Naylor In Wonderland

by Tobiiiaas

Summary

Jacqueline Burrows isn't an average girl. On the day of her mother's Garden Party, Jac finds herself transported to a strange new world. But all is not right with Wonderland and as friend and foe take sides, where does Jac fit in and can anyone really stop the Queen of Hearts?
Jacqueline Burrows glowered at the old woman and swiftly turned her back on her. She could hear her mother arguing with her grandfather in the garden but that was the least of the ten-year-old’s worries. Her long auburn hair was tied up in a neat bun and her green eyes sparkled in the midday sun.

‘I told you to get the good ones!’ Paula’s voice soared through the open kitchen window; Jac rolled her eyes towards the ceiling and picked an apple from the fruit bowl on the table. She bit into the apple; wiping her mouth as the juices rolled down her chin.

‘It’s hardly my fault they were out of stock!’ Jac’s grandfather protested. They had been at each other’s throats ever since he’d come to stay and Jac had had enough of it. She had homework to do but there was no way she could concentrate whilst all this was going on. And that was without the added irritation of the evening’s garden party.

Jac could understand why her mother was having a garden party or even why she was going to so much effort in preparing it. They never had parties before, so why now? Jac shrugged. She knew better than to ask questions, especially when her mother was stressed.

‘You’ll spoil your supper,’ Jac looked over her shoulder at Mrs. MacKenzie, the housekeeper. She smirked and took another bite of the apple.

‘Supper’s ages away,’ she replied. Mrs. MacKenzie paused from wiping the kitchen sideboards.

‘I know what you’re like Jackie. You’ll eat now and later complain that you’re full. What will your mother think?’

‘I don’t care what my mother thinks,’ Jac scowled. ‘And my name’s not Jackie.’ She paused, looking out of the kitchen window. Her mother and grandfather had moved away now but she could still hear their voices in the distance. ‘Is father coming home?’ Mrs. MacKenzie sighed and looked at Jac. Her eyes were tinged with sadness but when she spoke, her voice was as calm and level as it always was.

‘I don’t know Jackie - Jac sorry, I don’t know. You had better ask your mother.’

‘Like she’d know,’ Jac muttered. She could feel the back of her neck prickling - that was always a danger sign. But she had to keep her temper otherwise her life would not be worth living. Particularly if she spoilt her mother’s precious garden party.

‘Why don’t you go and play with your dolls for a bit?’ Jac knew Mrs. MacKenzie meant well but she rounded on her nevertheless.

‘I’m ten, not five.’

‘Yes, I know - I didn’t mean-’

‘I’m going to do my homework.’ Without waiting for Mrs. MacKenzie to reply, Jac strode out of the kitchen and down the hallway. The stairs echoed as Jac stamped her way up to her bedroom.

Paula laid the silk cream cloth over the oak table, taking care to ensure it wasn’t creased. Her father had skulked off to the summer house where she felt sure he was sulking. Probably doing the crossword as well, Paula thought. She glanced at her gold wristwatch. The guests would be arriving in an hour and there was still so much to do. She took a deep breath and bent down to pick up the cutlery from the box she had placed under the table.

‘Dammit! Where did I put the-’ Paula stood and looked back at the house. There was nothing for it; she would have to go back and get them. You couldn’t have a barbecue without the matches to light it. Her eyes focussed on the cutlery. Perhaps it would be best to get the table prepared; they didn’t need the matches just yet after all.
Paula had planned this garden party to go off without so much as a single setback if she could help it. Everything was organised and, matches excepting, in its proper place. She crouched down and resumed picking up the cutlery. A knife and fork for every guest and a spoon for dessert.

‘Paula?’ Paula finished laying the table and swivelled around to see her father standing in front of her. Today’s paper was folded and tucked under his right arm.

‘What is it?’ Henry swallowed.

‘What time are they arriving?’ Paula groaned but quickly regained her composure and feigned a sweet smile.

‘Four-Thirty, I told you yesterday.’ She returned to the table, straightening several of the forks so that they were exactly symmetrical with their accompanying knives.

‘Right,’ Henry said. ‘Do you need me to do anything?’ Chance would be a fine thing, Paula thought.

‘No it’s okay, dad,’ she said. ‘Mrs. MacKenzie and I have it covered. Why don’t you see what Jackie’s up to?’ Henry nodded and sidled away from her, leaving Paula to her organisation.

‘That needs to be there and that there and maybe if I just…’

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Henry Burrows rapped sharply on Jac’s bedroom door. He waited for a response and when none came, he knocked again.

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s your grandfather,’ Henry replied. The door opened and Jac appeared in the doorway, dressed in her pyjamas. Her hair was flowing down below her shoulders and a textbook lay open on the floor. ‘I’m not disturbing you, am I?’ Henry asked as he followed Jac into her room.

‘No, I’d just finished,’ Jac told him. ‘I only had a couple of worksheets to do.’

‘That’s alright then,’ said Henry, smiling broadly at her. ‘Your mother said I should talk to you.’

Jac sat down on her bed and folded her arms.

‘Did she?’

‘You haven’t seemed your usual self lately,’ Henry explained. ‘She’s worried about you. We’re both worried about you.’ Jac pulled a face at him.

‘She’s only worried about that party,’ Henry sat beside her, putting his arm around her shoulders.

‘You know that’s not true, Jac.’

‘It’s all she’s talked about for weeks. Nobody cares about her stupid party - I bet nobody turns up anyway!’ Henry sighed.

‘It’s easy,’ Jac told him and she couldn’t help grinning. ‘It’s just common sense and logic really.’

‘Is maths your best subject?’ Jac nodded and then added: ‘Well, I’m pretty good at science too.’ Henry picked up the worksheet and glanced through it.

‘You’re being childish, Jac.’ He looked down at one of the worksheets lying on the floor. ‘Maths, eh? How’d you find that?’

‘It’s easy,’ Jac told him and she couldn’t help grinning. ‘It’s just common sense and logic really.’

‘You know that’s not true, Jac.’

‘It’s very good. You should be proud of yourself.’ Jac’s smile faded.

‘I wish mum was.’ Henry put the worksheet back down and looked directly into Jac’s eyes.

‘She is proud of you,’ he said, his voice soft.

‘You’re just trying to make me feel better. I see the way she looks at me - like it’s my fault.’

‘For what?’ Jac moved away from her grandfather’s embrace and stared down at her feet, bending her toes in the white socks she wore.

‘Your dad-’ Henry began but the right words were difficult to find. ‘He had to go away on business.’

‘He’s not coming back is he?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’
‘He left because I’m too much to handle. I heard them arguing the night before…they both think I’m difficult.’ Henry laughed. ‘It’s not funny!’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘But name me a ten-year-old who isn’t difficult.’ Jac forced herself to smile.

‘Dad!’ Paula’s voice soared up the stairs to them. ‘Dad they’ll be arriving any second! Tell Jackie she’d better be ready.’

‘I’ll be down in a minute,’ Henry called down to her. They heard the unmistakable sound of Paula stomping out into the garden, the gravel crunching beneath her shoes. ‘Listen, Jac. I know your mother’s a bit much at times but she does care about you.’

‘I know,’ Jac mumbled.

‘Why don’t you get ready and come down when you’ll feel up to it?’ Henry stood up from the bed and headed over to the door. He turned back and smiled at Jac. ‘Just think about it, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Jac conceded. Henry closed the door behind him and walked down the stairs. He could hear Paula calling for him; Henry shrugged and opened the door to the garden.

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The garden party was in full swing now and the barbecue sizzled in the bright summer air. Paula was on her third glass of rosé and the conversation at the table was interspersed with raucous laughter and excited yells. Jac disliked it intensely but she only had another hour or so to suffer through before she could go to bed. The party was turning out to be just as horrid as she had imagined and not even the barbecue had managed to change her mind.

‘That’s a lovely dress you’re wearing, Jackie,’ Aunt Mabel told her. Jac pretended to smile appreciatively. She turned her back before Aunt Mabel could corner her further. Jac didn’t know why she had to call her Aunt Mabel when she wasn’t even related to the family and what was more, she hated that everybody called her Jackie. She preferred Jac and if they had to - Jacqueline was better than Jackie. Average girls were called Jackie and Jac knew she wasn’t average.

‘Pass Richard the potatoes,’ Paula told her. Grimacing, Jac picked up the platter of potatoes and took it to Richard who was sitting at the opposite end of the table.

‘Thank you dear,’ Richard said in his deep booming voice. ‘Marvellous food this.’ Jac looked at his portly appearance and tutted under her breath. ‘So what are you up to these days, dear?’ Jac flinched every time he called her dear. Richard had always been far too familiar.

‘Just school,’ she told him.

‘Ah of course! How old are you now, I don’t think I’ve seen you for a couple years at least?’ Jac knew she wasn’t going to be able to escape for a while and sat down on the empty chair beside him. ‘I’m ten,’ she said, taking a chicken leg from the platter in front of her and biting into the meat.

‘Ten eh? So that must be year four?’

‘Five,’ Jac corrected him.

‘Blimey,’ Richard said. He took a swig of red wine and hiccuped. ‘Pardon me.’

‘You shouldn’t drink so fast,’ said Jac. Richard gave a hearty laugh.

‘Oh you are a cheeky one, aren’t you dear?’ He continued to chuckle to himself for a few minutes. ‘I’ve always been told to take my time,’ Jac said when Richard had finally stopped laughing.

‘When you get to my age, you’ll learn that taking your time isn’t always an option.’ Jac stared at him.

‘Why, how old are you?’ She asked in surprise.

‘Now, now, you mustn’t ask how old someone is. It’s not polite.’ Richard leant across and whispered in her ear. ‘I’m fifty-four. Shush. Don’t tell anyone.’ Jac giggled.

‘How do you know my mum?’ Richard took another gulp of wine, deliberately swallowing slowly in front of Jac.

‘My family have been old friends of yours for - well as long as I can remember!’ Richard picked up a potato with his fork and tucked it into his mouth. He chewed for a brief moment and swallowed.

‘I should probably get going,’ Jac murmured. ‘Mum will expect me to help clear up.’ Richard nodded.

‘It’s been lovely catching up with you, Jac.’ Jac stopped and gazed back at him in amazement. ‘I
knew you never liked being called Jackie,’ Richard told her.
Jac skipped away from him, grinning from ear to ear. Her eyes twinkled and for the first time that
evening, she felt truly happy.

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The table was cleared and the guests were dancing and laughing in the patch of garden Paula had
prepared earlier. Jac could see Richard performing an interesting sort of waltz with his wife, Sylvia
and in the corner of her eye, Paula was swaying to the music on her own. Jac turned away from
them, strolling along the garden by herself.
‘Don’t go too far!’ Jac heard her mother calling but she paid it no attention. She needed time to
herself and far away from the party.
Jac wandered through the mess of weeds and undergrowth that lay at the back of their garden. She
hadn’t been through here for a while but she could still see where she had trampled through the last
time.
The willow tree stood tall and proud in front of her and Jac scrambled up the branches until she
found her favourite spot. She could see the party in the distance and it made her feel slightly superior
as she looked down on them. No one would find her here. She doubted whether her mother even
knew the willow tree was down here.
Jac glanced at the hem of her dress - she knew climbing up the tree would have scuffed it but she
didn’t care. Her mother would undoubtedly shout at her about it tomorrow but right now, Jac just
enjoyed being on top of the world. She felt safe up here as though no one could touch her.
The sun had begun to set and before long, Jac would have to climb down and go to bed. She still
had another half an hour, Jac thought. She dangled her legs over the edge of the branch, taking care
to hold on to the tree trunk for support. The last thing she needed was for her to fall and give her
mother more ammunition.
‘Pssst.’ Jac frowned, looking around for the source of the noise. ‘Pssst,’ it said again. Jac’s heart
was racing - nothing had ever found her here before.
‘Who are you?’ Jac whispered. Her voice trembled but she was determined to keep as calm as she
could.
‘Come down,’ the voice was high-pitched and had a husky edge to it. Jac began to climb down to
the next branch and then stopped.
‘Why should I come down?’ She asked. ‘Why don’t you come to me?’
‘I can’t climb like you can,’ the voice explained.
‘Okay,’ Jac said.

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Paula let out a deep breath as she said goodbye to the last of her guests. Henry had already gone up
to bed but there was no sign of Jac anywhere. Paula assumed she must have snuck off to bed without
any of them seeing her. She frowned. She didn’t like how sneaky Jac could be when she wanted.
Paula locked the conservatory door behind her and headed up the stairs to bed. Jac’s bedroom
door was closed and the light was off; she was obviously asleep, Paula thought. The party must have
tired her out. Paula wasn’t surprised - she was looking forwards to rolling into bed herself.
She closed her bedroom door behind her kicked off her shoes. She yawned as she walked over to
the closet and picked out her nightie. Henry was snoring in the room opposite.

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Jac was on the ground again. She looked over at the house - all the lights were off and everything
was quiet. They hadn’t forgotten about her, had they? Jac shook her head. She had to find whoever
that voice had belonged to.
‘Where are you?’ Jac asked. She heard a scurrying behind the tree and chased after it; the hem of
her dress caught on a bramble and tore. ‘Hey, wait up!’ Jac called out. ‘You told me to come down.’
The scurrying led away from the tree; Jac followed it. She was being led somewhere but Jac had
no idea where. All she knew was that something had spoken to her and she wanted to see who it was. Was it someone playing some kind of trick on her? Jac shook her head. People didn’t scurry. Mice scurried. Jac squeezed through a gap in the hedge. Mice didn’t talk either.

‘Please wait!’ But whoever it was didn’t wait. They kept on scurrying and Jac found herself following before she could help it.

‘Be quick, Miss Jac.’ Jac quickened her pace and broke through the tangle of stinging nettles. She winced as several of the nettle leaves made contact with her skin and attacked. The familiar white marks appeared on her arms and legs but Jac kept walking as fast as she could. ‘Down here.’

‘Down where?’ Jac looked all around, lost her footing and slipped. She slid down the hill and fell flat on her face at the bottom. She picked herself up; her dress was ruined and Jac knew her mother would kill her. If she ever managed to get back home that was.

‘You okay?’ Jac stared down at her feet. A white mouse was standing on its hind legs and looking up at her with twinkling grey eyes. It was also wearing a buttoned up scarlet coat. She blinked. She had to be imagining this - Mice did not speak. It simply wasn’t possible. ‘I asked if you were okay?’ Jac froze. The mouse had definitely spoken - she had seen its mouth open and close. She nodded. ‘Good!’ The mouse declared. Jac could have sworn its mouth spread into a broad smile. ‘Follow me.’

But Jac didn’t follow. This was completely insane. There was no way she was going to follow a talking mouse into wherever it was going.

‘Come on!’ The mouse shouted. ‘We must be quick!’

‘Why?’ Jac had found her voice at last. It came out of her like a tiny squeak.

‘Or else the Queen will catch us!’ The mouse shuddered as it spoke. ‘You don’t want the Queen to find you. Oh no, no, no, no.’

‘The Queen doesn’t have any real power,’ Jac told the mouse and she laughed but stopped when she caught sight of the mouse’s exasperated glare.

‘No, not your Queen,’ it explained. ‘Our Queen. The Queen of Hearts!’

‘The Queen of what?’ Jac exclaimed!

‘Of Hearts, Miss Jac! Now quickly please, follow me. We must get to safety.’ Before Jac could protest, the mouse was already scurrying away and she had no choice but to follow. She didn’t like the sound of this ‘Queen of Hearts,’ whoever she might be.

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Paula woke with a start. Something had been plaguing on her mind in her sleep and she felt a sudden need to check on Jac. She knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep until she had made sure that Jac was safely tucked up in her bed.

Henry’s snoring had finally ceased - he had drifted into a deeper sleep and Paula had been glad of the quiet. But before she had been able to just concentrate on her annoyance of Henry’s various noises. Now, however she had nothing to think about but the fact she hadn’t seen Jac since she had wandered off in the garden.

She climbed out of bed and walked over to the door, pushing it open slowly so that it wouldn’t creak and wake Henry up. Paula tiptoed into the hallway towards Jac’s bedroom. She pushed open the door and switched on the light. Jac’s bed was empty and there was no sign that it had even been slept in since the previous night. Paula’s heart dropped like a stone and she knocked sharply on Henry’s door.

‘Dad!’ There was no answer. ‘Dad wake up!’ She opened the door and bathed his bedroom in bright white light. Henry opened his eyes groggily.

“What’s the matter, Paula?” He looked over at his alarm clock. “It’s one o’clock in the morning, what’re you doing up?”

‘Jac’s missing.’ Henry sat up in his bed.

‘What?’

‘Jac hasn’t been in all night,’ Paula hissed. ‘Her bed’s empty and there’s no sign of her.’ Henry grimaced as he climbed out of bed.
Jac followed the mouse into what appeared to be some kind of small den. She felt sure that she could not possibly fit inside it but as she moved her front foot forward, Jac seemed to shrink until she was the same height as the mouse and she fitted easily in the den.

‘Would you like some soup?’ Another mouse was busying itself in the kitchen and stirring what appeared to be a pot of tomato soup. ‘I made it fresh this afternoon.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Jac began. ‘But who are you?’ The mouse that had led her here, took off its coat and hung it up on a stand beside the door.

‘I am Amelia and this is my husband, Timothy.’ Amelia pointed a grubby paw at Timothy who gave the soup another stir. ‘And we know who you are.’

‘Who am I?’

‘You’re our saviour,’ Amelia said and she smiled. ‘Now, I really think you should have some soup. You must be frozen.’ Jac shivered and after a moment’s consideration, she nodded.

Amelia led her through a small doorway into the dining room. Three bowls had already been laid out with tiny soup spoons next to them. The bowls were a cream china embroidered with gold leaf.

‘After you,’ Amelia said and pointed at Jac’s space in the middle. Jac sat down; it surprised her to see that her legs didn’t touch the floor. Amelia scurried up to take her place as head of the table.

‘You’ll enjoy this,’ she told Jac. ‘Timothy is a dab hand at soup.’

Timothy appeared shortly after this, carrying the pot of soup and a ladle. He poured copious amounts into each bowl and, after placing the pot down on the heatproof mat, he sat at the other end of the table and picked up his spoon.

‘Now, now, Timothy,’ Amelia warned him. ‘You mustn’t forget your manners.’

‘Of course not, honey,’ Timothy said and Jac was surprised at how soft his voice was. It was a marked difference from the husky tones that Amelia spoke in. ‘Shall I say a few words?’

‘We usually do, don’t we, Timothy?’ Timothy cleared his throat.

‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord of Wonder make us truly grateful.’ There was a brief silence. ‘Go on then,’ Timothy said to Jac. ‘Tuck in!’

Jac dipped her spoon into the smoking hot soup and touched it to her lips. She swallowed and a wave of warmth washed over her. She had never tasted anything so good in her life.

‘Told you he was good,’ Amelia chuckled. A sudden thought struck Jac.

‘Excuse me?’ She asked.

‘Yes, Miss Jac?’

‘Where am I?’ Amelia swallowed a mouthful of soup and clapped her paws together.

‘Why, you are in Wonderland!’
Trouble in Wonderland

- Chapter Two -

Trouble in Wonderland

The soup spoon fell from Jac’s hand with a tremendous clatter that shook the dust from the table.

‘I’m where?’ She exclaimed.

‘In Wonderland, Miss Jac,’ Amelia reiterated. Jac had heard of Wonderland; every child had. ‘I thought Wonderland was just a story.’ Timothy fixed Jac with his twinkling grey eyes and sighed. ‘To you it was but just a story yet now you see that it is all real.’ Jac blinked, staring back at Timothy open-mouthed.

‘Tomorrow, I will show you around,’ Amelia told her.

‘But you said it wasn’t safe—’ Jac began but she fell silent at the warm smile on Amelia’s face. ‘Oh it isn’t safe,’ Amelia warned. ‘Not during the night at least. But you’ll be travelling with the warmth of the sun on our backs.’

‘Yeah, but you’re both…well mice,’ Jac didn’t know how else to put it. ‘Surely you’ll be in danger if you go out in the day?’ At this, Amelia and Timothy both erupted into raucous echoing laughter. Jac felt the tips of her ears turning red and she stared down at her half-drunk soup, determined not to let her hosts see her embarrassment. Timothy clapped a paw on Jac’s shoulder and the warmth of his fur seemed to comfort Jac for a little while.

‘My dear Miss Jac,’ Timothy whispered. ‘My wife shall be quite safe in the day.’ Jac picked up her spoon and gulped down a mouthful of soup. It had gone cold but for once Jac did not mind; she had never tasted soup so good in all of her life. She cleared her throat.

‘You don’t need to call me miss,’ she said in a quiet voice. ‘Just Jac is okay.’

‘Very well Just Jac,’ Amelia said. Jac laughed - she couldn’t help it.

‘No, I mean just call me Jac.’ It took a couple of seconds for Amelia to understand but when she did - she joined Jac in her laughter.

‘Jac it is!’ Amelia slurped the remainder of her soup; she grimaced and Jac caught a whiff of a strange sweet-smelling aroma. ‘I do apologise,’ she said to Jac. ‘My bowels aren’t quite what they used to be.’

‘That’s just her excuse,’ Timothy whispered in Jac’s ear. ‘She’s always been terrible for it. Since the day I met her in fact!’ Jac giggled.

‘How long have you known each other?’ Amelia and Timothy exchanged thoughtful glances but neither spoke. ‘I don’t mean to be rude,’ Jac mumbled. ‘I’m just curious.’

‘No, no!’ Amelia boomed. ‘Curiosity is the essence of life!’ She looked up at the cuckoo clock on the mantel. ‘Timothy and I have known each other since we were tiny pups, oh that must have been…’ Her voice trailed away into silence.

‘Three score and ten,’ Timothy finished. ‘Seventy years,’ he explained at the blank look on Jac’s face.

‘You’re seventy years old?’ Jac couldn’t believe it. She had never heard of mice living so long - even if they were mice from Wonderland.

‘And looking good on it, wouldn’t you say?’ Amelia chipped in.

‘Years in Wonderland are not the same as your home,’ Timothy explained. ‘We have only twelve hours in our day and a hundred days in our year.’ Jac nodded, pretending to understand although she was more lost than she had ever been.

‘There was one thing,’ Jac started. ‘Something I’ve been wondering about.’ She wasn’t sure how best to say it but she knew she had to ask.

‘Go on?’ Amelia pressed.

‘Who is the Queen of Hearts?’
In an instant, the atmosphere in the room seemed to darken. Timothy shivered and Jac saw that his claws were bared. She backed away from him, afraid that he might attack if provoked. She turned to stare at Amelia.

‘She is evil,’ Amelia hissed. ‘The most evil thing Wonderland has seen in many a year.’

‘But I still don’t understand who she is?’

‘It is enough that you don’t know,’ Amelia told her, keeping her voice low as though she were afraid of being overheard. ‘And it is enough that I have told you.’

‘So is she the Queen of Wonderland?’

‘No,’ Timothy barked. It was a surprise to hear how firm his tone was. ‘She merely yearns to be.’

‘I think now would be the time for bed,’ Amelia said before Jac could ask another question. ‘Your room is up the stairs on the left - Timothy will show you.’ Timothy ushered Jac from her seat and she followed him willingly out of the dining room, leaving Amelia to draw the lime-green curtains. She flinched. Something had been watching her from the window. One of the Queen’s hideous spies, no doubt. She stared out of the window briefly but the creature did not return. Shaking the terror out of her heart, Amelia closed the curtains again and the room was bathed in darkness. She lit a candle to guide her way upstairs.

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Outside the mice’s den, dark and fearful creatures were gathering. They met around a glowing stone circle and bared and gnashed their frightful teeth. There was a spider monkey with a scarred face and claws that looked as if they had never been sharper. He grimaced; his scarlet eyes surveying the carnage around him. Two lizards were fighting over a young rabbit carcass - their teeth dripped crimson with the blood of its flesh.

A flash of light soared overhead and the creatures all raised their heads to look. When they had returned to the stone circle, a woman was standing in the centre. She had flowing silver hair that clashed with her yellow cat-like eyes and she was clad in a cloak of fine silk that was embroidered with tiny hearts such as those you might find on a playing card. By her side she carried a long emerald whip.

The creatures bowed their heads before the Queen of Hearts.

‘Get up!’ The Queen of Hearts spat. ‘Or I’ll execute the whole lot of you. One by one.’ There was a mad rush as every creature shot on to their hind legs. ‘Better,’ The Queen of Hearts cackled. ‘You!’

She hissed at the spider monkey. ‘What news do you have for your Queen?’

For a moment it seemed as if the spider monkey’s cocksure attitude had deserted him and he backed away slowly. But the Queen of Hearts had spotted him and his legs stuck fast in the mud.

‘I….’ He spluttered. ‘I mean…’

‘Don’t be afraid,’ the Queen of Hearts whispered and her voice was sickly and sweet. ‘I shall not harm you.’

‘There is no news, your grace,’ the spider monkey said. The Queen of Hearts face flashed with fury.

‘Are you quite sure?’ She was eye to eye with the spider monkey now and she could feel him trembling.

‘That is to say,’ he mumbled. ‘That is to say I have not heard anything myself. There may be others who have heard…differently.’ The Queen of Hearts turned away from him and he relaxed.

‘Is he right?’ Nobody answered. The Queen of Hearts took a deep breath: ‘I asked - IS HE RIGHT?!’ The force of her yell shook the trees around them and one of the lizards almost fell from the tip of the stone he was perched on.

‘No, your grace,’ someone said from the farthest reach of the circle.

‘Oh,’ said the Queen of Hearts. ‘You have heard something, minion?’ The minion stepped out of the shadows and like the Queen, he too wore a cloak patterned with hearts although it was somewhat less fine than hers.

‘I have, your grace,’ the minion said. ‘Another child has come to Wonderland.’ There were gasps among the creatures but the Queen of Hearts angered yell was louder than all.

‘Another child,’ she whispered. ‘Another human child?’ The minion nodded. ‘Where is it?’ Nobody
answered. ‘WHERE IS THE CHILD?!’
‘The mice took her,’ said the minion. ‘Amelia and Timothy.’ The Queen of Hearts clapped her hands together with glee.
‘Then you’ll just have to take her back, won’t you?’ The minion bowed his head.
‘I will do what I must.’ He turned and strode away from the circle, his cloak flowing behind him in the night air. The rest of the creatures cowered away from the Queen of Hearts but the fear of lower beings was not her concern. She had bigger matters to consider and plans to be calculated.

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The sun rose high and sharp over Wonderland’s rolling hills and dense forests. As promised, Amelia had woken Jac early and the pair were strolling through the apple orchard that Amelia explained was the back garden of the White Rabbit.

‘Won’t he mind?’ Jac asked, taking care not to step on any of the apples that lay scattered around the grass.

‘Oh no,’ Amelia told her. ‘In fact, he’s expecting us.’ They traipsed through the orchard and before long, Jac could see a huge mound of earth rising up out of the ground. There was a small round yellow door and waving at them from a wooden bench was a sparkling white rabbit. He wore a velvet waistcoat and as they drew closer, Jac saw that it had silver buttons that reflected the gleam of the sun.

‘Allow me to introduce myself,’ the White Rabbit said, leaping off the bench with a single bound and holding a paw to Jac. Jac shook the paw gingerly. ‘I am the White Rabbit.’

‘Jac,’ Jac murmured.

‘Yes, I very much know who you are,’ the White Rabbit smacked his lips together and hopped over to where Amelia lay. The mouse was sunning herself on her back and she giggled as the warmth tickled her.

‘Excuse me,’ Amelia said as the White Rabbit’s shadow blocked out the sun over her.

‘Come, come,’ he said. ‘I have prepared a breakfast of toast and honey.’ Jac’s stomach rumbled; she hadn’t eaten yet and although it was still early, she was beginning to feel extremely peckish.

‘Why are you called the White Rabbit?’ Jac asked as he led them through into his kitchen.

‘Why? It is my name!’

‘But don’t you have a proper name like Amelia?’

‘I don’t think Amelia would be quite proper for a silly old thing like me!’ Amelia sniggered behind them but Jac bit her tongue to stop herself from retorting. ‘Oh I wouldn’t worry,’ the White Rabbit grinned. ‘I know exactly what you’re thinking.’ Jac’s ears glowed red.

‘I’m sorry,’ she mumbled. The White Rabbit handed her a toast laden with golden honey.

‘There’s no need,’ he told her. ‘Please, eat.’ Jac bit into the toast and like the soup Timothy had made, she felt a sudden warmth descend over her.

‘Thank you,’ she said as she took another bite.

‘There’s a sofa through there,’ the White Rabbit said and pointed at a round door at the back of the kitchen. ‘You can rest on there.’

‘I’m okay,’ Jac lied.

‘No, you’re tired from the journey - I can see.’ Jac nodded and with the plate and toast in hand, she walked into the living room and lay across the sofa.

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There were no birds in the skies over the Keep of Hearts. They had all been poached and those that survived knew better than to come near it again. The Keep itself was made from dark grey bricks with faint heart-shaped patterns inscribed upon them. A singular tower rose high in the centre of the Keep and from its highest balcony one could survey every corner of Wonderland. But the Queen of Hearts eye was always on one particular corner.

The White Queen’s Castle was immense and beautiful to behold but it was not beauty that the Queen of Hearts craved. She desired to sit upon the throne of Wonderland - a throne she felt that was rightly
hers and yet it had fallen to her cousin. Her cousin’s rule had been the bitterest of pills to swallow in a lifetime of defeat and misery. The Queen of Hearts scowled as she saw the White Castle bathed in a multitude of coloured light. When she ruled, the Queen of Hearts told herself, there would be no more daily light shows. No more whiteness.

Her gaze fell upon the tallest turret of the castle and she could make out the silhouette of her cousin looking out over her Queendom. It took the Queen of Hearts a few seconds to realise that her cousin was looking straight at her.

‘Your stare seems most penetrating this morning, dear cousin,’ the White Queen said as she appeared in a flash behind the Queen of Hearts.

‘What do you want?’ The Queen of Hearts was not in the mood for idle chatter with her cousin - oh how dearly she longed to wipe that ghastly smile from her foul face.

‘You know that’s not how you address your Queen.’ The White Queen wore robes of luxurious cream silk and her golden hair was adorned with a silver crown encrusted with a single white jewel.

The Queen of Hearts spat at the hem of her cousin’s robes.

‘You are no Queen of mine.’ The White Queen shook her head and her golden hair flowed from side to side.

‘My dear, must we always quarrel so?’ She stood beside the Queen of Hearts now and looked out at Wonderland.

‘As long as you sit upon the throne, we will quarrel.’ The White Queen’s smile faded for a split second but soon she was grinning broadly again.

‘You forget, I think dear cousin, that it was by my will that you were allowed to stay here.’ The Queen of Hearts clenched her teeth.

‘I never forget,’ she hissed. ‘And one day you shall not be so smug when you speak to me.’ The White Queen laughed.

‘And what is it you intend to do?’ She could see her cousin’s chest rising and falling in time with her fury.

‘I will take my rightful place as Queen of Wonderland and I will rule.’ A silence descended between them until the White Queen said at last:

‘Then I pray that that day may yet be far away.’ She clicked her fingers and before the Queen of Hearts could say anything, the White Queen had vanished, leaving the Queen of Hearts to seethe and writhe in her own anger.

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Jac woke up in a cold sweat. Her skin had stuck to the sofa and the china plate lay covered in crumbs on the floor. As she came to her senses, she could hear hushed voices whispering from the kitchen. She recognised Amelia’s and the White Rabbit’s but there was a third voice that was entirely new to her.

‘The Queendom is under constant threat,’ the voice said. It sounded deep and gravelly - like an old general of some kind. ‘People are taken nightly.’

‘I know the situation is grim,’ the White Rabbit replied and Jac was surprised at how forlorn he sounded. ‘But they don’t know about the girl.’

‘The White Rabbit is right,’ Jac heard Amelia whisper. ‘We have the girl.’ Jac frowned - she felt sure that, by the girl, they were almost certainly referring to her and she didn’t like how she was being made out as a possession.

‘But that’s impossible!’ The third voice exclaimed. ‘Even if Alice had come back to Wonderland she would be old - too old to help us.’

‘It is not Alice we speak of,’ said Amelia. ‘But a new girl.’ There was a pause and Jac heard something grunt.

‘Very well,’ said the third voice. ‘Who is this girl?’

‘She’s through here,’ said the White Rabbit. ‘Let me show you.’ Realising that the door was about to swing open, Jac darted back to the sofa and pretended to be asleep.

The door creaked and Jac opened her eyes, feigning a long yawn for good measure.
‘And who might you be?’ Jac found herself staring into the wrinkled face of the Mad Hatter and knew she had imagined him wrongly from the sound of his voice.

‘I…I’m Jac,’ Jac squeaked.

‘I am Hatter,’ said the Mad Hatter extending his hand to Jac. He wore a red top hat on top of his frail grey hair. ‘Though some may call me Mad.’ He wheezed and Jac was startled to see how frail he appeared to be.

‘Pleased to meet you Mr. Hatter,’ Jac mumbled.

‘No just Hatter will do fine,’ the Mad Hatter laughed. ‘I have little time for formalities.’ As he stared into her eyes, Jac felt she couldn’t keep quiet about what she had overheard and she took a deep breath. ‘There’s something you want to tell us?’ The Mad Hatter asked.

‘I didn’t mean to but I couldn’t help overhearing you earlier…’ Jac fell silent as all eyes turned on her. ‘I’m sorry,’ she muttered.

‘No need! No need!’ The White Rabbit assured her. ‘Better you hear than someone less,’ he looked around as though checking to see that nobody was listening, ‘desirable,’ he finished in a low whisper.

‘Who is threatening the Queendom?’ Amelia made a cross motion on her underbelly.

‘The Queen of Hearts,’ the Mad Hatter whispered. ‘She seeks to usurp her cousin, the White Queen.’ Amelia and the White Rabbit shuddered but Jac’s expression was one of deep bewilderment.

‘How can there be a Queen of Hearts if the White Queen is the Queen?’ The Mad Hatter took hold of her hand and began to run his fingers across the lines on her palm. Jac didn’t flinch or move her hand away - the touch of his fingers was soft and warm.

‘The White Queen is the rightful ruler of Wonderland and she has ruled for many, many moons,’ the Mad Hatter explained. ‘The Queen of Hearts is her cousin and she is filled with such a hatred that you have never faced.’ He moved his hand away from Jac’s.

‘But I still don’t understand?’

‘The Queen of Hearts desires the throne above all else. And she will not rest until she gets it.’ The Mad Hatter paused and glanced over at Amelia as though he was looking for her approval to continue. ‘There is more than the Queen to fear.’ He was looking directly at Jac and she was enchanted by the shadowy gleam in his eyes.

‘What could be worse than her?’ The room seemed to darken for a moment but perhaps it was just her imagination.

‘I did not say worse,’ the Mad Hatter told her. ‘There is nothing worse than the Queen of Hearts but do not think that she is alone in her scheming.’

‘Who could possibly want to help her?’

‘Wonderland has become plagued by her minions - dreadful creatures clad in the cloaks of her name and each bearing the sigil of hearts. The symbol of her darkness!’ At this a strange cool wind seemed to blow through the room and Jac quivered.

‘It is time we were getting back,’ Amelia instructed. ‘Timothy will be wondering where we’ve got to.’ Jac nodded and followed the others back into the kitchen.

As they approached the front door, Jac paused and looked back at the Mad Hatter.

‘Who was Alice?’ The Mad Hatter smiled broadly at her and tipped his hat.

‘She was wonderful.’ But Jac could get him to say no more and with a final nod, she bade him goodbye and followed Amelia out of the house.

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They walked back in silence. Amelia scurried along the forest floor at a slow pace so that Jac would not fall behind. Everything around them seemed far too quiet and there was no longer any chirps of birds or squeaks of squirrels that Jac had heard in the morning. Wonderland lay still and Jac thought the sooner she was safely back in Amelia and Timothy’s den the better.

Evidently Amelia felt the same for she suddenly quickened her pace and Jac found it a struggle to keep up. Amelia took a shortcut through the forest and before long Jac saw the den shining in the
The night had descended fast - faster than Jac had anticipated.
Amelia knocked on the door but there was no answer.
‘silly old fool must have fallen asleep,’ she whispered to Jac. ‘Not to worry.’ Amelia reached into her pocket and drew out a small silver key. She unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The chaos that greeted them was almost too terrible to behold. Everything had been trashed. The wallpaper was torn and smeared with red paint and all of Amelia’s books had been ripped to shreds.
Jac saw that the mouse was fighting back tears as she strode into the dining room.
Amelia let out a ferocious howl that chilled Jac. Timothy’s soup pot lay in pieces on the floor and Jac caught sight of his wedding ring lying among the wreckage.
‘Timothy!’ Amelia’s voice echoed through the den but there was no answer. ‘TIMOTHY!’ Again her cries were met with silence.
Jac walked over to the mantel - something had fluttered out of the corner of her eye and as she examined the cuckoo clock, she noticed a scrap of paper underneath, blowing in the breeze that blew from the smashed window. She scooped it up and read aloud:
‘We have your husband.’ Amelia leapt up and snatched the note out of Jac’s hands.
‘Give us the girl or he will be executed.’ Jac’s heart was pounding in her chest. ‘The clock is ticking. You have four days.’

Jac tried to remain calm but she could not stop herself from shaking. Amelia scrunched up the note in her paw and threw it to the floor.
‘I’ll hand myself over,’ Jac said. She couldn’t help feeling as though it was her fault Timothy had been taken.
‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Amelia snapped. ‘I can’t give you up. You’re more important to our cause than my dear Timothy.’
‘But he’s your husband,’ Jac protested.
‘And that is why I will save him,’ Amelia murmured and every syllable of her voice shook with anger. ‘I will not abandon him.’
All was quiet in Wonderland as Amelia rapped loudly on the door of the Mad Hatter’s lopsided bungalow. Rat-a-tat-tap went the sound of her claws on the oak. Jac hid behind her - unsure of what to do and when Amelia knocked again; she recoiled slightly.

‘Hatter!’ Amelia bellowed. ‘Open this door right now!’ There was a long silence broken only by the sound of the Mad Hatter striding towards his front door. Jac could hear the sharp tap of his curved walking stick.

‘My oh my what is this shouting about?’ The Mad Hatter declared, opening the door with a flourish of his stick. Amelia drew back, narrowly avoiding the muddle base of the cane. Her back-paws slid on the wet grass and she toppled sideways into Jac.

‘Don’t you know the ti-‘ The Mad Hatter stopped and his eyes widened in amazement at the sight of Jac and Amelia balancing precariously on his doorstep. ‘Amelia? Miss Jac?’ He waited for the pair to disentangle themselves from their present predicament but Jac could tell he was finding it particularly difficult not to laugh. ‘Come on, come on,’ he said waving them inside. ‘ As Jac passed, the Mad Hatter bowed and lifted his hat to her.

‘Thank you,’ Jac mumbled. She seemed a little unsure but there was something about the Mad Hatter that made her want to trust him. He reminded her of her father or perhaps just the memory she wanted to believe.

They were ushered into the Mad Hatter’s kitchen and Jac had to stop herself before she exclaimed out loud.

The kitchen was vast - far wider and longer than anything Jac had yet seen in Wonderland and a candelabra hung from the beamed ceiling. Jac watched as the bulbs’ bright light changed from green to red and back again. A fire crackled at the farthest end of the kitchen and there was a silver kettle boiling over it - it was hung from a thick oak log that was lodged tightly into the fireplace. The walls were decorated with framed paintings some of whom looked as if they might be distant relatives of the Hatter.

In the centre, Jac saw a large round table - it too was made of oak but as she peered closer, she saw that it was riddled with woodworm and one of the legs looked as if it had been chewed. She wondered what was keeping the table up and it seemed that the Mad Hatter had read her mind for he put a gnarled finger to his lips and made a quiet shushing noise. Jac turned away.

‘So,’ the Mad Hatter announced, clapping his hands together. ‘What did you want of me?’

‘It’s Timothy,’ Amelia told him. Jac was impressed by how calm she was as she told the Mad Hatter of what had happened.

When Amelia finished her tale, the Mad Hatter was beside himself with worry. He paced around the room clapping his hands together and on more than one occasion Jac had to run over to stop him from touching the kettle with his bare skin.

‘What are we going to do?’ He squealed. ‘Oh goodness me this’ll send my blood pressure sky high.’

‘Your blood pressure?’ Amelia frowned. ‘He’s my husband. Do you see me running around like a headless chicken?’

‘Well, no,’ the Hatter admitted. He looked slightly ashamed and stopped pacing. Amelia let out a deep sigh.

‘We have to summon the council.’ The Mad Hatter froze. His right ear twitched from underneath his hat and his eyes widened in fear. He placed a trembling finger to his lips and made the shushing sound again.

‘You can’t be serious,’ he whispered. ‘I will not be a part of this.’

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Timothy opened his eyes. The dungeon was dark, cold and a foul scent hung about the air. His nose
twitched uncomfortably but there was nothing he could do to get away from it. Through the
darkness, Timothy could see very little and his fur began to tingle.
Small drops of water fell relentlessly from the ceiling; a soft pitter patter that never ceased. Timothy
closed his eyes and felt his heart racing. He missed his home, his comforts and above all else, he
missed Amelia. His only companion, the one who he knew could lead him out of the dark. He
tugged at the chain binding him but after a few moments, Timothy realised that it was too strong and
he let go. There was no point in overexerting himself.
A door creaked open behind him and Timothy froze, backing away as far as his chains would allow
him. He recognised the sound of the Queen of Hearts footsteps as she strode towards him, cackling
maniacally. She clapped her hands with glee and before he could retaliate, he found the hands
around his neck, squeezing.
Her eyes glowed with a malice that shone blindingly throughout the dungeon as her grip grew tighter
and tighter.
‘You will tell me,’ she whispered in Timothy’s ear. Her hands released his neck and he bent double,
gasping for breath. ‘You will tell me,’ the Queen of Hearts repeated and this time, she used her long,
sharp fingernails to tear through the soft covering of his ear. Timothy howled but the Queen of
Hearts placed a finger on her lips and made a soft shushing sound. Instantaneously, Timothy fell
silent. ‘That’s better,’ she muttered. ‘We don’t want to wake my pet.’
The colour drained from Timothy’s face at the mention of the Queen of Hearts pet.
‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he managed to squeak at last. The Queen of Hearts dug
her fingernails deeper into his flesh but Timothy knew better than to howl this time. ‘Tell you what?’
There was silence. ‘I don’t understand!’
‘You will,’ the Queen of Hearts promised. ‘Soon, the whole of Wonderland will understand.’
‘Please,’ Timothy pleaded. ‘Please, I don’t know anything. Just let me go, I just want to go home.’
The Queen of Hearts began to laugh and it was cold, high and full of cruelty.
‘I know your game,’ she murmured. ‘Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to. I have my spies.’
‘You’ve got it wrong!’ Timothy insisted. ‘We just want to be left in peace.’
‘We shall see,’ the Queen of Hearts told him. ‘Oh yes, we shall certainly see.’ She turned and began
to walk away from him. ‘I think I’ll leave you down here, just a little while longer.’ Timothy
watched until she was out of sight and even the echoes of her footsteps had faded away and he was
left in a grim silence, broken only by the continued pitter patter of water falling from the ceiling.
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Jac was in awe. She gazed around the domed room and her mouth fell open in wonder at the
fantastical array of creatures and animals that occupied each of the stone seats. The highest of these
seats was a dazzling throne made from the finest White Marble and Jac knew, without hesitation,
who belonged there.
‘Are you all right?’ Amelia asked.
‘This is amazing,’ Jac replied. ‘Absolutely amazing!’
‘Just remember,’ began Amelia. ‘The White Queen is a fair and just ruler but she does not tolerate
any disloyalty of any kind. You must only speak when you are allowed to speak and on no occasion
mention her sister, do you understand me?’ Jac nodded. ‘Good, then you should be fine.’
‘Where do we sit?’
‘Over here.’ Amelia led Jac to the last few remaining empty seats and they took their places next to
the Mad Hatter. Jac’s legs were too short to reach the ground and they dangled uselessly over the
edge of her chair.
‘How much longer?’ Jac asked the Mad Hatter. She was growing impatient as the White Queen’s
throne remained unoccupied.
‘It shouldn’t be too much longer,’ the Mad Hatter replied. ‘The Queen has much to attend to.’
‘Who’s that?’ Jac pointed at a figure adorned with a dazzlingly white cloak and who sported hair
whiter than the whitest white that Jac had ever seen. Its brightness was so vast that she felt her eyes
begin to ache and she quickly glanced away.
‘That, is one of the Queen’s White Guards. They’re an elite group of bodyguards but they have short
tempers and you would do well to keep your distance.’
Before Jac could answer, the White Guard stamped his foot three times and the entire chamber rose
instantly to their feet. Jac clambered up quickly and raised her right hand to her heart as the Mad
Hatter had done.
One by one, each member of the council began to stamp their feet until they were all in unison.
‘The traditional greeting,’ the Mad Hatter whispered. ‘Look!’ Jac followed the path of the Mad
Hatter’s eyes and she stared transfixed, as the White Queen stood before her throne.
‘My friends,’ the White Queen declared. ‘Please be seated.’ Once everyone had taken their seats, the
White Queen climbed upon her throne and the Council of Wonderland was officially in session.

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Timothy’s stomach rumbled but there was no food in this dingy place, nor anything to drink. His ear
still stung from his earlier interrogation but there was no point in crying out. No one would hear him
for no one was coming.

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‘I say we deal with this threat now!’ The speaker was a large, fat beaver with gleaming hazelnut eyes
and fur as soft as silk.
‘But how can we deal with a threat that we cannot see?’ Jac craned her neck to see who was
speaking now.
‘Nonsense!’ Cried the beaver. ‘We know exactly who the threat is!’
‘There is a difference between knowing and knowing, I thought you of all people would have
grasped that, Cornelius,’ the second speaker retaliated. Jac gasped and turned back to see what
Cornelius’ reaction would be.
‘We must attack now before it’s too late!’ Cornelius rose to his feet and began to stamp. Everyone
was watching him now and there was a collective air of foreboding amongst them.
Jac’s eyes fell upon the White Queen, who until now had remained quiet and had taken little part in
the proceedings. But she was standing now and Jac knew displeasure when she saw it.
‘Silence!’ The White Queen bellowed. Cornelius sat down immediately and seemed to cower in his
seat. ‘Is this how my Council behaves?’ No one answered. ‘Like squabbling children?’ Jac watched
as they each bowed their heads in shame until she saw that someone wasn’t bowing their head.
Amelia folded her paws and stared defiantly up at the White Queen.
‘You wish to say something?’ The White Queen addressed her. Amelia nodded. ‘Then by all means,
say it.’
‘Wonderland,’ Amelia began and she looked all around the domed chamber. ‘Wonderland used to be
such a happy place, full of energy and laughter and joy. But look at us now. Hiding from the dark
and from each other. Time was, we could let our children play out at night but now we cower away
even before the last light has faded. Don’t we want a Wonderland back where we do not fear the
dark? Where we know our families are safe and no one will harm us. Do we not want a Wonderland
that we can be proud of? A Wonderland that does not belong just to one person but to each and
every one of us.’ The Mad Hatter stood up and began to clap his paws together. The White Queen
said nothing; she merely watched attentively. ‘This is our Wonderland,’ Amelia continued. ‘This is
our home and no one has the right to take that away from us.’ Cornelius stood up and like the Hatter,
he began to clap. One by one, the rest of the chamber followed suit until everyone was on their feet
and everyone was clapping. ‘The Queen of Hearts has taken something from every one of us.
Cornelius, what did she take from you?’
Cornelius drew himself up to his fullest height but he didn’t stop clapping, not even for one second.
‘My home,’ he told the waiting Council. ‘Her minions came in the night and they razed my home to
the ground.’ Their was an angry murmur throughout them.
‘Do you see?’ Amelia told them. ‘We’ve all lost something. But now is our chance to take it back
and stop the Queen of Hearts once and for all! What say you?’ The answering cheer was so loud that
Jac had to cover her ears and it showed no signs of stopping any time soon.
‘It seems,’ said the White Queen. ‘I must make a decision.’

TO BE CONTINUED

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