopp. As will your lord-tailor-husband. He’s very... honorable.”

And because nearly anything Alice might have said in reply would have merely drawn attention to the many shortcomings of Lord Manchester, Tarrant had chosen that moment to noisily stumble into the room and inform them of tea in the drawing room.

For that, Alice’s smile had been one of relief, hope, and love.

But the Notifications had not ended there:

“You. Are. With. Child?” Mirana had asked, half-in and half-out of the free-standing looking glass in Alice’s childhood bedroom, each and every word on an evenly spaced breathless-sounding sigh.
“Yes.”

Tarrant had never seen the queen’s dark eyes flash with fury before. “And you did not see fit to inform me of this before I’d made my request for you to travel Up Here?!”

“How would that have changed anything?” Alice had asked, albeit in a chastened tone that Tarrant had enjoyed just a bit More Than He Should Have. “You would have still had to ask me to go. Are you truly angry with me for trying to spare you that additional responsibility?”

And the queen had actually glared! “I suppose I can’t be. But I won’t be forgiving you for withholding this from me so soon, Alice.” And then she’d looked from her Champion to him – her Hatter – and then back to Alice again, her pale face softening with disappointment and sorrow. “I’d thought, as your friend, you would have wanted to share your joy with me...”

Alice had winced. “Um...”

“Although, I suppose I should have known, what with Chessur going on about how I must be running short of Himoha flower but not saying a thing as to why...”

Tarrant had heard Alice grit her teeth. “I’ll have Words with that cat when I get back!”

*Oh, iambic pentameter!*

But before he’d been able to draw their attention to the verse, the queen had turned on him: “And Tarrant...! Why would you wish to keep this from me?”

“He didn’t,” Alice had bravely admitted.

“Ah. I see. In *that* case... however did you manage to keep yourself from running through the halls, shouting the news from the top of your lungs?” the queen had mused aloud, still addressing him.

“I very nearly did just that! Several times!” Instead, he’d had to rely on his Alice to help him channel the energy into less... disruptive pursuits. He’d grinned at Those Memories.

“I didn’t want to give up my position until it was absolutely necessary,” Alice had explained. “So...”

“So you asked poor Tarrant to keep the news to himself. And, of course, he did. Oh, *Alice*...!”

The White Queen had glared.
Alice had fidgeted.

Tarrant, having decided that his Alice had suffered enough, had cast about for a way to break the awkward silence... a way that hadn’t involved iambic pentameter, which he’d been sure would not have been Appreciated at that moment.

He’d heard himself say, “We felt the first Futterwhacken just the other evening!” He had even successfully avoided thinking about the specifics of That Evening in particular.

“Oh, that is wonderful! Congratulations, both of you! So, the child is to be...?”

“A Hightopp. Not a Kingsleigh,” his wife had confirmed. (And, oh what a Discussion that had been at the time!)

“Oh, I see. So, you’ll be returning to Mamoreal shortly?”

“Well, actually...”

“I have concerns about Alice’s health, Your Majesty. I’m worried... that, well...”

“Tarrant fears I might have trouble during the labor and will need medical assistance.”

Mirana had agreed, looking worried, “Yes, our healers here – myself included – won’t know anything about Uplandish mothers should you experience difficulties.”

“But I’ll need someone from Underland to come through to help with the birth... you know... just in case...”

“Ah! I see. Yes, your Uplander physicians won’t know the first thing about Outlandish babies now, will they?”

Tarrant hadn’t considered That! He’d merely assumed...

What? Tha’ th’blue blood woul’nae make any difference? Or th’changin’ eyes? Or th’—!

“Yes, exactly,” Tarrant has agreed, suddenly understanding why Alice had demanded the White Queen be present for the Main Event, “which is why we’d like to ask you to assist Alice. When the time comes.”

“Which I will be more than happy to provide, but A~lice...”

“Er... yes?”

“No more of this ‘I can manage by myself’ business. When you go into labor, I expect to be notified
“You know me so well,” Alice had grumbled.

“Yes, I do. Are we in agreement?”

“We are.”

After a moment of heavy silence, Mirana had reluctantly admitted, “I am glad you told me. Finally.”

Alice’s laugh had been a little forced. “I’ll be glad when you finally forgive me for keeping it a secret for so long.” And the queen had managed a smile that had hinted at the possibility of Alice being forgiven... someday... in the Distant Future.

“But, there is one other thing... Krystoval. I know our staying here, in this land, is causing the Jabberwocky to be ill...”

“Krystoval is holding up just fine. If anything changes, I shall let you know. Do not concern yourself with that when you have much more important things to sort out.”

Alice had sighed yet again. “I do, don’t I? My mother is going to require an explanation. For a lot of things. Especially if you come through the mirror on a moment’s notice to help me through the labor.”

“How about the truth?”

Alice had blinked at her. “The truth? No. No, impossible.”

“How odd,” Mirana had replied with a sad smile, “that you should allow impossibility to defeat you now, my Champion. It never has before.”

Tarrant had suggested, “You might be surprised, you know, Alice. She may be able to understand.”

Still, he could see Alice’s resistance to the perfectly sound idea.

“Dearest Alice, my closest friend,” Mirana had spoken up, “do not lose your muchness now. Be with your family, share this miracle with them, even if that means revealing Underland. For once this adventure is over, they will expect certain things from you, will they not? Now that they know you survived the sinking of your ship?”

“Yes...”
“Then. In that case, as a wise friend once counseled me, ‘Begin as you mean to go.’” Mirana had winked. “And we all know that lies, even white ones, cause more problems than they solve.”

“Indeed, they do!” Tarrant had been unable to not concur.

“So, you both will remain Here, for the time being,” the queen had decreed. “You shall both be missed terribly, but it’s quite obvious that you have things you must do and questions you must answer.”

“Botheration, I suppose so,” Alice had huffed. “Why do you always have to be right?”

“Because I’m the queen,” Mirana had replied. “Or didn’t you hear the coronation announcement?”

“My invitation must’ve gotten lost along the way.”

“A pity. I’ll issue you another.”

“You’re too kind.”

“Only sometimes, dear Alice.”

And then, with an air of finality, the queen had bid them farewell: “Do not hesitate to call upon me should you have need of me!”

She’d held out her hand to Tarrant, which he’d bowed low over, then had dragged Alice into her arms for a brisk hug. And, an instant later, the looking glass had rippled and then smoothed flat again.

“Alice,” Tarrant had said, wrapping an arm around her.

“Yes?”

He’d giggled. “I don’t mind telling you that I truly Enjoyed that.”

“I thought you might” had been her droll, but light-hearted reply. “And should you ever wonder whether or not I truly love you or would do anything for you...”

“I shall remember this afternoon, my Alice, and it will – most hastenly! – put my irrational fears to Rest.”
“Just so,” she’d replied, smiling.

And, from that day onward, things are different. New. Begun a-new. A new beginning. Why, even schedules had been arranged to keep him Busy:

“Hightopp, Alice has ordered us to—”

“Hamish! I did no such—”

“Oh, I do beg your pardon, your majesty.”

Tarrant had swallowed a giggle at the glare Alice had directed at Ascot over the tea service. Tarrant had chosen that moment to shift, to feel her knee press against his beneath the table.

“Hamish,” Helen had interjected delicately. “I’m sure Alice is fully aware of how... demanding a character she possesses.”

“Indeed you are correct, madam,” he’d allowed.

Margaret had smiled. “But that’s why we adore you so much, dear sister.”

For some reason, the comment had drawn a mocking smile across Alice’s lips.

“Ahem. As I was saying, Hightopp, Alice has decreed that I’m to take you to the club for fencing lessons. I’ve a membership, you know.”

“But the question is: have you ever used it before?” Alice had challenged over the rim of her teacup.

“Of course. I even know the way there!” he’d sniffed. “So. Tomorrow. Following lunch, sir. We have an appointment with a pair of fencing foils. Or else Queen Alice, here, shall be most displeased.”

“Oh, stop being such an ogre, Hamish Ascot,” Margaret had declared. “And pass the scones before I toss a sugar cube at you!”

At that particular comment, neither Tarrant nor Alice had been able to withhold their snickers.

And also correspondence with friends in Marmoreal had begun:
“Another note to you.” Tarrant had handed it over with a large, toothy smile. “From Mally.”

“Again?!?”

“It appears she has quite A Lot To Say to you regarding a certain secret you kept from her.”

“We kept from her.”

“You asked me to keep from her.”

“I wish she didn’t appreciate that distinction so much.”

Correspondence of All Kinds had begun to... pop through the small Marmoreal mirror, actually:

Plop!

“Did you hear that?”

“The plopping noise?”

“Um, yes. Is it coming from...?”

Plop!

“The vanity? I believe it is, Raven. Ah! Spinach puffs from Thackery! I sent him my observations you know. Here, give it a try!”

“You go ahead. I’ll catch the next one he tosses through.”

Plop!

Yes, in a matter of days, Tarrant’s world has been completely Changed.

The Good Things are plentiful.

Unfortunately, so are the Bad...
Alice gasps awake on a rush of terror.

_The nightmare again_, she realizes as she pats Tarrant’s cheek, shakes his shoulder, whispers his name in the darkness.

With a violent start, he opens his eyes. Unlike all the other nights, he does not curl himself around her. His hands seek out hers and his fingertips ghost over her knuckles and in the sensitive spaces between, but he does not grasp or clutch at her. Not this time. Not after a week of suffering in the dark.

“I’m sorry I woke you, Alice,” he sighs and in his voice Alice hears something different. After the first nightmare, she’d heard panic and fear. On the nights following that, his tone had changed to guilty and then accepting. Tonight, however, she hears something new. Something Bad:

Resignation.

Something _must_ be done about this! For Tarrant is not recovering – not _truly_ – despite his bubbly cheer during the day. She can only assume the heart line and his new role as a recognized, expectant father are saving him from the madness. Or worse: the Blackness.

“These dreams won’t haunt you forever,” she whispers.

He takes a deep breath. “They will.” He speaks with gravity and certainty. She doesn’t doubt he also speaks from experience. “They’re memories, Raven. Haunting is what memories do best.”

“Tell me about them,” she asks, without any real hope of him agreeing to do so. She’s argued and debated and cajoled on this point to no avail; he will not share his terrible burden with her. Tonight is no different:

“No, Alice. Please. Ask me for anything else.”

“All right.” Alice sits up in bed, leans over and lights the oil lamp on the sideboard. As she knows she can’t _force_ him to divulge that unmade future... “If you won’t tell me what you see, then tell me what reminds you of it. Permit me that much, please.”


Alice watches him for a moment, contemplating something she normally would not. Something she is not sure will work. Something she _shouldn’t_ do in her mother’s house. Something she’s willing to risk nonetheless.

She rolls away, stands, removes her nightgown, turns down the lamp until the room is as mysteriously shadowed as the Ascots’ terrace had been, and leans over him.
“Alice?” he whispers, watching as she climbs onto the bed, sits on top of the quilt and straddles his hips. “What are you...?”

“Look at me,” she replies, knowing there is just enough light for her request to be possible.

“I am.”

“What do you see?”

She doesn’t wait for him to answer. She can see it in the softening of his gaze as he studies the gently glowing light against her skin. Alice collects his hands and presses them to her naked belly.

She asks, “What do you feel?”

She leans over him, deliberately reaches for him until her fingertips touch his chest. He shudders, closes his eyes.

“Look at me,” she reminds him.

After a moment, he does.

“Watch my hands.”

She sees him swallow and then his eyelids lower as he obeys her command. Against his chest, Alice curls her fingers until they become claws. She softly – but not so softly it tickles! – drags her nails across his skin.

“What do you see?” she asks.

He shivers. “Alice...”

“My hands are fine. Just fine. Do you see that? Do you see me? Feel me? This is real,” she asserts in a low tone.

“Real,” he agrees, watching her hands open, reach, curl, and scratch across his skin. Against her belly, his fingers splay wider. She gently claws his chest again just as their child fidgets, flutters, Futterwhackens against his palms.

His breath catches. As does Alice’s. Truly, she’ll never become used to the sensation: where a Kingsleigh baby would have kicked, punched, and shifted, a Hightopp baby dances and twirls like a
mad dervish. Perfectly normal, Tarrant had told her, looking shocked at her surprise as he’d done so.

““This is real,” she repeats, marveling again at the miracle they’ve created between the two of them.

“Yes,” he agrees, his eyes closing as he concentrates on the feel of their child moving against his hands, on the feel of her hands moving over him. Alice allows him to surround himself with that darkness, to test himself.

When he opens his eyes, he focuses on her hands. She holds them up, over his chest, splays her fingers then curves them, reaches for him. This time, when he takes a deep breath, she recognizes the gasp. Beneath her thigh, she can feel him hardening through the thin layers of summer bedclothes.

“Tarrant?” she asks.

“This is real,” he answers.

“Yes, it is.”

“I’m going to be a...” Still, he doesn’t say the word. With a start, she realizes she’s never heard him do so. He’s announced that they are expecting. He’s declared that Alice is with child. But he’s never said that he’s going to be...

“A father. Say it, love,” she urges, petting his chest.

She watches his jaw clench. He squeezes his eyes shut. “A father,” he whispers, a tremor wracking his body.

“Say it again. Let me hear it again...”

“I’m goin’teh b’a fa’her.”

“Yes.”

“Our littlin’s Fa.”

“Yes.”

He opens his eyes. ““Tis real.”
“Yes. It is.”

“No one took ye from me.”

She rubs her palms over his skin.

“Ye’re no’ dyin’...”

Alice brushes her thumbs over his nipples and his breath catches in his throat.

“Ye’re safe. Our littlin’s safe.”

She nods.

“’Tis real.”

“We’ve made it real,” she whispers. “We’ve made this. This moment. This memory. Let go of that other one. Please.”

His hands move from her stomach to her hips. “Alice...”

“I need you to be all right,” she tells him. “Tell me what you need.”

“Teh feel ye, teh have ye hold on teh me.” His hips shift beneath her, Questioning, Asking...

She Answers. Alice pushes the bedclothes out of the way, tugs aside his night clothes. She places his hands on her bare hips again. “I need you to be all right. Show me what you need.”

He does.

He pulls her toward him, trapping his length between their bodies. She feels him pressing against her, along the entire length of her body’s most well-guarded cradle – or does she feel herself pressing against the full, hot underside of him? But it doesn’t matter, she realizes, as he pulls her down to him, until her skin meets his and her breasts are pressing down – or perhaps his chest is pushing up – and his lips brush over hers, dry and warm. Her own lips tingle at the sweet friction.

His hips move. Slowly. So slowly.

His arms wrap around her and his palms move over her back, rough and solid.
She holds onto him, curling her fingers over his shoulders, pulling herself even tighter against him. She rocks with him and they slide together. Their lips brush but do not cling. They’ve never embraced like this before, as if they might each sink into the other’s skin on a sigh rather than a shout of passion.

The clock ticks. Their bodies move, rub, glide. Alice *aches* to have him inside her, to touch the heat she can feel building within her, but this is not about what she wants. This is about what he needs.

“**Alice...**” he whispers and then opens his mouth against hers. She feels his tongue brush between her lips, which she opens. She returns the soft caress, agrees to *other* touches...

His hands slide down to her hips and she lifts up and over him...

... and sighs as he pulls her back down again, but now she is no longer empty, burning with listless heat.

He’s inside her. And the fit of their bodies together is... blissful, perfect, meant to be.

Tarrant’s hands press softly against her back and she relaxes against him, over him again, wrapping her hands around his shoulders again, leaning her forehead against his jaw. She kisses the skin she can reach without disturbing their embrace. Sometimes she lifts her face and he kisses her, gently – so gently! And with such *Care!* Sometimes he thrusts slowly against her, moving her hips with his hands, shifting her and settling her over him. Sometimes she moves against him, her hips circling, but mostly... *mostly*...

She simply holds onto him, just as he’d asked.

He doesn’t find release. Doesn’t even seek it. He moves only to prolong the embrace itself and when he is too exhausted to manage it any longer she feels him soften.

He shifts then, out and away from her, and she feels empty again. He lays her down beside him, thanks her with kisses that start at her temple, trail down her jaw, meander over her heart, pitter-patter down to her belly, linger over the new swell there, venture further and beyond.

Alice gasps as he settles between her thighs. She opens for him, dares to hope he’ll... Wonders a bit desperately if he needs *this* as well. Needs to do *this* for her...

*Please*...

He does. He kisses her *there*. Softly, warmly, deeply and with leisure that threatens to drive her mad. No amount of shoulder-scratching, no too-tight wrapping of his hair around her curling fingers, no
number of his-name-as-whispered-pleas hurry him.

He is driving her Mad...!

Alice bites her lip to keep quiet. She wants relief, *needs* it...

*Need*...

And suddenly she Knows what he’s waiting for:


And, with a smile and royal blue eyes that are very nearly luminous in the shadows, he comes to her.

And he’s inside her again – he’d evidently enjoyed his explorations as much as she had by the fullness of him now! – and it’s never felt so utterly *Right*. As if he is her reward for existing... for being born... for breathing...!

His movements are slow and skillful. Deliberate. She has to turn her face away, bite his pillow to muffle her cries when she reaches her pleasure, but he doesn’t relent, doesn’t let her rest before beginning anew. He continues and the pleasure stretches her out on a rack of mindless, tingling animalistic awareness. She breathes; she whimpers; she feels; she exists. That is all.

And when – in desperation – she grasps his hips so hard she thinks she may have punctured his skin with her fingernails, he pushes into her faster, with purpose. And she knows it’ll soon be over and she despairs even as she claws her way toward relief, release.

The world disappears as light sweeps through her, cords her muscles, compacts her being, sends her tumbling into the depths of her own mind...

... and Tarrant is still there, waiting for her, when she arrives, once again.

Panting, she struggles with coherency, with words, “You didn’t...”

He shakes his head, kisses the corner of her mouth, pets her breast. “I d’nae need to.”

Need. Again, that word.

She would have shivered if her body were capable of it. “Are you all right?” she manages, weakly wrapping her arms around his shoulders.
“Aye. Fer nauw, aye...”

She closes her eyes, fights exhaustion. “And if you need me...”

“I’ll tell ye, my Alice.”

“And you’ll show me what...?”

“I need,” he finishes. “I will. And whate’er ye need, we will.”

She feels him settle into bed beside her, reach for the lamp and, moments later, she’s sucked into the darkness of sleep.

And there are no more nightmares that night.

Chapter End Notes

1. OK, I am totally NOT a fan of sexual-healing-an-orgasm-can-fixanything philosophy, but I think being with someone, without anything in the way (like nightgowns which Alice has taken to wearing because her pj trousers are getting a mite tight at this point) and just feeling their body, experiencing their warmth can be healing and reassuring, which is what I'm trying - in my usual fumbling way - to express here. Tarrant needs to know - deep down in his heart/mind/madness Know - that Alice is OK and alive and safe and still with him, still his Alice. So, if you tell me the sex was lacking, yeah, I know. Because it's not about sex. It's about affirmation. (^__^)
Sometimes he still sees her blood on his hands.

Tarrant flinches away from the sight of his own fingers and palms and cannot-possibly-be-stained! cuffs. It’s the angle of the light. Or perhaps the shape of a shadow. Or maybe the glimpse of something innocently red out of the corner of his eye... But that’s all it takes for him to see it again: Alice’s blood – red, red, red! – on his hands.

The silence doesn’t help. Neither does idleness. He needs distractions! Occupations!

He reaches for Alice’s hat and examines the mooring of the dodo feathers. She’d left it behind today, had specifically asked him to take a look at it and mend it if necessary. He focuses on the task, and on her Presence within him. He wants to reach for her, to touch her heart and feel her reply, but...

_Alice is working now!_

Yes, another meeting with the railway. Details to be finalized. Dates to be set. Supplies and materials to be ordered – and this is an area especially requiring attention now that the chief logistics man seems to have inexplicably disappeared! There’s also a digging crew to be recruited and trained. Those sorts of things.

And, anyway, why would he bother her with... with this... nothingness? This... this need to touch her, to know that she is alive and safe and here and with him and...!

He shakes his head. Decisively.

_Stop this, lad. It’s been nearly a fortnigh’ since tha’... ‘Tis time teh pull i’tehgether!_

He’s trying.

_Put yer back inteh it!_

He has.

_‘Tis as easy as believin’ ye’ll be righ’tas warm summer rain on th’morrow!_
He doesn’t think he will be...

This injury, this hurt, this tragedy goes Deep. Deeper than he’s felt in such a long time. Sharper than even the worst of his pains. Worse than Horvendush Day. Not that the attack and the deaths of his family and the innocents from the other Clans hadn’t been horrific. It had been! Still is! But now, *now*...!

He puts the hat down before he surrenders to the need to tear something apart with his bare hands. He turns his back on it for good measure. He even feels himself Seeking out his wife and has to strangle the inclination before he interrupts her meeting with those boorish bureaucrats.

Tarrant closes his eyes, focuses on the strong, steady pulse around his own heart.

*Alice*...

He’d almost lost her. His Alice. Their littlin’...!

Yes, the memory of what had happened before he’d twisted Time is so much *Worse* than that Horvendush Day. So much Worse all because of the existence of two small words that he has never applied so totally and absolutely to anything in his life: *his* Alice and *their* littlin’... *His* and *theirs*.

“Mine and ours,” he murmurs to the overcast sky that hangs over the darkening city like a cat too lazy to evaporate. “Chessur could teach you a thing or two,” he informs the clouds.

They don’t answer him. Nothing here does. Not the doorknobs or the dogs or the dust rags. He sits down on the bed in this flat, grey world and wonders how Alice had survived a childhood here with her imagination and curiosity in tact.

Or, perhaps not so much in tact, but *starved*...!

Yes, it’s no wonder she’d chosen Underland over this... place. It’s no wonder she wants to return.

He wishes it were possible to do just that!

He sighs and glances down.

Flinches at the blood that’s *not* on his hands.

Resigns himself to enduring the subtle torture of his memories.
He wanders from the bedroom and downstairs into the library where he aimlessly flips through the pages of whatever book snags his listless attention.

She finds him there, standing in front of the book stacks with a tome in his hands, when she returns. He’s not sure how late it is when that happens. It’s dark outside.

“Tarrant?” she asks, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He blinks, stares at the illustration open on the page before him: a depiction of a child in the womb. He recalls the book’s title – *A Compendium of Surgery* – and recalls opening it to this page, as if directed by Fate...

But no, there is no Fate here. None that he recognizes at any rate! For what sort of being would permit a woman who carries a child to be *slain* by a... to be *foolish enough to risk*... to *allow herself to be*...?!!!

“How coul’ye do it?” he grates out, his expression grave one instant and furious the next. “How coul’ye risk our littlin’s life th’way ye did? Followin’ me out onteh tha’ terrace knowin’ Valereth ’as slurkin’ abou’ jus’waitin’ teh...”

He can’t even say the words.

And, when Alice seems to finally digest the source of his rage, when she finally formulates and answer, she cannot say the words, either. “I’m sorry you had to do... what you did. I am *truly* sorry, Tarrant.”

And he Knows she is; he can Feel it. It doesn’t make a bit of difference, however.

“But it would have been impossible for me to do otherwise. You *know* me. You *know* my nature.”

He makes a concentrated effort to calm himself. And is angered anew when he realizes he cannot manage it half as well as Alice can.

“I do,” he agrees through gritted teeth. “I e’en encouraged ye teh b’come this way. ‘Ye don’ slay...’ I said. ‘Ye don’...’”

“Stop,” she says, raising her hands to his shoulders. “Stop, please. It was a long time ago. And you believed in me when no one else did, including myself.” She shakes him gently. “You Believed in me. You *gave* me your muchness.”

“Nay,” he counters softly, feeling his anger transform into something softer and gentler under Alice’s
direction. Perhaps it is weak of him to give into it, to allow her to do this for him, but he can’t resist. Doesn’t wish to resist!

Tarrant slowly lifts his hands – no longer bandaged or be-thimbed Up Here – and frames her face in his palms. “I merely helped ye find yer own. Nae more than tha’.” He takes a deep breath and sighs it out. “I’m sorry I shouted. I’m sorry…”

“Shush, it’s all right. You’re right to be angry with me. I’ve been monumentally foolish.”

“Promise me ye willnae risk yer safety again,” his whispers intently and then winces when he realizes what he’d just said.

Ye fool! Ye swore ne’er teh ask her fer a Promise again!

“I promise,” she replies softly, “to always choose us.”

He catches the distinction as easily as she catches the slight twitch of the muscles surrounding his right eye, but he doesn’t argue. To do so would be futile. To ask for more would be to ask for the impossible.

His rage finally abandons him completely. He sighs. His shoulders slump. Alice removes the book from his hands and replaces it upon the shelf.

“Tarrant?”

He squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his jaw. He swallows. “I’m sorry, Alice. I shouldn’t have lost my temper with you. I…”

She waits, holds onto him while he struggles with words and thoughts and ideas and feelings and...

“I need you,” he finally says. “Every day. Fer th’ rest o’m’life. The madness ne’er really... I was stronger once, bu’nauw I cannae control it wi’out ye... I thought I was healed bu’ I’m... ye’re my Sanity. Alice, an’ tha’ moment... when I couldnae feel ye anymore... In an instan’ I was Lost an’... an’…”

“And you saved us nonetheless,” she interrupts, reaffirms her grip on his shoulders. “You saved us.”

He shakes his head. His hands move to her sides, as if he needs to hold himself steady, as if the room rocks and sways like a boat in a storm as she is his only anchor. “I’m Mad, Alice. Irreparably. I’ll ne’er be healed, be whole fer ye. An’ if a mahn cannae b’an’ry o’er his own broken-ness then I d’nae ken wha’ he can rage o’er!”
“Tarrant,” she whispers, stepping closer. Between them, the heart line weaves and twists as if it could shatter under the weight of their combined heartache. “We are both broken. I... you have no idea how frightened I was when you were just suddenly... Gone. From my heart, from my sight, from the room and I... I... I’m not The Alice without you. Perhaps I rely on you too much for strength, but I... I...”

Words appear to abandon her. But his Alice – his Champion! – she rushes after them and hauls them back!

“Fates, but I do not want to think about This!” Alice closes her eyes and mutters, “I’ve tried to not remember that... that moment of... fear. When the heart line just... vanished. When I couldn’t... feel you anymore and...” Her fingers tighten on his shoulders. “I’d thought I was stronger – that I’d become stronger – than that! But... I wasn’t. I’m not. I...”

Tarrant doesn’t move, barely dares to breathe. Is it possible his Alice...?

She opens her eyes. Confesses: “I Need you just as much as you need me. For the rest of our life.”

His answer is to lower his mouth to hers, to pull her close, to wrap his arms around her. He hears a soft noise rise up from her throat, a moan-ish breath and he doesn’t care that they’re in the library, that Alice’s sister is due to arrive soon, that Hamish – who had accompanied Alice to that blasted meeting! – is no doubt waiting in the parlor with Helen, that dinner will begin on the hour...

Her arms tighten around his shoulders. Her fingers clench in his soft, wavy hair. Her body moves toward his in ways that are meant to drive him out of his mind! Their mouths devour each other’s breaths and but for their bothersome clothing they can be no closer to each other – a situation he knows just how to address! Or, rather undress...

The sound of the door opening and a huffy exclamation of “Oh-dear-Lord!” finally manages to make an impression on both of them. Regretfully, Tarrant leans back, his fingertips brushing over the buttons of her dress and one of Alice’s warm, skillful hands just an inch shy of Tarrant’s belt.

“Impeccable timing, Hamish,” Alice grumbles, sending a glare in his direction.

“You see? What did I tell you, madam? If we’d waited another five minutes to fetch them for dinner, there’s no telling what sort of impropriety we might have been subjected to!”

Margaret bites her lip to keep from laughing at Hamish’s scandalized tone.

“Only five minutes?” Alice mutters and Tarrant giggles. With seven years of practice at it, undressing one’s spouse as speedily and efficiently as possible becomes a source of pride!
She turns toward Hamish and accuses, “Next time, don’t make it a point to play hide and seek in someone else’s house and you won’t risk being so offended!”

And, perhaps this is Not the Time for it, but Tarrant can’t help the swell of masculine pride at the vehement way his wife prioritizes his touch, his kisses. Yes, his Alice does need him. And she damns anyone who would judge her poorly for that!

“Alice! Listen to yourself! You are...” Hamish visibly searches for a term that is both an accurate description of their activities and something he can tolerate uttering aloud. “...embracing in your mother’s library. A common room of a residence not your own! Have you no shame?”

Tarrant watches as she pretends to consider that. “No, I don’t believe I do.”

“Yes, yes, I’m afraid we’re both rather short on Shame. Bothersome fellow as he’s often followed by Regret,” Tarrant asserts, his eyes sparkling. “Or perhaps Embarrassment or both and an assortment of unpleasant Cousins until you’ve run out of teacups and serving sets!”

Alice chuckles and glances at him, grinning knowingly. Which, she really shouldn’t have done as that particular smile never fails to evoke certain reactions from him. For instance...

His mouth mindlessly presses against hers again, and she swiftly grants his tongue entrance and...!

“Alice, please!” Margaret announces on a laugh. “If you don’t pry yourself away from your lord-tailor-husband, we shall leave you right here and start dinner without you!”

That gets Tarrant’s attention! He pulls back and gently informs his wife, “You must eat, mogh’linyae.”

And, miracle of miracles, his stubborn wife does not argue with him over it, despite the naughty sparkle in her dark eyes.Yet, it’s that sparkle that renews his heart, calms him, reassures him...

His Alice is safe and well and Needs him and their littlin’ is fine and occasionally Futterwhackens beneath their hands, within her belly!

Tarrant grasps onto that sensation of... contentment and holds on as tightly as he can!

Sometimes, his grip is stronger than others, but – over the course of the following weeks – it slowly strengthens.

For the most part, he manages to quash the faint uprisings of uneasiness and frustration before they –
twining together – grow too great for him to Contain. It is true that he will never be whole, be healed. He knows that it is the heart line and his Alice that hold him together: a mercury-less glue. He knows he will never survive her death.

But, at the very least, he’d like to be strong enough to control his own emotions! Well, *most* of the time. Under *normal* circumstances!

They have tea with Townsend again and Tarrant points out the deeply interesting coincidence of the man’s given name: “I suppose Fate has always meant for you to live in the country, sir. As you’ve been Sent from Town, Townsend.”

Alice had snorted so hard she’d nearly dribbled tea on herself – poor timing, really, after all, he’d *warned* her through the heart line not to take a drink right then – during his moment of Delightful Insight. Of course, she might have – must have! – misinterpreted the nudge he’d sent her.

Townsend had laughed. “Perhaps you are right, Tarrant. I wonder then, according to your name, what fate has planned for you?”

*Now that is something to ponder!* Which he’d done during the carriage ride home as Alice had looked over the contracts Townsend had managed to convince her to review over for him:

“Truly, dear Alice, with a mind like yours applying itself to the task, I would feel much more confident about the venture.”

She tries, his Alice. She truly does, but when he finishes his evening bath – again, she’d insisted he bathe first while she finished just one more section – Tarrant finds his wife slumped over the writing desk, her head pillowed in her arms. For a moment – a brief yet *Eternal* moment! – Tarrant thinks... fears... panics...!

And then her brows draw together and a small noise of distress escapes her lips.

*She’s o’ly sleepin’, lad.*

Yes, yes. Sleeping. Or... nightmaring?

*‘Tis yer own panic she’s feelin’. Are ye tryin’ teh wake her?*

What? No, no. Mustn’t wake Alice. She needs the rest.

He lays a hand against her disheveled hair – longer now than it has been in years! – and calms himself. When she settles again, Tarrant carefully rolls her out of the stiff, wooden chair and into his
arms. It’s but two steps to the bed where he lays her down and attends to her shoes. Unfortunately, when he tries to pull them off, a great deal of force is required. Noticeable force.

“Hm? Tarrant?”

“I’m gettin’ ye ready fer bed, love.”

“Oh... sorry. Tired...”

The boots tumble to the floor and he gently rolls her onto her side so that he can get to the buttons of her dress. “‘Tis all righ’. Sleep, Raven. Sleep.”

She does.

He dresses her in a nightgown – his gaze lingering over the gentle, convex curve of her stomach – and then he tucks her into bed. He doesn’t sleep, though. He’s not tired yet. He sits beside her with her dress on his lap and looks over the seams before deciding they’ll be too much trouble to let out. No, he’ll simply have to send a request to the Royal Seamstress for another set of dresses. Alice will need them. Soon.

“I’m goin’ teh be a fa’her,” he muses softly, his gaze moving over Alice. Alice. His wife, his Champion, his lover, his Everything... even the mother of his child.

Tarrant clenches his fists, grits his teeth and tries not to wake her – again! – with emotional over-spillage. After a few moments, the Thought moves toward the back of his mind, and he lets out the breath he’d been holding. The sense of accomplishment is small, but it makes him smile.

“I’ll be strong fer ye again, Alice. I will.”

And his determination seems to be enough to drive away the nightmares – the memories! – for another night. However, it cannot keep them away indefinitely. No, they sneak up on him at the worst possible times: at tea with Helen when Alice reaches across the table for the cream without bothering to ask him to pass it; in the bath when she stands up in the slippery tub without waiting for him to extend a hand to help her; when her stomach grumbles with hunger that she hadn’t mentioned despite the fact that she must have been hungry for some time!

“Alice,” he reminds her again and again. “You Promised to tell me when you needed something...”

“It’s only a small thing,” she answers with a smile.

Not for the first time (and certainly not the last!), he fits his palm against her belly and whispers, “‘Tis
th’ little thin’s I most wan’tae look after.”

Sometimes, she lets him. And sometimes...

Sometimes... he has to make her let him.

“Honestly! I can run my own bathwater!”

“Tarrant, you don’t have to rub my feet...”

“No, really, I can make up the tea tray. I was taught by a master, you know!”

“Stop. Please. There’s no reason – no rational reason – for me to not go for regular walks in the park with Margaret!”

In that particular instance, Tarrant had replied, “Yes, yes, but the name of the park in question is most... unfortunate.”

“Hyde Park?”

“Yes. Hide! Who knows how many people have gone missing in such a place! Or what if you Call me and I’m unable to find you because the park has Hidden itself or—!”

“I don’t panic whenever you go galumphing off with Hamish,” she’d reminded him. Then had paused and, regarding him with a playfully suspicious look, had asked, “Or should I?”

Yes, perhaps he is a bit overprotective. But, considering recent events, Tarrant thinks he’s entitled! And it’s doubly annoying that his Alice rarely asks for anything. (Irritating in the extreme!) He would be happy to do-make-give! her whatever she wants.

Unfortunately, the only thing she’s asked for is for him spend hours away from her, several times a week, engaging in utterly pointless exercise!

**Fencing.**

Tarrant sighs as he recalls the introductory lesson to this odd and poorly named activity.

The lecture had begun with: “Gentlemen, the point of swordsmanship—”
And had, from the onset, unfortunately lacked in both clarification and accuracy! To which Tarrant had thought to enlighten the man:

“Oh! I do beg your pardon, sir, but if it’s these rather annoyingly whippy, oversized hatpins to which you are referring, I feel I must alert you to the fact that they are... well, that is to say... Their points are – unfortunately – missing.”

The club’s fencing instructor had not appeared to take this information seriously. The man had stared – in a rather unfriendly manner! – at Tarrant, who, with an affronted frown, had turned toward his companion.

Hamish had sighed. “Hightopp, for the last time! These are swords and their tips are not missing. They are capped! For our safety!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! This exercise will be perfectly safe!”

“No, no, no. What I meant was are you sure this is the last time you’ll be insisting on that nonsense?”

“Nonsense!” Hamish had blustered in a very Helen-Kingsleigh sort of way. “Now, see here, Hightopp! We’re here to learn how to fence—!”

“Yet with no boards or slats or hammers or nails or bricks or mortar or logs or pins or wire or even marzipan in sight!” Tarrant had argued. “What sort of fence is one without – at the very least! – gingerbread bricks and molasses? I ask you!”

Hamish’s response had been to blink uselessly at him.

The fencing instructor had made a rather rude noise which he’d attempted – poorly! – to cover with a forced cough. “Ahem, yes, thank you for that, Lord Hightopp. Now, as I was saying, the art of fencing—”

Tarrant had opened his mouth to protest the nonsensical misclassification of the activity they’d been about to attempt.

Hamish, however, had cut him off, “The fence comes later.”

“We’ll be building fences?”
“No.”

“No. Fighting on the tops of fences?”

“If it’s possible, I’m sure you’ll find a way to do so.”

“Then I fear you’ll have to cut back on cake at afternoon tea, Ascot, or I doubt you’ll manage it without tumbling off and skewering yourself with this... this...!” Tarrant had scowled at the sorry excuse for a weapon and swished it through the air, making it *whoosh!* as it had traveled this way and that.

Hamish had glared at him.

But, in all honestly, Tarrant had already become accustomed to it by that time. He’d smiled back.

The instructor had cleared his throat again. “Perhaps... yes, let’s just begin and... see how things go from there. Lord Ascot, if you’ll demonstrate the correct posture for Lord Hightopp?”

He’d done so.

Tarrant recalls that his eyebrows had twitched with amusement. “What in all of Und—er, this room lacking in fences is *that* supposed to be?”

Hamish glowered at him. “This is how one begins a fair fight. Now, will you just—!?”

Tarrant hadn’t been able to prevent himself from snorting out a cackle.

Hamish had responded by groaning and straightening. “What is it *now*, you barbarian?” His tone had been weary and not a little annoyed.

Tarrant, waving a hand as if batting away a wisp of smoke from Absolem’s hookah, had obligingly stated, “A *fair* fight? Goodness! You people *do* have the strangest ideas!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If a fight were *fair*, there wouldn’t be a winner, now would there? Both opponents being equal and such, which rather defeats the point of fighting, wouldn’t you say? Rather, negates it altogether. In fact, one couldn’t really call it a *fight* now could they? It’d more of a—!”

A rather high-pitched growl had been Tarrant’s only warning.
He’s not given the same courtesy this time, however.

Hamish, obviously having grown tired of waiting for Tarrant’s attack, slices his foil through the air, right at Tarrant’s nose!

Scowling – for Alice won’t like it if he returns home with bruises – Tarrant uses his own implement – for it is most definitely not a sword; why it’s not even a sickly cousin of his broadsword or Frabjous Day claymore! – to block the attack – Parry! he remembers the move is called – and, with a flick of his wrist, steps forward into a lunge.

“Foils up, gentlemen!” the instructor calls.

Foil! Tarrant thinks with a amused smirk. And just what precisely are they meant to foil? The opponent’s concentration?

As the instructor rambles on about posture and whatnot, Tarrant allows that it might just be the case that foils are meant to discombobulate one’s adversary. The things are rather difficult to keep one’s eye on...!

“Hightopp! Are you paying attention?”

“I’m afraid not,” he admits. “I was just contemplating—”

“Perhaps,” Hamish says, rudely interrupting him to comment to the instructor, “a practical approach rather than theory would better serve us today, sir.”

“Perhaps you are right. Very well. Do you worst to each other. No doubt the one of you who minds my instructions will emerge the better for it.”

Tarrant huffs a bit at the implication that he’s unable to focus adequately and refuses to accept criticism! Why, the very notion is ridiculous! Especially since Alice had asked him for his specifically! Why, she’s counting on him to—!

With a surprised yelp, Tarrant counters Hamish’s sudden thrust and the paltry sword-fight-that-does-not-utilize-proper-swords-and-is-more-a-dance-than-an-actual-fight continues. Why Alice would fancy learning this useless sport is Beyond him!

A half an hour later, after Tarrant has “broken the rules of engagement” five times in various manners – purposefully tripping his opponent, grasping Hamish’s wrist, and elbowing him in the ribs – and despite his protests to the contrary – “This is a fight! You can’t expect me to simply wave this oversized hatpin at him, glaring as I do!” – and the foils have been safely stowed away, Hamish
“I’d say ‘good show, old man’, however...”

“I’m neither old, nor was it a show, and it would have been rather worth our while had we been permitted to use an actual sword.”

“Foils are swords, Hightopp,” Hamish continues, his voice flat with repetition.

“Next you’ll be telling me that the sun rises in the east!”

“It does.”

“... ah. So. I’m quite unsurprised to hear you make that assertion.”

Hamish pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He sighs. Heavily. “I don’t know why I bother to put up with your oddness.”

“Perhaps you might consult Alice on that point? I’m sure she’ll provide a few justifications.”

“I highly doubt Alice and I would be able to see eye-to-eye on your... better qualities.”

“Oh! Yes, yes. Perhaps not. She’s considerably shorter than you and seeing things eye-to-eye rather implies an equality of height, doesn’t it?”

Hamish snorts. “That may be, but I believe she makes up for her shorter stature in strength of stubbornness.”

Giggling, Tarrant agrees.

They finish getting cleaned up from the lesson and on Hamish’s suggestion – “We’ve time for a game or two of billiards yet.” – wander into the games room. Hamish leads him to an unoccupied table and Tarrant glances curiously through the open door on this side of the large room.

“Is that...?”

“The card tables through there? Yes,” Hamish replies shortly, disgust in his tone, as he hands Tarrant a cue stick.
Foregoing his usual remark on Londoners’ apparent affinity for long, slender, point-less objects, Tarrant instead observes, “Is that Lord Manchester...?”

“Gambling away his wife’s affection, his son’s future, and his own self-respect? Yes. It is.”

Tarrant raises his brows and, turning toward Hamish, comments, “You disapprove?”

Hamish sets up the table, frowning most viciously at the balls and felt-covered surface. And it’s just as well items cannot speak here in London or he’s sure Hamish would have been warned that if he continues to scowl in such a manner his expression will become stuck that way for a Good Long While!

“I do not approve,” Hamish replies. “Of gambling, drinking hard liquor in the middle of the afternoon, blatant infidelity, or idiocy in general.”

“Ah... so that would be why you don’t take fencing lessons with Lord Manchester,” Tarrant summarizes.

“We were the caps removed from the points of the foils, I might consider it, however,” Hamish comments darkly.

Tarrant, wisely, says nothing. Hamish performs something called “the break” with a bit more force than Tarrant has grown accustomed to but, other than that, the game continues quite pleasantly. Well, as pleasantly as a game wherein sticks are used to push balls around a table can be.

“I still can’t fathom why one mustn’t throw the balls into the proper holes,” Tarrant complains to the cue stick in his hands. “It’s far more direct. Imminently more satisfying as well. Throwing things.” He thinks of Thackery and Mally and grins wistfully.

“Perhaps the point,” Hamish returns as he studies the layout of the table, “is not to achieve one’s goals through direct means. I do believe such pursuits are intended to hone one’s skills at strategy and coordination.”

“Ah...” Well, considering their regular lessons with those ridiculously whippy excuses for swords perhaps a bit more coordination would be quite useful.

“Hightopp! It is you!”

Tarrant startles as a hand claps him on the shoulder. He turns and finds himself in the company of a rather intoxicated Lowell Manchester. He twitches his chin to the side when his nose encounters a veritable cloud of Bandersnatch-bile on the man’s breath.
“Didn’t expect to see you here, in a place like this, chap. However did you...?”

Hamish sets the end of his cue against the floor with a smart bang! and tightens his fingers around the stick. “Manchester,” he greets with surprising civility.


Lowell turns back to Tarrant and grins. It is not a friendly expression. Or perhaps, the trouble with it is that it is too friendly. Tarrant watches the man warily, remembering the snide remarks (in the Kingsleigh library) and disdainful silence (during dinner at the Manchester residence in town) and says nothing.

“In fact, I’ve been quite remiss in my duties as a brother-in-law, haven’t I, Hightopp?”

“That’s Lord Hightopp,” Hamish reminds him, his bland tone utterly ruined by the narrowing of his eyes.

“Lord—!” Lowell guffaws. “Well, certainly, but we’re family, are we not? Those sorts of formalities aren’t necessary! Now! Hightopp, what say you sit down and join me for a game of cards. We’re in need of a fourth.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” Tarrant says as neutrally as possible despite his uneasiness and rolling stomach. “But, as you can see, I’m in the middle of a game of billiards at the moment.”

“But you won’t mind me borrowing Hightopp for a bit, will you, Ascot?” Lowell replies, grinning.

“I’m afraid I will. As will Lady Hightopp as she’s expecting his return soon.”

Lowell snorts. “I’m sure Alice will understand.”

Tarrant, oddly enough, feels the urge to send his fist through Lowell’s teeth at the very sound of his wife’s given name being slung about so casually by this... this...! “Sir, I’m afraid you’ll have to count me out. I’ve no affection for card games.”

Which is true. The last deck he’d met had not survived him, actually.

“I’ll show you the way of it, Hightopp! No need to be anxious. Now, you’ve got an hour, haven’t you? Come along and bring your quid. The opening stake is—”

“You’ll not patsy up to your brother-in-law to help you win back your quickly-lost pounds!” Hamish slams his cue stick down on the tabletop, making Tarrant jump and Lowell scowl. “Hightopp, if you’ve don’t mind, I’ve had quite enough of this nonsense for today!”

“You needn’t shackle yourself to this... fellow,” Lowell advises Tarrant. “Why, I wouldn’t mind having my driver drop you off home in a bit.”

Tarrant gently but firmly shakes Lowell’s grip from his arm. “A generous offer, to be sure,” Tarrant says. “But I’m afraid I must decline. Ascot has promised to assist me with something very important this afternoon and, as he’s cleared his schedule for it, I’d hate to waste his time.”

He bows himself just out of arm’s reach. “Best of luck with your cards, sir. Although, if you find yourself having difficulties, might I suggest that another set might be more accommodating? Just a thought. Have a pleasant day.”

And with that, Tarrant nods to Hamish, who turns on his heel and marches from the room. Tarrant doesn’t try to keep up with him.

It’s not until they’re in the Ascot carriage that the man lets loose:

“That... that rotter! That utter bounder! How dare he attempt to cozy up to you in a blatant appeal for funds in a public venue!”

Tarrant is unsurprised to hear this; he’d thought Lowell must have had some sort of ulterior motive for being... pleasant to him.

Hamish continues, “Has he no shame – no sense of propriety – whatsoever?”

“Perhaps not,” Tarrant agrees cheerfully. “And while I’ve never found a lack of shame to be regrettable, I’ll make an exception this once.” And then allows: “Everyone has faults of some kind,” he observes, marveling at the intensity of Hamish’s irritation. Why, it’s very nearly Irritation rather than simple London-ish irritation.

“That Lowell has his fair share and more!” Hamish grumbles, glares out the window, then rubs a gloved hand over his face and sighs. “I pity Margaret and Winslow. The man is less than worthless.”

“Now that – Pity, I mean – is less than worthless!” Tarrant answers. “Utterly counterproductive to anything worth having or doing.”

“True. There are other, more productive avenues to keep in mind,” Hamish agrees. He inspects his walking stick – a gesture that Tarrant has learned he uses to reorient himself and sometimes to
distract himself from inexplicable bouts of embarrassment and occasionally to assist him in puzzling through some troublesome idea – and, after a moment, says, “Well, you were right earlier: I have cleared my schedule for the day. When you spoke of an important errand on which I could accompany you, had you done so in earnest?”

Tarrant grins. “Why yes, I had! And I’d be delighted if you would! Accompany me, that is.”

“I should be honored. Where to?”

Tarrant tells him.

Hamish coughs out a disbelieving bout of laughter. “And here I thought I’d run the gamut of humiliation and other assorted unpleasantness already today.”

Before Tarrant can do more that frown quizzically in reply, Hamish grumbles, “You’d better not tell anyone about this.”

Then he knocks on the roof of the carriage and shouts the new destination to the driver.

“Don’t worry!” Tarrant assures him. “This will be excellent fun!”

“What concerns me,” Hamish replies slowly, “is that you obviously believe that to be true.”

Tarrant snickers, shakes his head, and smiles.

*~*~*~*

“I envy you, little sister.”

Alice looks up from the embroidery she’s currently butchering. Normally, she wouldn’t have had any patience for it, but as she’d agreed to spending the afternoon with Margaret and Margaret seems to enjoy the domestic torture...

“I’m sorry? What?”

Margaret sighs heavily and, lowering the fabric and needle to her lap, confesses, “Tarrant. I envy you him.”
Alice blinks at her. “I... you... Why would you say that?” For, as surely as Alice knows the sun rises over Mamoreal from Witzend and sets in Queast, she knows that Margaret would never long for – let alone allow! – an impoverished man with wild eyebrows and long hair and a tradesman’s hands to touch her. It’s not vanity or discrimination, Alice believes. It’s simply that Margaret has only ever had an interest in her own kind. And, if there’s one thing Alice has learned from a lifetime of being compared to her older sister, it’s that Margaret is a Lady. And the proper companion for a lady is a gentleman. Which Alice is very thankful Tarrant is not.

“I’m sorry, Alice!” Margaret whispers and Alice sees tears of shame in her sister’s eyes. “I didn’t mean... I don’t...” She stops, takes a deep breath, controls herself. “I meant, I envy your marriage. It’s... it’s a marriage of substance and I wish... I wish Lowell would... would just once speak to me as if... as if...!”

“As if you have at least one interesting thought in your head,” Alice suggests, reaching across the space between their chairs and grasping her sister’s hand.

The tears return and Margaret only nods.

Alice reaches for a handkerchief – one of several she now keeps in her handbag and gently dabs the tumbling tears from her sister’s face. Margaret smiles her thanks and, her gaze darting to the bright blue handkerchief, releases a sobbing laugh.

“There, you see, Alice!” she nearly shouts. “This is exactly my point! Those aren’t your handkerchiefs – I’ve noticed Tarrant handing them to you before. They’re his and he gave them to you, didn’t he? Knowing you’d be away with me and you might need them and he wouldn’t be here himself to offer them to you and do you have any idea what I would give to receive even half that regard from Lowell?”

Alice rubs her sister’s shoulder and does her best to catch as many tears as she can. “Oh, Margaret. You were happy with him once, weren’t you? What happened?” Although, Alice thinks she already knows.

Margaret hiccups and wrestles once again for control. “Winslow happened. My beautiful son... after he was born, Lowell started... or, no, actually I don’t believe that! He no longer bothered to keep his affairs from me. That man makes a mockery of our marriage. Humiliates me with his philandering! Everyone is aware of it! And they probably laughed at me long before I ever suspected!”

Alice hides a wince. I should have told her about that scene at the engagement party...

Yes, she should have.

Damn you, Lowell, for forcing that decision on me.
Yes, she should have told Margaret, but would she have believed her then? Probably not.

“With an heir to the Manchester name, he doesn’t need me anymore,” she says. “It was all a lie, anyway. He never wanted me. He never even wanted to be married. That’s not so much to ask for, is it? For a husband to care for his wife, to want to be married to her?”

Alice shakes her head. “No, no, it’s not an unreasonable request at all. In fact, I’d say it’s your right to expect that.”

Margaret swallows thickly. “We always want what we can never have...”

Alice hesitates to ask the question she knows she has to. No one else will ask it and Margaret desperately needs to Face it. After a moment of awkward silence, she does: “What will you do, dear sister? Will you leave him? Divorce...?”

Margaret emphatically shakes her head. “No. No, I won’t. I won’t do that to you and mother.”

“Margaret, don’t use us and an excuse to delay finding your own happiness. You know I don’t care about what’s proper! And you know mother will support you in your decision, whatever it is! I’ve no doubt she wishes she could have spoken to you about this herself, but you know she can’t. She’s our mother, after all. I’m your rebellious devil-may-care sister, so I can say whatever I please!”

There’s a hysterical note in Margaret’s helpless laughter. Alice smiles for her and waits for her to calm down.

When she does, her sister whispers, “Even if I wanted to... end it, how could I? Winslow...”

Yes, Winslow would stay with his father. Alice is sure the man would never release his son and heir. And, certainly, his family would never permit it even if Lowell himself had no interest in the boy. In fact, Alice is almost completely sure he doesn’t. She’s never seen him touch the child at all, not to pick him up, not to play with him, not to kiss his brow or soothe his tears. No, Winslow is Margaret’s son. Lowell had simply been contracted labor on the part of his conception. It’s quite obvious to Alice that the man believes his job is Done.

Alice sighs. “I hate this place. These rules and restrictions.”

Margaret turns and gawks, utterly gob smacked. “Alice, don’t say such things! This is our home!”

And, however fleeting the thought of inviting her sister to Underland may have been, it no longer matters. It dies, unexplored, unvoiced, in that very moment.
“It’s not Society’s fault I’m trapped in this loveless marriage, that my husband shames me, that he treats me as if I’m a nothing more than a fixture of this house! I did this to myself, Alice. I saw what I wanted to see in him.” Margaret sighs. “I almost wish I’d never found out. I wonder how long the dream could have lasted if I hadn’t. Or if I’d borne a daughter first before Winslow...”

“Those aren’t very helpful thoughts to be having,” Alice gently scolds her. “What’s done is done. Now you have to think of Winslow. And, I’m sorry to say this, Margaret, but Lowell isn’t much of a father to him, and he needs one.”

Margaret nods, her shoulders slumping in dejection. “I know. I’d ask Lowell’s father to spend more time with him except...”

Alice sighs right along with her this time. “Yes, I know.” The man obviously hadn’t had much of a hand in his own son’s upbringing, not with the veritable empire he’d built out of what had once been a modest family business.

“If only papa were...”

Alice feels tears come to her own eyes at that. “Don’t, Margaret,” she manages through the painful tightening of her own throat. She wants to say more, to beg her sister not to torture both of them with such thoughts, but she can’t.

“I’m sorry.”

Alice nods.

The clock ticks. They sniffle and soak Tarrant’s borrowed handkerchiefs in tears. And when it seems like the morning has been completely ruined beyond repair, Margaret sits up and takes a deep breath.

“Well, this is getting maudlin. Come with me, Alice. There was a reason I asked you over today.”

Curious and still dabbing at escaping tears, Alice follows Margaret out of the small sunroom and into the parlor. Margaret smiles as she picks up a wicker basket and sets it on the sofa. Alice joins her.

“What’re those?”

Margaret lifts out the tiniest baby bunting Alice has ever seen. “Winslow’s baby clothes,” she says. “I thought you could use them... I know you and Tarrant don’t have much money with you...”

Alice doesn’t even have the presence of mind to search for something to say out of gratitude.
Instead, she idiotically observes, “They’re so... small.”

Margaret laughs. “It certainly doesn’t feel like it when they’re on their way into the world!”

Alice hears a small, frantic snort and assumes she must have been the one to make it. However, her attention is focused on a boot. A little fur boot. For an impossibly small foot. Hands shaking, she reaches for it and lifts it and its partner from the neat stack.

“For winter,” Margaret explains unnecessarily.

Alice nods, feeling the burn of tears again. “It’s... so... so...”

Dear Fates, her and Tarrant’s child – their child, still within her – will wear this tiny, precious, unbelievably sweet pair of boots to keep tiny toes warm from the chill and tiny ankles from getting chapped by the wind and tiny shins from becoming...

“Alice? Are you all right?”

And then it’s Margaret’s turn to hold the handkerchief to her sister’s cheek.

“I’m—sorry—Margaret—I don’t—know—what’s wrong—with me?!” she sobs.

And of course, as that’s the moment when Alice is most decidedly Not Together and her emotions are scattered and floundering like fish out of water, the front door opens and a voice calls out, “Hello? I hope it’s all right that we’ve let ourselves in!”

Brangergain i’tall! Hamish.

“Alice?!”

And Tarrant. Naturally. Well and truly, thoroughly panicking from her sudden loss of Control.

“We’re in here!” Margaret calls too helpfully. Alice wishes she had the fortitude to summon a glare at her.

But then it’s too late to bother with it because Tarrant fairly runs into the room. And Alice feels a stab of panic-relief-confusion! from him before he’s there, wrapping her in his arms. And, useless fool that she is, she clutches the pair of fur boots and sobs onto his shoulder.

“Alice? Wha’s th’matter, lass?!”
“N-nothing!” she babbles.

“It’s only the boots,” Margaret supplies as Hamish walks into the room.

“Wha’ boots? Alice? Is there sommat wrong wi’ yer boots, love?” He leans over to inspect her feet.

Marshalling herself, Alice thumps the little fur boots against his chest. “Th-these b-b-boots!”

He blinks at them, a puzzled frown pulling at his brows. “I’m sorry, Alice, but I fear even I can’t adjust those to fit you. Not with the size you’re currently at. They’re far, far too small for your right-proper-Alice–”

And whatever composure she’d managed to gather is dashed to bits at the reminder of how small and helpless and precious these boots are and their child will be!

“What in the name of the queen is going on in here? Alice? Are you all right?”

“Of course she is!” Alice hears her sister reply. “She’s expecting. She’s allowed to marvel at the miracle of life!”

“The miracle of...!” There’s a slight pause and then Hamish blusters, “You gave Hightopp a right scare, Alice! Now calm yourself before the man loses his mind with worry! And here we thought you were upset over something important.”

Margaret, bless her, comes to her little sister’s rescue. “Important? Important, Hamish? What could be more important than realizing one’s a part of bringing new life into the world?”

Hamish flounders.

Alice barks out a laugh, which, oddly enough helps her get her tears under control. She leans away from Tarrant and laughs. “Boots for our Hightopp,” she informs him, holding them up properly.

Tarrant’s suddenly misty-eyed stare as he looks at the little shoes in her grasp nearly sends her into an over-emotional bout of insanity... again.

However, he manfully blinks back his own tears and, looking up, smiles. “I like ‘em!”

He says nothing about their size or how they will fit their child or the important role they will play during winter... and for that, Alice damns convention, wraps her arms around his shoulders and kisses him in her sister’s parlor.
“Now,” Alice says decisively, knowing that Tarrant will never allow her to apologize for crying on his jacket, “What did you and Hamish do while you were out?”

“Yes,” Margaret says. “Let’s have some tea and then you boys can tell us all about your manly activities that have nothing whatsoever to do with babies.”

Tarrant giggles.

Hamish narrows his blue eyes at him. “Don’t say it, Hightopp. I forbid you.”

“So sorry! Must! Alice must know!” he snorts out, shaking with laughter.

“I must know what?” she demands, looking from her husband to Hamish and then back again.

“We bought a bassinet,” he whispers out in a high-pitched voice just this side of insane cackling.

“A bassinet? Whatever for?”

He sighs and gives her a long-suffering Look.

“No, I meant, why so soon? We’ve months yet.” Over three of them, if she’s counted correctly.

“Perhaps I was merely attempting to be productive.”

“Was fencing not?”

He snorts. “Fencing. The most utterly useless, senseless, nonsensical...!” He sighs and gives her a wry smile. “You will realize exactly how much I love you once you are able to permit me to teach you this... custom.”

“I can hardly wait!” She grins back, delighted.

“Yes, let’s tell Alice how very much you enjoy contradicting the instructor and then stomping on my toes, Hightopp. Very sportsmanlike of you.”

Tarrant doesn’t deny it.

Alice laughs.
Hamish harrumphs.

Margaret pats his shoulder. “Let’s get that tea on, then.”

Hamish glances down at her hand in the instant before she pulls away. “While the offer is very welcome, madam, I’m afraid I must be following Hightopp’s example – just this once!” he asserts with a mild glare in Tarrant’s direction. “– and attempt to accomplish something... productive this afternoon.”

Alice is a little surprised by the fact that Tarrant suddenly straightens. His green eyes narrow as he examines Hamish in contemplative silence.

“Well,” Margaret replies, ignorant of Tarrant’s sudden change in mood. “Far be it from me to attempt to waylay a gentleman on a mission. I’ll see you out.”

“Thank you, madam.” He turns toward Tarrant and Alice. “Will you borrow the Manchester carriage to get home or...?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Alice tells him. “The Kingsleigh carriage should be coming around on the hour.”

“Ah. Very good. Until Friday, Hightopp.”

“I look forward to it, Ascot,” Tarrant replies amiably but with a sly grin tickling the corner of his mouth.

Alice waits until her sister and Hamish have moved out of the room and down the hall. “What is it?” she asks him.

“Something productive,” Tarrant replies.

“What about it?”

“I suggested that very course of action to him earlier today.”

“Did you? How is that odd?” she asks for, by the look on his face, he had most assuredly not expected Hamish to seriously consider the suggestion at all.

“Because, Raven,” he answers, giving her a delighted yet slithy-mad smile, “I made it in reference to your sister and her... unfortunate choice of spouse.”
Alice feels her mouth drop open as Comprehension begins to dawn. First in lime green, then buttercup yellow, and then blushing rose...

She chokes, “You... you...”

And at the sound of the front door closing, Alice finds coherency and whispers urgently. “You don’t think he’d do anything... rash would you?”

“Out of my presence? I certainly hope not! I’ve been rather looking forward to seeing how Rashness suits him!”

“Tarrant!” she hisses.

His brows arch and his expression morphs into the epitome of Innocence. “Yes, love?”

Alice sighs through a grin that’s quickly becoming one of Wonder. “You are Mad.”

He giggles. “I’m glad to hear you say so, my Alice. Very glad!”

“Oh dear,” she muses. “I’m afraid we’ve made a rhyme.”

And when Margaret steps back into the room, she’s greeted with the sight of her sister and brother-in-law knee-deep in tears of helpless mirth on her sofa with a pair of baby’s winter boots still held in their hands between them.

Alice imagines they must be quite the sight if Margaret’s teary smile is anything to go by.

Chapter End Notes

1. Special “thanks” goes out to that_ellie for advising me on how pregnancy might be affecting Alice. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and making this story so much more believable! (^_^)/

2. The fifteen minutes I spent looking up Victorian Era gentlemen’s clubs on the Internet in no way lead me to believe they actually offered fencing lessons. Yes, that means there’s been another sighting of that Artistic License!
3. Hyde Park is not my own invention. It's really there in London and it's really named that. (Or, at least it was a hundred years ago. I actually haven't checked to see if it's still there now...)

4. A BIG Thank You to wanderamaranth for sharing her research on divorce in the Victorian Era with me! Actually, in the event of a divorce, Margaret might be awarded custody of her son (because he's under the age of seven) but I decided that, in a legal battle and with no male representation (i.e., Charles Kingsleigh) to back Margaret, the Manchesters would probably be able to take custody of Winslow. It's half Artistic License and half pessimistic realism on my part.

5. The part with the little baby booties was inspired by broomclosetkink. Here's your request, sweetie! (^__~)b
“Mialta!”

Alice’s eyes snap open as Tarrant’s exclamation interrupts her first sip of her first and bloody only! cup of tea of the day.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Helen asks politely, looking up from her plate of fruit.

“Mialta,” Tarrant repeats, ignoring the presence of Alice’s mother and sister and looking very Deeply into Alice’s eyes. “Or Almita, if it’s a girl.” He searches her expression for a reaction. “And, perhaps, Tamial. If it’s a boy.”

“Oh,” Margaret muses aloud. “Those sound like... lovely names. Unique.”

Alice continues staring, tea forgotten.

“What do you think, Alice?” Helen prompts.

“Mialta, Almita, Tamial...” she muses aloud, rolls the odd similarities over in her mind. The same three pairings of letters, arranged in three different ways...

“Tamial...” Alice draws in a quick breath as realization hits her. Tamial, Almita, and Mialta! Of course! “Ta” from “Tarrant.” “Al” from “Alice.” And “Mi” from...

“If you’re still wanting to name our littlin’ for the queen,” he murmurs, looking anxious. “Or at least name in part. Partly. A part of a name. A partly named sort of name. A—!”

Alice leans forward and kisses him. Her mother coughs and turns her attention to her teacup. Margaret helps herself to another cookie.

“They’re Perfect,” she tells him when she leans back.

His gaze is slightly unfocused with the intensity of his happiness – his pupils delightfully mismatched in size and orientation – and his eyes are so utterly green! He grins his tea-stained and gap-toothed smile... and then sighs.
“I’m so happy you like them, my Alice.”

“How could I not, coming from your mind as they did?”

The sight of his smile and weakly fluttering hands and slightly twitching fingers is response enough.

“Tarrant, the tea is lovely,” Alice’s mother comments to fill the awkward silence. “As always.”

“Thank you, but... oh! Actually, it was Alice who did the honors today.”

“Alice!” her mother gasps, glancing down at her cup. “Wherever did you learn to make proper tea?”

Margaret also regards her tea with surprise.

Alice replies, placing her bare right hand on his gloved left one, “Tarrant taught me...” And at this moment, she grins widely, inviting him to share the coming joke. “...how to listen to the tea leaves steeping.”

“I beg your pardon?” Helen manages.

Margaret sighs with fond exasperation. Suddenly, Alice feels like an over-imaginative six-year-old girl again. “Oh, honestly! What sort of sound is that?”

The question is meant to be an impossible one, Alice knows. She answers anyway. “It has a kind of rhyme to it... How does it go again?” She tilts her head in Tarrant’s direction and squints, digging through her memories, “Hush and brush, hiss and kiss...”

Tarrant turns his hand over on the tabletop and interlaces their fingers. Gently, he corrects her imperfect memory: “’Shush and hush they brush, lest the best be rest, hiss and kiss, lips from cup sip.’”

Alice smiles. “Yes, that’s it. The sound, I mean, of tea leaves steeping.”

Her mother and sister gape at her and Tarrant.

“It’s there if you listen closely,” he asserts, his brows dancing with the force of his convictions and humor.

Margaret recovers first. “Goodness, Alice. You’re still mad,” she comments in a fond tone.
“Undoubtedly.” And she’s not alone in that madness, either. However, no one remarks on Tarrant’s eccentricities as it would be frightfully impolite to do so!

“I imagine this place you’ve yet to tell me the proper name of – this country where you live now – looks more favorably upon that sort of thing,” her mother muses with a small smile.

Alice returns the gesture. It’s odd to see a satisfied gleam in her mother’s eyes when speaking of madness. “You could say that.”

“How far is it?” Margaret asks.

Alice considers her answer. She recalls Mirana’s advice to confide the truth to her family. She feels Tarrant’s encouraging nudge via the heart line. Still, bluntly informing them that she now lives in a world that exists through the looking glass and yet far underground would not be... prudent.

Instead, she chooses a riddle: “It is further than you could ever imagine, yet closer than a dream.”

“Oh, why won’t you just tell us?” Margaret fusses. Beside her chair, Winslow waves his chubby little arms and she passes him a small piece of orange to distract him.

“Where’s the adventure in that, dear?” Helen replies and then, leaning back in her chair, invites, “Give us another hint, Alice. What sort of place is it?”

Alice fiddles with her cup. She looks up at her husband who merely smiles and nods. After a moment of contemplation, she selects a page from Tarrant’s wonderfully eccentric book of Thoughts.

She says, “I’ve been considering things that begin with the letter ‘M’...” She rests a hand on her belly, grins, and says, “Miracles...”

“Muchness,” Tarrant immediately contributes.

“Madness,” she counters and then looks across the table at her mother and sister.

“Marvelous?” her sister contributes after a moment of thoughtful silence.

“Magical,” Alice is surprised to hear her mother say with great assertion. In reply to Alice’s no doubt flunderwhapped look, Helen huffs. “Oh, come now, Alice. You can’t expect me to believe you’d be happy anywhere boringly normal, can you?”

Alice laughs, nods, and – daringly – adds, “Mirrors.”
Tarrant’s fingers tighten around hers.

“Mirrors?” Margaret echoes. Even Helen frowns at the word.

“Yes, mirrors. And I’m afraid that’s all the help I can give you at the moment.”

Margaret rolls her eyes. “Magnificent. Now I’ll have M-words on my mind all day.”

Tarrant giggles.

Alice hides her grin behind her cup.

Tea continues. Minutes of companionable silence later, before Helen can make a move in the direction of the teapot to refill her cup, Tarrant rises and serves her.

“Thank you, Tarrant.”

“My pleasure, madam.”

Alice watches as her mother’s gaze flickers toward his gloved left hand. And then Helen takes a deliberate breath and smiles.

Something deep within Alice’s chest unlocks and dissolves. The sensation echoes from her Heart Mark as Tarrant resumes his seat.

The sound of the doorbell, however, interrupts whatever might have been said next.

“That’ll be Hamish,” Helen predicts. “Off to the club today or will you be purchasing more furniture?”

Tarrant chuckles. “The club, madam. I’m afraid, were I to disrupt your fine home with another addition, that item would be a loom.”

“A loom?” Margaret parrots, blinking at him. “You... can weave as well?”

“Oh, no! Not well at all!” he protests. “But it’s an Out—er, Hightopp custom that a bolt of fabric be made for a new littlin’ and I’ve yet to get started on it!”
“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” Alice asks.

“Yes,” her mother continues. “Why, my grandmother’s loom is up in the attic. I brought it with me when I married Charles, hoping...”

Alice sighs. “Hoping one of your children might take to it.” She shares a knowing look with her sister. In this both she and Margaret had been in complete agreement: a loom is nothing more than an medieval torture device!

Speaking of which...

Alice reaches for Tarrant’s hand and brushes his fingertips with her own. “You won’t... again will you?” Not only does she hate the thought of him deliberately hurting himself, shedding blood for even the best and most noble of reasons, but it would be Dangerous to risk revealing the color of his blood here.

He covers her hand with his. “I won’t. It will be white. A blank canvas, so to speak.”

She releases a breath and nods.

“Shall I ask Mr. Brown to have it brought down, then?” Helen asks.

“Yes, please, madam!” Tarrant enthuses. And then, after a moment of considering: “Perhaps to the sewing room if it won’t be too much of an imposition?”

“That will be fine.”

And just then the dinning room door slides open. “Lord Hamish Ascot,” the butler announces.

“Hamish!” Margaret greets with a grin. “Have some tea.” She waves across to the seat between Winslow’s bassinet and Helen’s chair.

“Thank you. I will. Good afternoon, Mrs. Kingsleigh. You’re once again looking well today.”

As Hamish slides into his seat and exchanges pleasantries with Margaret, Tarrant squeezes her hand – still lightly clasped in his – and takes a noisy sip of tea. Alice frowns briefly but forces herself not to think about her husband’s suspicions on that front. At least, not here!

They discuss Lord Ascot’s health and general wellbeing: “He’d like another visit with you next
week if you can spare the time and trouble,” Hamish informs her and her husband. They discuss
Lady Ascot’s next social function: “Well, that’s just as well,” Helen comments upon hearing her
friend’s schedule. “I’ve arranged a luncheon with the Young Ladies Professionals Society on that
day. Your mother needn’t feel obliged to attend what with her tea function to see to.” They discuss
people Alice has not seen or spoken to in years, people who are eager to see her again and meet her
husband, people who had glimpsed them at the Ascots’ soiree... but they do not discuss one person
in particular:

No one says a single word about Lowell.

It’s well into the afternoon before Hamish remarks on the time.

“So,” Margaret says and Hamish watches as she offers an insistent Winslow a finger sandwich.
“You’ll be fencing this afternoon with Tarrant?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Hamish differs and glances across at his usual sparring partner. “I wasn’t able
to reserve a lesson with the instructor. It’ll be either boxing or billiards today.”

“Boxing!?” Alice sputters before Tarrant can do more than twitch a brow in reply. “Absolutely not!”
She struggles to hide her fear – dear Fates, what if someone discovers Tarrant is Different: blue
blood! – beneath her outrage.

“Goodness, Hamish, I’d have to agree,” Margaret comments with shockingly fortuitous insight.
“Suppose you two got carried away! However would you explain a broken nose to your father’s
investors?”

“The rakish look is fashionable these days,” he replies with daring madness Alice would never have
expected of him a mere month ago. “Or so I’ve heard.”

“You’ll be well raked-over indeed if you don’t give up that idea!” Alice asserts.

Tarrant giggles. “Never fear, Alice, we shall engage in nothing but utterly bloodless, boringly
masculine pursuits. Like... backgammon!”

“Oh, a boisterous bout of backgammon. Behave yourselves,” Alice replies in a droll tone which
doesn’t match her relieved smile.

Tarrant snorts a giggle.

Hamish ignores her. “Hightopp, last call. Are we trouncing each other or not today?”
“Trounce him,” Alice commands her husband with a smile.

“Be safe,” he answers suddenly very serious.

She nods. It’s an easy concession to make. “Just a brisk walk around the park. Nothing for you to worry about. Enjoy yourself.”

He brushes his fingers over her cheek. “I shall endeavor to do so.” And smiling, Tarrant reaches over and collects his hat from the empty seat between him and the end of the table. Alice collects their right gloves from the empty seat beside her and passes Tarrant’s to him. He helps her up from her seat. Hamish attends to her mother and Margaret. Winslow is gathered up in his grandmother’s arms.

At the front door, where Mr. Brown is still hovering, Hamish offers, “Shall I give you a hand into your carriage, Lady Manchester? Mrs. Kingsleigh?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“That would be much appreciated.”

Alice feels Tarrant cover her hand with his own, pressing it into the crook of his arm, and he leans closer to murmur, “Would you happen to require similar assistance, my Alice?”

“Yours and no other’s,” she replies.

His smile widens and his eyes glow. “And, should you require anything else of mine...”

“I’m sure I shall and when I do, you shall know it, sir.”

“Then I shall look forward to Knowing it, my Alice.”

A smile, a caress of his gloved thumb over her gloved knuckles, and a closed carriage door later, Alice and her sister are off and on their way.

Grinning like a complete ninny, Alice leans toward the window and waves good-bye. Tarrant’s replying wave is quite... vigorous and, if Hamish’s expression is any indication, manages to sour the man’s stomach.

“It is so very good to see you happy, Alice dear,” her mother comments.

She smiles and leans back against the seat beside her sister.
“She makes a lovely mother-to-be, doesn’t she?” Margaret remarks.

Alice swallows a bubble of laughter: *iambic pentameter!*

She clears her throat and rallies, “And yet, for so long, you both despaired that I’d end up an old maid!”

“True enough,” Helen admits without taking her attention off of Winslow who is fussing in her arms.

Margaret contrarily adds, “I rather thought you’d never find a man who would be mad enough to have you, little sister.”

“Luckily, *he* found *me,*” Alice rebuts and their laughter sets the tone for the remainder of the afternoon.

*~*~*~*~*

“Hightopp, I’ve something... important to discuss with you,” Hamish announces on their way to the club.

“Oh?” He’d been expecting something like this. Why, ever since the day he’d warned Hamish away from indulging in counterproductive pity, the man has had *Something* on his mind. Quite obviously. And had been insufferably rude in *not* sharing his thoughts!

*Uplanders,* Tarrant mutters to himself. And not for the first time since becoming... acquaintances with Hamish Ascot.

“Yes. You see, I’ve had Lowell Manchester’s finances looked into.”

Tarrant wonders how that would be possible. “Looked into?” he queries, wondering at the odd turn of phrase in relation to financial matters.

“Investigated,” Hamish clarifies, not longer bothering to mince words. “I’ve also had an investigator follow him and report to me over the last month.”

“Oh. I see.” But only vaguely! However, he senses that full comprehension of this point will not be entirely necessary for what is to come.
He’s right.

Hamish explains his planned course of action and Tarrant turns the man’s rationale over in his mind.

“Ascot...” he begins. “I am not well-versed in these London-ish customs of yours, but... it seems to me that even Lowell will object to your... proposal.”

“I’m sure he will. However, this is all for a good cause, is it not? And, truly, how else can it be done? And who else will be willing to do it? Aside from yourself, obviously,” Hamish allows when Tarrant opens his mouth to add his own contribution. “Unfortunately, you do not have the funds for this particular enterprise.”

Tarrant objects cautiously, “I would have the funds... if you would loan them to me. That way you might avoid... difficulties.” He thinks of Lady Ascot’s reaction to what her son is planning. “Lady Ascot...”

Hamish winces. “With any luck, we shall be able to confine this matter to the sphere of gentleman’s influence. She never need know.”

“I see. Is that why you’ll proceed with this mad plan of yours at the club?”

“Yes. I can’t have a maid or butler overhearing this and reporting back to Marg—ahem, Lady Manchester. If the venture fails... If the absolute worst should happen, I would not wish her to be aware of the role she’s played... albeit unwittingly.”

Tarrant sighs. “You know I have to tell Alice.”

“Will she keep it in her confidence?”

“Alice is quite skilled at keeping secrets,” Tarrant replies. Too skilled.

“Very well. I have no objection. Only, please do not tell her where anyone can possibly overhear.”

“We’re due for another carriage ride soon,” Tarrant comments and tries to keep the lascivious grin from peeping out.

“That should suffice. Now, when we arrive, I shall need you to do the following things, Hightopp...”

Again, Tarrant listens. Listens and marvels.
“But, Ascot...” he finally manages when the man pauses to take a breath. “If... that is, if Lowell should take Offense and demand...? You would choose me to...?”

“Yes, Hightopp, I most certainly would. If you’ve no objections.”

“I...” Objections? No, he doesn’t. He would be glad to do this for Hamish, and, by extension, for Alice’s sister. However, Alice will object. Of that he is sure. “If I refuse, who will you select?”

When Hamish cannot think of an immediate reply, when no reassurance comes forward, when a flicker of fear crosses the man’s face, Tarrant knows what he must do.

*I’m sorry, Alice. Forgive me.*

“Never mind. I accept,” he declares.

Hamish relaxes. “I... thank you, Hightopp. It may not come to that.”

Tarrant nods but does not agree. They both know the sort of man Lowell Manchester is. And they both know the likelihood of this plan being met with peaceful, mundane success is very... small indeed.

And, as it turns out, their instincts on this matter prove to be entirely correct.

In a small, private study of the club, Hamish Ascot endures Lowell Manchester’s shock, affront, and fury.

“You... you are offering...! In exchange for my *wife and son, Ascot?*” the man hisses, red-faced with lingering spirits and rage.

“No. If you’ll read the contract again, sir, you’ll realize that I am offering you a way to avoid debtor’s prison and a fresh start for yourself and your family. In the event that you find yourself incapable of that, I am attempting to allow your wife and son to seek a more... stable and financially secure protector. But only should you continue to be as monumentally foolish with their future as you have been thus far!”

Lowell barks out a laugh. “And I suppose you’d *happily* offer yourself for the position, Ascot?”

“No, sir. I will not. This would be Lady Manchester’s choice. In every sense of the word.”

Tarrant doesn’t point out that Margaret may still choose Lowell, despite the fact that he has neither met nor maintained his responsibilities toward her thus far in their marriage.
Lowell grits his teeth. His hand curls into a fist, crumpling the paper that, with a few signatures, will guarantee the man an advance on his annual allowance which will permit him to repay his debts which will give him a fresh start. And all that Hamish asks in return is the reimbursement of the original loan by the second week of December. It's a simple agreement, really. And a feasible one as Lowell will be receiving his annual income in three months’ time. All the man must do is stop his excessive gambling and other... unsavory expenditures.

However, Lowell does not appear to see it that way. He sees only the price of his failure to repay the loan. A price his pride – for Tarrant cannot possibly believe his heart gives a damn! – is unwilling to allow him to consider!

“*This—*” Lowell indicates the crushed contract in his hand. “—is an *insult!* I demand satisfaction, Ascot.”

Tarrant watches as Hamish, expression neutral and utterly unsurprised, nods. “Very well, sir.”

Tarrant lets out a silent sigh of regret. Alice will not be Pleased with this. No, not at all!

“Choose your Second,” Lowell instructs him. “Mine will be around on the morrow with a formal challenge.”

“I understand. Have him deliver it to the Kingsleigh residence. Hightopp will receive it.”

Lowell glares, snarls, “As I thought.” He throws a nasty glare in Tarrant’s direction before tossing the now-worthless document at Hamish’s feet and storming from the room.

After the door closes behind him, Tarrant turns toward his... friend.

“Are you truly ready to meet him, lad?”

“I’ll be perfectly fine,” Hamish replies. “Besides, he may yet reconsider. Between now and tomorrow.”

He may, Tarrant acknowledges, but doesn’t believe he will...

Again, he is proven correct.

Tarrant greets the man who calls the following morning and accepts the letter. The formal challenge. He reads it there in the parlor as Hamish had explained custom dictates.
“Will Ascot be issuing a formal apology for this slight?” Lowell’s man inquires. Tarrant thinks he recognizes him from the gaming tables. He’d never sensed much of an affinity between Lowell and any of his fellow gamblers. In fact, the man seems utterly uninterested in the proceedings.

“Not at this time,” Tarrant replies.

“Then I believe we shall meet on the morrow at the time and place given.”

“Undoubtedly,” he replies. The man sees himself out.

Tarrant folds up the letter, tucks it into his jacket pocket, and then heads upstairs to where Alice is currently drafting a letter to Townsend, arranging for a visit next week. He opens the bedroom door and blinks. For Alice is not composing the letter he’d left her working on only a few minutes ago: she is standing in the center of their room, her arms crossed over her now-clearly swollen belly and a stern expression on her face.

“Who was that just now? And what are you Dreading?” she asks.

He sighs. “Come for a carriage ride with me?” he asks, knowing they’ll need privacy for this, more than they’ll get here with Brown and the cook and the chambermaid hovering about.

“Where to?” she asks, reaching for her coat.

Tarrant helps her into it and bundles her in a scarf and woolen gloves. “To Ascot’s house in town.”

He summarizes the scene from the club yesterday in the carriage. She takes it far more calmly than he’d expected she would. Far more calmly that he would have, had their positions been reversed. He knows what he’s Asking of her: Trust. Trust of the deepest sort. Trust that, as Alice’s mind and their littlin’s future hang in the balance, Tarrant will do the Right thing, that he will Choose Them. Again. If it comes to that.

Failure is un-contemplate-able: he can guess what will happen to Alice, should the heart line break... permanently. They had both received a taste of that unbearable future...

He shivers even though Alice is a warm weight tucked up against his side.

“May I see the challenge?” she asks quietly.

Flunderwhapped by her apparent acceptance of the situation, he passes it to her, watches as she opens and reads it. “It doesn’t say what Hamish did or said to cause this reaction from Lowell.”
“Oh, it doesn’t?” he attempts to stall.

Alice has none of it. “What happened?”

Tarrant explains – as best he can considering his limited understanding of Uplandish customs and logic – the nature of the contract Hamish had had drawn up.

“Ah...” she finally says.

“Yes.”

She sighs and returns the letter to him. “Tarrant...”

“I’m sorry, Alice! It’s just... Hamish needs... and I’m the only one who...!” Tarrant snaps his mouth shut and, closing his eyes, takes a deep breath before attempting to explain his rationale in a rational manner.

Alice’s bare fingers, still warm from being protected from the early autumn chill by her woolen gloves, press against his lips. “I know.” She doesn’t look happy – not at all! – but he can see and sense and Feel that she Understands. “It’s Hamish’s right to choose the weapon in this case. I trust him not to choose pistols.” She looks him in the eye. “I would not be able to stand by knowing you might be facing a handgun in a duel to the death,” she informs him. “Lowell demands satisfaction to the last man standing. Which means that there will be a physician present to rule one man or the other unfit to continue fighting; you should not have to take his place and...” Here, she draws a slow, deep breath. “And fight Lowell.” The idea is obviously abhorrent to her but all she says is: “You’ve stood by while I’ve fought. By the sword, the knife, the staff... And I named you my Champion. I suppose that makes you Margaret’s as well... because, well... you know I’d protect her – do this for her – myself if I could.”

“Alice, Hamish is Margaret’s Champion. I’m just—”

“—his Second. I know.” She shakes her head but doesn’t move out of his arms, for which he’s very, very thankful. “But I’ll be coming with you.”

“What?! No! Alice...!”

She turns toward him, her eyes blazing with temper and the mark over his heart is suddenly broiling him alive! “Whenever possible, you have always attended my duels. I claim that right now, Tarrant. You won’t dissuade or deny me.” She sits back and, closing her eyes, whispers, “If you have to fight, you may need to be healed afterwards. I need to be there to do that. If it comes to that.”

He feels her rage-fear-anger-pain-need-denial-fury-terror! subside. But he knows it’s not Gone.
No, she has merely wrestled it back under control.

“You’ll stay in the carriage?” he asks.

“Yes,” she agrees. “Unless you need me.”

“I need ye teh b’safe. Teh b’all righ’.”

“And the very same applies to you, Raven.” She tucks her head under his chin and nuzzles his coat. “Please keep that in mind.”

Tarrant tucks his head down, breathes in the scent that rises up from his wife’s now-wavy hair. “‘Twill b’jus’ fine, my Alice.”

She nods but her hands tighten on his jacket sleeves.

She Worries.

So does he.

But they’ve reached an Agreement.

And not a moment too soon, for, at that moment, the carriage slows and pulls over in front of the Ascot townhouse.

*~*~*~*

“Let me make sure I understand this, Hamish,” Alice says, subtly struggling with a storm of emotions. He Feels the occasional rumble, the brief flashes of heat, like an electrical storm within his chest. “According to this contract you presented to him, if Lowell can’t pay you back, you would force him to offer Margaret not only a divorce, but permanent custody of Winslow?”

“No!” he huffs. “Blast it, Alice! Haven’t you been paying attention?”

She grins knowingly at him. “Perhaps not. It’s hard to think past the part where you asked my husband to stand up with you and possibly fight on your behalf if circumstances demand it.”

Hamish has the grace to look abashed. “I will not permit any harm to come to your Hightopp, Alice.
I give you my word. This is between Manchester and myself.”

“Yes, back to that. What is, or rather, was the purpose of this contract?”

Hamish leans back into his armchair and sighs. “I was attempting to give Manchester a fresh start. I’d advance him the sum of his salary from his father’s company. He’d need only use it to square his debts – get his feet back under him and his head back on his shoulders. I intended that he finally manage to curtail his rash and foolish expenditures when he realizes how very close he is to causing his family profound public humiliation.”

“Why hasn’t Lord Manchester stepped in? He’s Lowell’s father,” Alice points out and Tarrant understands her perfectly: This is not your responsibility, Hamish Ascot, so why had you decided to take it on nonetheless?

“I’m afraid he already has. Stepped in. Advanced funds to his son already this year.”

Alice shakes her head. “And yet you persist with this mad idea? What made you think Lowell would be able to pay you back if his habits have become that bad?” She narrows her eyes at him. “Unless, you were expecting that he wouldn’t...?”

Hamish glares at her.

“If he had chosen this contract of yours over debtor’s prison, you would be, you realize, essentially forcing the man to divorce his wife and abandon his son?”

“I didn’t intend to force him to do anything! The decision whether or not to proceed with a divorce would have been Lady Manchester’s! Should she have required legal representation, I would have happily employed a solicitor on her behalf, but... However... Why are we still discussing this blasted contract? Manchester rejected it – very soundly! – so it’s a moot point!”

“Humor me.”

Hamish glances at Tarrant who merely shrugs and admits, “I’m rather curious myself. About how these things work here in London.”

Obliged to satisfy his guests’ enquiries, Hamish huffs to himself and starts over, straightening his shoulders. “The contract was intended to force Manchester to finally come to his senses. If he didn’t pull himself together, he’d have to disclose his personal bankruptcy to your sister. And she may yet choose to stay with him but – bloody hell! – I’d like to see her with the option of doing what she feels is best for herself and her son. That is all, Alice!”

“An admirable goal,” Alice admits. “And, perhaps because of that, it seems to have been more than
enough to anger Lowell. It also seems more than enough reason to endanger my husband’s life. And, were it not for the fact that you obviously have my sister and nephew’s welfare in mind, I would probably kill you in cold blood for even daring to think it.”

Tarrant fists his hands and resists the urge to shudder. He knows that Tone of voice. He’s heard it before:

“Good boy. I suppose you can be taught after all.”

Madness. Alice is dancing upon the very Line between being a mercenary and a Champion. A wife – a mother! – and a sister, a heroine.

“And yet,” she continues, leaning forward as far as her belly and their seven-month-old child will comfortably allow, “I wonder if you’ve truly considered the implications of your actions, Hamish. Do you realize you just tried to buy my sister’s divorce? You presented yourself as Margaret Manchester’s protector...?”

“Stop it, Alice. We grew up together, the three of us. Our fathers were close friends and sometimes business partners. For obvious reasons, my own father cannot stand in for yours. Hence, this situation falls to me to be dealt with.”

“Do you really believe that?” Alice challenges. “You honestly see yourself as a surrogate father to Margaret?”

His mouth works. His expression turns quite consternated.

“That’s what I thought,” she replies to his eloquent silence. “You won’t be able to keep this – the duel and the reason for it – from my sister, you know.”

“You won’t tell her,” he dares with more bluster than confidence.

“No, I won’t. But I hear Lowell’s awfully talkative when he’s on his second bottle of scotch. Rather enjoys shouting all sorts of things at his father’s portrait in the library. Who knows what might come out?”

“Blast,” Hamish mutters. He shakes his head. “No. No, he won’t dare. We’ll keep this between ourselves.”

“Famous last words,” Alice counters.

“Excellent,” Hamish replies. “That means you’ll be on your way soon then, does it?”
Alice barks out a laugh. “Very well, Hamish. We’ll leave you with your foolishness. Perhaps you’ll come to your senses...”

Hamish sighs. Deeply. “Alice, Manchester has failed your sister and she doesn’t even know the true extent of it!” He runs a hand over his cravat self-consciously. “I merely tried to help.”

Tarrant thinks he hears Alice mutter something about terminally heroic males, but he can’t be sure...

Hamish rallies, “Or would you rather see her and your nephew suffer because of that man’s selfishness, short-sightedness, and lack of self-discipline? Our families have been tied together for too long for me to do nothing. Unfortunately, that contract was the best option available to me... Unless you’d like to simply do away with the cad entirely!”

Hamish is only half-serious. But Tarrant is startled to actually see and Feel his Alice consider the option!

After a long moment, she finally says, “I’d rather you not be called down to Floor to explain yourself in front of the House of Lords. Margaret would not be able to bear the shame of it. The accusations. The scandal would be even worse in that case.” She sighs. “No. Don’t kill Lowell. He’d be made out to be a hero and you and my sister...”

“Yes,” Hamish agrees shortly.

“Brangergain i’tall but how did you ever manage to get yourself into this mess?” she asks weakly.

“That,” Tarrant says, speaking for the first time since they’d crossed the threshold, “would be my fault. And a small comment about productivity, if I’m not mistaken?” He glances at his startled-looking friend. “If I had merely encouraged you to continue pitying Margaret’s situation, you would not have felt the need to hire an investigator... and then a solicitor... and then approach Manchester with that contract... and then... ahem, yes, yes, exactly!”

For a long moment, the silence is Absolute.

And then Alice laughs. “Oh, bulloghin’ boggleogs. I should have known.” But when she turns and looks at Tarrant, her smile is genuine. “You started this mess, did you, Raven?”

“I... believe so, yes, my Alice.”

She shakes her head, but not in denial or disappointment but in wondering disbelief. With a twitch of her brows, she declares, “Then we’ll have to see it through.”

“We?” Hamish parrots. “I dearly hope you’re not including yourself in this, madam!”
“I am,” she replies mildly. “So make room in the carriage.”

“For an unreasonable, obstinate, irrationally stubborn lady in a delicate condition?” he clarifies accusingly. And when Tarrant giggles at the utter accuracy of Hamish’s proclamation, the man glares and – eyes promising something utterly nasty – draws a breath to speak.

Alice cuts him off. “Speak your mind with regards to me all you like, but you’ve not the experience or the wisdom required to accurately judge Tarrant. Besides,” she concludes, “you’ve insulted enough of your peers for one twenty-four hour period, haven’t you?”

“I suppose I have,” Hamish replies, deflating.

Alice moves as if to stand and Tarrant leaps up to help her. She surprises him by not moving toward the door to the private study, however. She approaches Hamish’s chair and lays a hand on the back of it. “We’ll stay with you if you’d like,” Alice offers with sudden compassion. “You don’t have to be alone in this house today. And I’ll swear not to speak another word concerning tomorrow.”

Hamish leans his head back against the chair. He smiles. For nearly a minute, the man says nothing. And then: “Well, in that case, tea anyone?”

Tarrant cackles. “I was wondering if you’d forgotten entirely!”

Apparently, it’s too much trouble to look affronted. Hamish shrugs. “Blame your wife. She wouldn’t stop harping at me long enough for me to offer.”

Alice returns his smile. “My condition must be muddling my priorities.”

Hamish laughs.

Tarrant lets out a breath, expelling his tension and then drawing in the fortitude necessary for What Comes Next. What Alice had promised she will not speak of. And what must be done in order to avoid thinking of it as well. Perhaps... yes, perhaps... Tarrant decides: “Well, that’s settled then. We’ll stay for a bit and, in exchange, you will permit me one liberty, sir.”

“What’s that, Hightopp?”

“No, no! No objections!” Tarrant forestalls him. “For I will be teaching you how to make a proper pot of tea!”

Alice bites her lip but her humor dances within his chest. Hamish groans. “Bloody hell. Domestic
torture. I should have known.”

“Yes, you really should have,” Tarrant agrees. “Even you cannot stomach that shukm you brew!”

Hamish harrumphs. “That is not even a proper word,” he objects, standing.

“It is where we come from,” Tarrant counters. “Now, to the kitchen! March ‘Hare’!”

Alice laughs out loud. Hamish gives Tarrant a blank look then, with a shrug and a toss of his bright red hair, leads the way.

Chapter End Notes

A big "thank you" goes out to Wanderamaranth for sharing her research on the customs of 19th century duels! I'm still being rather vague and making historical errors and such, I'm sure, so let's blame my Artistic License for those, ey? (^__~)
The baby wakes her just before dawn. Alice frowns as an unfamiliar bedroom swims into focus. Gingerly, she rolls over... and into Tarrant’s solid warmth next to her. Alice can’t remember accepting a guest room in Hamish’s residence, can’t recall entering it or disrobing down to her shrift, either. In fact, the last thing she recalls is leaning her head back against the sofa cushions and curling up...

She glances over her shoulder at her husband’s still-sleeping face and smiles. Somehow, Tarrant must have transported her to this bed. He’d even managed to remove her boots without waking her this time! Either he’s getting more skillful at taking care of her or she’s getting better at trusting him to do so. Or, perhaps, a bit of both.

Suddenly, the listless shifting in her abdomen intensifies and very nearly vibrates. Gasping, she pulls Tarrant’s arm over her side and settles his palm against her belly and the activity within. She watches his expressions as he wakes: an instant of Objection, a moment of Stubbornness, a flicker of Contentment, a twinge of Awe, and then a ripple of...

What? No, can’t be, she thinks.

But it is.

Tarrant opens his eyes, green and unfocused. He nuzzles his cheek into her longer hair and sighs. “Alice...” He meets her gaze and there’s a moment of Shame before he allows himself to show her what he truly feels. “Is it wrong for me to...?”

He moves closer to her and she feels his warmth all down her side, from shoulder to knee. She can’t help but take note of that part of him against her hip.

“In the morning?” she wonders aloud, unable to even consider that he might find her swollen body remotely appealing... well, That Way. “I’d say it’s pretty usual by now...”

“No,” he rumbles in her ear. “It’s not morning yet. I was dreaming of you and...” His hand stirs on
her belly, caresses. “And you’ve part of me inside you, Alice. And you wanted... you asked me to... you accepted, sought, took, gave, will give and it’s... it’s...” He groans softly into her hair. “Is it wrong for me to... think These Things?”

She swallows thickly as his hips move again, clarifying exactly what Sorts of Things he’s thinking. “No, it’s not wrong,” she manages, her heart rate picking up. She closes her eyes and rolls the idea around in her head – his point of view: part of him has joined with part of her inside her; she’d Wanted this, had Offered... She shivers despite the fact that she always feels warm these days. Margaret and her mother had assured her the constant warmth is normal. But they had said nothing about the possibility of her husband desiring her like this!

“It’s not wrong,” she repeats, her voice husky even to her own ears and Tarrant nibbles at her ear. When she turns toward the heat of his mouth, he leans over her and gently curves his arm around the mound of her stomach.

“I’ll ne’er forget th’way ye look, lass, carryin’ our littlin’... I cannae find th’words teh d’scribe ye...”

“Try?” she asks, needing this reassurance.

“Lovely...” he burrs. “Beautrific... a-glownious... prechlian... geminous... My wife, my Alice...”

She moves closer to the sound of his voice and kisses him. She opens her arms to him and he shifts to crouch over her. Her shrift and his trousers are tossed over the edge of the bed. A pillow is inserted under her hips and his warm hands – no longer so rough these days – are wrapping her legs around his hips and he’s...!

Alice swallows back a moan. He kneels between her thighs, moves gently-slowly-wonderfully! within her. She doesn’t care that it’s nearly time to get up, that they’re in a borrowed bed, under the roof of a man who had once asked for Alice’s hand...

Tarrant makes love to her, cradles her breasts and belly in his hands, whispers Outlandish endearments flavored with lust, lust that he – incredibly! implausibly! impossibly! – feels for her because of this shape she’s become.

“Impossible,” she murmurs, reaching for his hand and guiding it down her body to the place where they come together. “That you want...”

“I do,” he answers, his breath almost a whine. His gentle, nimble fingers touch her where she’d directed. “I do wan’ ye, m’Alice. Can ye no’ feel it?” he teases a bit breathlessly.

She closes her eyes, arches against the mattress, gives herself over to him. Smiles. “Impossible thing number one: my husband will desire me because I carry his child.”
“Number two,” he continues, “My Alice will want my child.”

She gasps. “Three: we will dare to make love in this house.”

“Four: we’ll ne’er be apart.”

His movements and ministrations mesmerize her and she feels her end approaching. Her victory. No, his victory. The victory he gives her. Thoughts and breath and words... all are gone as she feels the Intensity crash into her!

And as her pounding heart begins to subside, she feels him moving faster which means soon he’ll...

“Five! I’ll-be-a-fa’her!” he shouts on a strangled breath. And then his eyes lose their focus completely. The right pupil dilates and his breaths gasp. His hips suddenly still and his chest expands with each hard-won breath. Alice pushes his hair back over his shoulders, pets his skin, calls him back to her, here and now, in this borrowed bed in Hamish Ascot’s house.

“Six,” she concludes when his breaths have calmed somewhat and his blood has stopped racing. “I will love my husband more now than I did just a moment ago.”

“My Alice,” he answers between breaths, “have you already forgotten? That’s not an impossible thing.”

Alice smiles. “Neither are the rest of them.”

Tarrant smiles back. She passes her fingertips over his lips and memorizes that smile, curls her fingers closed and keeps it safe in the palm of her hand, carries it with her as they rise and prepare to meet the dawn. And What Comes Next.

*~*~*~*~*

The duel.

Alice’s stomach lurches as the carriage pulls to a halt. She grasps the handle of her valise a bit tighter, reminds herself that she’s placed two throwing knives in her jacket pocket for convenience and that Tarrant wears his gauntlets – something he should have done the night of that damned soiree! – and tells herself that this is Hamish’s fight and Hamish will be fine so she need not worry that Tarrant will be in danger.
No, there will be no mortal peril here today. She Believes that. She must.

Hamish measures their expressions with a long look and then says, “I’ll give you a moment, shall I?” Sword box under his arm, he ducks out of the carriage before either of them can summon up a half-hearted protest.

Alice doesn’t waste time; they only have a Moment.

She leans over and kisses her husband, her heart so full of fear and need and resignation and desperation she feels tears burn her eyes. “Choose us, no matter what happens. Please.”

“I do. I shall. I will. I have, my Alice.”

His gloved fingertips drift along her cheek and then the carriage rocks as he turns and steps outside. In the shadows, Alice watches and waits.

This is not Alice’s first duel, but it is her first time witnessing one, and in all honesty she should not even be here, invading this time-honored and sacred gentlemen’s rite.

She couldn’t care less. She needs to be here. Her sanity and the heart line and the wellbeing of their child Demand it.

As this is Tarrant’s first – and hopefully only and last! – Uplandish duel, he follows Hamish’s cues and introduces the two of them to the attending physician. The man frowns at Hamish, looking very disappointed. Hamish weathers the doctor’s disapproval well, however. Alice can only imagine that they know each other. Perhaps the man will even tell Lord Ascot of this.

Well, that’s Hamish’s problem.

Alice has Other Things to worry about.

The Manchester carriage pulls into the small field. Her hands fist so tightly in her jacket and skirt that, despite the gloves, she feels the muscles cramp.

Please let Tarrant not need any of these potions...

Alice doesn’t know what she’ll do if these basic health aides, with which the queen had equipped them before their journey, fail him. Or are not sufficient for his injuries. They have no more jabberwocky blood, no ready escape to Marmoreal’s alchemy lab and Mirana’s expertise in the healing arts.
Once again, they are alone.

Were it not for the fact that Hamish had truly been doing all that he could to help her sister and nephew, Alice is fairly certain she could have browbeaten or blackmailed Hamish into apologizing. Or perhaps that’s merely wishful thinking on her part. But it matters not! For here they are.

It is a shame, however, that Hamish and Lowell do not fight for her sister’s freedom – for that would truly be something worth fighting for! They fight for honor. Or the shallow, hollow dream that it is.

She’d very much like to kill Lowell for forcing all of them into this situation. She damns him, his weakness, he need for alcohol and mistresses and brothels and gambling and what in the world is wrong with the man?! How could her father have missed the sickness in him? Why had Charles Kingsleigh looked the other way when Margaret, cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling, had announced that Lowell had proposed?

If there were ever one thing Alice would dare to think ill of her father for, it would be this.

Or, perhaps not. Perhaps he had merely been drawn in by his own hope: hope that marriage to Margaret would draw Lowell away from his flaws and weaknesses, would strengthen him, would change him for the better.

Alice is glad her father had not lived to be disappointed. Marriage has, in fact, pushed Lowell as far away from Better as one can possibly get: he has since become Worse.

If the reports from the investigator Hamish had hired are to be believed (and also if Hamish can be trusted not to skew that information in the retelling), then the man has been steadily wearing his way through and using up favors and compassion from both friends and family at an alarmingly increasing rate.

Lowell Manchester had had no business whatsoever getting married at all!

Alice is sure her father must have known this. Certainly, Charles Kingsleigh had had Lowell’s finances checked. His habits reported on. Undoubtedly, he’d already heard rumors about the man’s... proclivities. And yet... And yet he’d never raised a single objection to the match. He’d said nothing at all.

Giving Lowell the benefit of the doubt? Or a second chance? Alice wonders, but then decides it does not matter. Now they are all victims to her father’s mad dream of an impossible outcome.

Alice hates – despises, abhors, detests! – that Tarrant has been pulled into this. Of every rotten facet of the situation, that is the worst! But neither she nor Tarrant can – in good conscience – leave Hamish, his good intentions, and his honor at the mercy of one of his useless, poncy peers. Not when he had dared to not ignore the fact that Alice’s sister is trapped in a marriage of humiliation and
shame. Not when he had glimpsed only more of the same on the horizon for her.

Oh, if only they had more time!

Time. Yes, in this instance, Time could not be more cruel.

Alice places her hands over her belly, feels the baby roll over then settle, and curses the Time that makes her, Tarrant, and their child so vulnerable. It’s true that Alice would duel Lowell herself if she could! It’s true that, in the past, she has dueled for less!

But now she and Tarrant have so much more to lose than simply each other.

If the creditors would but wait until after Christmas – and the birth of their child! – she would not be so fearful; she would not wonder or dread what might happen to their child should anything... adversely affect her heart line. She hates that their child is at the mercy of her body, an imperfect body, a body with unimaginable strength but also a frightening weakness. But they cannot wait until their child is born; Lowell’s debts cannot be put off any longer and this had been Hamish’s chance to save Margaret’s marriage. If only Lowell had signed the blasted contract!

But no. He’d let his dumb pride get in the way. He’d demanded this fight. This duel.

Alice shivers even though the combined body heat – her own and the baby’s – ensures that she is rarely cold. Bad Things happen during duels. Men loose their heads, behave foolishly while armed with dangerous weapons. She’s heard the stories of how often there are... accidents. How often the Seconds end up fighting each other with just as much ferocity as the named combatants.

She will kill Lowell’s Second if he so much as takes a step in her husband’s direction!

Stop, she tells herself, focusing on the weight of the throwing knife that had somehow wandered into her grasp. She cannot permit her anxiety to reach Tarrant. He must focus now. She must focus now.

All is not lost. For even if Lowell loses the fight, he may reconsider the contract. Surely he can keep his nose clean for a few months, until his birthday and his annual salary is awarded to him for the following year!

And, although she hates to think it, Hamish losing the fight – safely! – would not be a total disaster. The very fact that Lowell would have managed to defend his honor might actually stretch him along a bit more with his creditors, up his standing, buy him a smidgeon of leeway.

Alice admits she had been wrong to imply that Hamish’s actions are not noble. In fact, she knows of no nobler man in all of Upland. But she knows she’s not wrong to assume that his motivations for doing this are... emotional. Alice knows what kind of... attachment would inspire this sort of
defensive scheming and risk-taking, this willingness to face one’s own mortality.

She knows what it takes to inspire someone to risk so much for a dream.

Across the clearing, Lowell and his Second emerge from their carriage.

They face Hamish and Tarrant across a modest distance.

Hamish offers no apology.

The swords are inspected and, despite the frost on the ground and the chill in the morning air, coats and jackets are doffed.

Hamish and Lowell face off in their trousers and shirtsleeves and, in the instant before the first blow is landed, Alice hopes these last few months of fencing lessons will not have been for naught.

Lowell attacks first.

Alice watches, the throwing knife in her hand and the valise they’d quietly rushed through her mother’s house to pack at her feet. She keeps her attention on Lowell’s Second, for the most part. But, remembering the underhanded play Stayne had tried so long ago, she also watches the combatants, too.

Lowell is good, surprisingly. Perhaps the man is angry enough to focus. Or perhaps he’d merely burned through the booze with several cups of coffee this morning. It matters not. He’s a threat.

He steps confidently, attacks quickly, lunges smoothly.

Yes, he’s quite good.

Hamish, however, is clearly Better.

Although the man has merely his recent interest in fencing to guide him, he uses those skills effectively. Alice glimpses his footwork and combination lunge-parry-lunge-turn-strike-parry! with interest. Hopefully, if Hamish is this good, Tarrant really will have something to teach her when she’s able to learn it!

She slaps the wayward thought aside and shifts her attention back to Lowell’s Second. The man hasn’t moved from his stance near the carriage. In fact, he appears utterly indifferent to the fight. Or perhaps he is merely indifferent to Lowell.
Which *could* mean that...

The man had not agreed to be Lowell’s Second out of camaraderie, but out of warmongering.

*No*, she tells herself, *Tarrant will not have to fight!*

She had purposefully left this point out of their six impossible things for today. She will not risk making the necessity of her husband’s safety an unconquerable obstacle, an unavoidable tragedy.

*Tarrant will not have to fight!*

Hamish sidesteps a jab and returns it with a brief slash which catches Lowell’s sleeve before the man manages to block it. Alice watches as red blossoms on the white fabric of his torn sleeve and wishes the terms of the duel had been confined to first blood. However...

Lowell redoubles his efforts, circling Hamish and attacking with a flurry of fairly predictable – but *fast!* – left-right-left-right! assault.

*Watch your flank!* she wants to yell but bites her tongue instead.

Lowell lunges low, catches Hamish in the thigh, near his knee. The man stumbles back, keeps his guard up, and ignores the damp fabric clinging to the wound beneath the fine wool of his trousers.

Lowell preens.

Hamish scowls and performs a pathetically half-hearted lunge at the man’s chest. Lowell blocks it easily and Hamish – daringly! – uses the momentum to spin himself, pivot smartly on his good leg and return the favor, slicing open Lowell’s pant leg along the back of his thigh.

Lowell curses and flinches away.

Favoring their wounds, they once again face off.

Shirtsleeves are ripped, trousers torn, flesh sliced and punctured, but no one moves to execute a fatal blow.

As the minutes are trampled beneath booted feet and crushed into the frosty, nearly frozen ground, Lowell’s arm becomes less steady, trembles with exhaustion. His feet drag and his knees refuse to bend as readily as they had. Hamish, however... Hamish’s recent training has clearly paid off – or, rather, it *will* pay off if the man can keep his wits about him, draw Lowell in, disarm him and finish
the fight.

She continues to divide her attention between the duelists and their Seconds, relieved that Tarrant is still alert.

A shout goes up from the center of the clearing: Lowell.

And Alice would have looked away if not for the suspicious shrug of the Second’s shoulder. Before she can do more than lift the throwing knife and aim, Tarrant has already thrown one of his own. It strikes the man in the shoulder joint – deeply, if his shocked gasp and widened eyes are any indication! – through the layers of his coat, jacket, vest, and shirt. His hand, dangling at his side, spasms open and a small pistol drops to the ground.

Tarrant raises a hand, shakes his head, and waggles a finger at the man. “I wouldnae b’ doin’ tha’ again, if’n ye’re hopin’ teh keep th’ use o’ yer other arm,” he warns softly.

Gritting his teeth, the man reaches up and pulls the small throwing knife from his flesh. He weighs it in the fingers of his left hand for a moment and then Alice sees a malicious gleam flash through his eyes. In the next instant, the knife is spinning through the air...

... right at Hamish.

There is nothing Alice can do. Nothing Tarrant can do. It all happens so fast and there are no cats with evaporating skills or bloodhounds to knock the man out of the way.

There is, however, a rock.

At the precise moment Alice realizes the danger he’s in, he steps backward.

Trips.

His arms flail wide.

Lowell lunges forward, blade trained on Hamish’s chest.

And the little steel throwing knife strikes the nearest target: Lowell’s shoulder.

“Bloody hell!”

Lowell flinches, steps back, his sour expression twisted with pain: Hamish has regained his footing;
the chance to end the fight has been lost. Furious, Lowell glances up at the Seconds, from one to the other.

“That’s Hightopp’s knife in your shoulder,” his man informs him, gesturing for Lowell to back up toward him so he can pull it out.

The doctor waves the man away. Hamish gapes at Tarrant, who sends the other Second a furious glare from beneath his hat.

Lowell screams, “You gutless cheat! Ascot! Is this how you fight for your honor?”

“No, it is not!” he protests. He stomps – as menacingly as his wounds allow – over to Tarrant as the doctor examines the knife still in Lowell’s shoulder. “Why in the world would you dare to bring... bloody... throwing knives!” Hamish spits on a whisper, “to a duel?”

Tarrant is not given a chance to answer.

“What the blazes were you thinking?” Alice hears Hamish hiss in Tarrant’s ear. “I explained that this was to be a fight between Manchester and myself!”

“Mayhap no one informed Manchester’s mahn o’that,” Tarrant growls back, keeping his eyes on the subject of his speculation. “Ye asked me wha’t I was thinkin’? I was thinking tha’m’Alice woul’nae want me teh’ge’shot by tha’booly grommer!”

“Shot?!” Hamish sputters, looking across the clearing at Lowell’s Second.

Alice is not a little bit surprised to note a sudden and utter lack of surprise in either Hamish’s tone or expression as he takes note of the man. “Blakefield,” he growls, encapsulating a History in that one word. His next are spoken so softly she almost doesn’t hear them: “You would bring a pistol to my duel, you cheat.”

“Ye’re nae su’prised,” Tarrant observes.

Hamish rounds on him. “I’m not surprised that you would bring knives here, either! You’re a wretched cheat, Hightopp. You know I have to win or lose on my own merits!”

“Aye, I do. An’ I was willin teh’le’ye do so. Howe’er, Blakefield seems teh’ve felt o’herwise.” Tarrant continues on a rumble, “Bu’nauw I’m thinkin’ ‘twas fortuitous ye’d stumbled o’er yer own feet, Ascot ‘r tha’mahn wouldae foun’dis mark in ye wi’my dag’her.”

“You... Wait a moment. You didn’t throw it at Lowell?”

Tarrant nods across the clearing. “He’s th’one wi’th’ bluddy shoulder an’ th’pistol a’his feet!”
Lowell, having overheard this, shouts, “This is an outrage! How dare you accuse Blakefield of such underhanded treachery!”

“I’ll accuse where it’s warranted,” Tarrant replies, his mood shifting suddenly, speaking in a tone eerily similar to that of the voice of the Blackness. Alice focuses on calm, on rationality, on confidence and Sends him what strength she can. His posture straightens from the crouch he’d been leaning forward into. His hands uncurl from their claw-like arrangement before fist ing.

Alice breathes a sigh of relief.

The relief itself, however, is short-lived.

“Doctor Jameson...!” Hamish begins.

“Don’t ask me for verification, sir. I was attending to my patients.” The man removes the knife without warning and, ignoring Lowell’s squeal of pain, presses a cloth against his shoulder. “And, by the way, if either of you would like my opinion, I believe this fight is over. For today at any rate. Continue to fight in the condition you’re both in and I can promise neither of you will be pleased with the consequences.”

Tarrant gently shoves Hamish in the direction of the carriage. He then crosses the field and collects the sword Lowell had dropped and holds out his hand for the throwing knife which the doctor returns to him with a disgusted grimace. Hamish waits at the carriage door, swaying on his feet and bleeding, but he doesn’t take his eyes off of Lowell’s Second. Alice doubts he could do anything to prevent another attack on Tarrant now, but that’s not the point. Hamish stays outside and waits for his friend to safely cross the field and Alice could kiss him for watching her husband’s back, for this show of solidarity. She keeps the throwing knife at the ready and watches from the shadows. Just in case.

And, in this case...

She watches as Tarrant navigates the field, weapons in hand, his eyes flashing peridot green with uneasiness and suspicion. She watches as Manchester’s Second simply smiles, a gesture that could have been a polite goodbye if not for the gun still lying at his feet. She watches as Tarrant kneels, locks both swords in the case, yet keeps the small throwing knife held lengthwise between the first and middle fingers of his right hand. She watches as he tucks the sword case under his arm and steps toward the carriage.

“Ascot!” Lowell shouts.

Hamish looks up and glares tiredly at his aversary.
“We’ll finish this another day.”

Hamish nods then permits Tarrant to usher him into the carriage. Tarrant follows, raps on the roof and the driver snaps the reins and then they’re...

Alice watches as they pull away from the clearing. She glimpses the doctor getting into his own coach and Blakefield helping Lowell into his.

It’s over.

For now.

Alice slides the knife into her coat pocket; in this case, she hadn’t needed to use it.


She hands it over, turns her face toward the window and doesn’t watch as Tarrant treats Hamish’s wounds. And Hamish is too tired to object to the strange medicine. Alice closes her eyes, focuses on Tarrant’s presence – so close! and safe! and hers! – shudders, holds herself together just a bit longer...

They drop Hamish off at his home and Alice waits while Tarrant sees him safely inside. No doubt Hamish will wonder how his cuts could have been healed so quickly. No doubt he’ll brood about the next duel. Luckily, he’ll be in better condition for it than Lowell will.

Alice holds herself together until Tarrant strides down the steps, speaks to the driver, then ducks back into the carriage and pulls her into his arms.

They don’t go home.

Not right away.

They circle the city, immerse themselves in its bustling noise...

... so that they do not have to speak. For this is a Silence that, when broken may never be mended. Alice sits on his lap with his arm around her waist and his hand against her belly and their child sometimes rolling or spinning within her. She pulls herself as close as she can get to him:

Her husband.
A hatter, the father of their child, and – she finally realizes – a True Champion.

*~*~*~*~*

The fight is not over.

The fight is never over.

And finally, Alice understands why Tarrant had despaired all those years ago – when they’d lain side-by-side at the edge of the queen’s croquet pitch in Marmoreal, enjoying the sunshine and the thick turf and the hard-earned break in combat training – and he had asked... no, begged, pleaded for her not to choose the life of a champion. Finally, Alice Understands his heartache at the thought of her knowingly accepting the duties of the Queen’s Champion.

“...you’ll never know peace,” he’d said. “...Once you step on this path, there will be no leaving it.”

There will be no leaving it for either of them.

The moment Tarrant had ushered Hamish toward the carriage, had braved the silent battlefield alone to collect his friend’s (and his own) weapons, had performed that function alone...

Alone.

Vulnerable.

Mortal.

When one accepts the Duties, they accept that the Duty supersedes their own safety, their own wants, their own life.

Alice had watched Tarrant do just that.

Like her, he had offered up himself to fate, to whatever omniscient power may have been watching.

That sort of sacrifice leaves a mark on a person’s soul. A scar that will never heal. Alice Sees it now, Feels it. Strange that she’d never noticed it before. Unbearable that it had taken Tarrant’s sacrifice to Show it to her. She should have recognized it before, for when Tarrant had warned her away from becoming the Champion (for good!) he’d spoken from experience: he’d spoken of a Sacrifice so great that, even though it had not been required in the end, he had never been quite the same
His Sacrifice had been his future.

Tarrant had offered himself up to the Red Queen. Had gotten himself captured to buy her time, had conspired with her to gain the one weapon that could defeat their greatest enemy in combat, had surrendered his own life so that she might escape.

Tarrant Hightopp had been her Champion, then, wielding nothing more than two bolts of fabric, a sunhat, an iron dress-frame, a powder puff, and a bottle of perfume. Shackled to the consequences of resisting, he had Fought for her, for the Vorpal Sword, for Hope. He had unflinchingly given up his life.

That sort of thing, never truly leaves a person, Alice realizes. The confrontation with one’s own mortality never ends.

The fight is never over.

“Alice?”

She closes her eyes and bites her lip. She will not cry about this. Not now! Not when it is far, far too late!

“All Alice, what is it, Raven?”

His hands grasp hers and she feels Strength and Love and Warmth surround her heart, blossom in her chest. The pressure pushes out the tears she is trying so desperately to conquer, control.

Control. Since becoming the Queen’s Champion, her life has become – has been! – all about Control. And Tarrant, having already Known what she would be feeling, had permitted her that. For her sake, he had Given that to her whenever she had not blatantly Taken it.

And, to her shame, she realizes she’d once thought his greatest Gift of Thoughtfulness had been to forgive Leif his transgression against them.

Oh, how utterly Blind she’d been!

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. And she is. Every tear is an apology; a tragic sonnet wrapped in a riddle, distilled in a rhyme the shape of sorrow. She raises her hands to his face. “I’ll be better. Us. We’ll be us now. Not me and you, but us.”
She knows she’s not making any sense. Oh, how she wants to tell him she’s sorry she never noticed their matching scars! Oh, how she wants to reassure him that she’ll never dominate their decisions again!

She tells him, “I’ve finally noticed: without you, there’s no me.”

Two halves.

Partners.

Equals.

And their fight is not over.

“My Alice,” he whispers into her hair, breathes relief and wonder against her tresses. “You’re terribly late, you know. Naughty.”

And she laughs, sputters tears against his vest, coughs thickly into the fabric.

She doesn’t deserve to be forgiven for This.

But he *does* forgive her. Unconditionally. And in... “Iambic pentameter.”

“I’m considering things that begin with the letter ‘M’,” he replies with a smile rather than a giggle. Alice sighs against his vest and, sitting beside him, only half-dressed for luncheon with her mother, Alice joins him in that silent pursuit.

She considers Miracles and Magic and Madness and Muchness and Mirrors and Missions... and she knows he’s right.

The fight is not over; they’ve Uplandish Logic and Disbelief yet to slay if Mirana is ever going to be able to step through that looking glass when Alice has need of her.

They spend over a week considering those things that begin with the letter M. Oddly enough, it is another M-word that provides the catalyst for the conversation they Must have...

“Margaret! I haven’t seen you in days!” Alice accuses her.

“I’m so sorry. Lowell’s been feeling a bit under the weather. A slight infection, I think. But he’s on the mend now.”
“Well,” Helen comments with a polite smile, “that’s good to hear.” She sets aside her knitting and leans toward Margaret without getting up off of the sofa. Opening her arms, she wordlessly demands an exclusive visit with her grandson.

“How’s the loom-work coming along, Tarrant?” Margaret asks as she surrenders the wiggling boy to Helen’s arms. Margaret’s sleeves ride up her arms a bit with the motion and Alice is startled by the sudden rage she feels from Tarrant. She follows his gaze – which has always and only ever been beautifully green in her family’s presence – to the finger-shaped bruises on her sister’s pale wrists.

Helen notices as well. Winslow fusses and pats his grandmother’s cheek but Helen is transfixed by those marks. “Margaret...” she whispers.

“Are you injured elsewhere?” Alice asks, standing with difficulty. She wishes she could charge across the room and... and... do something! As it is, she merely waddles and snarls. “What did that beast do to you?”

“Alice, please, calm down! It was only the fever and... and it was an accident!”

“An’ tha’one, tae?” Tarrant interjects in a dark tone. His gaze is fixed on Margaret’s jaw and, once she looks for it, Alice can see the faint discoloration of a faded bruise.

“You’re not going back there unless he calms down!” Helen commands.

“I’ll kill him,” Alice declares.

“He’ll ne’er touch ye again!” Tarrant agrees.

Tarrant’s voice – rumbling with rage and the promise of Pain – and his curling fingers and fisting hands do not pull Alice from her own ruminations of retribution. It is her sister’s gasp and her mother’s cringe that successfully catch her attention.

She follows their horrified gazes, looks up at her husband... and into his unfocused red eyes.

Forcing herself to calm down despite knowing – and imagining! – what that louse had done to her sister is nearly as hard as having to watch Tarrant be a Champion. And because it is merely nearly as hard, she manages it.

“Tarrant,” she whispers, Nudges, reaches out a hand to rub his shoulder.

He gives himself a small shake. “I’m sorry.” And, oh, how he is! She can Sense it as his regret pulses
against her heart. “I’m so sorry, Alice. Forgive me...?”

And somehow she Knows what he can’t say aloud, here, now. She remembers a conversation beneath ever-blossoming cherry trees following her sixth duel in the name of the White Queen. It had been years ago, but he’s never forgiven himself for needing her as much as he had. She knows what he’d say if he could. She knows he’d call himself *slavish* for chaining her to him.

And no matter how many times she’s told him otherwise, he can’t believe – accept, acknowledge – the fact that she hadn’t – has never! – been *chained*: Tarrant Hightopp had – and continues each day to – set her *free!*

But now... now there is another weight upon his conscience. He has lost control. In the presence of her mother and sister. And now they will have to explain...

Alice is not ready for this.

But, then again, she’s not sure she ever will be...

“Tarrant, your eyes...”

Both of them look up at her mother, drawn to do so by Helen’s faint tone.

“Did I just imagine that your eyes were... different? Just now?”

“Yes,” Alice says at the same moment Tarrant reflexively answers with a resigned, “No.”

The sound of the clock in the room resonates in the silence.

Finally, Tarrant turns to her, places his hands on her shoulders and says, “Alice, we do your mother and your sister a disservice by attempting to conceal very obvious truths from her.”

“The truth,” Alice counters softly, “can be a terrible burden to bear.”

Tarrant reaches for and grasps her fingers. “I know.” Alice watches as his sympathy melts into determination. He looks up and across the room at Mrs. Kingsleigh. “If you truly wish to know what it is we have not yet said, then we will tell you...”

Alice glances at Tarrant again, smiles wanly when he squeezes her captured fingers, and turns back to her mother. Whether she’s ready or not, Now is the time.
“Have a seat Margaret. Please.”

Tarrant fetches two chairs – one for Alice and one for himself – and places them opposite the sofa. Alice seats herself, wonders how to begin, spies the glove on her left hand, and reaches for Tarrant’s.

“Tarrant’s people aren’t like us.” Tarrant nervously watches as she gently takes his hand in her lap and pulls the glove from his left hand.

Margaret gasps at the sight of the heart line. Helen looks weary, as if she’d nearly managed to convince herself the sight of it had merely been a harmless nightmare.

“This isn’t a tattoo, mother,” she tells them both. “It’s a permanent mark created from three drops of blood. In his case, three drops of my blood. The color of which is reflected in the mark itself.”

Tarrant collects her left hand, slides the silver ring from her finger and then pulls her glove off as well. She takes a deep breath and prays for muchness.

“Just as the color of the mark on my skin reflects the color of Tarrant’s blood.”

Margaret looks a breath away from passing out. Helen, however, stares at her daughter’s hand and hesitantly reaches for it. Alice allows her to take it. Winslow, still far too young to understand what is amiss, although he senses it, whimpers for his mother. Margaret reaches for him and pulls her onto her lap, anchors herself with his small, squirming body.

“You’ve just seen Tarrant’s eyes change color,” Alice continues, “corresponding to his emotions. And his blood... is not like ours. Tarrant comes from people very different from us, mother. And, if you can accept that, then, perhaps you can also imagine that the land which gave rise to such wondrous beings might be vastly different from the one you know. Might be... magical, even.”

Helen studies her daughter’s hand, now held in her own. “You hands are rough, Alice. Tarrant, you work in the hat-making and tailoring trades, do you not?”

“I do,” he admits in a rasping voice.

Helen pauses at that. “And does my daughter work beside you in your trade?”

“No!” Alice very nearly flinches at the force of the conviction in his reply. The heart line flares and Tarrant’s discomfort manifests; his eyes adopt a shade of simmering yellow; he rambles-grumbles-rants, “Imagine Alice staining her hands! Slicing open her fingers! Pricking her skin in the name of fashionable accessories! The Idea is ludicrous, madam! Alice is our Champion!”
Oh, thwimble fumpt! Alice had most definitely not intended to bring that up. Yet. Or ever.

But Tarrant will not be shushed. Not quite yet: “She is the champion to the queen. The Queen’s Champion.”

“What does that mean, Alice?” Helen presses.

Alice closes her eyes and wishes for a third vial of Jabberwocky blood. When moments pass and none appears, she reluctantly explains, “It means I’m the queen’s steward. I protect her and her children.”

Helen shakes her head in disbelief. “Alice, you don’t know how to... protect someone.”

“I’ve learned.”

“No...”

“I’ve made a promise. A promise to the rightful ruler of the place where I belong. A promise to protect the people that I love.” Alice doesn’t have to look in Tarrant’s direction to know he is experiencing the depth of her commitment.

“Mother,” she continues, “would you not fight for your family? If... there was ever a need?”

“But these people... they are not your family, Alice.”

Alice sighs. She pulls her hand from her mother’s grasp and gives up the argument. For now. “That’s the situation, mother.”

Helen is silent.

Margaret, oddly enough, is not: “Alice, these things you claim. They are impossible!”

“Tell me Tarrant has hazel eyes, Margaret,” Alice dares her. “Go on and explain away the fact that you just witnessed his eyes go from green to red and back again, and then to yellow and green.”

Margaret opens her mouth. Closes it. Pulls her son closer to her. “I can’t.”

“There is such a thing as magic,” Alice says to her family. “And if you can find it in yourselves to believe in it, to give the impossible a chance, then...”
“Then what, Alice?” Helen asks.

Alice sighs. “Then I won’t have to choose between There and... Here.”

Yes, it’s a decision she’d already made once. It had been a painful one then. And although she knows exactly which she would – must! – choose if forced to do so again, she doesn’t fool herself into believing the pain will have diminished in the slightest.

Again, Silence wanders into the room with them. Leans back in an armchair, crosses its legs, and settles in. Margaret’s whisper barely disturbs it: “Time, Alice. Give us some time to think about this... *Understand*...”

Alice nods. “Of course.” Although she doubts either of them truly can.

Margaret looks at her son, smoothes his wispy hair back from his forehead. “This is all happening so fast... so much has... I just can’t...”

“What is it, dear? You know we won’t allow Lowell to handle you so roughly again! You’ll stay here and we’ll sort him out,” Helen assures her.

Margaret manages a watery smile. “I... thank you, mother, but I don’t think that will be necessary. I... I received a visit from Lord Manchester yesterday evening. He’s sending Lowell away. To the Americas. To open a new branch office. It’s all been arranged.”

“What?” Alice sputters, too shocked to wish she could take back her graceless and tactless reaction.

“He’s leaving this weekend. They’re packing now. At the house, I mean. Now that his fever has broken and he’s on the mend...”

“Will you be going with him?”

“No, no, I won’t. Lord Manchester has encouraged me to stay; a voyage like that would be difficult for me and dangerous for Winslow.” She bounces him on her knees for a moment and he squeals with delight. Softly, she continues, “Lord Manchester also mentioned that he’d very much like it if, when Win’s of age, he would apprentice with the company.” Margaret fidgets. “In all honesty, he gave me the impression that... Lowell will not be welcome should he return to England.”

“Oh... my!” Helen exclaims.

Alice wonders just how much her sister knows about her own husband. “Perhaps he’s caused some
sort of trouble for his family recently...” she speculates.

“Dueling,” Margaret reluctantly mutters. “At least, I’m fairly sure. Lord Manchester was... livid.”

Alice imagines he had been. But not due to the dueling. Well, not merely due to the dueling.

Alice glances at Tarrant who is trying his best to not only hide his smile but sit peacefully on what she suspects is a very strong urge to Futterwhacken right here and now!

“Come with me, Margaret,” she invites, standing with Tarrant’s hand under her elbow to assist her. “I have something that will take care of those bruises by the end of tea.”

“Tea!” Tarrant suddenly interjects, as if he’d forgotten about the subject completely. “Yes, yes, the tea tray will not assemble itself!”

“Winslow and I shall keep you company as you do so, sir,” Helen answers, once again silently demanding her grandson be placed in her arms.

Margaret sends a wary sidelong glance at Tarrant.

Alice remarks, “He hasn’t changed in the last half an hour, Margaret!”

“No, no, it’s fine, Alice,” Tarrant lisps. “I wouldn’t want the tea tray to feel slighted should I neglect to give it my full attention.”

“Tarrant...” she protests but he merely brushes his fingers over her cheek, dons his glove again, and strides from the room. Moments after the door closes behind him, Alice continues to stare at it rather than attack her sister with an accusing gaze.

“I’m sorry, Alice,” she whispers, passing Winslow to Helen and standing. “I just... that was rather frightening and he’s so strange...”

“Perhaps,” Alice answers in a tightly controlled voice. “It is us Londoners who are strange and Tarrant normal. Have you ever thought of that?”

Her sister has no answer to the challenge.

Alice takes a deep breath and scolds herself for being so impatient. She’d known this wouldn’t be easy.
“Right. Come upstairs with me and we’ll get you fixed up.” She does. And, as Alice collects the pot of Pain Paste while Margaret disrobes in her old room, Alice takes a moment to consider that, despite the uneasiness that exists between her sister and Tarrant now, there is good news to celebrate:

Lowell is leaving.

Possibly for good.

And, if Margaret so desires, in two years she might file for divorce, citing abandonment. It would still be scandalous but not nearly as shameful as Hamish’s solution would have been. Few people will blame Margaret for divorcing Lowell under these expected circumstances and Alice wonders if the Manchesters will object to Margaret getting remarried one day.

Still those are thoughts of a far distant future. Still, it is a possible future! And one that had not existed a week – or even a few days! – ago.

And she ponders the possibility that the duel – and Hamish’s outrageous contract – had somehow played a part in all of this. Had Lowell’s inability to defend his honor finally pushed his father over the edge? Or is Lowell’s financial situation more dire than the investigator (and Hamish) had described?

Regardless, Lowell will no longer be an embarrassment to his family or his wife. Not for years to come. And, by then, Lowell’s self destructive tendencies may well come to fruition. America is a wilder place than England, Alice has heard. Perhaps too wild for Lowell. Regardless, the width of an ocean is a safe enough distance from Margaret and Winslow. The man will finally be able to do whatever he likes and, Alice imagines, he will finally learn what it means to stand on one’s own two feet.

Perhaps he will return a better man for the experience.

Perhaps he will stumble into trouble he cannot squirm his way out of.

For the moment, it doesn’t matter.

Alice collects the ointment from Marmoreal and joins her sister. She soothes away Margaret’s bruises: one on her upper arm, the two on her wrists, and the faded one on her cheek.

“It’s a poor gift to leave you with,” Alice remarks.

Margaret glances down at the blemishes. “But a memorable one,” she admits. “Should he return, I will not welcome him back so readily.”
“No, for Winnie’s sake, I don’t imagine you should. Just tell me one thing, sister,” Alice continues in a gentle tone, “I’ll do and say nothing to anyone else, but I need to know... Has Lowell hurt you in other... Was he so out of control he...?” Gathering her muchness, Alice blurts, “Did he attack you?”

“No!” Margaret replies, eyes wide and expression showing nothing but shock... and then disgust. “No. He didn’t. He only grabbed me roughly.”

“And struck you in the face.”

Margaret sighs. “You won’t believe that it was the wall that did it.”

“I might if Lowell had shoved you into it.”

“After he arrived home, I tried to tend to his injuries. He pushed me back. I tripped on my skirt and...” She looks up. “I am telling you the truth, Alice. Please do not entirely blame Lowell for this. He is... ill. Ill in mind and body. And nothing I’ve done has helped him.” She lowers her head and sighs. “I’ve given up.”

“No,” Alice answers. “No, you haven’t given up, you’ve chosen your son’s future. He’ll have a comfortable life with Lord Manchester looking after the two of you and offering him a place in the business when he’s of age.”

“He still needs a father,” Margaret admits.

“But not today, dear sister. Let that be a worry for another time.”

She nods.

No, the fight is not over. Not for any of them.

Winslow still needs a father.

Alice still has to explain about Underland and the queen’s impending visit.

She leans forward and embraces her sister. Margaret sighs out a long breath and rests her head on her shoulder. They sit, thus, on Margaret’s old bed, in a room she had once filled with adolescent hopes and innocent dreams and romantic expectations of a simple and happy life.

No, Margaret hadn’t found that life, hadn’t lived those dreams.
Not yet.

Alice closes her eyes and feels a smile curve her lips.

The fight is not over.

The fight for Margaret’s happiness will continue.

And Alice must continue the fight to keep her mother and her sister in her life, even after she returns to Underland.

These will not be small battles – not in the least! – but she has never fought one more worth the effort.

Yes, some things – these things! – are worth fighting for!

Chapter End Notes

Why is Lowell so horrid in OPK? Well, frankly, the guy's at the end of his rope. He's failed as a husband and a son. He's frustrated he couldn't successfully trounce Hamish. His debts are coming due and he'll be sent to prison if he can't pay them. I actually feel for the guy. That's no excuse to manhandle his wife, though! (And no, I'm NOT suggesting a history of violence in their marriage. Nor am I suggesting that a sexual assault occurred. NOT AT ALL.)
“Alice!”

At the sound of her sister’s nearly-scandalized tone, Alice looks up from the slice of pound cake she’d been unknowingly contemplating. In truth, her mind is still spinning out the possibilities that Lowell’s imminent departure has opened up. She wonders if Hamish might... Or if she or Tarrant should perhaps mention something to Margaret... But no. It’s too soon. Lowell hasn’t even left the country yet!

Perhaps, if there ever were an occasion for an unnecessary slice of cake, this would be it. Still, Alice knows she shouldn’t, not with the typical early London winter making her usual brisk walks impossible.

No, no more cake this week, Alice!

Well, no more today.

And then, recalling the cook’s truly heavenly puddings, amends: No more cake until after dinner.

Blast it all, but maybe Alice should have spent the duration of her pregnancy in Underland. At least there, when the food calls her name it’s not a product of her overactive imagination (or, perhaps, lack of willpower)! Of course the food Up Here doesn’t speak. Not like Thackery’s Contrary Crumpets and Gooseberry Guilters and... Yes, perhaps being forced to subsist on a diet that talks back would have been a much Better option all around...

“Alice!”

“Hm? Oh, sorry. Where’s the fire?” Not in the lavatory – which Margaret had just purportedly visited – she hopes!

Margaret sits down in her chair and holds out her hands in front of her over the demolished tea service. “They’re gone! Completely gone!” she exclaims, wide eyed.
And, indeed, they are. The bruises that had marred her sister’s skin and had initiated the much-needed but much-more-dreaded and utterly-unplanned revelations of her husband’s Otherness have disappeared.

Margaret continues, speaking as if she can’t trust the reality of her own skin and senses, “That ointment you used...”

“I told you they’d be taken care of by the end of teatime,” she replies drolly.

“But this is...” Margaret visibly flounders.

Alice resists the urge to accuse her of being flunderwhapped... aloud.

“Impossible?” Alice gently suggests. Then she smiles and glancing in her husband’s direction, winks. “Only if you believe it is,” she concludes and is rewarded with a wide hatter grin and a boyish giggle.

“But how...? This is impossible, Alice! How could you... and I... and it... and it shouldn’t have worked so well! Not at all!”

Tarrant barks out a cackle. “That is nearly word-for-word what Ascot said the other day! Why, by the time we’d traveled back to the townhouse all those cuts and scratches and so on had made themselves quite scarce!” Why Alice doesn’t think to Pinch him or Nudge him to shut off his ramble at this point, she doesn’t know. Later, she blames her pregnancy, for certainly if she weren’t utilizing so much brain power fending off unnecessary helpings of sweets, she would have managed to circumvent that particular revelation!

“Of course,” Tarrant blithely continues, “poor chap was too exhausted to really notice his renewed health until much later, but... Alice! I must warn you: that man is after something called a trade agreement and he’s looking rather... fiercely Muchy about it!”

No, Alice’s only though at this point is how she’s ever going to successfully deal with a fiercely Muchy Hamish Ascot. (Which she has to admit is a rather alarming thing to contemplate, indeed!) It’s only after Margaret inhales sharply and straightens in her chair that she realizes what had just Slipped out...

Margaret turns to Tarrant, who is playing with Winslow’s bare toes. The toddler squeals and giggles, twitching and writhing with delight in Helen’s tolerant embrace.

“Tarrant?” Margaret asks pointedly.

“Hm? Oh! I beg your pardon, madam!” he fairly shouts, withdrawing his fingers at once. “I meant
no harm! I was simply investigating things that begin with the unique sensation of ticklishness. It’s a favorite pastime of Alice’s – this particular topic of contemplation – and perhaps her Curiosity is paying me a visit today—”

“Along with my good sense,” Alice mutters, chastising herself for not finding a way to keep Tarrant from mentioning Hamish’s suspicious injuries.

“Tarrant,” Margaret interrupts with urgency. “What’s all this about Hamish being injured?”

“Oh, but he isn’t any longer! Marvelous thing, Pain Paste... if it can be called a Thing. Perhaps it’s more of a substance than a...” Margaret’s Look must be really something because Tarrant stops right there. “Ahem... Yes, yes, Ascot is fit as a fish’s fin!”

“But he was injured?” she demands. “What happened last week that he would require...? And... Is this whatever-it-is the reason he hasn’t been by yet to take you off to the club today?”

“Er, no, madam. That would be because today is Thursday. If my shoes are correct, that is.”

Alice glances at her husband’s boots and notes the particular shade of the leather. “I believe they are,” she replies, knowing they’re not quite dark enough to be Friday shoes yet, but are certainly not light enough to be considered a pair of Wednesday boots.

“You still haven’t answered my inquiry, sir!” Margaret continues, ignoring the shoes and their fascinating weekly color shift entirely. “Why was Hamish in need of this... pain paste?”

Tarrant fidgets. “Ah, um, well...”

“Alice?” Margaret demands when Tarrant’s yellow-green gaze flicks nervously in her direction.

Alice sighs. Oh, what an inconvenient time for Tarrant’s mad genius to go on holiday! “I’m afraid I’ve given my word not to speak of the incident.”

“Tarrant?” Margaret barks, irritated. In the slight pinching around her mouth, Alice knows her sister senses the battle is Lost.

“Me as well, madam. I was permitted to tell only Alice.”

“Mother? Do you know anything about this?”

“Thankfully, no,” Helen replies blandly, her attention on coordinating a game of patty-cake with her barefoot grandson. “But if you’re so concerned, dear, might I suggest addressing Hamish yourself on
“Yes. Yes, thank you. I shall.”

She does.

The next day, when Hamish arrives to collect Tarrant and take him to the club to resume their fencing (Tarrant’s lip never fails to curl into a mocking, half-hearted snarl at the word) lessons, Margaret beats the lethargic Mr. Brown to the front door and, throwing it open, demands, “What foolishness were you engaged in last week that resulted in you being injured, Hamish?”

There’s a beat of shocked silence which rolls lazily down the hall, bumping against the grandfather clock and making it chime (or perhaps that’s only the half-hour being marked), then flopping into the library where Alice is curled up on the sofa with Tarrant, an open newspaper between them.

“I... Well, I... Whoever said I was injured, madam? As you can see, I’m in perfect health!”

“Yes, thanks to that miracle ointment my sister brought with her! Why were you in need of it?”

This time, the silence is contemplative. It picks itself up off the floor, leans over the threshold and cocks its head, as if studying Margaret Manchester with Great Interest.

“And... may I ask,” Hamish returns in a slow, speculative tone, “how it is you came to be aware of the existence of that wonder cure?” In the time it – no doubt – takes Margaret’s expression to twitch with guilt, Hamish’s Speculation turns into Upset: “Were you in need of it?”

Apparently, her sister’s struggle with Shame and Frustration is more than answer enough:

“Manchester!” Alice’s eyes widen at the sound of... Dear Fates, had Hamish’s voice just... cracked?

“What did he do?!” he demands to know. And then: “How dare he lay a hand on you un-gently! Why, I’ll run that gutless fiend through this time and never mind the bloody rules of engagement! I’ll march down to that pier this instant and...! His boat’s not sailed yet! Yes, I’ll just... Driver!”

Alice can feel herself gaping as she glances up at Tarrant. He meets her astonished gaze with wide eyes and an equally startled expression.

“Hamish Ascot!” Margaret shouts back. “Have you been dueling my husband?”

Alice winces. Certainly, Mr. Brown, the cook, the chambermaid working upstairs, the neighbors, and the street vendors around the corner had heard that!
“Madam, I have!”

If Alice’s jaw hadn’t already unhinged, it certainly would have done so upon hearing that!

“What ever for?”

There’s a long pause and then a last offensive: “Lady Manchester, if you do not know, what good would be accomplished in telling you?”

“For one thing, I won’t allow you to set foot in this house until you do!”

“Well! Then it appears we are at an impasse, madam. Hightopp!”

Alice glances over her shoulder at her husband, expecting him to give her an apologetic look before he removes himself from the sofa and steps out into the hall. At the very least she expects him to answer! Say something chiding and witty in a delightfully cheerful tone!

But Tarrant does none of those things.

Alice glimpses a smug grin on his face as he curls his arm tighter around her shoulders and pointedly turns back to the newspaper spread out over Alice’s stomach.

“I don’t think he heard you.” Margaret’s reply is composed of dulcet tones that dance down the hall rather... Dangerously. “Perhaps you ought to bellow a bit louder?”

Hamish blusters, “Oh! For the love of...!!”

“Margaret Manchester?” Tarrant suggests, sotto voce.

Alice bites back a bark of laughter.

And perhaps it’s the pressure of her contained humor that kicks the Idea loose, but suddenly, Alice thinks of Tarrant’s “unwitting” confession the day before concerning Hamish’s use of the Pain Paste and...

“You utterly, undeniably diabolically brilliant mad hatter!” Alice hisses. “You set all this in motion with that slip about Hamish needing the pain paste!”

“But of course,” he replies. “I was rather surprised you didn’t try to stop me. Are you feeling quite...
“Collected, Alice?”

“No, not hardly! I’m an absolute oblivious twit these days!” she huffs. Then feels the need to point out: “You do realize they could kill each other on the front step, don’t you?”

“Shush, my Alice. I sense an Ultimatum coming!”

It does: “So, let’s have it, sir! Either fire when ready or disclose the extent of your utter foolishness!”

And Hamish Ascot – much-more-Muchier Hamish Ascot – answers that dare:

“Foolishness! Is it foolishness to attempt to assist a dear friend’s husband with the tidying up of his priorities? With the securing of his finances? With the care and continuation of his family’s future? Foolishness is it?”

“And just why would Lowell require that kind of assistance?”

Hamish counters more quietly, but not by much: “Why would his father send him off to America to open an office we all know to be fiction?”

This time, it takes Alice a moment to realize this new breed of Silence is in fact one arisen from Shock and dawning Shame. The moment stretches taut with tension.

“Perhaps... you’d better come in after all, Hamish,” Margaret replies almost too quietly for Alice to hear.

The door closes. Their footsteps draw closer but Alice doesn’t move away from Tarrant’s embrace. Nor does he offer to let her go.

The library door slides open and Hamish gestures a shaken-looking Margaret to precede him. She does and takes a seat beside Alice. Alice reaches for her sister’s limp hand and squeezes her fingers.

After nearly a minute, Margaret draws a shaking breath and dispenses with the most obvious theory:

“It can’t be that Lowell has a bastard child. If so... the mother would have been sent away. Not Lowell.” Margaret stares straight ahead for a moment more. And then she muses woodenly, “Did he have an affair with a married woman? Of higher standing?”

Alice honestly doesn’t know and, reluctantly, admits her ignorance. “I’ve no idea, dear sister. But I don’t believe that was the primary reason for him being sent away. In fact, would the woman’s husband not be permitted to challenge him for the insult? I doubt even Lord Manchester could
Margaret nods, her brows drawing together. "Then I... I don’t understand..." But she does – or, at least, she’s beginning to! – for she looks up at Hamish who is hovering awkwardly in the middle of the room as if waiting for the firing squad to cock their hammers.

“You offered my husband a loan.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Why?”

Bluntly, Hamish answers, “He needed the money.”

“Money his father couldn’t give him?!”

“Money his father refused to give him any longer.”

“Any... longer?”

Hamish releases a long breath and crosses the room to kneel at Margaret’s feet. In a move that is brazenly forward and yet so utterly appropriate for the moment, Hamish gathers Margaret’s other hand in his own and explains, “According to the man I hired to... look into your family’s welfare, Manchester was but weeks away from gaol. Debtor’s prison. I’m so very sorry, Margaret.”

Margaret stares at their hands. “Gaol?”

“I’m very much afraid so.”

“But how could I not... know?”

Hamish hesitates.

Alice forces herself to say the hateful words that the man who loves her sister cannot bring himself to utter:

“Are you sure you didn’t? Think about it, Margaret. When was the last time you entertained any of his friends? The Manchesters themselves? You know that Society forgives nearly everything except...”

Again, Margaret draws another deep breath. When she opens her eyes, she fixes her clear stare upon Hamish who is still kneeling at her feet, his hand now trapped in her grasp. “You offered Lowell a loan?”

“I did.”

“Why didn’t he accept it?”

Hamish swallows. Noticeably. But, ever noble, ever honorable, he gives her the truth she seeks, despite what it will reveal of him: “I believe it was the terms of the contract, Lady Manchester.” He clears his throat and continues. “Those being, were he unable to repay the loan by the first of the year, he was to disclose to you the extent of his personal bankruptcy and... if you desired it, consent to a divorce and also relinquish Winslow into your care unconditionally.”

Margaret’s breaths have become soft gasps at the utter... the undeniable... the unavoidable Implications of Hamish’s intentions.

But he has not finished yet. “Your husband took exception. We dueled.” He pauses a moment, gathering his thoughts for what must be said next. “I am sorry my attempts to... assist only exacerbated the situation. I had hoped he would turn around, you see. You deserve so much better than he had – thus far – been capable of. And, as your dear father could not confront his foolishness, I... took it upon myself to...”

Alice aches for him; Hamish has bared his soul and very nearly his heart, but...

Margaret says nothing to this.

Hamish swallows. His expression twists. He pulls his hand from Margaret’s abruptly and stands. His tone is hard with self-reproach and mortification, “I fought Manchester’s foolishness with my own, it seems. I do not ask you to forgive me, but I offer my sincerest apologies. Whatever they are worth at this point.”

He turns toward Tarrant. “Hightopp,” he says brusquely, ignoring Margaret’s unwavering, blank stare. “Are we going to the club today or not?”

Alice sends a Nudge along the heart line. Margaret needs her, needs her sister, needs to speak of things a woman can only tell another woman. And Hamish needs his half-mad friend. “Go,” she urges him.
“Yes, we are!” he declares, gently withdrawing from behind Alice and settling her against the cushions of the sofa. He presses a swift kiss to her hair before standing. His fingertips linger on her shoulder and she feels his Reassurance engulf her.

Yes, they had hoped Margaret would be happy to learn of Hamish’s regard... They had simply assumed it would not happen on the same day she learned of her husband’s utter lack of sense, of responsibility, of... worth.

Hamish waits on the threshold for Tarrant to join him, but before he can make his escape, Margaret poses yet another question the younger Ascot is somehow compelled to answer.

“Hamish? The duel... who won?”

“Neither. It was a draw, madam.”

Alice twitches at the over simplification, at the credit Hamish is giving Lowell despite the bastard’s utter inability to deserve it.

Margaret looks up at him, pins him there in the doorway with her stare. “No, it wasn’t.”

“I...”

“Lowell fought for the sake of his own selfish pride,” she explains. “The same cannot be said for you.”

Hamish has no answer to this. No verbal response at any rate. He merely nods his head, bows to Margaret, pivots smartly on his heel and leads Tarrant from the room. And when Alice wraps an arm around her sister’s shoulders, her hand still grasped in Alice’s gloved left, Margaret leans against her sister and – finally – cries. Her tears are silent.

Alice’s heart is breaking for her: her sister’s (and their father’s) dream of Lowell is no more. The extent of his utter selfishness tears the belly out of every promise that man had ever made her sister.

Of course there are tears.

Of course Hamish’s veiled declaration is met with misery.

But then Alice remembers something Very Important:

She remembers traveling through the looking glass with Mirana’s help. She remembers seeing her
mother again in the guise of a not-dream. She remembers soothing her and speaking of fond, found friends and someone... someone who loves her...

No, the moment Alice had realized Tarrant’s love for her had not been a joyous moment, either. It had been filled with pain, with the tearing, wrenching, wretchedness of making a Choice. While one dream had died, another had been born. But that, Alice realizes, is more often than not the way of things.

Through the pain, Alice had Seen clearly. She’d found herself facing a choice between a life of stagnation and a life of promise. It had taken less than an instant for her to choose.

“Lowell had fought for the sake of his own selfish pride... The same cannot be said for you.”

Margaret has Seen her choices: staying loyal to a man who has failed her or opening her life to a man who loves her, enough to Sacrifice for her.

Alice knows her sister understands that choice. And when the pain has lessened – when the tide is out and the sorrow at sea – Margaret will make it.

It will be no less difficult than Alice’s had been.

But it will be Margaret’s and that is considerably more than her sister had ever expected to have again. And Alice senses that is why her sister weeps... not from a lack of hope...

... but from a sudden influx of too Much of it.

*~*~*~*~*

Alice is falling asleep against his shoulder... again.

Tarrant Feels it as her consciousness fades, as her emotions diffuse and unfocus, as her weight settles against him completely, as her arm which she’d curled around his waist loosens until it lies slack against the back of the bench.

The sounds that whisper through the house – Margaret playing with Winslow and Helen commenting on the news downstairs, Anne dusting the hall, Mrs. Cray cleaning out the stove – and the sounds that eke through the walls and windows from the street – the traffic of feet and horses and brash drivers – all conspire with the knocking of the loom to send Alice to Sleep.

In fact, there is only one sound that is absent in this murmured symphony, Tarrant thinks: Hamish Ascot’s pompous declarations and blustery back-peddling (which he does – no, no, had done – quite a bit of in Margaret Manchester’s presence!) and harrumphs of concession. Yes, there is a Hamish-shaped hole in this soft noise.
“Don’t worry,” Alice had assured him. “I know my sister. She just needs time to... find her Muchness.”

Yes, yes, of course! Why, he can imagine his sister-in-law is not enthusiastic about replacing a defective husband as if he were a pair of outmoded boots! These things take Time, he knows. And Margaret’s parting comment to Hamish so long ago... Yes, she’s aware of his motivations. No, she does not regard him as another Lowell. And, most importantly of all – and, as Tarrant is constantly reminding Hamish! – it is what Margaret had not said that must be paid special attention:

She had not said “No.”

She had not said “Never.”

She had not even said “Farewell.”

“Perhaps I shall intrude upon your family for Christmas supper,” Hamish had mused. “Helen is constantly inviting me.”

“Please do!” Tarrant had replied, overjoyed despite not knowing what this “Christmas” is everyone had taken to speaking of!

Alice had been pleased when he’d reported this. “You see? They’ll come around.”

“Yes, yes, but with all the circling they’re doing, it makes one very frustrated and somewhat sick to one’s stomach from dizziness!”

“If you feel that way from just watching, imagine how Margaret and Hamish feel. Let them make their circles, Raven. There’s a reason it’s called a merry-go-round.”

He’d considered that for a moment and then, smiling, he’d concluded, “For the reward which is acquired not despite but because of the circuitous route taken, my Alice?”

“Precisely.”

“Then I ought not interrupt the journey.”

Alice had smiled and wrapped her arm around his waist, had leaned into his shoulder, had closed her eyes and sighed, “Yes. Let them have their mad Caucus Race. It won’t end until it’s over and not a moment before.”
They’d had that conversation a month ago, on an afternoon much like this one. Alice had taken to joining him here, as he’d worked her great-grandmother’s loom, as he’d woven hand’s width after hand’s width of pure white wool. Creating his wife’s tartan had been good practice, he notes, for this one – their littlin’s – is turning out much better!

Now, after two months of practice, he works the machine with skill. Skill his Alice appreciates as the regular, rhythmic movements predictably soothe her into sleep. And he knows she Needs her rest now that she’s finally being permitted to have some. Even after spending all day in bed yesterday, Alice still has not fully recovered her strength. But no, of course she hasn’t! For five continuous, unrelenting days, their littin’ had very nearly Futterwhackened poor Alice breathless! Why, Margaret and Helen had hardly known what to make of it.

“I told you the Hightopps are... different from us,” Alice had gasped when Margaret had sputtered and squawked about more impossible things! “And Tarrant’s known throughout Witzend for doing the very best Futterwhacken. I can hardly expect less from his son or daughter, now can I?”

The very thought of one day teaching a little lass or a little lad how to Futterwhacken had very nearly set his head spinning. Luckily, he’d merely felt his hands spin on his wrists. Once. But Helen and Margaret had seen it, had gasped, and had nominated themselves for preparing an Immediate tea service.

“They’ll be fine,” Alice had assured him once the room had emptied.

“Yes, yes!” he’d agreed, still frowning with Worry. “But will they be fine in time for the arrival of our littlin’? And our queen?”

“I’ll make sure of it,” she’d promised and then gasped as yet another performance had pushed the air from her lungs.

“That—was—quite—Vigorous!” she’d wheezed once it was over and, despite his Concern, Tarrant had giggled.

“Perhaps it runs in the family?” he’d suggested.

Family...!

Tarrant makes a concentrated effort not to pause in his work and disturb Alice’s slumber. He knows the patterns of Alice’s sleep; if he moves her now, she’ll awaken and he must avoid that at all costs. No, no, he must wait until her breaths hitch and her eyes move beneath the delicate lids. Only then will it be safe to return her to their bed down the hall. He continues weaving, rhyming her into dreams with the knocking of the loom. She needs the rest. Just as their littlin’ does.

Five days of fierce Futterwhacken.
Followed by three days of slumber and then...

And then Alice will be able to share their littlin’ with him. And then he will be able to hold that tiny body in his arms. And then...

*D’nae stop yer weavin’, lad! Yer lass needs th’rest!*

He knows.

*Ye’ve o’ly one more day teh go, lad!*

He knows that as well.

*Yer Alice will be jus’fine!*

He’s not so sure about that, but he Hopes...!

Tarrant grits his teeth, squeezes his eyes shut and Banishes the Bad Thoughts to the Back of his mind. It’s a cluttered place, truth be told, and rather dim and shadowy as he’s yet to get around to lighting it. And due to the darkness it’s rather difficult to tidy up so he expects those Bad Thoughts will be stumbling around for quite some time before they manage to find their way back to him. And by then...

*Aye, by then yer littl’lad ‘r lass will b’ born.*

And Alice will be fine.

Yes, everything will be Fine.

“Fine,” he murmurs, opening his eyes and moving his whole-and-healthy fingertips over the weave. Then he giggles. *Fine, indeed! “Yes, yes, a fine weave, indeed!”* he rhymes, imagining Alice can hear it in her sleep and have pleasant dreams filled with his nonsense and her Alice-laughter.

A fine weave, indeed!

And it truly is! It’s the best weave he’s ever managed and he’d long passed the required length of fabric weeks ago, but he’d kept on weaving. He’d needed the activity, the distraction, and the closeness of his wife as she’d sat with him and sung songs with him and sometimes rubbed his shoulders.
He gently folds the finished cloth out of the way and muses at what they’ve made together, he and his Alice. This blank canvas will become bright with color, just as their littlin’s life will be.

Never before has Tarrant truly cared for the color White – a shy color, too bashful to commit to one hue or another, no Muchness at all! – but now...! Now...!

Now it is the most perfect color in the entire universe.

It is the color of Hope, of Possibilities, of the Future.

Now Tarrant Hightopp understands why Mirana has always insisted upon surrounding herself with it.

And he’s never been happier knowing that the White Queen herself will be attending the birth of the next Hightopp.

*~*~*~*~*

“Your Majesty, Avenfaire Palace has been rebuilt, down to the last tile in the throne room.”

Mirana looks up from the reconstruction report at this happy statement. Goodness knows how many pages she would have had to wade through to discover that!

“Thank you, Fenruffle. That is most welcome news!”

She accepts the latest scroll from her agents in Shuchland and sets it apart from the rest of the pile for last. Knowing that there is a reward for suffering through this seemingly unending mountain of haphazardly composed and nearly-illegible-at-times correspondence, Mirana takes a deep breath and prepares to reapply herself to the reports.

Fenruffle begins to bow himself from the room, but then pauses and, frowning more fiercely than usual, glances toward her vanity – piled with all sorts of texts and previously read scrolls and whatnot – and comments, “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but it seems as if your correspondence has... grown since I was last here this morning.”

“Has it?” she muses, joining Fenruffle in frowning. She rises from her chair and drifts toward him. “How odd...”

Coming to stand next to him, she admits that the collection does look oddly more... populated than it
had just this morning.

“Very strange...”

And then, as they study the disorganized jumble, the parchments shift all on their own and the pile seems to... enlarge. Mirana shares a wary glance with Fenruffle and then, with hesitance, begins relocating the top rolls of parchment. Fenruffle obediently holds out his arms and acts as a paper receptacle. The scrolls are rustling against his chest and tucked under his beak before Mirana realizes the source of the... problem, as it were. A collection of much smaller scrolls litters the tabletop and each is still unread, tied with a ribbon.

She reaches for one and unrolls it.

Reads:

Mirana, all’s well here. The birthing pains are coming every fifteen minutes or so. Love, Alice

For a moment, Mirana just stares at the odd message. And then, whirling, she consults the calendar, the clock, and calculates the time since Tarrant’s last letter:

Your Majesty, Our littin’ commenced with the Five Days of Futterwhacken today. I expect Alice will be needing your assistance on the eighth day. I know she won’t ask you again, but I am. Please come. Your ever-faithful hatter, Tarrant Hightopp

Mirana turns back to the vanity and digs down until she feels her fingers pass through the insubstantial surface of the small, silver looking glass resting face-up on the vanity’s tabletop.

“Oh, botheration!” she nearly shouts, causing Fenruffle to flinch and the scrolls in his arms to crackle-crumple-crunch!

“Put those down,” she says shortly. “And fetch the king, please. Now.” Mirana doesn’t look up as the gryphon does as she commands. He dumps the scrolls on the nearest armchair – those arms might as well be useful for something! – and rushes for the door. Mirana tears the ribbon from the next scroll.

Mirana, Still fine. I haven’t told Tarrant yet, but I think he already knows. No change in the pains. Love, Alice

And another:

Dear Mirana, I believe my labor has begun. If you could make time to visit later, I’d appreciate it.
I’ll send a note every hour to let you know how we’re progressing. Love, Alice

And another:

Mirana, I was only able to evade Tarrant’s questions for so long and then I had to tell him. Ten minute breaks. Nothing urgent. Love, Alice

The next:

Mirana, I can see now I should have INSISTED Tarrant go to the club with Hamish today. Botheration. My water broke and he nearly suffered an apoplexy. Five minutes or so apart now. Still not urgent. Pain is manageable. Love, Alice

And then:

Mirana, Please bring a Calming Draught. It’s for Tarrant. We all need it. The duration of the breaks hasn’t changed but the pain is intensifying now! We’ve called the doctor, blast it all. Well, maybe he’ll have something to calm Tarrant.

And the apparently most recent:

Mirana! Where are you? Are you getting these? If you’re looking for that Calming Draught, ask Thackery! And if you don’t find it in the next ten minutes, I insist you simply shove Tarrant through the mirror when you arrive. Less than five minutes!!

“Mirana?”

The White Queen turns as her husband enters the room, his face drawn with concern. “Dale,” she begins, opening the largest drawer in the vanity desk and pulling out a small satchel. “I’m afraid my Champion needs me. I must go. If you could...?”

Dale leans forward and presses a whiskery kiss to her forehead. “Of course, Mi-sh’rya. I’ll just read through these~” He nods to the pile of correspondence on her desk. “– while I hold the looking glass open, shall I?”

She smiles and places a kiss on his lion-lips. “I love you.”

He chuckles. “And a good thing, too! I wouldn’t offer to read through field reports for just anyone, you know.”

“I know.”
And with a smile, a wave of her hand and a flutter of fingertips, she steps through the free-standing mirror and into...

... into a vacant bedroom. She takes a moment to survey the slightly dusty shelves filled with dolls and books and other little-girl odds and ends. And then she hears:

“Brangergain i’tall, Tarrant! If I want to bloody pace the bloody room I bloody will! For the last time, I’m bloody fine!”

Ah-hah! Mirana thinks and moves toward the door.

There’s a slight rumble of masculine fear bundled in a rhythm that sounds Outlandish to Mirana’s ears.

“I don’t need to see the bloody doctor!” she nearly shouts back. “I need to see Mirana! Ow!”

“Alice, dear, I still don’t see how someone from this country you’ve come from could possibly—”

Locating the correct door, which stands slightly ajar, Mirana pushes it open with a hesitant poke and takes in the scene: Alice is crouching over the back of a low chair with the slats in her white-knuckled grasp, an older woman Mirana assumes must be Alice’s mother is rubbing circles against Alice’s lower back, yet another woman who could only be Alice’s sister is frowning at Tarrant who is hovering over his wife... obsessively.

Mirana clears her throat and announces herself, “Ah, excuse me, everyone! I’m Mirana of Marmoreal. So wonderful to meet you all! And, Alice! I’m so sorry I’m late! It seems your bad habits have migrated to me today! Now, Tarrant, will you please take my bag? Thank you. And open it, yes. I’ll need those things organized thoroughly on a suitably large table, if you don’t mind.”

Alice’s sister gapes at the queen, to which she smiles in response then politely ignores.

Alice’s mother has stopped rubbing her daughter’s back and is looking equally flunderwhapped.

Alice looks up, still riding the pain of the contraction and manages a teeth-gritting grin. “Mirana.” Her brown eyes, flecked with yellow aggression, scan the queen. “No time to change?”

“I’m afraid not,” the queen answers, explaining away her crown and elaborate gown. “But it seems fitting this way. This is quite the occasion, Alice. I ought to be properly dressed for it. Now, what do we have, dear?”
Mirana presses her hands to Alice’s belly, considers the shape and direction and weight of the baby. “Ah, excellent!” She then leans over and checks Alice’s bare feet. “Good, good!” Smiling, she drifts in front of Alice and requests, “Open up! Say ‘Ah!’”

As Alice does so, her mother finds her voice. “What in the world is that supposed to accomplish?”

Mirana merely grins and announces, “It won’t be long now, Alice.”

Turning, she notices that Tarrant is watching their exchange with peridot-green eyes, his very un-groomed brows knit together in abstract Worry. “The bricks, if you would, Tarrant? Right here is fine,” she indicates with an airy gesture. The room is clearly a guestroom that had been stripped of all non-essentials. Clearly someone had Prepared things. Most likely Tarrant as Alice has been rather... preoccupied for the last eight days or so.

He sets the heavy stones down on the floor, adjusting them at the queen’s direction. “Wa’telse can I do?” he burrs, his gaze never leaving his wife, who attempts a brave smile for him despite her shaking limbs and shuddering shoulders.

“Let’s ask Alice,” Mirana replies and gently removes her Champion’s claw-like grip from the chair. “Alice, dear, who would you prefer at your back?”

“Tarrant,” she answers without a moment’s hesitation. Mirana nods and accepts Alice’s request that she take the midwife’s position. “But your dress...”

“Will not object in the slightest. Nor will I,” Mirana consoles her, patting her cheeks. “Now, Tarrant, where is the blanket? Ah, good!”

As Mirana removes her jewelry and washes up in the steaming water, Tarrant approaches his wife. He stands behind her and takes each of her hands in his. He presses a kiss to her temple. “Writing desk, my raven,” he whispers.

Alice takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and nods. “We can do this,” she assures him, assures herself.

Mirana notes the tears in his eyes at Alice’s utter and undiminished bravery. His tears echo her own. She completes her preparations with a layer of slick lotion on her arms. Mirana kneels down and gently inserts a hand beneath Alice’s shrift.

Seeing this, Alice’s sister murmurs numbly, “I suppose I’d better bring the doctor upstairs.”

“Mirana will take care of the baby,” Alice reminds her. Her voice tightens as another contraction builds. “Make sure he’s clear on that!”
“Yes, of course,” Margaret says, her tone automatic, before ducking out of the room and the strange sight the three of them must make.

“What can I do?” Mrs. Kingsleigh asks, clearly irritated at the direction things are taking but valiantly keeping her priorities straight. Even in mid-labor, Alice’s will and determination are forces to be reckoned with.

“Be here for Alice,” Mirana replies, investigating her Champion’s progress gently. “Nearly there, Alice.”

*Dear Fates, please let my midwifery skills be up to this task!*

Alice nods, her breaths puffing out like the steam locomotive that had once served Underland... before Iracebeth had ordered it destroyed rather than permit it to be used to transport traitors to her crown beyond her reach before their scheduled beheading.

Mirana barely hears the blustery protests of an older gentleman when he accompanies Alice’s sister into the room. She ignores everything except for her Champion, who is also Underland’s Champion, who is and has always been Tarrant Hightopp’s Champion.

The queen looks up and into Tarrant’s face. His gaze is fiercely green and focused on his wife’s expression. She can only imagine what he Sends her through the heart line, can only imagine what he Feels from Alice, but he stands tall, holds steady as she grips him to keep herself anchored.

“Beautrific, my Alice,” he murmurs softly. “’Twon’b’much longer nauw. I’ve gau’ye, luv. Ye’re ‘ere in m’arms an’ ye’ll no’be lettin’ me go...”

As the contraction eases, Mirana checks the baby’s position then urges, “Onto the bricks now, Alice. It’s time, dear.”

Tarrant helps her up and Mirana ignores the doctor’s protests – “This is barbaric, madam! You can’t expect a safe delivery in this manner! Lady Hightopp ought to be abed, or at least seated properly in a birthing chair!” – and arranges the length of white fabric Tarrant had provided as well as an empty basin.

And then Time enters the room and begins to play.

As Alice kneels, leans back against her husband, bears down and hisses through gritted teeth, Time seems to slow and yet Mirana finds herself with barely enough opportunity to think, to urge and encourage Alice, to direct Tarrant to shift his weight or lift Alice’s arms or...
Time wraps up fifteen minutes of activity and packages it all into a single instant. Or so it seems to Mirana. And then a small body is sliding into her arms and onto the length of white wool. Mirana shifts the baby into one arm and tends to the cord.

“Congratulations, Alice, Tarrant,” Mirana whispers as she wipes the baby clean with the wool... which mysteriously begins to color in the most interesting ways where the child’s skin touches it.

“We’ve created a Tamial, my Alice,” Tarrant whispers into her hair.

Alice sobs once, smiles.

Mirana pushes the basin in place with her opposite hand. “You’re almost finished, my Champion. You know what comes next.”

Reluctantly, Alice draws another breath, closes her eyes, and waits for the final contraction to come. And when it does, the last essence of her pregnancy is dispelled.

“Excellent work, Alice!” Mirana praises her, doing her best to clean up Alice with a warm cloth. “Now, I believe you’re ready to lay down for a bit?”

Mirana follows them to the bed and urges Tarrant to sit beside his wife. She then lays their son in the cradle of Alice’s tired arms. Tarrant reaches across her to hold them steady and they both study their son’s surprised and rather disgruntled expression. He whimpers a bit, coughs, but doesn’t cry.

The doctor’s presence goes unnoticed by the two of them as he steps up to the bed and examines his patient. When he seems satisfied that Alice has delivered safely, he looks up and across the bed at Mirana.

“Is that how it’s done where you come from, madam?”

“It is,” she replies with a serene smile.

He sniffs. “A miracle she didn’t hemorrhage.”

Mirana says nothing. Let this man think what he will. Mirana had not come through the looking glass to educate him. The man insists on lingering on the premises just to be sure Alice doesn’t encounter any complications. He excuses himself to finish his interrupted cup of tea downstairs.

Alice’s sister escorts him away.

Mrs. Kingsleigh seats herself beside the bed where she can clearly see her newest grandson. Mirana
finds herself enraptured as well by the baby’s flashing irises and the curling wisps of strawberry-blond hair atop his head. He flails a bit and makes a grumpy mewling sound.

Yes, Mirana imagines it had been much easier to Futterwhacken before this entire birthing business began. Poor disappointed lad...

She finds herself mesmerized by the child’s tartan. It remains as fluffy and soft and clean as it had before the birth and yet the colors...! Mirana gapes as she watches the Hightopp colors weave themselves into the threads slowly, steadily, relentlessly. Why, if the newborn infant spends the night lying on that fabric, his Hightopp-ness will succeed in staining the entire bolt into Hightopp tartan!

She burns to ask Tarrant about this, the mechanics of it! Why doesn’t she have a tome dedicated to this phenomenon in her alchemy library?!

But now is not the time. There will be time later for intellectual pursuits.

For now, Mirana turns her attention to where is should be: to the child nuzzling Alice’s breast.

“Alice,” Mirana murmurs, feeling her heart throb: Alice has yet again emerged the victor, a Champion. For really, that is what motherhood is, is it not? She informs her dearest friend, “He’s absolutely perfect. You didn’t need me at all!”

“We did,” Alice counters weakly, her eyelids drooping with exhaustion. “All three of us did.”

“Tamial,” Tarrant murmurs, his fingertips gently investigating his son’s skin, “would not have been possible without your assistance, Your Majesty.” His expression softens until she fears he might weep great, Hightopp tears. “Thank ye fer always keeping th’ mirror open teh my Alice. Thank ye fer watchin’ o’er her aboard her ship. Thank ye fer... e’erything.”

Mirana finds herself meeting his dark blue – but perfectly clear and dry! – eyes. “Hence the name?” she asks tearfully.

“Aye. Fer the thrice o’ us.”

“Is it all right?” Alice asks and Mirana has to take a moment to persuade her tears to retreat.

“Yes, of course! I’m honored, Tarrant, Alice. I’m honored to be a part of your family.”

“Auntie Mirana,” Alice jokes tiredly and Tarrant gently collects their son from her shaking arms. Alice leans against her husband’s shoulder and closes her eyes.
That’s Mirana’s cue. “Tarrant,” she whispers, “I’m leaving some things for Alice to take if she’d like. In small doses, of course. I’ve left instructions on their use.”

He nods, completely transfixed by the presence in his arms.

Smiling, Mirana stands and begins to clean up. As promised, she leaves a fresh pot of Pain Paste and a few other things Alice might have a need for in the coming days. The birthing stones are placed back into the impossibly small bag along with the potions and other remedies she’d prepared, just in case.

Collecting her valise, the queen stands and steps toward the door.

“You’re leaving so soon?” Mrs. Kingsleigh asks.

Mirana inclines her head, amused that the woman’s gruff tone no doubt comes from pique at not having any control over the situation rather than any intentional rudeness on the queen’s part. “I’m afraid there’s much to be done at home and I must return.”

It’s an excuse. Mirana knows she could stay... but what would she do? Alice and Tarrant are in no condition to receive visitors today of all days! What other options remain? Share an Uncomfortable Tea with Alice’s family? No. No, she can be of more use in Marmoreal. She will visit with Alice and Tarrant and their son another, less stressful day...

“But... you’ve only just arrived!”

Yes, Alice’s mother has questions and concerns. Well, perhaps Mirana ought to address those before she goes...

“Mrs. Kingsleigh,” Mirana replies gently, “would you be so kind as to see me out?”

And, faced with such a reasonable request, Alice’s mother cannot refuse. “Yes, of course.”

But when the woman turns toward the staircase that descends obediently – how oddly silent everything is Up Here! – toward the first floor, Mirana clears her throat. “I’m afraid that is not the way I came, madam.” And then she drifts toward Alice’s old bedroom. Mrs. Kingsleigh, frowns and follows her.

“How precisely did you arrive, madam,” the woman inquires, “if you did not enter through the front door? And... how did you manage to arrive in such a timely fashion?”

“Ah, yes! All will be answered,” Mirana assures her. “But first, I must apologize for arriving so late
into... things. I had hoped... Ah, well, as I mentioned, there’s much to be done at home and I’m afraid I rather lost track of the day! Luckily, my chief of staff noticed that the pile of parchments on my bureau had mysteriously grown, otherwise I fear I would have disappointed dear Alice and broken my promise.” Mirana shudders at the thought. “That would have been unforgivable!”

Mrs. Kingsleigh is silent for a long moment.

Mirana sets her bag down and gestures for the woman to join her. Mirana moves toward the bed and takes a seat on the end of it. She waits for Mrs. Kingsleigh to comply. “Now, before I return to my country, I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you a riddle, Mrs. Kingsleigh.”

The woman sighs. “Well, get on with it. I’m used to them by now.”

Mirana arcs her brows in silent surprise. “Alice has not revealed the details of my land to you?”

“No. Just one riddle or hint after another!”

“I apologize for asking you to endure yet another one. Please take comfort in the fact that it will be the last.”

Alice’s mother does appear much happier upon hearing that. “Let’s have it then. I’d like to get back to my daughter.”

“As you should! Now... ah, yes! Here we are: I’m contemplating things that begin with the letter ‘M’...”

Mrs. Kingsleigh huffs. “I’ve heard this one before.”

“And what answers have you thought of, madam?”

“Magic, miracles, madness, muchness... whatever that is, marvelous, magnificence, and mirrors, of all things!”

“Ah, but that is one of the most important ones,” Mirana reassures her. “For it is the way home for me, for Tarrant, and for Alice and their son.”

Mrs. Kingsleigh doesn’t understand. But she will.

“Now, before I go, I ask you to please consider one more thing: although the path to and from my land seems easy. Simple, even, please consider the possibility that the journey itself is very difficult and it had taken quite a lot of strength on Alice’s part to return to you. Just as it will take a lot of
strength for her to leave you again. Please keep that in mind and support her decision. Alice deserves every happiness she is capable of.”

Mirana holds out her hand and shakes Mrs. Kingsleigh’s in a perfectly proper lady-like grip. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, madam. I hope we’ll meet again soon and, perhaps, at that time, become friends.”

Then, with a brief curtsey to her unwilling hostess, Mirana swoops down gracefully and collects her satchel and then sweeps toward the mirror. Stopping just a few inches in front of its silvery surface, the queen turns and glances over her shoulder. With a smile, she bids Alice’s mother:

“Fairfarren, Mrs. Kingsleigh.”

And then she squares her shoulders and steps into the looking glass...

... and emerges in her office to a rather boisterous crowd.

“What happened?”

“How’s Alice?”

“Is it a boy?”

“Is it a girl?”

“Is i’ta spoon?”

Mirana looks over the assembled throng: Mally, Thackery, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, Bayard and his entire family – both sets of pups! She also sees Leif, her own daughters – Alicibeth and Tarranya, Chessur, a violently twitching Nivens, and even a grudging Fenruffle! On the balcony, a motion draws her gaze and she spies Maevyn balanced on the railing. From the orchard below, she thinks she hears the impatient barking bellow of the Bandersnatch!

“My queen!” Dale says, snapping her to attention. “Please, we can see something has happened.” His gaze travels over her dress, forever ruined. “But we don’t know if it’s good or bad!”

Mirana smiles. “Alice is fine!” she announces.

“An’ th’bairn?” Thackery hiccups, clutching a pepper mill.
“Is a Hightopp! Tamial Hightopp,” she informs them.

“It’s a Tamial!” Mally crows.

Bayto frowns. “So that would mean it’s a... boy?”

“Who bloody cares?” the dormouse enthuses. “This calls for a drink! Chess, it’s your turn to make the tea!”

“No cat hair this time,” Bayard demands.

“The cat hair is what makes it Special,” Chessur assures him with a typically unnerving grin. “Only a dog would ask for Dandy Tea without the dander!”

Before Mirana can be swept from her office to an impromptu tea party, she glances at the looking glass and back into Alice’s childhood bedroom. Helen Kingsleigh is still sitting on the bed, one hand flat over her chest and the other clutching the quilt. Mirana watches as the door opens and Alice’s sister leans over the threshold. Speaks. Mrs. Kingsleigh regards the looking glass for a moment more then, with an abrupt shake of her head, replies. Stands. Leaves the room.

“Was it a good idea to leave Alice to explain that?” Dale murmurs in speculation.

Mirana smiles. “Most definitely, my king. A Champion always rises to the challenge placed before her.”

“And as always, I shall trust your judgment on all matters concerning your Champion.”

“What a wise monarch you are!”

He chuckles. “A wise monarch who has read himself into a thirst. Come down for tea. The field reports will wait for an hour.”

Indeed, they will.

And, indeed they do.

Chapter End Notes
1. I'm told that being a bit scatterbrained can be a feature of some women's pregnancies. It certainly is part of Alice's. So if you think she's a bit out of character, that's the reason. Poor Alice. She's a few sugar cubes shy of a tea service at the beginning of this chapter.

2. I've purposefully left out the detailed Details of the birth. There's loads on the Internet about the process of childbirth. If you're that curious, go on an Google it. For the purposes of this story, I decided the gory details weren't necessary for expressing the miracle Alice and Tarrant experience... as a couple. No two births are the same, but I apologize if Alice's seems disingenuous in some way and I point to the Artistic License in my defense.

3. FAN ART ALERT! Yes, there is fan art for Alice, Tarrant, and their little one (which also shows the Heart Marks and heart lines).

The Hightopps (One Promise Kept, Book 3) Warnings: NOT worksafe -- nudity, mature themes, OPK Book 3 spoilers
Alice has known many names in her lifetime:

Alice Kingsleigh, daughter of Charles and Helen Kingsleigh.

Champion Alice, champion of the White Queen – Mirana of Marmoreal.

Alice Lasling, mercenary-trained champion of Prince Jaspien.

Alice Hightopp, Tarrant Hightopp’s wife.

Lady Hightopp of Iplam.

And now...

Alice regards her son, who has worked up quite the appetite from trying and failing to (most likely) Futterwhacken for nearly an hour, and considers her newest name: mother.

She is Tamial Hightopp’s mother.

“I ken tha’ look.”

Alice smiles but doesn’t take her eyes off of their little Tam at the sound of her husband’s voice. “Do you? Already?” For, certainly, it’s a new one. She’s certainly never felt this particular expression from inside her own skin before!

“Aye.”

“What does it tell you?”

“How ver’much I luv ye, Alice.”

She looks up at that, at the sight of Tarrant leaning over her armchair, his hair still damp from his bath and his nightshirt is peeking out from between the lapels of the housecoat her father had once worn in winter. For a moment, she’s at a loss for words – she’s as wordless as a newly hatched
jabberwocky! – but then they find her, as they always do... eventually.

“You take my breath away,” she whispers.

His eyes deepen in color, past that indigo of unconditional and absolute adoration to a shade she hasn’t seen much of recently – not since that morning before the duel, actually: violet.

“Th’ gentlemanly thin’teh do in tha’case would be teh giv’it back, wouldnae it?” he muses on an equally soft whisper of his own. And then he leans down and brushes his lips against hers.

“But are you a gentleman?” Alice murmurs when he pulls back after that too-brief and shallow contact. She leans forward, following his mouth. The arm not wrapped around Tam finds another use: her hand tangles in the worn, soft fabric of the housecoat lapels.

Tarrant’s eyebrows twitch: yes, he’ll play her game. “I’ve been told ‘twould be teh m’benefit teh b’come one.”

“But your wife would suffer horribly...”

“Och, nauw we cannae ha’tha’...” And with those words, he closes the distance between their mouths, thrusts his hand into her hair and possesses her. She groans, marvels, and shoves away the twinge of embarrassment and shame – here she is, suckling their son at her breast and yet she wants-desires-needs-long-aches for her husband’s touch!

And because she needs More, of course, he pulls away. “No, Alice,” he lisps, covering her hand with his. “It’s too soon. The queen specifically said...”

“But I’m fine!” Dear Fates, had that been a whine?

It must have been, because Tarrant chuckles softly and a smile of pure Masculine Delight stretches his lips. “You are considerably more than fine,” he agrees. “However, now is not the time.” He cocks his head to the side and observes with delight, “Rhyme.”

She knows. Her sigh of impatience and regret signals her agreement. Yes, she may be healed, thanks to Mirana’s skills in alchemy. Yes, she wants him. But, perhaps, it’s best if they don’t... here.

This time next week, you’ll be home.

In Marmoreal.

Alice tells herself she can wait.
Herself disagrees.

But, Alice, being the more rational and determined of the two, releases his housecoat. Her father’s housecoat. A father’s housecoat. Tarrant is a father now, isn’t he? It wouldn’t be Right for him to wear the housecoat of a bachelor now would it?

“The robe suits you,” she tells him. “From one father to another. Perhaps you make it feel at home again.”

“Now that, my Alice, is a compliment deserving of some Attention.”

Alice tries to hide her smile of anticipation but feels it peeping out at him regardless. “What sort of attention, Raven?”

Again he leans down, but this time her lips encounter only his damp hair as he angles his face toward her neck. She obligingly tilts her head to the side and shivers when his lips – and then his teeth! – caress her skin.

“The sort,” he rumbles, “that you will enjoy Quite a Lot... once you’ve taken your turn in the bath.”

“Am I need of a bath?” she teases.

“You are, as always, utterly Alice-y,” he assures her, inhaling deeply. “But ’tis m’job teh take care o’ ye...”

And she had better let him do it, she knows. Surprisingly, it’s gotten considerably less difficult for her to remember to allow him to. It doesn’t hurt that her reward for doing so is nothing less than his undiluted happiness.

“All right. Would you see to the fire, then? Tam’s nearly ready for bed.”

“Tam?” Tarrant asks, moving toward the hearth and knocking away the ashes before adding more coal.

“Tamial. Tam,” she explains and then dares to add, “Tam o’shanter...”

Her husband’s shoulders stiffen and he turns toward her just in time for her to see the Light of Inspiration enter his eyes. “Tam o’shanter...?”

Their son stirs, satiated and sleepy for now. Alice lifts him up to the square of linen draped over her
shoulder and pats his back. “A hatter’s son must have a hat, Raven.”

“Indeed he must!” Tarrant declares and reaches for Tam after they hear his soft burp. With experience gained from minding the queen’s children one Wednesday morning after another for years (and then with that experience refined over the course of the previous month since Tam’s birth), Tarrant nestles their son into his arms. Tam opens his eyes a bit, works his little lips and fists his little hands, waving his too-soft arms aimlessly.

“Ah, no more Futterwhacken t’nigh’, Tam,” Alice hears Tarrant tell him as he moves toward the bed. “Nauw ’tis time fer th’ Bedtime Bandersnatch teh carry ye off teh yer dreams. ‘Ere he comes! Gal~umph! Gal~umph! Gal~umph!”

Alice swallows a giggle as each narrated stride of the fictitious beast is matched with a hypnotic sway of Tarrant’s upper body. Just watching him lull their son to sleep is making her tired!

She leaves the room with one last glance at Tarrant, sitting up in bed now and humming a tune that brings the Maigh Festival to mind. His arms still rock a bit, but very slowly and gently now. Surely, Tam has closed his tiny little eyelids and is falling asleep...

And if Alice wants to take advantage of the Attention Tarrant had promised her in exchange for the compliment she’d Paid him, she’d better stop dawdling!

When Alice emerges on a cloud of steam, hair washed but still damp, fingertips only slightly wrinkled and her skin still flushed from the hot water, she heads directly for the bed and her husband. Climbing up next to him, she leans closer and...

Stops.

A small, gentle snore whispers from between his slack lips and whistles lightly through his nose.

With a small huff of disappointment, Alice sits back a bit and regards him. Botheration, but she’d hoped...! It’s been over two months since the last time they’d...! And Mirana’s pastes and potions have worked wonders...! Even the depression her mother and sister had warned her about had run its course and now she’s Herself again and she wants...!

“Thwimble fumpt,” she mutters under her breath.

A small twitch from within the blanket Tarrant still holds close to his chest draws her gaze. Alice smiles down at Tam, who is wide awake and appears to be studying his father’s face with Great Interest.

“Yes,” she whispers to him, unable to not touch her son, offer her finger to him and watch him curl
his little hand around it. “He may Share those features with you some day. I hope you like them as much as I do.”

Tamial is too young to have mastered the art of smiling, but he seems pleased nonetheless.

Alice gently lifts Tam from his father’s arms and moves off the bed. She paces with him in front of the fire until he gets drowsy and her hair dries. She keeps an eye on Tarrant, too: worries about his back, but lets him sleep.

When she looks down and sees Tam’s eyes – a soft amber now! Tarrant had told her they’ll keep changing until he chooses a Disposition he prefers over the others – soften with exhaustion, watches those little eyelids begin to lower, she places a soft kiss on his brow, inhales the scent from his thin, red-gold curls. She lays him down in his bassinet and then moves to the side of the bed to make sure Tarrant is deeply asleep. She sees that he is and dares to shove him a bit. He snuggles down until his head touches the pillow. She pets his long hair gently as she watches her husband sleep.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Without you, we wouldn’t have him.”

How many times has Tarrant saved her life?

In the makeshift hat workshop in Salazen Grum.

During the battle on Frabjous Day.

Through the looking glass of her cabin aboard the Wonder.

During the Trial of Threes.

During the Champions’ Duel when she had fought for Jaspien.

And not only had he Killed Time for her, but he had Moved it: had gone into the Past...

Her husband is a hero. She’s known this since she’d realized that he’d saved the White Queen on Horvendush Day, since he’d organized the Resistance...

Tarrant Hightopp has always been a hero. Most recently, he’s been Alice’s.

She glances once more over the edge of the bassinet at their son, who sleeps on his stomach, oblivious to the wide world and the great gift he’s already been given.
“Your Fa saved you,” she informs him softly.

Yes, he had. Alice doesn’t doubt that Tarrant would still do anything and everything necessary to save her life if it ever comes to that again, but now she knows she’s not alone in receiving that honor. Now she knows she shares that Special Place in his heart with another, with Tamial.

And Alice can think of no one else she would rather see secure and safe beneath Tarrant’s capable protection.

This is not the first time she’s had this particular Thought, but this time she does not cry. She does not sob. She does not wake Tarrant with the overflow of intense Anguish these sorts of things have been capable of coaxing from her until very recently.

Tonight there is no gut-wrenching, heart-twisting, inexplicable sorrow.

Tonight, Alice smiles, slides into bed, and when she feels Tarrant’s arm wrap around her waist and his nose press into her hair... she sighs and goes to sleep.

*~*~*~*~*

“Hightopp. I’m in need of your assistance.”

Tarrant looks up nervously at Hamish Ascot across the billiard table. “I’ve heard that before,” he mutters darkly.

Hamish frowns in confusion, blinks in recollection, then smirks in expectation. “This is a favor of a completely different variety,” he assures him. “Although, by some standards, it is more perilous.”

“Then tell me in the carriage,” Tarrant requests, lining up his shot. “So that I won’t have to repeat my refusal so many times.”

“I’m afraid I can’t take ‘no’ for an answer on this particular occasion,” Hamish replies. “Besides, ‘tis the holiday season. Christmas is just around the corner. It’s rude to refuse to help your fellow man.”

“But it’s not rude to drag him away from his wife and son on a moment’s notice?”

“For the love of the queen!” Hamish huffs. “You’ve been trapped in that house for an entire month. I rescued you!”
Tarrant pulls back the cue stick, pauses, looks up at Hamish, stands, pinches his nose between his thumb and forefinger, takes a deep breath, counts all his friends from Thackery – backwards! – and says, “Ascot.”

His tone turns the unpretentious syllable into a very Dirty sort of word, indeed.

“Besides,” Hamish continues blithely, disregarding Tarrant’s Tone. “You can’t tell me you’ve completed all of your Christmas shopping! Not unless you’ve had the vendors come ‘round the house for you to peruse their wares!”

“Shopping?” Tarrant echoes.

“Yes. Shopping. For Christmas presents,” Hamish explains very carefully.

“Presents?!”

Hamish rolls his eyes. “Bloody...! Of course. I should have known what with your absolutely barbaric fascination with knives that you’d know nothing of Christian customs.” He eyes Tarrant warily. “I feel it’s my civic duty to inform you that your immortal soul may be in great jeopardy, sir.”

Tarrant blinks. “Immortal...? Never mind! Never mind! What’s this about presents? There’s to be some sort of Gifting?!” And why hadn’t Alice told him this?

“Yes! Pay attention, Hightopp!” Hamish clears his throat and lowers his voice. “Now, it’s customary to buy close friends and relatives a thoughtful gift. Perhaps something they would like to have but for some reason – expense, perhaps – refuse or hesitate to purchase for themselves.”

Tarrant swats the cue ball with the stick in his hands, giving up on taking the shot he’d been due. He’s too busy considering the fact that what little Uplandish money that still remains in their possession is with Alice at the moment, so how can he possibly purchase anything for his wife, their son, their hostess, and everyone else who ought to be Thanked properly with a Christmas gift?

“Must the gift be bought?” Tarrant queries, interrupting Hamish. But as he hadn’t really been paying attention anyway, it’s all for the best. No doubt the man will thoughtfully repeat himself. And be more blunt about it the second time around.

Hamish gives him a brief glare. “No, there’s no requirement stating that the gift must be bought, although I hope you’re not considering thievery.”

“What?! No, no, of course not!” Tarrant responds, thoroughly Offended.
Seeing his distaste at the Idea and his disgust with Hamish for even Thinking it, Ascot nods. “Good. Now, as I was saying, I’ll need your expert advice. I’ve noticed you have a way with children and I’m endeavoring to procure an appropriate gift for Winslow.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to purchase anything too... advanced for him. To do so might suggest that I expect to be present when he makes use of it in the future. That would... give the wrong impression, I believe. So I must find something he can enjoy now and also in the future as I’d regret it very much if the gift indicated that I wouldn’t like to be present in Winslow’s future when the fact of the matter is that I hope to... well... that is...”

“Ah. A gift for both Winslow’s mother and Margaret’s son! Now you’re starting to make sense.” Tarrant gives him a long look. “Was it really necessary to over-explain?”

Hamish huffs again but his lips twitch in a reluctant smile. “Yes, I believe it was. Otherwise I’m sure you would have expired from shock at my candidness.”

Tarrant snorts. Candidness. Candied. Candied-ness! “I enjoy being the one to tell you this, sir, but you’re going to have to work on your Sweet Somethings if you hope to one day charm Lady Manchester’s ears!”

Looking fabulously scandalized, Hamish hisses in the near-empty room, “You are enjoying this situation at my expense just a little too much, Hightopp!”

“I disagree! However can one enjoy something too much?” he counters, grinning.

Hamish leans back and sighs. “Yet again, you make far too much sense to be considered sane.” He regards the table. “Are you at all interested in finishing this or shall we begin my errand now?”

“Let’s begin your quest for Winslow’s gift,” Tarrant decides. “You can give me more examples of appropriate gifts. I’ll need to prepare something for Alice and Tam, and Mrs. Kingsleigh, of course...”

“Right, come along then,” Hamish says, sending the balls into nearby slots with fashionable flicks of his wrist and then turns and racks his cue stick. “I shall educate you on the way.”

And Tarrant will say one thing for Hamish Ascot: when the man takes on a task, he applies himself to it thoroughly. By the time they’ve disembarked from the carriage and entered a rather posh-looking toy shop, Tarrant wonders if, perhaps, he should have been taking notes! But never mind! Never mind! He knows what will be expected of him on this Christmas Day. Now all he has to do is find – formulate, finagle, figure out! – a way to...
He finds himself staring at a small, brown, velveteen figure of a stuffed rabbit and has a Moment of Inspiration. “Yes, exactly!” he very nearly shouts. Hamish, who had been inspecting a wooden train set, steps over and blinks at the toy.

“This one?”

“It’s perfect!” Tarrant enthuses, still wrapped up in his Plans. “Thackeries are highly useful, you know,” he continues, picking up the lifeless creature.

“Well. Despite your insistence on being incomprehensible most times, I must admit it’s a charming thing. If a bit plain.”

“Plain things are the very best sort,” Tarrant assures both Hamish and the velveteen rabbit. “For they can always be dressed with Imagination, which never ceases to suit them unfailingly well.”

He offers the squish-ably soft toy rabbit to Hamish with a smile.

Hamish blinks at him then accepts the potential Winslow Gift. “It’s sometimes frightful to hear such oddness come from you... and believe it actually makes sense,” the man mutters, looking over the brown bunny.

“You’ll miss me when I’ve gone,” Tarrant predicts suddenly. And then amends: “When we’ve gone. Don’t even try to deny that Alice’s muchness has grown on you!”

“Muchness is what you call it?” he responds in a skeptic tone. “But yes, I believe I will. As will my father. You know he’s been asking about the two of you. And your son, of course. He sends his best. He’d like you to come out for a visit before you go, if you think Alice is up for the trip.”

Tarrant hesitates, glancing out the shop window at the dour weather. It is cold and rainy and that rain often turns to ice by morning; he can see it gleaming in the light of the gas lamps on the street when he parts the curtain of their room and looks out...

“Suppose the carriage had trouble keeping its wheels together on the ice? Or found itself unequal to the task of staying on the road?” Tarrant murmurs. “I’d feel much better if I could interview the vehicle before we set out...”

Hamish snorts. “Well, perhaps in the spring you’ll make the trip out to the estate.”

Tarrant looks down and finds himself staring into the glass eyes of a porcelain doll in a blue dress. “Perhaps, Hamish...”
“Yes?”

“We’ll be returning home soon.”

There’s a brief pause. “Yes, I expect you would have to. But certainly not in this weather?!”

Tarrant sighs and meets his friend’s gaze. “In truth, the weather has no bearing whatsoever on our mode of transport. Alice has invited both her mother and sister to be there when we... leave. And I’m inviting you.”

“Of course I’ll see you off, Hightopp.”

“I... Thank you, but...”

“What is it now?”

Tarrant smiles. “I’m afraid it will be a terrible imposition for you, seeing as how you don’t believe in magic.”

Hamish snorts. “A magical mode of transport? What will you do? Walk through a wardrobe?”

“Not quite,” Tarrant replies, Intrigued by the idea. “Although it wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest were that an actual route to... Somewhere.”

Hamish scowls. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Magic,” Tarrant repeats patiently. “I’m sure you’ll believe it when you see it.”

Hamish has no witty rejoinder to that. Instead, he asks, “Let us assume I will be able to... accept that some sort of magic exists. But... why show me at all?”

Tarrant grins. “It would be nice to see you at tea on Mondays.”

“Tea... on Mondays?” Hamish confirms slowly.

“Yes. It’s all arranged. Alice will be coming back on Mondays for afternoon tea with her mother and sister. When possible, I’ll be accompanying her.”
“Just... for tea?” Hamish repeats warily.

“Yes. Tea is quite the most Important beverage of the day.”

“Hightopp...”

“Ascot?”

“I do believe I...” And here, Hamish’s confused frown reverses itself into a delighted grin. “I should very much like to continue our association. It has been... unexpectedly rewarding.”

“Yes, yes, it has!”

And rewarding things deserve things awarded to them!

Tarrant watches Hamish call the clerk over and pay for Winslow’s Christmas present. Tarrant, however, does not follow the exchange. He feels his eyes un-focus as he considers all the he will have to do, and the brief time in which he must do it!

*~*~*~*

The first clue that Tarrant had been Up To Something had been when she’d caught him sending a scroll through the small Marmoreal mirror. He’d jumped when she’d called his name. Yes, he’d very clearly jumped and his eyes had been a rather interesting shade of Guilt.

“Writing to Thackery?” she’d asked, off-handedly.

“Er... well, yes, but... it’s nothing to worry about, you know. It’s just a... a...” Alice had watched him search his scattered thoughts. “A recipe!” he’d fairly shouted. “Yes, yes, a recipe. Nothing to worry you at all!”

And, normally, a recipe wouldn’t worry her. Not at all. However, Tarrant’s mannerisms had spoken of Something Else. Something he is attempting to keep a Secret.

Alice hates secrets. Of all kinds. General and capitalized ones.

“Hamish is coming over for Christmas supper,” Tarrant had announced to fill the Suspicious Silence.
“And he’s staying... after.”

“AFTER?” Alice had asked with raised brows.

“Yes. I’ve invited him.”

“I... see.” Getting Margaret to agree to see them off had been hard enough, especially with their mother refusing to confirm or deny that Mirana had departed their house through the mirror! Alice knew her mother had seen her do so; she’d had that shocked look about her for days after Tamial had been born. Alice wonders if Tarrant had felt this frustrated when she’d been insisting that Underland had been nothing more than a dream!

Tarrant had fidgeted a bit as she’d considered the fact that he’d invited Hamish to join her mother and Margaret to watch as she and Tarrant step through the looking glass and return to Underland. And she’d spent another moment noting his nervous gestures and feeling his discomfort sizzle along her heart line, wondering what in the world could be making him so anxious.

Finally, she’d smiled. “All right. But if he panics...”

“He won’t!”

_Will you?_ she’d nearly asked but had bitten her tongue at the last moment.

Now she wonders if, perhaps, she should have been a bit more... insistent last night.

“What in the _world_ is going on up there?” Margaret demands as yet another series of ceiling shaking _thumps!_ gallop down the hall.

Alice, her hands full with taking care of Tam’s most recent testament to the astounding progress an infant’s digestive system can make, frowns. “It’s Tarrant, I’m sure. He shouted something about Christmas presents this morning before he dashed out of the room like the ribbon on his hat was on fire.”

“Now, _that_ I’m sorry to have missed,” Margaret mumbles.

Upstairs, a door slams and several other boisterous thumps are heard.

“Is that coming from... Mother’s sewing room?” her sister muses with a scowl.

Alice can’t confirm or deny that as she hadn’t really been paying attention. “Most likely. He’s determined to make something for each of us before Christmas morning. Despite my assurances that
it wasn’t necessary.” Her mother and sister had agreed not to exchange presents this year when Alice had gently explained that Tarrant is unfamiliar with the custom and he has quite enough to keep him busy just now. But somehow, he’d Found Out. Alice blames Hamish.

Margaret observes, “By Christmas? But that’s the day after tomorrow!”

“I’m aware of that,” Alice replies, juggling various squares of clean linen, soap, and a basin of warm water. “And, from the sound of it,” she adds as more enthusiastic thumping erupts from above, “so is he.”

“Do you put up with this sort of thing often?” Margaret dares to ask.

Alice gives her an exasperated look. “There is a reason for why the hat workshop is in a separate wing of the castle.”

“Hmm...”

*Thump!* *Thump-thump-thump-thump!*

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” Margaret declares. “How are we supposed to concentrate with all this racket going on?”

Alice assumes the question is rhetorical and Margaret does not want to know how happy it would make Alice if their cross-stitch session were cancelled due to an overabundance of thumping.

*Thump thump!*

“I’m going up there.”

“Margaret...! At least wait until I’ve got Tam all dressed again!”

*Thump*

Margaret twitches, huffs, and glares at the ceiling. Alice knows that Look. She grabs Tam’s bunting and hurriedly – but carefully! – bundles him into it. Tamial, who has become accustomed to rather leisurely sorts of changings, with lots of singing and playing and bathing and such, takes exception.

“Oh, brangergain i’tall!” Alice mutters as he lets out a loud wail of disappointment in response to the poor quality service he’s received. This, combined with the thumping, apparently satisfies her sister’s Limits. Without another word, Margaret pivots smartly on her heel and sweeps out of the open lavatory door. Alice grits her teeth as her sister *marches* toward the stairs.
“Bloody. Blasted. Boggletogs!” Alice informs her son, wrapping him up in a warm blanket and scooping him up in her arms. By the time she makes it to the stairs, Margaret has already reached the top landing. Mindful of upsetting Tam – whom she’s noticed is very Particular about the speed, smoothness, and general rhythm of his transportation – Alice follows. She peers over the top step just as Margaret comes to a stop at the sewing room door.

Her face skewed into a most irksome expression, Margaret knocks once then throws open the door. And gapes. And, fumbling for the doorknob, closes it again. She then blinks, shakes her head, opens the door again, gapes once more, then firmly shuts it.

By this time, Alice has managed to mount the stairs and is striding down the hall.

“Are you all right?” she asks.

“Alice!” Margaret turns and holds out her arms.

Mindful of Tam’s Preferences in motion, Alice glides a bit faster. Yes, she really should have asked Mirana about those comportment lessons! “What is it?” Alice asks, wondering if her sister had somehow caught Tarrant in between trousers and kilt. And, if so, she really ought to be looking a bit more appreciative of the sight!

Margaret takes a deep breath. “I need you to open that door and tell me I’ve not gone mad.”

Intrigued (and a little relieved that Margaret had – apparently – not seen something she Should Not Have!), Alice reaches for the doorknob. As the door gently squeaks open on its hinges, she finds herself greeted with the very wide, very guilty stares of her husband, Mallymkun, and Thackery. The three of them are still standing frozen in the midst of what looks like the ruins of a sewing-room-turned-hat-workshop.

She snorts.

Turning away from the utterly inanimate scene on the other side of the threshold, Alice giggles and regards her sister. “Would you like me to confirm that there is, in fact, a white dormouse in lovely blue brocade jacket and a march hare in a striped waistcoat who both appear to be helping Tarrant with the making of a variety of hats?”

“Oh...”

Sniggering, Alice turns back to the room and watches as Mally looks up at Tarrant questioningly. Tarrant glances at the dormouse guiltily. Thackery twitches, hiccups, and shudders.
“Hello,” she greets them. “Welcome to London. Will you stay for tea after you’ve finished helping Tarrant?”

That seems to break the odd, ice-like air that had frozen them in place.

“Tea? That sounds lovely!” Mally enthuses. “And is that Tamial?”

“Tea!” Thackery exclaims. “Th’ cups ‘ad better b’upside dauwn an’ righ’ side out!”

“You were contacting Mally and Thackery about helping you with our Christmas presents?” she asks her husband, who nods slowly.

“You could have just told me,” she chides gently, marshalling the will to not look at the not-finished projects scattered across the tables.

His smile is bashful and boyish in the extreme.

With a shake of her head, Alice starts to pull the door closed. She wishes them luck and then reminds them, “Open a window when the mercury gets a bit dense, will you?”

She receives three nods of agreement and then she shuts the door.

Margaret is still standing next to her, looking numb.

Alice explains, “You’ve just encountered two of our closest friends. I’ll introduce you properly when they’ve time for a break.

“I’m... looking forward to it?” Margaret asks.

“It’ll be a memorable experience,” Alice promises, curving an arm around her sister’s waist. “Now, let’s go downstairs and you can show me those new cross-stitch patterns.”

Surprisingly, her sister obliges. Or, perhaps, it’s not so surprising after all. After seeing a mouse and a hare fully dressed and in the company of her brother-in-law, perhaps a bit of normalcy is not only welcome, but called for.

They cross-stitch.

And when Tarrant comes downstairs to ask about tea, they prepare a tray and take it up to their Underlandian guests in the sewing room.
Alice had warned her sister that Mally and Thackery were not normal animals. And certainly not dumb ones.

Mally fusses over Tamial, tickling his nose with her tail and winding her paws through his sparse, silky hair. She also vents at Alice: “It’s so nice you *told us* we could stay for tea.” And: “It’s so exciting to *finally know* I’m an aunt!” And so on and so forth. Tarrant twitters into his cup gleefully.

In response to one of Mally’s more obvious – yet veiled in an uncharacteristically sweetly spoken tone – scoldings, Thackery throws a teacup at Alice, which she ducks easily and Tarrant catches deftly. “Now, now, remember what I told you, Thack,” he gently reprimands. “We can’t be ruining Mrs. Kingsleigh’s tea set.”

“Spoon!” the hare insists.

“Yes, yes, you can toss those.”

And he does. Vigorously.

“Have you finished what you were all working on already?” Alice asks at this point.

“Nearly, nearly!” Tarrant assures her and she watches his eye color shift and flicker in response to the mercury glue he’d no doubt been up to his wrists in this afternoon. His gloved hands flutter about the tea service and his giggles are plentiful enough to charm Tamial, who waves his arms and kicks a bit despite his wrappings.

“Not today,” Alice sympathizes with him just as Margaret dares to ask Mally about her family and then – upon learning that she is an unwed Mouse of the World – inquires about her profession. “But someday soon,” Alice continues, speaking in a confidential tone to her son, “your Fa will teach you how to Futterwhacken splendidly!”

For that, Tarrant leans close to her and kisses her cheek.

And teatime continues:

Mally goes on about her recent duties as a member of the White Queen’s Guard.

Thackery upends his teacup and commences with attempting to recombine the maker’s name on the bottom of the cup into rare Witzend words.

“This is wonderfully mad,” Alice whispers to her grinning husband. “You should have told me to expect them!”
“I wanted it to be a surprise,” he lisps, his pupils mismatched in size and orientation.

“It was,” she answers.

And later, Margaret joins her in waving goodbye to Mally and Thackery as they hop back through the looking glass in her old room. Tarrant had already sequestered himself in the sewing room again – “I’ve a deadline! So sorry, ladies!” – and so he had elected not to see his friends off.

After the rippling looking glass calms and its surface smooths flat again, Margaret approaches it and tentatively dips her fingers into it. “Is this how you’ll... go back? Is this what Mother saw when your... queen... left?”

“Yes.”

“Does it... hurt?”

“No, but it does feel a bit strange.”

“I can only imagine.”

Yes, but it is an imagining that Margaret never would have dared to contemplate. Well, not until now! And this seems to be the season for never-before-contemplated Things. For Margaret is quite obviously and equally stunned when, two days later, following Christmas supper, as she’s wearing her Hightopp original bonnet and Winslow is playing on a blanket wearing his new beret, Hamish offers her a gift for her son to open.

“What’s this?” she asks, startled.

Alice nudges Tarrant. “Let’s see what’s keeping Mother and that tea service,” she murmurs. They make a discreet exit. As they close the library door behind them, they hear Hamish murmur, “It’s only a trifle, madam.”

“It’s... very kind of you to think of Winslow,” Margaret replies slowly. “A bit odd, you know, but I appreciate it...”

There’d been the sound of paper being torn and the soft, papery pop! of a box being opened and then a gasp. A Margaret gasp.

“I understand it may not be... entirely appropriate. Please do not misunderstand me, madam. I am not suggesting I could ever fill the position his father once held. But, if you have no objections, I should
very much like to be his friend.”

“Winslow’s?” Margaret clarifies, clearly stunned.

“Yes.”

And on that note, Alice and Tarrant, with Tamial in his arms, tiptoe into the kitchen to see about that tea service and the conspicuously absent Helen Kingsleigh.

“Have you been sent to fetch me?” Helen asks smoothly when they enter the kitchen.

“Not quite,” Alice tells her.

“We’ve sent ourselves to ensure the tea preparations take as long as possible!” Tarrant asserts.

Helen smiles and they dawdle. Alice passes Tam to his grandmother and she and Tarrant fiddle with the sugar bowl, debate the proper arrangement of the edibles, ignore the kettle when it begins to boil then they waltz over to the stove to the hummed tune of the Tumtums when the kettle insists on being ignored no longer.

They spend nearly thirty minutes puttering around in the kitchen.

And smile knowingly at each other with every uninterrupted minute that passes.

When they finally return to the library, they find Hamish seated on Winslow’s blanket across from Margaret. Winslow’s newest toy is performing a polka with the aid of Margaret’s hands and Hamish is twirling the giggling toddler around and around. Alice swallows a smile at the sight of Win’s beret perched precariously on Hamish’s bright orange hair.

“Auburn haired men...” Alice hears her mother muse on a good-natured sigh.

“And blonde daughters?” she whispers back, grinning.

“An unexpectedly... satisfactory pairing,” Helen agrees softly as Tarrant interrupts the dance to exclaim over Hamish’s headwear.

“No, no, that is most certainly not the proper hat for you, sir!”

And, Alice has to admit, the dove grey billycock Tarrant produces and places upon his head does suit him much better!
“This is a Hat Party,” Tarrant declares, assisting Helen with her wide-brimmed and luxuriously feathered touring hat before producing a tiny swatch of fabric from his pocket and tugging it gently onto Tam’s head.

“A Hightopp tam o’shanter,” Alice sighs happily. And, with the article being made from their son’s tartan, there’s no risk of his eyes not matching his headwear. Tarrant clamors upstairs and fetches both his own top hat and Alice’s asymmetrical cloche-turned-sunhat.

“There!” he says joyfully as he places Alice’s hat upon her head. “Now we all look ourselves!”

Hamish rebukes him, “Hightopp, how can we look ourselves while sporting hats we’ve never worn before?”

“Perhaps the hats have found us,” Alice suggests.

“The Right Hat will always show one’s Inner Truth,” Tarrant agrees.

“Then what does the wrong hat show?” Helen inquires.

Tarrant gives her a sad smile and shakes his head. “Unfortunately, there are a great many people wandering around lost in the wrong hat, madam.”

Alice considers this, considers her husband as he considers the sight of his son in the arms of his mother-in-law. She considers how very many people struggle to make themselves fit a top hat when a bowler would suit, a bonnet when their being begs for a cloche. So many misguided people, fearful people, people unknown to even themselves...

And Tarrant Sees it.

I love your Sight, she Sends, her heart so tangled up in a feeling so precious she thinks she could weave a tartan from it and clothe him in it, using the edge of the mysterious pain she suddenly finds her heart in possession of to trim the ends and produce a cut to fit him perfectly.

Tarrant’s breath hitches, his throat works, and when he looks up at her his eyes are black. Alice doesn’t doubt that her own mirror his. Black: the Color of Everything.

The feeling is that Intense.

“Well,” Hamish announces, demolishing the breathless moment. “As we’re all perfectly safe from being lost in wrong hats, I expect now would be the time to give you the trifle I picked up with you
“And what would that be?” Alice asks as Tarrant beams with delighted expectation.

Hamish stands and leaves the room. They listen to his footsteps recede down the hall toward the front door.

“Do you think it’s a walking stick?” Tarrant whispers loudly enough for Helen and Margaret to overhear. “Hamish is very fond of walking sticks, I’ve noticed.”

“No,” Margaret counters. “Hamish is very fond of his walking stick. And if he actually gives you that one, I think I might just swoon from the shock of it.”

Helen raises her brows at the observation but does not scold her daughter for making such a... wifely comment about a man she’s not married to. Well, not currently married to. And Alice suspects her mother holds her tongue not just because it’s Christmas.

Hamish re-enters the library with a long, suspiciously familiar-looking wooden case under his arm. “The queen only knows why I feel the need to give you two of these – you could certainly do more than enough damage with one – but I’m quite confident my dueling days are over, so it’s time to give them a new home.”

Alice watches as Hamish sets the box down and gestures for Tarrant to open it. With visible reluctance, he does.

Alice steps up next to him and, looking down into the velvet-lined case, grins. “Well, now you won’t have any excuses not to show me what you’ve learned!”

“A mahn’s ne’er wi’out excuses,” he grumbles, almost glaring at the pair of fencing foils.

“I trust you’ll permit Alice to chase you around a bit with them, if for no other reason than to ensure you don’t make it too easy for me to trounce you some Monday in the future.” Hamish grins, looking quite proud of himself.

*Be-pridish, enpuffed Hamish Ascot,* Alice muses, enjoying how Perfectly Outlandish fits this new man who has grown up and out of the shell of a shallow and spoilt boy. And if Tarrant Hightopp can work wonders like this on a man he’s known for only half a year, what miracles await their son?

Alice grits her teeth at the sudden and *deep* Throb of her heart.

Again, Tarrant looks up at her in response and an inquiry tickles beneath her skin.
With a slight shake of her head and a wry smile, she puts him off. She’ll tell him later. Perhaps after Tamial has grown up and is dancing the Wedded Step with his bride at the Maigh...

**Tick. Tick. Tick.**

“What sort of clock makes a noise like *that*?” Margaret muses into the suddenly *tick-y* moment in the room.

Alice frowns and automatically glances toward the clock which had been decked in holly to match the festive atmosphere of the library. But, no, the sudden, small, high-pitched, *twang-y* ticking isn’t coming from *that* time piece.

She turns back to Tarrant and meets his equally befuddled gaze. And then...

And then their gazes drop, as if choreographed to do so, to his vest pocket.

Slowly, he lifts a hand and dips his fingers into the fold of fabric and pulls out his pocket watch.

“It’s ticking again,” Alice observes, looking up and into his eyes.

His frown clears and his brows curve into a sad arch. “It’s Time,” he agrees.

“You’ll be leaving now?” Margaret asks, gathering up Winslow and standing.

Alice nods. “Yes. We will.” She holds out her arms to her mother who passes Tam to her.

“And... how will you be returning?” her mother asks warily.

“You already know the answer to that, Mother,” Alice tells her softly.

“And yet not one of you has seen fit to inform me of it. Hightopp tells me I’ll only believe it when I see it,” Hamish pouts.

Margaret lays a hand on his arm. “And even then, you might not believe it,” she warns him with a smile.

Despite the words, his own lips curve into a grin. Before Margaret can remove her hand, he presents his arm to her and she lightly curls her fingers around his elbow. “Well, I must admit, I’m curious
“There’s a first time for everything,” Alice can’t resist observing.

Tarrant giggles.

Helen takes a deep breath. “And a second time for some.” She gives her daughter and son-in-law a shaky smile.

Alice nods. “Then let’s move upstairs, shall we?”

In Alice’s old bedroom, a trunk, a valise and various other items they’d collected during their stay sit next to the looking glass.

“I’ll go first,” Tarrant offers, brushing his fingers down her back. Alice nods. “Ascot, if you’ll lend me a hand? Still attached, of course!”

Hamish steps forward, wearing the frown of confusion Alice had seen quite often on her mother and sister’s faces. He opens his mouth to protest when Tarrant doesn’t stop in front of the mirror, but moves to step into it. Of course, Tarrant moves faster than Hamish’s objection can be voiced and the man ends up squeaking in a very undignified manner as Tarrant stands half in, half out of the glass. His head and shoulders disappear for a moment and Alice imagines he’s greeting whomever is waiting on the other side.

“Are you sure this is... quite safe?” Helen murmurs, her wide eyes locked on the alarming sight of a nearly-half of Tarrant.

“Perfectly. I’ve never even caught my toe on the frame on the other side.”

“What’s it like?” Margaret presses.

Alice considers that. “It’s like walking through a reflection. It’s cool to the touch and then it’s warm. It pushes back on you a little and then it doesn’t. It’s like walking through a looking glass,” she summarizes.

When Tarrant turns back to the room, he says, “The queen and a few... friends are waiting for us.”

“Ah, we can’t keep the queen waiting,” Alice observes.

“She’s got quite the rapport with Time, I believe,” Tarrant replies. “Which would explain the reminder we just received.”
Alice cocks her head to the side in agreement. “Yes, it would.”

“Ascot, if you would pass me the valise last?”

Obliging, Hamish hands over the sword case first.

Alice embraces her sister. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Yes, very soon!”

“Mother...”

“I’ll miss you, Alice.”

“This isn’t good-bye; this is the beginning! A new beginning. For all of us.”

“I... hope you’re right.”

“I’m right mad, remember? You can trust in that.”

“I shall do my utmost, dear.”

She offers an arm and receives an embrace, offers her cheek and receives a teary kiss. And then, with a wave, she steps up to the mirror and her husband still standing in it.

“Let’s go home,” she whispers.

His eyes deepen in color past emerald to cobalt. “Aye,” he agrees. Looking up, he thanks everyone, “Mrs. Kingsleigh, thank you for your hospitality.”

“It was my pleasure. And I believe I asked you to call me Helen.”

“You did. And, circumstances permitting, I shall again.”

“You do what you must to ensure circumstances do permit, Tarrant. I’ll be expecting you to accept my hospitality many times in the future.”
“We shall. Lady Manchester—”

“Margaret,” she interrupts firmly.

“Margaret, it has been most enjoyable making your acquaintance.”

“For me as well.”

“Ascot...” Tarrant looks at the man who has the most Disturbing gleam of calculating Muchness in his blue eyes. He sighs and grumbles, “Hamish, the next time I see you, I’ll be explaining precisely why you cannot use looking glass travel in your trade.”

“I await your explanation then.”

With a nod and a smile, he gently curls his arm around Alice’s shoulders and then they step back... through the looking glass.

And before Alice can register the fact that her mother and sister and Hamish Ascot are now merely reflections in the mirror, a shout goes up.

“Oi! Ye’re back!”

“Ye’re late fer TEA!”

Ducking Thackery’s chosen projectile, Alice turns and gasps at the sight before her:

The queen’s office is filled to bursting with their friends. She even glimpses Maevyn on the balcony and Chessur floating beside the young jabberwocky. From outside a distinctive “GRRRRRRRRRRBBrrrlll! GRRT!!” sounds from the Bandersnatch’s throat.

She sees the Tweedles and Leif, of course. Even Nivens and a scowling Fenruffle. Her regular sparing partners, the frog footmen and fish butlers and..!

Mirana steps away from her husband and children and extends her hands to both Alice and Tarrant.

“Welcome home, Champions of Underland.”
Notes:

1. The reference to Alice's depression and moodiness since the birth of her son is a nod to postpartum depression. If anyone was wondering. It's a subject that deserves far more attention than I give it, but, dang it, this story is Long Enough already!! Besides, between the heart line and mysterious Marmoreal miracle medicines, I think she'd be OK... ish.

2. Yes, that was a Narnia reference. (^_^) b

3. Three words: The Velveteen Rabbit. *sniffleLOVEsniffle*

4. A billycock looks similar to a bowler or a derby hat. The first one was made in 1849, I think.
The training field at Marmoreal echoes with the sharp sounds of activity again. With the movements of Champions. With the conversations of swords.

Alice regards both her husband and her long-time friend and fellow Champion, Leif.

“Males with pointy sticks,” she mutters on a fond sigh as Tarrant lunges and Leif has to leap back to dodge the blow.

“What was that, Alice?”

She looks up as Mirana floats toward her. “Oh, nothing. Where’s the usual crowd?”

Mirana smiles the smile of a mother in fortunate possession of a Quiet Moment. “All napping.”

“All of them?”

“Well, the young ones. Bethie, Tarra, and Chestor are hard at work at their lessons.”

Alice grins. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Mirana leans against Alice’s shoulder and peers down at the bundle in her arms. “And congratulations to you, too,” she continues, seeing Tamial’s eyes closed and mouth slack in sleep.

“He’s been uncharacteristically tired all morning,” Alice comments. “The ceremony last night must have worn him out.”

The queen nods. “Yes, it’s not often we hold the Rehabilitation. So, when the occasion arises, it never fails to be quite... impressive.”

And it had been. They’d traveled to Shuchland through the looking glasses two days before and Alice had been startled by what she’d seen. From the reports she’d overheard, she’d expected the palace to be in ruins, the clay homes lying in broken, dusty piles along the avenues, but – of course –
she’d heard the news of the devastation months ago. Instead, the city had been even more breathtaking than she’d remembered.

“This is remarkable,” she’d murmured.

“Champion Leif, Krystoval, and all the volunteers would be happy to hear that,” the queen had commented, joining Tarrant in assisting her through the mirror. Normally she would have managed just fine on her own, but with Tamial in her arms, she hadn’t been willing to take any chances.

The city had been clothed in color. Illuminated with candles. Pulsing with life. And when she’d found Krystoval, she’d congratulated it.

“And you did all this despite feeling ill while we were Upland. Krystoval, I can’t thank you enough for enduring...”

“Champion Alice, Lady Hightopp of Iplam,” it had rumbled, angling its great crested head in order to peer down at the infant in her arms. Beside her, Tarrant had tensed. The Jabberwocky had ignored Tarrant’s ever-present wariness and continued, “I have much to make amends for. Iplam was merely the beginning.”

Krystoval had lifted its head and observed, “The Hightopp Clan has a future again. This is good, and more than worth a little discomfort.”

Alice had smiled.

“Still... I would very much appreciate it if both you and Lord Hightopp would make Underland your permanent home.”

“We have,” she’d assured Krystoval and then she’d turned toward the hatchlings who had been clamoring all over to themselves to greet Tamial.

“Frighteningly fast friends,” Tarrant had muttered, the heart line vibrating with anxiety as Tamial had – rather than scream and wail at the sight of the monsters – squealed happily and waved his arms.

Alice had patted his arm. Yes, it would seem that their family is destined to count the jabberwockies amongst their friends. Whether Tarrant particularly enjoys the idea or not.

It had been a joyous event in Shuchland. She’d declined an active roll – and had thanked Tamial for giving her an excuse to avoid having to make a speech! – and had listened to King Aven speak of the tragedy and the restoration. He had even thanked his son, King Dale of Marmoreal, for coming to their aid and Alice had reached for Tarrant’s hand at hearing that.
And then Mirana had taken the podium and repeated the tale that Alice and Tarrant had told her through their letters and interviews.

“With Valereth now resting at peace here in Underland, and due to the tireless efforts of all of us and the Intentional Magic, our world is safe again. And, more than that, it is waiting for us to live again! So let us smile through our tears and continue on!”

The applause had been deafening. Tamial had flailed a bit in response. Alice had had a sudden vision of life two years from now: a toddler with Futterwhacken tendencies.

For the first time, Alice had wondered if, perhaps, she should have caved to Tarrant’s request for a Kingsleigh child. But no, no. She’d been right to insist on a Hightopp, she knows. The Hightopps had been made for this world. The queen is versed in the medicines their son might one day need. Another Kingsleigh... no. Despite the idea holding undeniable appeal – a grandchild of Charles Kingsleigh living in a world beyond even his wildest imaginings – it would not have been safe.

And there, that night in Shuchland, with the glowing sandstone palace and sky filled with fireworks and jabberwocky flame, Alice had sat on a blanket with her husband, had kissed him as he’d taken his turn holding their son, had realized that it had all been Worth It.

“Alice?”

She comes back to the edge of the croquet pitch with a shake of her head. “I’m sorry. I was in Shuchland just now.”

Mirana smiles. “Yes, as I suspected. You enjoyed the festival?”

“Very much. I never would have expected... That is, in Upland, if you want to live somewhere, you only need to get permission from the owner of the land not...”

“Not the land itself?” Mirana supplies, looking puzzled. “I’m sure I’ve said it before, but... things are certainly odd Up There.”

“They are,” Alice agrees. “It’s good to be home.”

She glances out at the two combatants. They’re using real weapons and, even though the edges are dull, she worries. Tarrant and Leif circle each other, their chests heaving and faces frowning fiercely. The heart line tells her Tarrant is Concentrating, not Furymangling. For which she’s very grateful: fury and rage have no business being present at a training match. Or a duel, come to think of it!

“I’m surprised you haven’t tried to join them,” Mirana observes.
Alice laughs. “Tarrant’s promised to spar with me later this evening.”

“Has he? So soon after you’ve given birth?”

Alice glares at Mirana’s too-wide eyes and too-innocent expression. “Yes, he has, and you and I both know I’ve been completely healed for weeks. So if you even suggest to him that I shouldn’t...!”

Mirana actually sniggers at that. “That sort of cruelty goes against my vows.”

“Otherwise, I’m sure you’d do it just to repay me for not telling you I was expecting.”

“I’d consider it, certainly,” Mirana allows. “But, Alice, despite how much I wish I could have been told, I understand why you didn’t. And you were correct: knowing you were with child and being forced to ask you to undertake such a dangerous task would have... wounded me deeply. Far more than not knowing in the first place. I cannot thank you enough for putting Underland and the safety of its residents first... again.”

“Mirana, I made you a promise – to be your Champion – and it was sealed in blood and death.” Ever since the duel between Hamish and Lowell, Alice has been considering the implications of being another’s Champion, of spilling blood in that person’s name, of killing... slaying... Yes, she had killed the Jabberwocky all those years ago in the name of the White Queen. And Alice suspects that had sealed her fate: from that moment on, she would never not be a Champion. The training she’d received upon her unexpected return had not been optional but necessary. The oath she’d later spoken in the privacy of the White Queen’s Office had been a mere formality. And Causwick... Alice suspects she’d become Jaspien’s Champion not because Mirana had released her but because Mirana had been convinced of the necessity of it, had believed it to be their only way to guarantee their continued safety while in captivity: Alice had become Jaspien’s Champion because, in the end, the White Queen had willed it to be so.

Her life is not her own. Alice sees that very clearly now. Her life belongs – and will always belong – to the White Queen. Luckily, the White Queen is not only a queen but a friend, her friend, Mirana.

Alice doesn’t fool herself into believing she’s accepted the fact totally that her fate is not her own. But really, who truly controls their own fate? No one. Not even a queen. Most especially not a queen!

It goes against Alice’s nature to accept and welcome protection from someone other than herself. But she is trying to allow Mirana and Tarrant to take care of her. Some days it’s a harder task than others. But, overall, she thinks it’s getting easier.

Trust, it seems, is the sort of thing that either grows or breaks, but never remains the same from day to day.
Alice smiles proudly as Tarrant ducks a swing from Leif’s broadsword then parries neatly. Even though he had objected to the practice, fencing seems to have benefited him very well, she observes. Of course, later tonight, they’ll see just how much his skills have improved...

“Ah, I know that gleam in your eyes,” Mirana observes with a smile. “That’s the look of my Champion... and she’s thinking about rolling around in the dirt with sharp, pointy objects.”

Alice laughs softly and Tamial grumbles against her chest before settling down again. “You know me so well, Mirana,” she congratulates the queen. “But it will have to wait. I have tea to attend this afternoon.”

“The first visit with your mother and sister?”

“Yes. And perhaps a... family friend as well. Although, I think they still have trouble believing I’ll be walking through a mirror into my mother’s house in London.”

“That is what makes you suited to Underland, you know, Alice,” Mirana observes. “Your ability to Believe. Unconditionally.”

Alice smiles. “I’ve been wondering why this place suits me so well.”

“Because you suit it.” Mirana’s dark eyes refocus on the fighters on the pitch. She smiles. “And because you – and only you could ever – suit the last of the Hightopps.”

Alice chokes back the swelling emotion in her chest. She warms herself with it; it will keep until she can Share it.

“He’s not the last. Not anymore,” Alice observes, her arms tightening around Tamial.

Mirana shakes her head in wonder. “He would have been, if not for you, Alice. Someday, my dear Champion, you really must open your mind to a conversation with Fate. She has many interesting things to say. And only then will you see the design that has woven Underland into the place it is.”

“There is method in all this madness?” she asks, smiling at her own joke.

“Method and more,” Mirana replies, unaware of the reference Alice had paraphrased.

“Then, perhaps, someday I shall. Still, I’m not keen on the idea of Courting Fate. I’m a married woman after all.” She winks at Mirana, sure that this time Mirana will share the joke with her.
She doesn’t. “I’m sure Tarrant will understand, Alice. The choice is yours. Just as it is his.”

“You... you are... serious,” Alice stutters.

“Of course, I am, Alice. Courting Fate is a very serious thing.”

Alice blinks. *That* is a thought that will take some getting used to!

Mirana pats her knee. “I have Courted Fate once or twice, myself. Many monarchs must. But you, my Champion, need never undertake *that* task. Unless you have reason to doubt me.”

“I can’t imagine that ever happening,” Alice assures her, relieved to be able to stop thinking about the very Disturbing concept of courting Fate.

She turns her attention back to her husband and the fact that, despite having set aside his jacket, waistcoat, cravat, and hat, he seems to be working up quite a sweat. The fabric of his pale blue shirt clings to the small of his back and is turning damp under the arms. She knows from years of life with him that his perspiration has the most intriguing scent: Tumtum sap and apple peelings and something she could swear is the hot wind off the salty Crimson Sea.

Beside her, Mirana shifts and Alice forces her eyes away from her husband and the inevitable destination to which *Those Sorts* of thoughts will lead her.

“How long will you stay in London?” the queen asks.

“Just for tea,” Alice answers. “Tarrant plans to start getting caught up on hat-making.”

“Ah, excellent! I’m afraid the requests for Hightopp hats have been... mounting.”

Alice snorts. Yes, Tarrant had nearly fainted at the sight of his workroom when he’d opened the door this morning: parchments had covered nearly every available surface, the floor included. Alice is sure they’d been organized at one point, in order of date or perhaps urgency or even the relative importance of the requester. But now, after Thackery and Mally had come through to gather the supplies Tarrant had needed in London in order to finish those Christmas hats...

At the thought of Christmas, she remembers the gifts Tarrant had given her and Tam once they’d closed the front door to their apartment behind them. (The keyhole had even welcomed them back... before it had spied the baby in Tarrant’s arms. “Oh, brass-in-need-of-buffing! Now I’ll have regular slammings to look forward to when *that* one gets tall enough to reach the knob! *Lovely!*”) The keyhole’s snark had only added to the sensation of Coming Home.

They’d brought the bassinet from London and Tarrant had produced Tam’s *other* Christmas present
– a mobile which he’d fixed over the bed. Alice had been as transfixed by the gently rotating miniature hats on their thin wires as Tamial. (She’d hoped that was a Good Sign. Perhaps he’d one day take up his father’s trade, as Tarrant had? But if he does, he’ll have to accept the Thrice a-Vow with someone, so perhaps it would be better if he doesn’t?) She’d reached for Tarrant’s hand when he’d come to kneel at Tam’s bedside next to her. It had taken a moment before she’d realized that he’d removed her ring and was in the process of peeling the ever-present glove from her left hand.

“We’re home nauw,” he’d murmured, replacing her ring on her now bare finger and lifting her hand. He’d met her gaze as his lips had caressed her heart line. “An’ I have sommat teh show ye, my Alice.”

And that’s when she’d noticed the new door in the parlor. A door that had opened easily and without complaint under her hand and had revealed a cozy bedroom.

“When we’re ready, an’ if’n Tam doesnae object... ‘twill be his.”

Alice had smiled and kissed him. She would have thanked him properly for this gift of privacy if he had allowed her to.

But he hadn’t.

“‘Tis late, Alice,” he’d replied with maddening rationality. “An’ we’ve a celebration teh attend on th’morrow.”

Tonight, however, Alice decides as she watches her husband spar, measures the spreading damp spots on his clinging shirt, devours his form and grace and power with her eyes... Tonight he will not deny her.

*~*~*~*~*

Tarrant finishes sorting and stacking the hat orders and then regards his workshop. For a moment, he doesn’t know where to start. He can’t recall how to start!

And then, when a warmth that reaches between two worlds enfolds around his Panic and shushes it gently, he remembers.

He makes hats now: a hatter never-again-alone with his hats, passes customers by attracting Time! And Time is kind to him. Perhaps they’ve both managed to move past their grudges?

One hat after another is begun until he has a hatter’s dozen on hat forms. When he runs out of forms for the next, he returns to the first and begins the process of Making it. Colors are applied and the
requested baubles and bells and beautiful things. He works quickly and the rhythm numbs his mind as his Alice’s pulse warms his heart.

Alice’s pulse. Yes, now it is only his Alice who keeps him warm, sane, content. He will never again feel his son’s warmth so intimately. Alice’s warmth will never again contain his son’s. True, he’d never felt anything different from Alice’s heart... it had been the Idea...

An Idea whose time has passed. Now Tamial is his own person. And while he still needs his Fa and Mam, Tarrant somehow feels... diminished. His tools clatter to the tabletop; he thinks he understands now why Alice had been so very sad after their littlin’ had been born. He thinks he Knows... in a way that most fathers never do. Had Tarrant’s Fa still been alive, he probably would have warned him about this: the power of the heart line, the thought that a man can feel his child’s life through the warmth of his wife.

“A rhyme,” he muses past the choking lump in his throat.

This accomplishes nothin’, lad. Yer littlin’s born. An’ ye’ll see him soon enough.

Yes, yes, he will! And that Time will arrive sooner if he concentrates on passing customers!

Tarrant collects his tools, blinks until his vision clears, and returns to his trade.

And he plies it unrelentingly... until movement on the other side of the room attracts his gaze. In an instant, he’s there, beside the mirror. He notices his reflection – wind-swept hair, mismatched eyes, scratched and stained and scuffed fingers and knuckles – before he presses through, straddling the worlds.

And Alice is there, embracing her mother. Helen looks up at Tarrant and he nods in greeting. He also suddenly remembers he’d left his hat on his teatime chair and wishes he’d thought to wear it so that he might take it off to her.

“You’re right on time!” Margaret exclaims.

Tarrant giggles. “Yes, yes, it seems that Alice’s habit of lateness hasn’t taken a liking to me today!”

“Tarrant. How have you been?” Helen inquires, separating from Alice.

“Quite busy, madam! And may I be permitted to say you’re looking very well!”

“Permission granted,” his mother-in-law muses with a wry smile.
He turns to Alice but he does not ask her if she is ready to come home. For some odd reason, the words get all tangled up around his Adam’s apple. He holds out a hand to her.

She takes it.

“I’ll see you again next Monday, if that’s convenient,” Alice says.

Helen nods. Margaret assures her, “We’ll be here. And Hamish has promised to be here, too, next time.” This comment she aims at Tarrant, who catches it with a grin.

Alice smiles and then holds Tamial out to him. Tarrant curves his arm beneath hers and accepts their son against his chest. He looks down and into his son’s eyes – fuchsia today! – and then, with Alice’s hand still claspfed in his, guides her through the looking glass with him.

And when they emerge in the hat workshop again, he smiles and releases a great, apprehensive breath.

“You were worried,” she accuses.

“Always, my Alice.”

“But Tam and I were perfectly safe the entire time!”

He lifts his gaze from his son’s curious and roving gaze to his wife’s nearly-frowning face. “Yes,” he agrees, still holding her hand but lifting it so that he can trail his scraped knuckles along her cheek. “And I wonder if... that is, you might prefer... to stay there. Longer. Or for a Time. Or perhaps... I mean, I—”

Just when he’s working himself up and into a mercury-induced frenzy, Alice reaffirms her grasp on his hand and presses the fingers of her other hand to his lips. “I choose us,” she reminds him. “I belong here. With you.”

His eyes drift closed and his heart seems to unfold itself from within a cubby hole in his chest. “I... Thank you, Alice. For choosing... for reminding me... for not minding that I still need you to.”

“It’s not that you don’t trust me not to return, I know,” she surprises him by whispering. “It’s that the mercury makes you wonder if you’re... enough.”

“I’m half mad, Alice. Of course I’m not enough.”

“Unless your wife specifically asked for a man who was half comfortingly sane and half wonderfully
“She’s have to be half mad herself to even think such a request.”

“I believe she is.”

Tarrant smiles down at her, leans toward her, presses his lips to hers. Tam’s fist thumps against his chest and Alice giggles. “Perhaps Thackery has had words with him?” she suggests.

He sighs. Yes, Tamial seems to object to public displays of affection in a manner very similar to Thackery! “I do not look forward to the Time when he’ll be able to aim and toss things.”

Alice laughs. “Come on. Let’s get ready for dinner.”

And after dinner, after Tam has been settled in his bassinet, after one of the queen’s nurses has arrived to keep an eye on him, Alice practically drags Tarrant down the flights of stairs to the croquet pitch.

“Eager, are we?” he muses.

“I don’t know, Hatter. Are we?”

He chuckles darkly and unlocks the sword case. The moon is out tonight and its light glints off of the steel of the blade as he first caps it with a rubber ball then passes it to Alice. A grin worthy of Tarranya stretches her lips wide as she swishes the thing through the air, playing a whistling symphony.

Tarrant giggles madly at her antics and her very, very sloppy form.

“Alice, have you forgotten everything you know about sword fighting?” he muses, leaving his own sword in the box and stepping toward her.

“Of course not!” she declares. “But this isn’t a sword. And we aren’t fighting. Yet.”

“All valid points!” he praises her. “However, your stance is quite unstable. In fact, you’re barely up-standing.” He reaches for her hips and tugs at her until she’s centered over her knees. He lifts her arms to the correct pose and then, standing behind her and placing his hands on her shoulders, shifts her upper body into the correct orientation.

“Like this?” she asks before he can begin his planned lecture and lunges with an alarmingly appalling lack of finesse.
“Goodness, no!” he exclaims, his hands reaching for her. “Not unless you’d rather fall over than fight!”

Her back brushes against his chest as he reaches for her forearms and repositions them for an effective lunge. His right knee nudges hers until she picks her foot up and moves it where it’s supposed to be. The warmth of her is startling, scintillating, seductive. How long has it been since he’s touched his wife... intimately?

Tarrant shakes his head. No. Not tonight. Tonight he’s promised to teach her the basics of that badly named pastime, fencing!

“How’s this?” Her voice comes to his rescue and Tarrant finds himself busy again, correcting her lackluster mock parry.

“Alice...” he murmurs as he lifts her arms yet again to the proper height and angle. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were a rather... deficient swordswoman.”

Alice stills and then glances over her shoulder at him with a knowing grin, a challenging smile, the light of a dare in her eyes. “But you do know better, don’t you?”

His heart explodes into his throat at That Look. Fate save him, he Knows that Look. That Look had pushed him over the edge and into finalizing the first exchange of the Thrice a-Vow; That Look had pulled him to her until their lips had touched and her mouth had opened and his tongue had dared to sample the flavor of her...

Tonight is no different.

There’s a soft, whispering clatter as the sword drops from her hand to the grass. She turns in his arms and presses against him – holds onto him! – and demands his attention, his presence, himself within her mouth.

He can’t stop his arms from pulling her closer, even lifting her onto her toes and pressing his pelvis against hers. He can’t. The thought had crossed his mind that he ought to stop himself. But, after looking both ways for on-coming trains on lines of thinking, the Thought had passed right through his mind and continued on its way.

“Mmm,” Alice moans as she captures his tongue between her lips and sucks.

“Ngh!” His hands scrabble at her tunic before one declares the need to outflank her and weaves itself into her hair. He pulls her gently away from him and this would have been the moment to stop except the scent of her – warm and lush and a little earthy from perspiration – drifts up from her neck and into his nose and he must address that scent properly!
“Tarrant!” she gasps as his teeth groom that womanly Alice-scent from her skin. Her hands are at his shirt, ineffectually trying to tug it from his shoulders without having asked the buttons if they wouldn’t mind parting with their respective buttonholes first. Normally, he’d fear for the seams, but it seems he’s too far gone for that.

He wants her. Here. On the croquet pitch. Here, where she’d watched him spar earlier. Here, where her eyes had followed him with sensual hunger that he’d very nearly expired from his own Want at the sight of. Here, where he must prove himself worthy to protect the queen in Alice’s stead. Here, where he is still her Champion.

He wants a Champion’s Reward.

Her hands find the closure on his trousers and with the ease of years of practice, she opens them.

Tarrant’s breath catches in his throat. He looks up at her, into her lust-laden eyes. “Yes,” she says. Sighs. Gives him the reward he desperately wants.

“Here,” he growls. Later, he’ll wonder if his eyes had been colored with the Blackness. As it is, he can barely force himself to pause long enough to make the declaration-that-is-not-a-question-but-a-warning.

“Here,” she dares him, rubs against him, enflames him.

Here it is.

Her tunic is no match for his fingers, her breeches no barrier to his hands. He lowers her onto them, uncaring of who may be watching in the bright moonlight, wraps her legs around his hips, moves between her thighs, and has her.

It’s only at that moment, when he is deep inside her that he realizes she’s Won, for she now has him.

She smiles, reaches for his waist, and thrusts against him. “I want...” Alice whispers, demands.

He gives. As he always Gives. Even though she had not Asked. Not properly.

He doesn’t care. He leans over her until his arms are bracing him up and his chest just barely touches her swollen breasts. She arches into him and gasps the words that Change everything:

“Please... Tarrant... I need... you.”
“Ye have me,” he promises her, glad that she does, indeed. So very, very glad!

He moves and she meets him and they clash and come together in the sweetest battle he’s ever known and it’s not fighting because she’s with him through every twitch of his hips, through every brush of lips, through every pass of his chest against hers. Her hands urge him closer and push away all else.

This is a fight, he realizes. A fight against the rest of the world.

And he will fight this battle to the death. With Alice struggling with him, he cannot do otherwise.

She grasps him, her husband, her lover and he understands that she needs this as much as he does. He wants his wife, his lover. He needs to know she is his and she will take him in as readily as she had in the past. He needs to know that they have not lost This, that This is not a price to be paid in exchange for their son.

It’s fast. Too fast. And hard and he knows it’s rough. He marks her with his mouth and he permits her no breaks in her pleasure and he demands that she Give everything she is to him before they are through!

He claims her as if this is the last time. Or the first time. Or every time and he knows he should stop and be gentle with her – it’s been months! – but she rides against him and she holds onto him and it would take an act of Death or Time to make him stop!

She growls as her pleasure crests again and he thinks it’s the best sound he has ever heard. She Takes him with that growl.

Mine... she says without words.

Yours... he agrees on a snarl.

He answers the lithe curving of her body – her plea for More – with a thrust so harsh, her entire body shifts against the grass. She rolls her head away from the sky and she’s tight – so tight! – and the gasps that leave her throat are nearly whines and he’s forcing her to take this pleasure, to endure it, to be it. She will Lose Control, he decides. She will not be permitted to keep her composure Here. Not here. Not with him.

She doesn’t.

When she tightens – impossibly! – more and her breath catches in her throat, Tarrant slams his mouth down on hers and Takes her scream. It’s His, after all. He’d orchestrated it.
And he’s not finished yet.

Not quite.

He sits back on his knees, pulls Alice with him, grasps her hips and Moves in her, out of her, through her and he’s Lost to it as he has never been lost to anything, not even in the madness, not even in the moment he’d Moved through Time. And the fear-need-want-mine!-take-have-give-Alice!-keep-make-mark-HAVE! possesses him.

“Tarrant!”

It’s the sound of her wondering gasp, the feel of her hands grasping his arms, the sight of her body arching into him – offering! – that slays him.

He watches her face as he Loses himself in her, as the heat explodes throughout him and washes over him, blanking his sight and stealing his breath.

And his Alice, his Champion, pulls him toward her, settles her lips against his, and gives him the breath from her own lungs to replace that which had been forcibly taken from him.

Despite the borrowed breath, he does not tell her he loves her. He does not tell her he needs her. He does not tell her life is Impossible without her. He does not have to. They share a heart line. His Alice already knows what he does not say. Just as he already knows what her answer is.

They remain there, a tangle of expired need on the pitch, until he leans back and gently begins to dress her in her wrinkled tunic. She assists him with her breaches, lifting her hips helpfully, then reaches out to help him straighten his clothing.

They stand.

And as they do, just when Tarrant begins to wonder how many people and animals and trees had just witnessed that, he notices the utter stillness of the world around him. Notices the way it holds its breath. And then...

And then it doesn’t.

Beside her foot, Alice’s foil begins to inexplicably roll along the pitch, as if it had been halted immediately following its decent, held by an invisible hand that had just now released it. The trees resume their rustling conversation in the once-again-meandering night breeze. The draperies flutter and flap from various open castle windows and balcony doors. But Alice and Tarrant only have eyes for the weapon at their feet. The foil stops rolling and rocks gently back and forth three times before
settling into the grass.

Alice looks away from the not-sword Hamish had given them and up into Tarrant’s eyes.

“That was very kind of Time,” she whispers. “To stop just for us.”

“Indeed, if that is in fact what just happened,” he agrees softly.

She stares at him for a moment, then blinks, then arches a brow in playful skepticism. “Do you think we managed to Stop Time all by ourselves?”

“My Alice,” he murmurs back, his mercury-stained, pin-pricked, callus-hardened fingertips tracing the curves of her face. “I do believe we have found ourselves a new riddle.”

“Then let me hear it, Hatter.”

He leans in until his lips caress the shell of her ear with every syllable they form: “What is Impossible for two Champions of Underland to accomplish together?”

Alice turns toward him and he feels her smile brush against his jaw and then she’s whispering her Answer in his ear:

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“Perhaps we’ll make a list?” he suggests on a breath, wrapping her up in his arms.

“Let it always be empty.”

Always, he Agrees and then smiles into his wife's windblown, wavy hair, for there is nothing left for the two of them to do now except ensure that that list of Impossibles remains utterly blank and itemless.

In short, there is everything left to do.

Tarrant Hightopp is looking forward to it!
Epilogue

How is this possible?

Mirana, the White Queen of Marmoreal, lingers on the threshold of the solarium terrace and gazes out at the scene on the wide lawn before her:

Her eldest daughter, Alicibeth, perches elegantly in the chair at her youngest sister’s tea table and offers to refill Thacie’s cup.

Chestor, her eldest son is putting his best friend and steed, Winsommer, through a very intricate routine that could be a dance if not for the military precision of each step the stallion takes across the croquet pitch.

Mirana knows where her middle child, Amallya, is – where she always is at this time of day. And, of course, from the racket they’re making, it’s easy enough to locate her two youngest sons.

However, it is Mirana’s second eldest daughter – the ever-perfect crown princess’s identical twin – who captures her mother’s attention. Mirana watches as Tarranya, who truly could be her sister’s mirror reflection in every sense with the exception of character and hair style, lies on her back in the middle of the pitch, a blunt-edged practice sword at her side and her arms folded beneath her head. From here – in the shadows – Mirana can see that her daughter’s eyes are closed and her short hair is tangled with drying sweat and dust. In this moment, Tarranya of Marmoreal looks utterly peaceful – a sharp contrast to her usual fiercely opinionated and confrontational disposition. The sight of her manages to unsettle Mirana even more than she had been before pausing on the threshold.

“Are you daydream walking, Mirana?”

She blinks and looks up at her Champion. She takes a breath, twirls her fingers through the air and manages to return her friend’s smile. “Good afternoon, Alice. How was Tarra’s training today?”

“Excellent. As always,” Alice says, leaning against the railing and angling herself so that she can enjoy the view beyond. “She’s determined, you know.”

“As determined as you were?” the queen hears herself ask.

“More so.”
Mirana sighs.

“What is it?” Alice asks, straightening. Her smile fades and her brows draw together in concern.

“I... Well, I...” Mirana draws in another deep breath and huffs it out. “Alice, how is it possible that I’ve become the mother of two nearly grown women?”

Alice’s lips twist into a wry smile. “I’m assuming you’re referring to Bethie and Tarra?” She snorts before Mirana can reply. “You were at their birthday celebration last week, weren’t you? You do recall it was their seventeenth?”

“Yes, yes, I do,” Mirana sighs out. “Somehow... it hadn’t seemed quite so... real then.”

And with uncanny insight – perhaps Tarrant’s Sight has decided to accompany Alice today! – Alice remarks, “What happened to make it seem so real today?”

Mirana drifts over to the railing to stand next to her Champion. She needs a shoulder to lean on. Alice turns to stand beside her and accepts Mirana’s weight easily. But of course Alice would provide a perfectly steady shoulder for Mirana to lean on – she’s had nearly twenty years of practice at it!

For a long moment, Mirana says nothing. She marvels at how neither she nor her good friend nor their spouses have aged but their children had certainly – and, at the moment, it seems quite suddenly! – grown up. The queen’s dark gaze sweeps over the genteel teatime of two young ladies, her son looking quite dashing on Winsommer, her twin boys attempting to out-Futterwhacken their best friend... (It’s a lost battle, she knows. No one out-Futterwhackens Tamial Hightopp. Not even his teacher and father! Mirana watches the sunlight play with the boy’s red-gold, curly hair as he twists and turns and dips and bows and steps and slides. The dance leaves her breathless and the boy hasn’t even reached his Dancer’s Prime yet! Not at a mere twelve years of age!) Mirana almost makes a comment about how excited Tam must be about the coming Maigh but, in the center of the pitch, seeming oblivious to her brother and Winsommer’s exercises, Tarra draws her gaze again.

“Mirana? What’s happened?” Alice presses, all humor gone.

The queen sighs. “The Oraculum.”

It’s only two words, but Alice understands. Mirana can hear the caution in her Champion’s quiet contemplation. And then: “Can you tell me?”

Mirana’s spontaneous giggle slams into the back of her lips, which she’d pressed together very
deliberately, then takes a detour and escapes through her nose, much to her embarrassment. “I’m afraid, my Champion, I’ll be in need of your services again... soon.”

Alice tenses. “I’m listening.”

“It’s Tarra, you see,” Mirana continues, still studying her daughter.

“Yes? Is this about her insisting on becoming the next Champion?”

“No, actually. It’s about her and a Marmoreal lion-man with a flunderwhapped expression on his face standing together under the arbor... with his First Claw around her neck.”

“The arbor you and King Dale spoke your vows beneath?” Alice confirms.

“The very same.”

“Oh, botheration.”

Mirana lifts a brow and nods once in complete agreement.

“And how does this little drama come about?”

The queen sighs. “I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“You...? Excuse me?”

“Absolem, in his infinite wisdom –”

Alice snorts and Mirana makes a mental note to channel her frustration more circumspectly.

“– saw fit to only show me the one day.”

“Hm. And just how much time will I have to prepare my interview questions?” Alice muses aloud.

“That... was also unclear.”

Alice glances out across the field and Mirana watches her Champion regard her protégé with a thoughtful expression and crossed arms. “Once she’s nineteen, she won’t need a Champion to test
her suitor for her. The image you saw could be... some time off yet.”

“Do you honestly believe that?”

“No.”

Mirana sighs. Yes, for some time now she’s suspected her daughter is smitten with Champion Leif. And Tarra is not one to indulge in inactivity once she knows what she wants.

“But there’s Leif to consider, you know,” Alice tries to comfort her. And it would have been a comfort if Mirana hadn’t overheard the lion-man – just yesterday! – call her daughter the most sacred of Shuchish endearments: Tarrash-rya.

Mirana sighs.

Alice smiles. And when Mirana notices, she rolls her eyes. “You would enjoy this, Champion.”

“Yes, I would,” Alice agrees. “I’m quite looking forward to another round of Wooing Rights, Your Majesty. It’s been a bit dull around here recently.”

Before Mirana can decide how she feels about seeing her Champion fight her husband’s Champion for the hand of her still-too-young daughter, Alice continues:

“If you ask Tarrant, he’ll tell you the same thing the Oraculum did: it’s meant to be.” Alice offers up a sheepish grin. “He’s Suspected for Some Time now. Actually, once he finds out what the Oraculum has shown, I fully expect him to be unbearably enpuffed about it.”

“And were it any other situation, I’d been thoroughly entertained at the thought of Tarrant in an unbearable state of... puffiness.”

Alice sniggers. “It’s hard to imagine that he can puff up any more, I know, what with Tam being the dancer he is and so smart and funny. But it’s possible. With Tarrant, anything’s possible,” Alice warns her happily.

“Very true,” Mirana allows. And then dares, “Even that he’ll manage to convince his son to take up his trade?”

Alice shakes her head. “Tam got his stubborn streak from me. No, that one’s not destined to be a hatter,” she says with a contented smile. “Besides, Tarrant’s very pleased with his current apprentice.”
Mirana grimaces. “Yes, I was afraid you’d say that.”

Alice laughs. She glances from Tarra to Tamial then commences with a brief survey of the wellbeing of her other charges. “Everyone is fine, Mirana,” Alice assures her. “And happy and I’ll prove it to you; it’s nearly teatime and I think there’s room for one more chair around the tea table in the workshop.” Straightening, Alice gestures for Mirana to follow her. “Come on. Amallya can show you what she’s working on. You’ll even get to see Tarrant looking thoroughly enpuffed over his apprentice’s most recent accomplishments!”

“And with a treat like that on offer, how can I refuse?” Mirana replies and moves to follow.

Yet, on the threshold, she pauses, turns, and looks back at her children and at the one daughter in particular who seems to be teetering on the very edge of adulthood.

Tarra smiles up at the sun, still lying on the pitch, her eyes closed to the world around her. With all her heart and not only her soul but her husband’s, Mirana wishes she could say something to encourage her daughter to linger there just a little longer, in childhood. But Mirana knows her child, her daughter, her brave warrior-woman.

And just as certainly, she knows that Change is coming for her.

Soon.

But not today.

“Mirana?”

The queen takes a cleansing breath, coaches a smile onto her lips and turns around. “Sorry, Alice. Yes, let’s go to the workshop for tea. I’m ready for Amallya to impress me.”

Alice grins and reaches out to rub Mirana’s shoulder. “And you’ll be ready for the other thing, too. When it’s Time.”

“Yes, everything has its own Time.”

Alice’s eyes flash with a secretive gleam at that comment and Mirana finds herself wondering what it is Alice Knows about Time. “How very true, Your Majesty. How very true. And at the moment, it’s teatime.”

“It is.”
And that is how life must be lived, Mirana knows: one moment at a time. This one will be for tea and hats and the princess who is determined to make them for the rest of her life. And, for now, Mirana will focus on that.

The rest will come when it comes. As it inevitably will.

And, when it does, she’ll be ready for it. After all, that’s her job.

As a queen. And as a mother.

*~*~*~* The End *~*~*~*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, approximately twelve years have passed since the end of Chapter Twenty-one.

Yes, I realize I didn't mention what happened with Margaret and Hamish (and Lowell). Yes, I know I didn't really discuss what Courting Fate would mean.

Yes, I am aware that there’s this very Interesting hint about Stopping Time floating around in OPK now.

I haven't forgotten. I promise. (^__~) And, yes, that means there could be a Book 4 on the way...

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