Ages of Alice

by just_a_dram

Summary

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Notes

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Pairing: Alices and hatters from several ages, including Alice Kingsleigh and Tarrant Hightopp
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Ages of Alice

1. Adalheidis & Alvis[1]

It is widely held that for every season there is a hatter. There is good logic behind this assumption, because there are always royal heads to be hatted. What is not as well known is that for every hatter there is also an Alice. Unfortunately, the Alice has not always had a proper degree of muchness to achieve what she ought.

That has left me, who has seen all of Underland's history since the dawn of the first day, to weather all incarnations of the Alices and their various levels of ineptitude. It has become so very tiresome. The Alices are almost without exception hopelessly stupid girls. Indeed, some of them are hardly worth mentioning at all.

Adalheidis was quite nearly Alice enough, however.

She came as a girl child to Underland; ten years at least, but maybe more, she had estimated. Her spiritedness and forethought brought her to Underland. As she told it, men had been attacking her village, and of her three sisters, Adalheidis had been the only one to think to crawl inside the village well.[2] It was imperative to hide from such raids, because these foreign men thought nothing of taking women and female children from the villages as their own, as slaves, as wives, as concubines.[3] Thinking the attack over, she had emerged Bottomside—although, to be precise, as one should be, it was not yet Under, but rather Above, as our world had not yet inverted.
I was not as magical as I am now, and therefore, I could do nothing more than rub against her legs to communicate my directions when I happened upon her in the forest, but she seemed to like it. *Humans do so like my fur.* The action was enough to get the child to follow me, and I led her to Alvis. I would have taken her to my mistress, but my mistress already had four girls and I did not think she would take to another one, troublesome as they are. I had a notion that he might not find her so troublesome, and my notions are seldom if ever wrong.

The girl child did not speak Alvis’ language and he could not make heads or cat's tails of what had brought her to his door with one of her ginger plaits come undone and gown dirtied and torn asunder, but he took pity on her and made her a part of his household.[4] At least, that is what he told people: *I have taken pity on the child.* I think he found her rather pretty, but he would not have admitted to such a thing. I knew, however, that Alvis was fond of more than just jewels and gold and silver: Alvis was a collector of all things he thought fine, and beneath the grit and grime, Adalheidis was a fine girl child.

Strong, dark bearded Alvis was a worker of metals.[5] So skilled was he in his craft that he was tapped by the crown of Alfheim for all manners of decorative metalwork. Arm bands, brooches, circlets, and war helmets all came from his forge.[6] His workload grew as the Alfar of Alfheim multiplied, and Adalheidis was nimble fingered and took to his craft, becoming his helpmate in detail work as she grew into womanhood.[7]

When the Oraculum, gifted to the crown of Alfheim by the Vanir, foretold Adalheidis' service to the Alfar, she did not hesitate, for she knew the fear of foreign attack and the pain of loss.[8] Our world was now Her world and she would not stand idly by. This is what she explained to Alvis, as he reluctantly forged the Vorpal sword, which was intended to be the instrument of Jormungand, the great serpent’s, death.[9] He preferred to make beautiful things intended for less violent purposes and he preferred his beautiful Adalheidis safe and not armed for battle against a serpent. Stone jawed, he sat stiffly, as she fingered the sword.

"It's good work, Alvis. Strong work."

He glowered at the sword. "There are other things I would make for you if you want a demonstration of my skill. Things you need not bloody."

"I must," she told him.

"There is always choice," he insisted with a jerk of his chin.

"I've made mine."

Indeed, she had, and there was no dissuading her. Adalheidis, the strong willed child, had grown into Adalheidis, the strong willed woman, and she would not be prevented from doing what she Ought.

And she would have. Perhaps there would have been slaying and perhaps the man who made the crowns and helmets for the heads of the Alfar would have grown the courage to be more than a mentor to his dear, ginger haired apprentice and perhaps their children would have brought balance and peace to our world.

But I despise politics. I prefer not to get involved. Without my assistance distracting the guards Alvis could not be rescued from the sodden dungeons of the Aesir. He moldered there. He died there. Adalheidis lost her focus. The Alfar lost their Champion.

For my *uninvolvement* I was rewarded by the Aesir with immortality and immateriality—two very useful qualities that I was glad enough to accept.
Adalheidis and Alvis were rewarded with a spilling of their blood.

I do not like blood: it mattes the fur. Uninvolvement was a wiser choice for me.

The world inverted. Everything went dark. And everything had to begin again, new, different, more magical, and Under.

Perhaps in this one case it was not the Alice who was not Alice enough. But I do so hate politics.

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[1] Alice is a shortened form of the Old French Adelais, which is derived from the Germanic name Adalheidis, from the Germanic word elements *adal*, meaning noble and *heid*, meaning type. Alvis is Old Norse in origin and derives from a myth in which Alvis fell in love with the daughter of the god of Thunder.

[2] Alice Liddell was ten years old when the story of Alice in Wonderland was told to her by Dodgson (Carroll). She was one of three sisters. The Dormouse's story about the treacle well, where three sisters live, owes its inspiration to St. Frideswide's well located just outside of Oxford. Alice had visited this location several times with Dodgson. St. Frideswide was an eighth century, Anglo-Saxon princess. She founded a nunnery, where she became the abbess, but a prince sought to marry her anyway. Frideswide fled to Oxford, where she was protected by the people from the prince. The well was an answer to Frideswide's prayers: she asked God for a more convenient way for the nuns to fetch water, but the waters also had healing properties and people began to seek it out for its curative powers. Treacle is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'cure-all,' which means the three sisters in the Dormouse's story must have been very sick to have sought out the well.

[3] Adalheidis came from the Frankish kingdom ruled by the Carolingians roughly around the year 800, the year Charlemagne was crowned emperor by the pope. While Charlemagne ruled at the height of the Carolingian Empire, elements of decay were already setting in. External threats in the form of invasions by Muslims, Magyars, and Vikings (Norsemen) were already troubling the empire. Violence bred decentralization and the militarization of society.

[4] By the year 800, people in Northern France had begun to speak Old French (*langue d'oil*), which was a direct descendant of Old Gallo-Romance with influences from Old Frankish. The Franks had fully mixed by this time with the native Gallo-Roman stock. This resulted in a blending of cultures. The Gauls had been taller than the Romans, of pale complexion, and red headed. The Franks were also tall and fair-haired. Charlemagne, for example, was described as being tall, fair-haired, and robust with a thick neck.

Carolingian women's dress was influenced by fashions from the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine). They wore a *stole*, a long dress pouched at the waist by a leather belt. Sleeves extended to the elbow. *Fibulae* (brooches) were worn at the shoulders for decoration. A *palla* (long scarf) was draped around the shoulders and could be worn over the head. According to *Salic Law*, it was illegal for a married woman to appear in public with her head uncovered.

[5] Alvis' people originally were Norse, the people who most famously to sack and settle Western Europe in the late eighth century, but who originated in Scandinavia. The Norse were great seafarers and they used that skill to trade and travel as far as the coastline of the state of Maine, Russia, and the Byzantine Empire. Yes, the Norse 'discovered' America 500 years before Columbus and in much smaller boats without the benefit of nautical instruments.

[6] The picture of Norsemen being blond is a stereotype. They were generally of pale complexion, but the majority had brown, not blond hair. Men generally had long hair, mustaches, and sometimes beards. Their hair was well kept as was their clothing. They favored brightly colored linen or woolen
tunics sometimes trimmed in fur that reached to mid thigh, which were worn over trousers. They generally also wore brooches, arm bands, necklaces, cloaks, leather boots, and leather belts with a knife and pouches.

[7] The Alfar are the Norse light elves that inhabit Alfheim. Light elves were bright, radiant, and fair, fairer than the sun according to Nordic sources. Humans interbreeding with the Alfar was not unheard of, and therefore, the pale appearance of Underlandian humans, such as Mirana and the Hatter, can be explained by their ancestors being both human and Alfar.

[8] The Norse believed that their world was divided up into nine worlds, on three levels, all held together by a great tree. The top level consisted of three kingdoms: Asgard, home of the Aesir or Warrior Gods, Vanahiem, the home of the Vanir or Fertility Gods, and Alfheim, the home of the Light Elves (Underland prior to inversion). The Vanir had the ability to see the future, explaining the ability of the Oraculum. Furthermore, according to Norse mythology, the warlike Aesir went to war against the older Vanir (the Aesir-Vanir War), and the Vanir lost. The implication here that the Alfar had sided with the losing side is not based in Norse mythology.

[9] The Norse believed that a great serpent, Jormungand, encircled Middle Earth, where humans lived. He was one of the misshapen offspring of Loki, arguably one of the chief Aesir.
What Alaïs lacked in muchness, she made up for in beauty. Or, so I am told: I do not care for the appearance of human women. A good quantity of fur would improve them mightily, in my opinion, which I fancy to be the most important opinion in all of Underland.

Alaïs fainted dead away the first time she met me, which spoke to her lack of fortitude, but Faramund did not hold this weakness against her. Indeed, when he found her unconscious on the forest floor, he may have thanked the stars above for his good luck: given her state of distress, he might be able to do this fine lady a good turn.

"What did you do to her, foul creature?" he demanded, scooping the limp mass of femaleness up from the ground.

Ready to rise to the defense of the Alice right from the beginning this hatter was.

One could not see her long flaxen tresses beneath her white veil, but they were under there, waiting to be discovered. I imagine there was a great expanse of fair flesh underneath her very superior high necked and long sleeved tunic as well, but Faramund would have known better than I about that truth, once he took her for his own.[2]

Which he did almost immediately.

Although she was not strictly free to be taken. Alaïs was married—or, rather she had been, Above. Unhappily, it would seem, by how eagerly she accepted Faramund's tender advances.

One can get very bored when one lives Forever, and I had taken to following about the humans that I found most interesting. Therefore, I followed Faramund when he discovered Alaïs, wrapped her in his cloak, and heaved her over his shoulder to take her back to his cottage. [3]

His home was not as refined as Alaïs was accustomed to: one could see that immediately when her eyes went wide, glancing around the humble abode. Nevertheless, she was soothed by Faramund's calm manner of speech. His trade—the making of the coif and couvre-chef for those at court—did not cause the madness as modern day haberdashery does, and he was accustomed to speaking with fine ladies if not having them sit in his home.[4] He may not have been expecting a lady of this quality to fall from the sky, but once she did, he knew just how to deal with her.

"Where did you come from, my lady?"

Language was no longer a barrier in Underland, as both it and I had grown more magical in the interim, so she was able to understand our Faramund's inquiry. Standard Underlandish is understandable to all, and we are able to understand all whom stumble upon us.[5]

"I came from the stairwell," she answered quite illogically, but then, we came to learn that while
Alaïs was pretty and kind, she was not the sharpest needle in the cushion.

Although to be fair, she always kept to that stairwell story. As she told it, she had been sitting at the High Table, when the castle had fallen. Her husband should have had her removed from the castle, she insisted, but he had not. She had been left undefended with only a host of serving ladies, as enemy knights had stormed the castle. [6] Hiding had been her only recourse. Taking the route through the paneled door behind the High Table, she had slipped down the slippery stone spiral staircase, tumbling all the way to Underland.[7]

Faramund intended on wiping away all of that past unpleasantness by making her life here with us inimitably pleasant. He made his new wife a never ending series of beautiful things and Alaïs made him a passel of very boisterous children that would have pulled my tail if it were not for my evaporating skills. She grew accustomed to some of our Peculiarities, like talking dogs and cats (miserable mice were not yet gifted with speech being of the lower order of beasts); and we grew accustomed to the hatter's lovely wife, who gently managed not only her own household but the lives of all her husband's Nearest and Dearest. The beloved woman made the most delicious potages and thought nothing of sharing them with a cat, even a chatty one that had once frightened her.[8]

When the fated day came, there was no question of Alaïs taking up the Vorpal sword. The Oraculum was wrong, Faramund assured everyone most fervently. "I won't have it!" was defiantly shouted countless times.

There was nary a person willing to disagree with Faramund, for while the Oraculum showed the Alice fighting the beast, no one could picture a world where our Alice could do such a thing. There were things she was good at, but donning chainmail and wielding a sword were not among them. Perhaps we were not imaginative enough or perhaps Alaïs was another Alice who was simply not Alice enough.

No one needed to ask who would fight if Alaïs did not: Faramund would stand in her stead. It seemed a good compromise to all involved. Faramund was no hearty specimen of a hero, but he seemed more suited to be our hero than his fine boned wife. Furthermore, he took on the role with a confidence that bred the same in those around him.

Indeed, Alaïs was happy enough to let him to stand up for her, for she finally had a husband who would be her Champion, who would not leave her undefended. She shined his armor, mended his tunic, and sent him off to battle with a full stomach and a kiss.

Unfortunately, Underland does not want a hatter for a Champion. Hatters have their role to play, but Underland requires an Alice. It has been said that if the Alice does not slay, then the fell beast does not die. Such was the case with Faramund and the Buganwyrm.[9] Faramund bravely wielded the Vorpal sword for naught.

Alaïs was not there to see her husband fall to the poisonous, gaping maw of the serpent. It would have broken her frail, human heart; and it is not only eggs that the king's horses and the king's men cannot put back together again. Nevertheless, it was a short-lived reprieve: she and her children did not survive the coming darkness.

It was a shame, because she always very kindly scratched behind my ears. And the potages, I missed the potages.

[1] Alaïs is the Old French form of Alice. Faramund is Gaelic and means thunder.

[2] Alaïs came from Northern France, ca. 1000. French women of this period wore very tight tunic
gowns that reached the floor. The gown came so high as to completely cover the neck. The sleeves closed at the wrists and the gown fastened at the waist. This style of dress was known as the *cottes-hardies*. Additionally, wealthy women wore another tunic over this gown, which was sleeveless, and a long cloak lined with ermine. All women wore a veil that completely surrounded the neck and fell both forward and backward.

[3] Faramund's people originally came to Underland from Galloway, a region in Southwestern Scotland. English dominance of the region was declining between the 9th and 11th centuries with Gaelic dominance in ascendance. Whether Faramund would have been more Anglo-Saxon or Gaelic is unclear, so a mix might have been probable. Men and women of Gaelic origin wore linen or silk tunics (*leine*) and oval cloaks (*brat*). Tunics were generally white and came to mid thigh on men. Hats were unusual, although cloth bands or gold circlets were sometimes worn. Anglo-Saxons, on the other hand, wore short tunics, cloaks, and trousers. Piercings and golden bracelets were popular for men, as was shorter hair and beards.

[4] Amongst Anglo-Saxons, *coifs* (flat round caps) became popular head-coverings for men and all but the youngest of women wore a head-rail (*couvre-chef*) that was the ancestor of the wimple.

[5] Why does Alice not understand Outlandish? Outlandish is not Standard Underlandish, of course. The magic works to make Underlandish intelligible to those who speak Outlandish and vice versa, but unfortunately it cannot make Outlandish intelligible to an Englishman, nor would it English to a Frenchman.

[6] Alaïs lived during very early Capetian France, when the French king had not yet successfully regained control of the country beyond his personal domain (*Ile de France*, a strip of territory centered on Paris). Lords were in a constant state of warfare with each other, as well as with the king. It was commonplace for even clergy and peasants to come under attack from marauding armies. The Church was attempting, rather unsuccessfully, to curb the violence of the nobility, but it remained a highly turbulent era.

[7] The rabbit hole in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* perhaps owes its inspiration to a door located in Christ Church College's dining hall. Senior members of the college, such as Alice's father, would have dined at the High Table. After the evening meal concluded, senior members would not have walked amongst the undergraduates, but exited through a paneled door to a very narrow, spiral staircase, which led to Tom Quad.

[8] Potages were very common in Northern French cuisine in the high middle ages. A potage is either a stew or porridge where meat and vegetables are boiled in water until they become very thick.

[9] *Beowulf* is the oldest heroic poem in English and the first to portray a both a typical European dragon and a dragon slayer. Beowulf's dragon is referred to in Old English as *draca* (dragon) and *wyrm* (serpent). The dragon is described as having a poisonous bite, being nocturnal, treasure hoarding, inquisitive, vengeful, and fire breathing. Its movements are described by the verb *bugan*, which means to bend. Therefore, the Buganwyrm is a bending serpent akin to a dragon.
Chapter Notes

3. Alix Le Roy & Terrell Chapin[1]

From what I could tell from our admittedly short acquaintance, Alix Le Roy was an adventurous sort, full of the kind of curiosity that has been known to kill cats. She was the eldest daughter of a cloth merchant from the town of Lagny (or so she said).[2] She was hard headed enough to have been carved out of a block of Marmoreal marble, however, which made me doubt her place of origin.

She came to Underland one warm afternoon, bundled up as if to protect herself from a winter night that did not benefit from having been grouped with several other winter nights.[3] She swept across the squares of our land with those voluminous skirts and layers of contrasting fabric billowing as if she was a king—or a queen—of Underland itself.[4] With a singular purpose she approached the village in Snud, where I had helpfully informed her that the Royal Hatter could be found practicing his trade.

I was a jaded creature, many centuries old by then, and she seemed likely to cause the kind of trouble that I might find amusing. Trouble of the Alice sort. Her present trouble was of the hatting kind: she had lost her hood and was in need of an immediate replacement.[5] She imperiously stressed this numerous times as I floated through the air, leading her to the hatter.

Faced with the de-hooded lady, Terrell Chapin asked her, "How did you lose it?"

It was no wonder he was confused: the women at the court of Poch were not given to misplacing his beautiful headgear.[6] No doubt he was thinking that this woman, who stood before him flushed from her brisk walk, must be a careless sort of woman. Terrell, the proud royal hatter, was rather attached to his creations, and I could tell he was leery of a woman who was careless with hats.

"It tangled in the briers, when I slipped through the door," she puffed.[7]

"What door?"

"A door on the grounds of the monastery," she exclaimed impatiently.[8] "Can you give me another hood or not?" she demanded, and Terrell's eyes went wide: it sounded as if her foot had stomped the slate floor beneath her heavy skirts.

"A monastery?" Terrell repeated.

He was justly shocked by her avowal, because, while there were no such things as monasteries in all of Underland, he knew of them. The doors between Underland and Above were open more in those days than they are now. The Alices were not the only ones to come and go. Other humans and creatures wandered in and began new lives with much greater regularity. Therefore, it happened that Terrell's people had not been in Underland so long that he was not aware that young ladies should not be poking about the doors of monasteries. The monks would have something to say about it at
very least.

"I was curious," she responded, placing her hands on her hips.

She was turning so red that I was concerned she would pop, and, as I have noted, I do not care for the effect blood has on my fur. So, I offered a helpful Solution. "Give her a cap, Terrell, before she turns quite feral."

Terrell quirked a brow. He did enjoy a rhyme. Not as much as some hatters, mind you, but he appreciated them nonetheless.

She turned and narrowed her eyes at me. "Demon!"

I appreciated Alix's spirit after a string of several very lackluster Alices, but I did not much care for her calling me a demon. Nevertheless, if she truly thought me a demon, it did not greatly disturb her, for she had followed me anyway and it did not distract her from her purpose: she put out her hand, as if to silently call for a hood to be placed in her hand.

"Well, I'm afraid this was intended for the Queen," Terrell hedged, holding up a barett he seemed loath to bestow upon the young woman.[9]

She frowned, "I wouldn't wear it if it was intended for Queen Anne herself: that is a man's cap."[10]

Terrell smiled, but I knew it to be a false smile. He was already becoming annoyed with Alix. Mine, on the other hand, was real and broad, a grin that went from ear to ear, showing nearly every last one of my preternaturally white teeth, for I was right about Alix causing trouble.

"This is what comes from being led by devil's spawn," she added, looking askance at me. "One should guard against the devil, be forever vigilant."

To spite her I disappeared and reappeared behind her shoulder. "Then why didn't you?"

Alix was brave, however, and she would not wilt at the sight of floating, talking cats, no matter if they were devilish or not. After making a sign over herself, she readdressed herself to Terrell, ignoring my inquiry. "You're not much of a hatter if you make hats such as these for women."

"You're not much of a lady," Terrell retorted.

Oh, it was amusing, just as I had hoped it would be, but now I could see that the Worm had Turned.[11] A fool would have said they were not fond of each other, perhaps that they were even on their way to becoming certain enemies, but I am no Fool. Passion of that sort means only one thing.

She spent the next two hours telling him—with a great flourish—of the caps and hoods and veils in her world of which he knew nothing. Nominally she went to these lengths to chide him for offering her this very unfashionable headgear, but her true purpose was quite different. I could see through her, because I am oftentimes transparent and others appear similarly to me. I am terribly perceptive.

There would be no Alice to slay the Lindwurm in that age either.[12] Underland faced the poison of its bite and the pall of death without the aid of the Alice. The villagers of Underland wailed with no Champion to hear their cries. They died as so many had done before them. I have seen it…countless times.

All that curiosity and outrage wasted. On long distance trade, of all things.
Alix Le Roy had dreams of a merchant empire, and she could use a man of Terrell's skills, although she berated him and reminded him repeatedly in the course of those two hours that he was a tradesman and she was a merchant's daughter. That was all for show, a veritable sleight of hand: she wanted him for more than just his skill with a veil.

From what I observed, Alix also was rather skilled—at getting what she wanted in life.

A cap angrily flew across the room just as the mood shifted as quickly as a queen can dash across Underland. I left when the kissing began. Kissing humans are revolting—like dogs slobbering over a bone. Tongues should be used for the cleansing of fur, the drinking of milk, and nothing else. So, I departed posthaste.

That was the last Time I ever saw Terrell, for Alix took him with her right back Above. Or so I was told by the trees who saw them depart and survived what followed to tell their Tale.

Something changed at the close of that Age of Alice: our world became more separated from Above than previously. Time slowed. Alices did not wander into our world with the same frequency as before. We lost sight of Above just as we became madder than ever. Perhaps Underland had begun to give up hope. Perhaps she thought to protect its citizens from Alices who were not Alice enough to be worthy of the mantle of Champion. Although, I can not help but think Underland could have stopped this long ago if that is what she truly wished.

What could I have done? Nothing, certainly.

[1] Alix is the German or Old French version of Alice and Le Roy means King. Terrell is Old French and Old German and means "following Thor," the god of thunder. Chapin is a bastardization of Chapman, which means a shop man.

[2] Lagny had been one of the towns that participated in the Champagne Fairs in the High Middle Ages, but by 1500, when Alix came to Underland from Champagne, France, the annual fairs were no longer taking place.

[3] The Red Queen explains in *Through the Looking-Glass* that they sometimes group winter nights together in Wonderland (as many as five nights at once) for warmth.

[4] Late medieval fashions throughout Europe became heavy partially in reaction to the dropping temperatures that resulted from the Little Ice Age. French women wore long gowns with a natural waist that came to a point. Sleeves were wide and elaborately trimmed. Necklines were square, exposing the chemise. Skirts were slit to expose the underskirt and gowns were adorned by long trains.

[5] In France, England, and the Low Countries, women at the turn of the 16th century wore black hoods with veils at the back, which covered linen caps that allowed the front hair (parted in the middle) to show.

[6] The kingdom of Poch takes its name from one of the labeled compartments on the brightly colored playing board for Pochspiel, a card game originating in Germany. It appears as early as 1441 in Strasburg and was popular throughout the 15th, 16th, and 17th century in France, Germany, Switzerland, and England.

[7] The garden door to Wonderland was inspired by a door on the grounds of Christ Church College that led to the Cathedral Garden, which the Liddell girls could see from their nursery window, but were not allowed to enter. The plants along the border of the wall contained the flowers that are
mentioned in *Through the Looking Glass*.

[8] When the Champagne Fairs were operational, the fair at Lagny was held each year on January 2nd on the grounds of a Benedictine monastery.

[9] *Baretts* with their upturned brims were a fashionable choice of cap for men, but in Germany they were also worn by women over beaded, silk lined nets that held the hair. Terrell's people were originally from Bavaria, and therefore, the fashions he created mimicked German styles.

[10] Anne of Brittany was Louis XII, the French king's consort from 1499 until her death in 1514.

[11] The idiom 'the worm has turned' must date to the sixteenth century at least, for it appears in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*: "The smallest worm will turn being trodden on". Shakespeare uses the word "worm" in the archaic sense of dragon or serpent.

[12] The Germanic wurm (or worm or wyrm) is a near equivalent to a dragon, but it is wingless. The Lindwurm could be bipedal, quadrapedal, or limbless. Their bites were believed to be venomous.
Chapter Notes


I do wish it would have worked out between Aileas Keeng and Farren Lumhat. Not because I am regretful—cats are not troubled by regrets—but because if it had worked between them, I would not have eventually had to lift a paw in saving this world. Heroism does not suit cats the way sunshine and cream do, so I believe I would have preferred it that way. That is Not the way it happened, however.

The pair of them seemingly had it all in hand. If I would have played at cards—which I did not, due to the Card Soldiers being under her control—I would have bet on Aileas and Farren's hand.

From the moment she stepped through her mercuried looking-glass into Underland, it seemed that all would be well. They were not so different: she of Ulster stock and he of Lowlands stock originally, as it was told by the Lumhat clan.[2] They got along like a pair of blissfully boring toves raised around the same sundial even though she was from Above and he Below, even though fifteen years separated them in age, and even though neither of them cared for cheese.[3]

I imagine she would have eaten fistfuls of it when she first arrived, however. Half starved to death, raving mad with hunger Aileas was, which suited the rest of us just fine. Not that we were happy to see her bent over with hunger, but because, you see, by that Time, we were all Mad. Even the Royal Hatter; although not as mad as some hatters, I must point out. Misery may love company, but so do the Mad.

She was seven, which might not sound like a Promising age for a human girl child, but it was. She was just curious enough, mad enough, daring enough that she not only made for a very good companion for Farren, but also a very good future Champion. No one else except for me seemed to be thinking it at the Time, but then, none of them had lived through all the Alices. I had, you see, become something of an Expert in them.

There was none of the messy lovesickness that some of the Alices and hatters had experienced. Farren was truly a brother to Aileas and she a rather bossy and opinionated little sister to Farren. I thought it best. Things had fallen apart before due to Love. Adalheidis’ mourning of Alvis had doomed all but myself to die. Faramund’s insistence that he be the Champion in his love, Alaïs’, stead had likewise ended in darkness and death. Alix and Terrell had left Underland together, hand in hand with no thought to the coming destruction that would rain down like fire upon the heads of all the Underlandians they left behind.

Just to be sure, I teased and prodded as Aileas grew into a rather pert, little, ginger haired, grey eyed young woman right underneath Farren’s nose. I teased them about the time they spent alone together in his workroom. I teased Aileas about Farren’s tall, straight back and his carefully tended mustache, which must have tickled her lips. I teased Farren about Aileas' soft places and her off key singing, when she tended the garden. I joked about the manner in which feathers intended for tricorns could be used for more decadent purposes. I joked about a house full of Lumhat children. Neither of them
budged, neither blushed, neither could work up any display of emotion other than a droll eye roll.

It was positively, mind-numbingly uninteresting. But surely for the best. Brother and sister, truly, absolutely. I misted a breath of relief. This Alice and This Hatter were not such Idiots after all.

Love is a useless emotion. I was sure of it. I was sure that siblings were the sort who might save Underland once and for all. Certainty is something that I cherish, but as I have been gifted with a great deal more than nine lives, I suppose it does no great harm to my reputation to admit that in this one instance I was wrong.

Well, partially wrong: Love is still useless to me, but apparently vital to Underland.

Aileas slayed Cirein-cròin.[4] She killed him dead with the Vorpal sword forged centuries earlier by Alvis. She succeeded where so many not quite Alice enough Alices had failed.

I thought that was to be the end of it. But it was not.

Farren was in awe. He had known her to be a useful sort of girl. Aileas could reap and sow. She made bannock, hotch-potch, black bun, colcannon, and forfar birdies almost as well as his Mam.[5] She was not just useful, but praiseworthy. She was sharp witted and sharply curious. She was fiercely loyal and fiercely independent. She had learned what she cared to about haberdashery and then moved on to things that uniquely interested her as well, namely trade. Farren saw her less as began to travel to the far corners of our world, but he was always glad to see her return to their shared hearth.

When Aileas became a slayer, when Aileas became the Champion, she became something altogether different in Farren's eyes. He had not stood in the way of Aileas, when it came time to fight Cirein-cròin, because he was a man who respected Fate. The Oraculum showed his Aileas facing down the beast and he would not raise a hand or a voice to stop her. Kitted out in his clan's walking kilt, he had trembled beside her on the battlefield at the thought of losing her, but he put his faith in the hands of Underland.

Now she stood before him victorious, and it was as if he was seeing her for the first time. As Aileas strode about the battlefield, dragging the bloodied Vorpal sword and receiving congratulations from their friends, Farren stood apart. He could no longer approach her as the Royal Hatter, her friend.

Floating in the sunshine, pleased that nothing had spoilt my fur and I had been made to do nothing to achieve this outcome, I watched him through one eye. Farren's hands were shaking. Well, I thought, let the poor man lust after her, Underland has already been saved.

And did he ever! He made a secondary occupation of devoting himself to the contemplation of all things Aileas. I had teased them about their imaginary Love, and now it was finally blossoming, but only in Farren's heart's cottage garden, not in Aileas'.

Unrequited Love has a certain appeal that only outside observers can fully appreciate, and I was quite the observer of Farren's maudlin moping. A fact which made me less and less welcome in their home, but it is nearly impossible to keep me out of the places I wish to be. Indeed, months later, as I curled around a tricorn, awaiting Aileas' return from travel abroad for trade purposes, Farren kept giving me—the unwanted visitor—dark looks, but that was all he could do.

"Canna ye find ocht tae divert yersel, Cattie?"[6]

"Your face might freeze that way, Farren," I observed, remarking on the ugliness of his frowning face. "Although it would be no great loss to the ladies if it did."
"Ah canna wark wi ye hairs on ma hats," he grumbled.

"I shall disappear them." I stretched, pawing the air as I rolled onto my back. "It is rather selfish of you to want to be here alone when Aileas returns."

"Ah niver said that," Farren complained.

"You didn't have to. It is written on your face with Indian ink. A rough tongue scrubbing might do you some good."

Farren startled, as if he believed my taunt, but a scrubbing was delayed by Aileas' return. Farren went completely silent as she burst into the room.

"Chessur," she greeted me, coming over to briefly rub my offered belly.

_Not just anyone can touch my belly_, but this was an Alice of some considerable worth.

"Guid morn," she continued, walking over to Farren and leaning down to press a kiss to his temple.

I kneaded a bolt of fabric, watching with some amusement as he went stiff at the touch of her lips to his skin. Aileas was conventionally considered to be a pretty sort of girl, but she looked like an oddly rounded boy ever since she had taken to dressing as one. Nevertheless, Farren was visibly affected by her in her linen knee breeches, muddied, square-toed, buckled shoes, and wispy hair pulling free of its queue.

"Wis ah misst?" she teased, picking up a long, wide, white feather to drag through her hand.

"Aye, verra much…ower much, lass."

Aileas rolled her eyes, as she hopped atop the worktable, sitting upon its edge and kicking her feet.

"Wis thare naebody tae mend yer sark?"[7]

"His heart," I corrected.

Aileas turned her grey eyed gaze on me. "Hert?"

"No one to mend his heart: lovesick," I explained with a grin.

"Haud yer wheesht!" Farren exclaimed, his face beginning to flush.[8]

_This is what I lived for_. Humans are so predictable, but can be terribly amusing, when they do not intend to be so.

"He anely baters us, Farren," Aileas said with a dismissive shake of her head.[9] "Pey him nae heed. As ye peyed the gairden nae heed whiles Ah wis awa: the flouers are hauf drochtit an' seelenced for want o' watter," she cheerfully chastised.[10]

Farren had apparently had enough of merely thinking on Aileas, for he made a heated admission, knocking aside the tricorn upon which he had been working as he did, "Na! Aileas, he speaks whit he sudna, bit he speaks the trowth."[11]

Aileas frowned, because she did not understand—did not want to understand—her Farren's confession, thinking on him as a brother, as she did. "Farren," she said softly, sadly, wishing intensely that he did not mean what he said, for Aileas was wise and Farren was a fool in love.

It was not the response he was hoping for, and so Farren waited. He waited for Aileas to understand
and respond in kind, but he waited for naught. Aileas did not feel the regard for Farren that he felt for her. She never would.

Aileas moved from Farren's hearth, for it was no longer proper for her to live there with a man who wanted what she could not give him.

What should I care? Why should anyone care accept the hatter and the Alice, whose little lives were affected by this petty domestic drama? I shall tell you: one would have been advised to care, because Underland was not happy. And when Underland is not happy, its residents suffer. Underland can be a harsh mistress.

Cirein-cròin was dead and the rightful king sat atop the Diamond throne, but darkness came to Underland nonetheless. The Diamond King grew greedy, overcome by a thirst for power. He conquered the King of Spades. He brought down the kingdoms of the Blue and Green. His armies marched on the kingdom of Clubs. The Champion deserted the king's cause, fearing the darkness that lurked in the corners of the King's eyes, and she died for her treason. Farren took his own life, not willing to live in a world without Aileas.

When the monarchs of the Red, White, and Hearts brought down the Diamond King, half of Underland had been destroyed, the balance of power had been unseated, and evil haunted the land, waiting to be unleashed once more.

Evil in the form of the Reign of the Red. Evil in the form of the Jabberwocky.

[1] Aileas is the Scottish version of Alice and Keeng is Scottish for King. Farren is Old English and Gaelic and means thunder. Lum Hat is Scottish for top hat.

[2] In the year 1700, many Lowland Scots migrated to Ulster, Ireland due to famine in Scotland. Culturally and linguistically, there was initially no difference between the two groups separated by the North Channel.

[3] Toves are like badgers, according to Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*, but they are also like lizards and corkscrews. They rotate and bore. Toves live beneath sundials and live off cheese.

[4] Cirein-cròin was a Scottish, legendary, massive, sea serpent. It was said that he fed on seven whales and troubled not only the water, but also the land.

[5] Bannock is a barley and oat-flour biscuit baked on a griddle. Hotch-potch is a thick stew with meat and vegetables. Black Bun is a very rich fruit cake, made with raisins, currants, finely-chopped peel, chopped almonds and brown sugar with cinnamon and ginger; and it takes its name from its dark color. Colcannon is made from boiled cabbage, carrots, turnip and potatoes, which is drained and stewed in a pan with some butter, salt, and pepper. Forfar birdies are an oval meat pastry made of minced meat and onion. These are all traditional Scottish dishes.

*Mam* – mother (Sc)

[6] *Ocht* – anything (Sc)

[7] *Sark* – a man's shirt (Sc)

[8] *Haud yer wheesht* – be quiet (Sc)

[9] *Bathers* – teases (Sc)
[10] Drochtit – parched (Sc)

[11] Sudna – should not (Sc)
The Fifth Age: Alice & Tarrant

Chapter Notes

5. Alice Kingsleigh & Tarrant Hightopp[1]

After a thousand years of Alices and hatters, of kings and queens, of monsters and death, I had begun to think this was the way of things. The years have left me Wise and Mad, but not Omnipotent. Perhaps I had been wrong in thinking that the slaying of the beast would put an end to it all. Perhaps I had been wrong to ever believe there could ever be an End.

Hope springs eternal, however, even for cats.

I could not help but hope that Alice Kingsleigh would be Alice enough. That she would be The Alice. That Underland would rest at peace. If for no other reason than I would not have to watch its fall yet again. That had grown so tiresome.

Let me be perfectly clear: I helped the Hatter, because I wanted his hat. It had nothing at all to do with Adalheidis and Alvis. Nothing to do with regret.

Alice had slain the Jabberwocky with jaws that bit and claws that catch. But then the Alice left. Without so much as a kiss for our Hatter. I knew from experience that merely slaying the beast would not be enough. I knew from experience that Alice’s leaving would no doubt mean no good for Underland. I could find no lasting relief in the fall of the Red.

Tarrant began to worry when the Alice did not immediately return, and he was not aware that the Fate of Underland itself might be in the balance. Although, I am not sure it would have made much of a difference in the intensity of his Want. I could see the slurvishness, the possessiveness (humans believe things belong to them, while cats know better) spreading through him, as he began to think of the Alice as something more than a Champion. The Hatter's first concern may have been He and She no matter if he knew about the machinations of Underland or not.

It all seemed rather familiar. Regrettably so. Cats are creatures of habit, but we do enjoy something new to amuse us now and again. Every century or so.

Everyone else seemed content to celebrate the reign of the White. While I was unwilling to do anything about it—had I not done enough, mixing myself in politics, no less?—it did occur to me that things had gone very Badly when Underland was ruled by three and then two. How much worse could it get in the hands of One? We are all Mad here. Mirana is not above being numbered amongst us. Mad people can be delightful, no doubt, but they can also be Deadly Dangerous.

Everyone else seemed content to Pretend that the Hatter—our resident madman—was waiting. Everyone else seemed blind to the fact that he would gleefully kill Time again if necessary.

No one paid any mind to any of these dangers except for me. Instead of seeing the danger, we played at croquet, composed riddles and rhymes, and sat for tea more than once a day. I spent a good deal of Time making my fur look as luxurious as possible in case some eligible Cheshire Cat presented
herself to me. I had no use for Love, but a little toy and teasing would be no great inconvenience if
the opportunity arose. It would certainly break up the monotony at very least.

Well, I did a bit more than that. Just a bit. I teased the Hatter. Let me assure you that my teasing of
the Hatter was not for any other purpose than my own Amusement. It was not to prepare him to
share his Truth should the Alice return. No, not at all. I could care less about their illogical
interactions.

"Should the Alice return, you should think of doing something with your hair, Hatter," I suggested,
floating before his looking-glass. I was not in the habit of helping people with their grooming for fear
of hairballs, but he certainly could have used my assistance.

"How did you get in?" he grumbled disagreeably.

I ignored him, because he knew very well how I came to be anywhere: walls could not hold me. "It's
dreadful. Very orange and overly curly. Yes, you should begin to think of it immediately."

He frowned at me. "I can not see myself to look upon it, let alone think on it."

I quickly dematerialized, solving his problem and leaving naught but a grin to block his view of
himself.

"My hair is the least of my problems," Tarrant groused. "Better not to look at all." His hand moved
to wipe away his image, but he was Real and not a figure drawn upon a steamed up glass.

I sighed, coming to sit weightlessly atop his glorious hat. "You do have the hat. The Alice cannot fail
to appreciate that." If she did, she was completely daft.

"Aye," he smiled faintly, no doubt partially charmed by my rhyme. "But the Alice is young," he
quickly amended.

"The human child grew up," I reasoned. "She is not as young as she once was." If humans had at
least nine lives, like a superior species, they would not be so concerned with age, which is
necessarily fleeting.

He adjusted his hat, unseating me unapologetically. "She may never come back. It would be a waste
of Time to think vainly about my appearance."

The Hatter had never worried about cherishing Time before. Therefore, I knew his statement was a
Falsehood. The faster the grains of Time slipped through the hourglass, the better, whether waiting
for a Champion or waiting for a Wife. Oh, I could tell: the Hatter wanted the Alice hearthside, fully
Hightopp.

"There is no improving your looks," I conceded. "You are hopeless there." I always looked my best.
A quick wash of the fur and I looked Marvelous. Not so with the world weary Hatter.

He snarled at me, throwing a length of linen over the looking glass.

"But," I purred, coming to light upon his dressing table and picking my way around the clutter. "You
might prepare yourself in other ways. You might consider what you will Say to the Alice when she
returns."

"If," he corrected.

"She promised," I reminded him.
He blinked, looking down at his shoes. "She did," he lisped softly. "How very ungenerous of me to doubt Alice, when she has given me no reason to do so, when she has done nothing but been a true and good Friend. That makes me the worst kind of…"

"Hatter," I groaned testily. It would not do to have him getting lost in his own mind, and I could see he was beginning to circle that drain quite resolutely.

Straightening up, he pulled at his cuffs. "It is Time for tea."

"One moment, please, Hatter. I only ask you to consider telling the Alice how you feel. Words can be just as important as Appearances…with ladies of character."

"Alice has more Character than you can even begin to Imagine," the Hatter insisted, sounding as affronted as his yellowing eyes showed him to be.

Before I made the mistake of making myself sound too solicitous, I grinned, "Then think on what you will Say," I drawled. "Your friends have no wish to watch you moon over her if she does return. Save us that indignity at least. Be direct and be done with it. So she may proceed to rejecting you and we might proceed with our lives."

If only she would Not reject the Hatter. But he was correct, mad though he was: the Alice was young, the Alice was most likely a great deal more appealing than our Hatter, and the Alice was not from our world. Surely she would not come to stay, if she returned. Surely she would not come for our Hatter, if she came at all. Surely Underland would once again come to No Good.

I take no joy in the admission that I may have also suggested Nivens make a trip Above to seek out the Alice. Just for Curiosity's sake, mind you. Just to See what it was Alice was taking care of up there that was taking so very long.

Twitching, Nivens stood before the Queen to deliver his acquired information. "The Champion is traveling."

"How lovely," Mirana said, tilting her head with a serene smile. "Won't everyone be glad to hear how pleasantly our Champion is spending her Time Above?" she mused, with a twirl of her fingers.

She meant the Hatter, not everyone. I knew as much. Presumably everyone knew as much, although no one spoke the obvious. Unmistakable facts can be terribly boring when you compare them to the obscure. It was worth no one's Time to bring up what was as plain as the nose on Bayard's face.

 Needless to say, I doubted very much that our Hatter would be consoled by tales of Alice's travel, but then, Mirana has always been overly Optimistic.

"She traveled to another land entirely," Nivens continued. "On a ship. I couldn't follow. I simply couldn't."

I shivered. Sea travel. I could think of nothing worse. All that blasted water in which to soak and drown. "What would cause her to do a fool thing like that?" I sneered. Even an almost nearly Alice enough Alice could make very dubious decisions, it would seem.

"Trade."

Just one word. A word that gave me pause: another Alice with long distance trade on the brain. Brilliant. There is nothing new in this world or any other.

Months passed. With middling interest I watched the Hatter for signs of increasing madness and I did
the same with Mirana. I watched for signs that Alice's hoped for return would be too late—either romantically or politically—for Underland.

Yes, it seemed increasingly possible that the Alice would not return. In spite of the improbability, I continued to tease—not prepare—the Hatter for the Alice's return. Prompting him numerous times to know what he would say if she should appear, to tell her how he felt. For, slaying is simply not enough: that much was absolutely clear.

Perhaps the Alice realized for herself just how dreadful sea travel was, however, because despite the seeming improbability of it all, one day she surprised all of us by waltzing into tea time. And oh how much more appealing a surprise is to that which is expected!

What follows, I must warn you, is not my story. What follows is the Tale the Hatter Tells. He told it to anyone who would listen at least once a week for any number of years. Quite possibly his favorite story to bend a listener's ear with, I believe. It is, I suppose, rightly His Story to tell.

... Alice waltzed from the woods like a blonde vision, and the Hatter quite nearly crushed the teacup in his hand in shock. Instead, drawing upon some inner calm that he had not thought existed, he replaced the teacup in its Proper Place and stood, brushing his hands on his trousers, as his napkin fluttered to the ground. Alice was here—finally, miraculously!

"Move down!" he directed under his breath to the occupant of the seat next to his.

Nivens frowned slightly, hating to always be made to move down at the Hatter's tea parties—he was fastidious enough to find the whole thing rather repugnant—but then, seeing that it was for the returning Champion, he acceded to the demand cloaked poorly as a request with an exaggerated sigh.

A chorus of hello, Alice and good day, Alice, and you're back, Alice and the clapping of paws followed the blonde as she strolled down the length of the table towards the newly abandoned chair, which the Hatter had pulled out with as much gusto as he could demonstrate.

His heart was hammering out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat," because it seemed a very Alicey song and his heart was having a very Alicey moment, as she approached him smiling a very Friendly Smile. It did not escape him that this smile was saved most exclusively for him, for she was not looking to her right at the others gathered there for tea.

"Welcome back, Alice," he lisped with a shy smile, when she stopped before the chair he held for her.

She reached up to touch his sleeve as she took her seat, and he could very nearly feel the softness of her fingers through his woolen coat.

"I'm so happy to be back," she said softly.

The feeling was most definitely returned—tenfold! His mouth could not find the words, but he was certain that his eyes and fidgety face were speaking for him. Oh, there was so much to say.

He reached for the sugar bowl—for salt could not be had at the moment and Luck was desperately needed—and took a pinch, throwing it over his shoulder before taking his seat.

"Well isn't this a happy reunion," the Cheshire Cat purred.
Hatter did not rise to the bait of the thick sarcasm of Chessur's tone. He could only stare in wonder at his Alice here before him. He shook himself from his reverie, however, recognizing that he was being a most Negligent host. If he wanted her to be His, he best pour on the charm in addition to the sugar.

"Tea, Alice?" he asked, his hand shaking only slightly as he reached for the teapot. First, he had not cracked his cup, and now it looked like he might manage to pour tea without scalding anyone. He was doing, for all intents and purposes, better than he had expected he might if... *no, no, no!* **doubting Alice would never do!**... *when* Alice tripped back into his life.

Except, he realized just in Time, there was a dormouse asleep in what had been Niven's teacup and what was now Alice's teacup, so he could not actually follow through with his offer unless he wanted to drown his friend and offer Alice Dormouse Tea, neither of which sounded terribly pleasant.

Hatter cleared his throat. "Mallymkun," he said rather loudly in order to wake her, for the little, fierce warrior had returned to her former form as a drowsy eyed dormouse due to the effects of peacetime, no doubt. "Klotchyn."[2]

"Don't wake her," Alice protested, holding her hand over the cup.

"Yes, don' wake me," Mally mumbled, having awakened enough to speak and adjust her position within the cup so that her back paws dangled over its edge.

"I'll simply have a scone," Alice explained, when she saw the disappointed look that Hatter could not hide quickly enough from her, as he set the teapot back down.

"Barrie norrie!" Thackery exclaimed with a closed fist pound on the table that helpfully sent a tray of scones flying in her direction.[3] Granted, it was her head they were aimed at and she had to duck, but it was a cleverly efficient delivery method nonetheless. Even Hatter could appreciate that, despite Alice's close call; particularly when it gave him the opportunity to pick wayward crumbs from Alice's loose curls, which he did rather adroitly. This was not, after all, their first tea party: Hatter was skilled in crumb, jam, and cream removal from cotton, wool, silk, and all varieties of fur.

In thanks, she turned that Only for Hatter Smile on him once more, and the things he was supposed to Say to her began to tumble around his mind most noisily, his hand freezing near her cheek. **Close enough to touch.**

"Have you returned to us?" Nivens inquired with a little twitch of his nose. "For more than a visit?" he added. He might have had more than a passing interest in her answer, as he was always tasked with seeking her when she was Above. He did not particularly relish that role, although it added to his air of importance.

Alice nodded, smoothing her napkin across her lap. "Yes, I expect to stay."

Tarrant's elbow, which was rudely resting on the table's edge, jerked and slid from the table, knocking off his teaspoon and sending it flying harmlessly off to the right.

She turned her gaze on Tarrant, looking a little amused at the disturbance. "If my friends will have me."

"Tae hiv an' tae haud," Thackery twittered, giving a good yank to one ear.
Tarrant giggled to relieve the nervous bubbling in his stomach.

"You've done travelling your world?" Nivens pressed, stirring his tea silently.

"You have such an adventurous spirit," Tarrant lisped with reverence.

"That is great praise, indeed, but I do enjoy travel. I should very much like to explore this world," Alice asserted.

"I think we can all guess who would be willing to go with you, the Alice," Chessur drawled.

"Well, I should be glad of the company," Alice nodded.

Tarrant's eyebrows reached high, as he realized that he was being spoken about. It made him feel distracted and unraveled. "You will have scones, and your friends will have…I'll have…have…"

Hatter stuttered.

"Tea?" Alice offered, nodding towards the teapot.

"No, no…that is not right," he said, shaking his head. "I have some tea, you see," he said, bending over to feel for his napkin. It was somewhere on the ground, when properly it should be on his head or on in his lap. His hat was already on his hat, so he intended to replace the napkin on his lap.

"Hatter?" Alice said, addressing him from above. "Are you aware that you have made a rhyme?"

A rhyme? Why, yes, he did! The realization was rather shocking, and he knocked his head in his hurry to sit back up, setting the china rattling. He giggled, napkin in hand, before smoothing it over his thigh, as his Adam's apple did a visible dance. "Yes, I believe I did," he lisped.

"It was lovely," Alice assured him.

"Quiet, please," Mally begged from her cup. "Some of us are trying to sleep, you know."

Tarrant quickly conducted an imaginary orchestra, his lace cuffs brushing the crumbs from his plate as he did, singing so as to put his little friend back to sleep:

"Wee little fingers
Eyes wide and bright
Now sound asleep
Until morning light." [4]

"One of us is trying to sleep," Chessur corrected. "The rest of are trying not to be sick."

"The singing wasn't so bad really," Nivens offered helpfully.

"I wasn't referring to the singing," Chessur said, slowly blinking his bright eyes.

"Have you a cold?" Alice innocently asked, turning an anxious gaze on the Cat.

"Nausea," the Cat corrected, "sickness of the stomach churning kind due to Ridiculous Humans. I could cut the Frivolous Flattery at this table with a fish-knife."

"How unfortunate that we don't have any fish-knives at hand," Alice smirked.
Tarrant could not help but giggle once: Alice was a Snark. It was a good thing he had a great deal of thimbles on hand.[5]

"Divna bowk on the table, Cattie," Thackery warned the sarcastic feline.[6]

"I would never be so Rude," Chessur stated with indignation.

Hatter merely wanted everyone to go silent or go away, because there were things he was supposed to say, things he had practiced telling Alice, and which needed some measure of quiet to do so. Otherwise, they would come out in a muddle, which would not suit.

"What is so fragile even saying its name can break it?" he asked, as his be-thimed fingers traced the silverware set before him.[7]

Mally's head peeked over the cup, eyes a blink. "Quiet now!" she called out. She paused to nod at Alice, as if she had just realized the Champion had returned, which may have been the case, given her sleepy repose. "Hatta's got something he wants to say," the Dormouse finished authoritively.

Hatter nodded. Yes, he did. Except, there were now five pairs of eyes trained upon him, most importantly Alice's eyes. Alice's lovely brown eyes, looking just at him and waiting for him to speak. She would be disappointed, he feared. \textit{He could never say this as eloquently as he wanted, and she deserved nothing but the best.}

"I'll have…" he began again, pausing to nervously straighten his bowtie so that his hands did not flap uselessly as they seemed to want to do. Breathing deeply, he began again, "I'll have you, Alice…if you'll have me."

He closed his eyes as soon as the words were out. That was not exactly how he had planned to say it over the past few months; \textit{no}, he reminded himself, \textit{more than a year}. More than a year he had been running through what he would say, and perhaps that had been too long, perhaps the anticipation was too much. His words had not been pretty or according to plan, as he had wanted them to be when he asked the Alice…

She touched his hand. Her fingers, just as soft and warm as he had imagined them to be countless times, worked his hand open so she could place her hand in his.

"Hatter…"

"Tarrant," he interrupted her, which may have been Discourteous, but which was also entirely Necessary, because he so wanted to hear her say it.

"Tarrant," she corrected herself. "Is that a…?"

"An offer," he interrupted again, frowning at himself for being so very Impatient. "It is an offer," he reiterated, his words insisting on being heard. "I'm offering myself, but I'm doing it all out of order."

"Start at the beginning," she urged, squeezing his hand, which he was attempting to pull back, so he could grip at his hair in disgust for doing it all wrong.

"I've spoilt it by being Early," he grimaced.

"On the contrary: you're late. You have no idea how late," Chessur sighed with a flick of his tail.

Nivens began to feel for his pocket watch to assess the Cat's pronouncement, as he considered himself to be an Authority on Lateness.
It did feel like a very long Time in coming, Hatter could not help but admit. But for Alice, it no doubt felt very Sudden. It occurred to him, however, staring back at Alice and feeling her hand in his, that he had begun with the offer and yet Alice was still here, having not stood up and skipped back Above. That was either extremely Good Luck or a very Good Sign.

Whatever the case, he gathered his nerve to begin where he had intended on beginning. He wanted very much for Alice to know how highly he esteemed her. "You are very muchy Alice, and I quite like that muchiness. I quite admire it. You are kind and curious and dedicated to friends and very useful in a crisis. All very good qualities."

"She is pretty," Mally supplied. "You think her pretty, and she would like to hear it, I suppose."

Tarrant was glad for that suggestion, for Mally might be a dormouse, but she was also a female. If she thought Alice might like to hear how very pretty he thought her, he would be happy to oblige. If he had some paper, he would happily compose a sonnet in her honor. But as he did not, he said whatever flew into his mind: "You're as pretty as a bread-and-butterfly indulging in weak tea with cream. Or a lizard lazing on a sunny stone. Or a flamboyant flamingo. Or a particularly eager eaglet. Or…well, Alice, dear, I think you're the prettiest lass in all of Underland."

Alice blushed to the tips of her ears. It was a becoming blush, but he could not help but think that she looked rather uncomfortable. Not at all the feeling that he was hoping to kindle in her heart.

Concerned that he had embarrassed Alice by comparing her to non-human things, he worried his lip. "Did I do wrong to praise you just so?" It might have sounded absolutely gallymoggers to her Aboveland ears for all he knew. Such pretty, Alice ears, he considered.

"It was done just right!" Mally called from her cup, thumping the side enthusiastically. "Wasn't it, the Alice?" she asked encouragingly.

"I'm sure the Alice is completely enamored," Chessur said flatly.

"It was…most unusual, most creative," Alice conceded with a nervous smile. "Thank you most kindly, but should…are these the sort of the things to be said in company?" As she asked her question, her eyes roved over the table, taking in the other teatime guests, who were all evidently exceedingly interested in this discussion.

"I should like to hear them," Nivens put in. "If indeed you are asking my opinion, which I rather think you should: I am something of a representative of the Queen at this tea."

"You are nothing of the sort," Chessur contradicted. "Nevertheless, I would like to hear his nonsensical ramblings as well. They're bound to be Terribly Amusing."

"We all would," Mally agreed. "We've been waitin' to hear 'em."

"Pins and needles!" Thackery called out.

"Shall I?" Tarrant asked, waiting for Alice's permission to continue, for it was only Alice's opinion he cared about in this case. When she did not immediately respond, Tarrant felt Dread grow inside of him, crowding out all other emotions. "The thought that you could feel the same for me as I do for you is Nonsense, for I know there are any number of things that would keep you, Alice, for caring for me, a mad hatter, but…"

"For shame!" Mally called out, climbing from her cup. "I'll stick 'er myself if that's 'ow it will be."

"Now wait," Alice said, looking from Mally, who was currently threatening with a hatpin at her
elbow, to Tarrant, who was looking rather expectantly at her. "Wait one moment, please. I rather think I am not being given much Credit."

"We don't have a great deal on hand, I'm afraid. It went on sale—ten shillings, six pence—yesterday and it flew off the shelves," Tarrant said with a giggle, miming with one hand the flapping of wings.[8]

Alice stood, her one hand still in his as she placed her napkin on the table and turned to address the rest of the table. "It is very good to see all of you and I expect we shall visit more soon, but Tarrant I have things to discuss. Private things," she added looking squarely at the Hatter. "Despite the evident interest of the group, I can tell what kind of Offer this is and it is not the kind that should be made before a crowd."

Tarrant stood at this pronouncement, nearly knocking over the table and dragging a corner of the tablecloth with him in his eagerness to go Anywhere with Alice. Even if she was a little cross with him, for he liked cross, bossy Alice—it was the First Alice he ever had the pleasure of meeting.

"How very selfish," Chessur observed.

"Don't follow us," Alice pointedly directed at the Cat.

"Where are we going?" Tarrant asked quietly. It might be his world, but at the moment he was at Alice's command.

"I think the Windmill will suit," she said nodding to the ramshackle building just steps away.

Tarrant responded most adeptly to this idea, half dragging her towards its closed door, which was only ajar for the briefest of moments as he opened it wide enough for Alice to step through and happily slammed it behind them, leaving them peaceably alone. He leaned against its surface, drawing strength from its solidity, as he stared agape at Alice. His thimbles tapped metallically against the wood, providing an atonal musical accompaniment to their private meeting.

She looked just as he remembered her, for he had learned her face well. He wanted to learn how she felt, tasted, and smelled too.

"Are you cross?" he murmured.

"Should I be?" she teased softly.

He swallowed, reminding himself to silence his chirping Fears: Alice is still here, listening to what I would tell her. "Alice, I love you."

Oh, but did it have to be that? He did not recall speaking the words, but he heard them reverberating back at him off the walls and there was no one in the Windmill but himself and Alice, so it must have been himself. For, it would have been very odd for Alice to say such a thing to herself and the doorknob was pressed into his back effectively silencing it, which left only him, the Mad Hatter. Admittedly, that he was in love with her made him the likely culprit whether they were alone or not.

He blinked, having very nearly confused himself. He would have sighed at himself, but he was quite familiar with doing things and only learning about them later. Yes, he was certain he had said it: it was him.

It gave him a strange kind of self-assurance to already have those words floating about the room and Alice still standing before him, so he pressed on, "You are a most excellent friend to have, Alice, and a wise man would be satisfied with Friendship, but I am not a wise man. I am thoroughly mad, and I
found myself quite madly in love with you by the time you laid waste to the Jabberwocky. I have stayed in love with you while you were above, wishing that I had told that important detail you before you left." He took a deep breath, having used all of the air inside of him like a deflating balloon in his rush to tell Alice how he felt.

"I thought…" Alice said, looking down at the dusty floor as the toe of her boot drew meaningless shapes in its grime, "I thought perhaps that you might be…or that at very least you might fancy me. It occurred to me just as I was leaving on Frabjous Day…is that terribly presumptuous?"

"It isn't terrible at all, except to say that it is terribly astute," Tarrant suggested. "Shows that you're rather saganistute."

"I…liked the idea," Alice said softly, looking at him with wide, suddenly muchy eyes.

Tarrant wanted to dash back outside to check her teacup for traces of Cock and Bull Tonic, but he remembered with a start that Mally had occupied the blonde's cup and therefore, she could not have ingested any Cock and Bull.[9] The only conclusion must be! That must mean! There could be no other explanation! If she claimed that she liked the idea of him loving her, then she must mean it, for Alice would never knowingly lie to him. Confidence bloomed within him as brightly as the chatty, cheery Tiger Lilies that danced beneath his bedroom window.

"I think I am very much on my way to feeling the same. To," she paused to reach out a hand to run her thumb and forefinger over his lapel, "loving you. That is why I have come back: to tell you how I feel."

It was simply beyond his abilities to constrain himself. He held out his arms to her. To her credit, Alice, muchy Alice, did not hesitate: she stepped into his arms and pressed her head to his chest.

He felt her breath stir his bowtie, he held her narrow waist, and he smelled her sweet Aliceness. His Senses were very nearly overwhelmed with Alicey goodness. He was learning her already, and yet there was so much more to learn. It had been many years since he sat at a desk, but he was certain he could be a very good student in the subject of Alice.

"There will be time enough for offers, Tarrant. Private offers without an audience," she said with an upward quirk of her lips, as she lifted her head to meet his gaze.

Yes, he would find out later that Alice was not fond of public pronouncements and offers. He was not aware of that at that moment, but he felt a bit sheepish nonetheless. "I was quite…carried away, Alice," he confessed. "I frequently am."

Alice's little nod indicated her agreement just as he felt her fingers rub against his the tweed of his jacket. He wished he had never put the dastardly thing on this morning so that there would be less between himself and his dear Alice.

"I will certainly forgive you your eagerness, as long as you forgive my tardiness in returning to you. Alices are uncommonly late creatures, I'm afraid."

He would forgive her much graver things, but he imagined he would never have to. Not when he took into account the earnest look she was giving him—this was the look of someone who would take great care with him, who would take him into her heart. It had been so very long since he had felt that particular comfort; and this would be far finer, for Alice had the Heart of a Champion. This would be cherishing of the highest order.

"It is forgotten, Alice." Indeed, the months since Alice left were already very much forgot. Who
could spare room in one's already crowded mind for thoughts of an Absent Alice when there was Absolutely At Hand Alice waiting to make memories to fill up that space? "I am fortunately forgetful," he promised her.

"Excellent," she said biting her lower lip in contemplation. "If that is forgotten, we can begin building new Memories, can we not?"

Oh, she read his mind: clever Alice. "Indeed," he hurriedly acceded.

"I should like to explore Us—you and me—types of Memory creation," she whispered conspiratorially to him.

He nodded, his nose bumping hers slightly. *Yes! Yes, what a Grand Suggestion.* One he was more than happy to pursue. "May we begin?" he asked inches from her lips. He quickly removed his hat with one hand and tossed it onto a deserted table, using his hard earned hat throwing skills for a more pleasant purpose than he had previously had cause. "Begin at once?" he asked again on a whisper.

Her sly smile almost put him in mind of a certain Cat, as he bridged the distance between his lips and hers, while her hands snaked under his coat to lie flat against his chest. The contact of her soft lips and the tempting feel of her warm hands smoothing across his front were enough to make him gasp.

She pulled back slightly, but he chased her; there was a slight clicking of teeth, but he was not deterred, he would not give up so easily. There was a popular Confusion abroad that First Things were Perfect, but he knew better. First Things were exhilarating, exciting, excellent, but they were not elementary and rarely perfect. His first hat was not perfect, but he remembered it most fondly. This kiss would not likely be perfectly choreographed, but he would remember it forever, and he and Alice would learn how to better it—together.

He anchored himself to her as he wrapped his fingers under her jaw and into the fine hair at the nape of her neck before pressing his lips to hers once again. She tasted of…Alice, just as he had imagined she would. Not strawberry tarts or lemonade or spun sugar—inferior things all of them—Just Alice. And she felt like Alice too, leaning against him; her lithe form inclining against him most pleasantly. Alice was kissing him back—*A miracle, indeed!*—and slipping one of those naughty, wandering hands along the band of his collar, as if she was feeling for a pulse. If she located it, she would find it racing along merrily enough, trying to outpace his racing thoughts, no doubt, in a race to the finish line.

He wanted more—he always would, for he was greedy and slurvish and covetous—but he stopped, he broke their first kiss as his breath became ragged with awe and fever and restraint. He cursed his meddlesome clothing for the second time today for denying him what he Wanted.

This was only the beginning, he reminded himself: he need not carry away Alice or let himself be carried away by the Madness. The kiss had begun soft and not reached the desperation that it might have with his mouth open against hers, his tongue sweeping against hers, and the answer of hips pressing against hips. No, that was for another Time. This was a kiss that promised future Kisses, a kiss that would no doubt keep Tarrant awake that night with thoughts of Endless Possibilities.

"Are we stopping?" she inquired, blinking confusedly.

"We're just beginning," he promised her.

"Oh," Alice sighed. She was not, it seemed, entirely satisfied, however: she rocked forward on the balls of her feet and pressed one last kiss to the corner of his mouth, just off-center, a pleasantly
irregular kiss, only slightly demanding. She stood back flat on her heels.

For a moment he merely admired Alice Just Kissed, who was just as pretty as Just Alice, but also imbued with a flush across her cheeks and moistened lips.

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" he asked, reverently stroking her temple with be-thimbled and bare fingers both and touching his forehead to hers.

Alice licked her lips, causing Tarrant to ponder whether he would ever be able to think upon anything other than those lips ever again. Those lips were beginning to imitate that Cheshire smile once more, as if she had just caught a canary. He rather hoped she had not: he liked canaries. But then, he had not noticed any canaries flapping around the Windmill. So, it seemed unlikely…

"I have thought a great deal about ravens and writing desks."

A riddle—his favorite; why, yes, he could think of other things, he realized with relief. Riddles, canaries, cats, and Alice lips all could fit inside his crowded mind if he concentrated hard enough. For he would no doubt become a very tiresome and useless hatter if he spent Time dwelling on nothing but Alice lips. There would be plenty of Time for Alice lips and Explorations and Offers and any number of wonderful things, including the investigation of previously unsolvable riddles.

He giggled, his shoulders shrugging, "So have I! Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

She beamed at him, positively beamed, and his mind went blessedly silent as she began to answer, "I would very much like to find out."

And they did. They most assuredly did. Together.

…

I was there the day Underland inverted, going from Above to Below. I was there the day it became Underland. We—Underland and I—have witnessed it all together, which might be why Underland speaks to me. Not regularly, mind you, but on occasion. On this particular occasion, sitting outside the Windmill as those two whispered and promised behind its door, Underland whispered in my ear: It is done.

I can see now that Underland was correct. Since the Alice returned and the Hatter spoke his Truth and she took him into her Heart, darkness has not swept our world as it did in the past. I finally see what was hidden to me for all those years: it was not enough to simply slay, because Underland required Love—the Love of an Alice and a hatter. And this pair, this Alice and her hatter were more than enough; they were absolutely Alice and Hatter.

Their Love produced children for the thrones of the Red, Green, and Blue. By the next generation it had created grandchildren for the kingdoms of the Hearts, Spades, Clubs, and Diamonds. In their care and under their careful guidance, balance and harmony have settled over our land.

Cats do not feel regret. If I had dabbled in politics earlier and if I had come to Alvis' aid before the world inverted, there would have been no Underland as it is now. I would not be immortal and immaterial. There would have been no Other Alices. No additional hatters. There would have been no Alice Kingsleigh and Tarrant Hightopp.

I was rather fond of some of those Alices and hatters, but…

Cats have no regrets.
It all happened as it should.

THE END

[1] Alice is an English name meaning noble. Tarrant is Welsh and means thunder.

[2] Klotchyn – heads up, pay attention (Glossary of terms for Burton's Alice in Wonderland)

[3] Barrie – excellent (Sc); norrie – notion (Sc)

[4] This is a verse from "Rock-a-bye Baby," which is both a lullaby and nursery rhyme. Origins are debated, but the earliest recorded version of the rhyme can be found in Mother Goose's Melody (London, c. 1765), possibly published by John Newbery.

[5] Lewis' poem, "The Hunting of the Snark," describes the Snark as being unimaginable. Alice's snarky behavior is just another aspect of her unimaginable character, for she is as curious to Tarrant and he is to her. According to the poem, one of the ways to seek the Snark is with thimbles.

[6] Divna – don't (interrogative form) (Sc); bowk – vomit (Sc)


[8] 10/6 is the price of the Mad Hatter's hat, according to the card tucked in the brim.

[9] A cock and bull story is one that is fabricated to deceive or amuse. The earliest recorded use of the phrase is in John Day's 1608 play, Law-trickes or Who Would Have Thought It, but the proverb evidently was already much in use by that time.

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