All Wrong (Remix)
by scrivner_scribbler

Summary

When Alice steps back through the Looking Glass, everyone tries to convince her that Wonderland wasn't real. Before Hatter can reunite with her, the Wonderland shifts power yet again, preventing him from crossing into Alice's world. Evidence starts to vanish, and Alice begins questioning her sanity. Alice tries to move forward even though Hatter, Jack, and the Queen are hard to forget. Wonderland finds Alice, and she is thrust into its twisted politics once again. The only problem is something's happened to Hatter.

Notes

Hi guys! This is a remix of a fic I found a few year back by ky-sta on deviantart (the title is the same). It really stuck with me, so I wanted to try reworking it.

Please use the link below and give the author mad props for her work, on this fic and on others! (I'll also post it at the end of this chapter so I can hyperlink it it properly).

https://www.deviantart.com/ky-sta/gallery/?catpath=%2F&edit=0&q=all+wrong

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by All Wrong by ky-sta
Chapter 1

It was a shock for Alice to wake up in a hospital bed. She knew she wasn’t in that old building anymore—her fingers rested on something rough and scratchy and even with her eyes closed, it was too bright. The fluorescent lights and white walls were blinding when she first woke. She squeezed her eyes shut but the brightness stained the back of her eyelids. Her head ached and she moaned. Like when she stared into a stage light too long, the white wouldn’t go away.

She forced herself to blink, to wake up. White remained around her, but slowly she was able to discern light shades of blue and yellow on the wall, her bed, and the monitors. And then she saw the people.

“Mom?”

Her mother looked up from her lap. “Oh, sweetie. I’m so glad you’re back.”

“I’m sorry I worried you.”

“You always worry me,” she said with a small smile. “This time was just a little more taxing.”

“How long was I out?” Alice tried to sit up, but her mother gently pushed her back.

“An hour or so. You were lucky someone found you.”

“What did you tell the police?”

Her mother raised an eyebrow. “Police?”

“Didn’t you call 911 or Missing Persons?”

Her mother smiled again, but this time it did not reach her eyes. “Honey, you were only gone for a few hours. I was worried but…” She didn’t need to continue.

Alice knew the protocols of missing persons, had memorized them once she began searching for her dad. She had figured that time worked differently in Wonderland—after all, it did in the Carroll story.

But hours? She had been in Wonderland for two days. Even with a strange sort of time exchange, how could two days only be worth a few hours? It seemed unfair. Unreal.

Nurses began to bustle around her, asking her the perfunctory questions about dizziness, nausea, headaches. She shook her head to all except the last, still mulling over the temporal misplacement.

Perhaps it was the Looking Glass? Maybe it had the power to pick people up and place them back right where (or when) they left. Or maybe it placed them where they were needed? She hadn’t had time to ask Jack or Hatter about the quantum mechanics of the whole thing.

Hatter.

Alice sat up very quickly. Probably more quickly than the nurses would have allowed if they had been there, but they had left with her mother a few moments ago, probably to deliver a logical yet incorrect diagnosis. Concussion, they would say, or emotional trauma. Don’t listen to her stories, Mrs. Hanson, her mind invented them to cope with the stress of it all. None of those people ever existed. It’s all in her head. We’d like to keep her and run some tests, if you don’t mind?
A shudder ran down Alice’s spine. After what did (or didn’t) just happen in Wonderland, the idea of staying in a hospital or asylum or psychiatric ward terrified her.

She wanted to whisper his name though. Just once. As if saying it would affirm that everything in Wonderland was real. That he was real.

But what if the nurses came in? Wouldn’t that be enough proof to drag her away to a place with padded walls, barred windows, and a lot more white?

When the nurses finally did come back, she still had not said a word. They explained that she had probably hit her head on something, that she should try to rest for the next couple days and forget about the whole ordeal. Alice remained silent through it all, nodding politely and smiling when they prompted her to. Once everyone was satisfied that she was “well,” her mother led her out to the car.

It wasn’t until she arrived home that she noticed it. She was packing up the maps, pins, and print outs that had cluttered her desk during the past ten years when she realized that her right arm was plain and bare once more. There was no scaly green tattoo printed on it.

Slowly, Alice’s shaking fingers traced over her bare skin, trying to find swirls that were no longer there. Nothing was left of it.

“Yeah,” Hatter had said, “that’s not going to come off. Sorry.”

“Well, it’s off Hatter,” she said grimly.

Her fingers continued brush along her skin as she turned back to her desk. For ten years, this corner of her life had been dedicated to her father. She had plotted and tracked middle aged men across the globe, hoping that one day she would stumble across him, holing up in some remote area. The map had started when she was little, but over the years it had grown into an unhealthy obsession. People said she was crazy for doing it. Even her mother, who indulged her, suggested that she leave it be. No one thought she could find him, but she did.

Alice smiled down at her arm. She had found a lot of things in Wonderland that she hadn’t been expecting, not just her father.

But then again, did she?

Her fingers stopped. There was no tattoo. There was no proof that any of it was real. Her father was dead, Jack was gone, and Hatter was... Had she imagined it all? Already, the details about Wonderland were growing fuzzy. Certain things remained clear, like the water spraying her face as a boat zipped along the lake, the plastic sparkles plastered on the Hearts casino, saying goodbye to Hatter in front of the Looking Glass. But other parts had started to fade and fizzle, as memories do. The edges going blurry and indistinct.

Of course it was real, she assured herself as she resumed packing the map away. There was no way that she could have imagined someone like Hatter. He was too...too...Well she didn’t what he was exactly but he was definitely too much of something. He had to exist.

And he had said that he would visit her. Alice had to believe he would. Especially after that goodbye, she blushed just thinking about it. She had tried to be witty and, well, the result was less than spectacular. But, the moment had seemed charged and she had to say something. He had looked at her, and she had thought that maybe something was happening. Certainly, she felt different around him. More combative. More sarcastic. More vulnerable. Happy.
She had been happy with him. She had cared for him. And the way he looked at her, she thought he had cared for her too.

Could she have imagined all that? She wasn’t sure.

She put down the box. “Mom, I’m going out.” Then she grabbed her scarf and scrambled out the door.

It was colder than she expected. Wind nipped at her arms until she had to hold them to keep warm. It was a few minutes before she realized that she had been rubbing her arm again. Tracing a pattern that was no longer there.

When she reached the building, Alice paused. No construction workers were standing outside, guarding the entrance. There was no yellow tape to warn away pedestrians—nothing to indicate that building was condemned. All was empty and quiet.

The sky darkened with grey clouds, and her fingertips hovered inches above the damp side rail. If she went in and nothing was there, she didn’t think she could handle it.

The air seemed to press down on her, as if it was adding weight to her decision.

She ascended slowly, testing each step. Sure, the staircase had held her before, but it had been dark then and she had not seen the flakes of rust that fell to the ground like snow.

Just as with the ground floor, no one was upstairs. The walls were damp, probably from last night’s storm, and the exposed pipes dripped and even rattled. Small puddles of water formed beneath each leak so that the drops did not echo when they hit the ground, they just died with a quiet splat. Clear strips of plastic tarp dangled from the ceiling. Like threads from a broken cobweb, they fluttered in the breeze. Alice shivered.

She made her way to the center of the room, looking for some sparkle or glint. Anything that would indicate that the Looking Glass was still here, that it existed. But all was dark.

Slowly, she turned around, as if this would somehow summon the portal. After the third revolution, everything remained the same, and Alice stopped spinning.

A cracking and tearing echoed throughout the room, sending out tremors that reached deep into her chest. Or maybe, the room was not splintering, maybe it was all in her head again. Her nails dug into her palms as she tried to hold it all together. The fear, the pain, the loss. She tried to keep herself from shaking to pieces, tried to focus on the pain in her hands, but she felt parts of herself chip and fall away.

None of it was real. Wonderland, Charlie, Jack, Hatter—all of it was in her head.

She wanted to sit and sob on the floor, letting the leaky pipes drip onto her. Parts of her were already breaking, why not let everything shatter to pieces? Alice lowered herself to the floor, trying to remain steady on the way down. But she did not cry, forced herself to stay dry-eyed as she felt the cracks inside her spread.

Why did it hurt so much? Shouldn’t losing something imaginary be painless? Effortless? Yet it felt like so much more was gone.

Two days. Only two days in Wonderland yet somehow she managed to lose her father and defeat a dictator and meet someone. Was that why everything was breaking? Because she had changed so much? Or was it because her whole adventure was an hour long dream?
Alice wanted to believe that it all had happened, that Wonderland and its inhabitants existed. Yet without the Looking Glass, she had no proof. Everything and everyone from Wonderland had stayed in Wonderland. And even if Hatter wanted to visit, even if all of this was real, he couldn’t reach her without the portal—at least, that’s how she suspected it would have worked.

After a few deep breaths, she stood and headed back home. The shattering feeling in her chest had stopped, or at least dissipated. Her mother stared at her when with wide eyes, but said nothing. Alice didn’t blame her mother’s expression when she looked in her own mirror and saw a crack addict staring back. Red-rimmed eyes, dirt smudged on her face and jeans, hair a rat’s nest. It wasn’t pretty.

But at least it was real.

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Every few days, she went to check on the building, to see if a large gilded mirror had magically reappeared. But after a week, they finished the demolition and there was no more building to haunt.

She took to wandering through antique shops and wading through odd knickknacks in the hopes that she would stumble across something strange and queer. Something Wonderlandian. However, this practice, too, stopped after a few weeks. Perhaps, she figured, the mirror could not be found or stumbled upon. It revealed itself when it chose, to whomever it chose. Magical objects did that sometimes, she read.

The dream she held onto the longest was Hatter. Alice kept believing that he would come to her, that he would find her no matter where the Looking Glass decided to leave him. Hatter was determined and relentless and brave. He would come. But when a month passed, then two, and Hatter still had not appeared, she let that dream die as well.

None of it was real. It was all in her head.

Here's the hyperlink to ky-sta's *All Wrong* fic specifically and her general page.
Hatter bounced on the balls of his feet but his reflection was just standing there and smiling. That was one of the funny things about the Looking Glass, it wasn’t always an exact copy. Sure, there were times when it worked like a normal mirror—like right before Alice left—but other times it did weird things. Like now, his reflection seemed calm and happy while he was coiled tight and anxious.

He was so keyed up that when Jack tapped him on the shoulder, he swung blindly at the prince. “Good thing you ducked,” he said.

“Yes. Well,” Jack brushed off his suit, “good thing you missed. I would hate for you to be charged with treason. Again.”

He was trying to be funny so Hatter forced a smile. It was hard. Even though Alice rejected Jack’s pretty-boy proposal, he still didn’t like the prince. He was a good prince, Hatter was sure, but he was still trying to gauge if he was a good person.

“Did you get it?” he asked.

Jack smirked. With a flourish, he pulled out a plastic bag filled with papers and official looking documents.

“Thanks.” Hatter snatched it and began rifling through its contents.

The prince sighed. “It’s all there. Passport, ID, Social Security number—”

“What?”

“Didn’t you read over the info from the White Rabbits?”

“Suppose I didn’t.”

He sighed again. “Just ask Alice when you get there.”

Alice. Hatter had tried not to think about her. Not too much. It hurt, ached.

The moment she left, he’d felt a lot of things, and none of them were particularly pleasant. After only a few seconds, he was charging towards the Looking Glass, ready to dive in after her. Jack, however, had stopped him. He started babbling about identification and records and all sorts of things that needed to be sorted out if Hatter wanted to go after her. After much persuasion, Hatter agreed to wait a few days.

Now he stood in front of the portal, the plastic baggy clutched in his hand as if it were the Stone of Wonderland itself.

Jack had been gracious through the whole ordeal, and he had even tried to make peace with Hatter. But trusting the prince was proving harder in practice. Jack had led them all into danger so many times that it seemed unnatural not to distrust him. His history with Alice didn’t help matters either. Of course, Duchess and the prince appeared to be an item, so maybe he had moved on.

None of that mattered. Not really. Jack was staying, and he was going after her. After Alice.

The Looking Glass began to hum with life. His smiling reflection vibrated a little, like water disturbed by a breeze. He raised a finger wanting to just touch the edge of the portal, just to see what
it felt like, to see if it made ripples.

Before he could do anything though, a commotion drew his attention to the room’s entrance.

“Jack!” A man was knocking down suits as he stormed towards the front of the room. Indistinct at first, but as he continued to march towards the portal, his features became clearer. Blonde hair, ice blue eyes. Tall and slim.

By the time he roared Jack’s name again, Hatter recognized him.

He stiffened.

“Knave?”

“Jack, you’ve been busy since I was away.” The man bounded up the steps towards Hatter and the prince. His voice seemed jolly enough, but there was a slight edge to it.

“Busy as usual.” Jack’s stance was relaxed, but Hatter noticed as hands were clenched on the seams of his pants.

“Congratulations on kingship brother.” Knave was still smiling too wide. “Or should I say, your majesty?”

“No need for formality,” the prince patted the man’s shoulder. “We’re brothers.”

“Whatever you say, your majesty.” His tone sounded red alarms in Hatter’s head, but Knave remained casual. “Too bad I missed all the fun.”

“I wouldn’t say destroying the casino was fun.” Duchess slunk over to Jack’s side. “Would you darling?”

Jack tried to smile. “No indeed.”

Knave looked towards the Duchess and gave a feral grin. “Hello cupcake.”

She stopped smiling immediately. “Not on your life.”

Hatter stifled a chuckle, which drew Knave’s attention.

“Hatter.” His grin widened and his voice rose a little. “Nice to see you.”

“Likewise,” Hatter nodded stiffly, his eyes never leaving Knave’s.

“I’m guessing you had a part in all of this shenanigans?”

“Naturally.”

“Never far from trouble are you old boy?”

“I’m hardly old.”

“Older than me.”

“A lot of people are.”

Knave kept smiling through it all like they were old pals, but Hatter noticed that he had inched his way over towards the stone.
“Say Jackie,” he turned back towards Jack and Duchess, “what did you do with mother?”

The two visibly tightened up.

“We, ah didn’t get the chance to detain her properly,” Jack said. “She disappeared.”

“A sly one, our old dame.” Knave was dangerously close to the ring, too close for Hatter’s comfort. Having dealt in the dodgy all his life, Hatter did not believe Knave’s innocent stance. In fact, his hands were behind his back in a very suspicious manner.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Please do not call our mother a ‘dame.’”

“That always did bug ya, Jackie.” Knave was laughing as he put an arm around Jack and pulled him close.

Something shifted in the Looking Glass. The thing was still vibrating like crazy, but Hatter still felt it. A tiny shudder almost like a hiccup. He glanced at his reflection. It was no longer smiling.

“Jack,” Hatter warned.

In the moment his attention was diverted, Knave had spun the two royals around and began escorting them down the platform. He was talking about something but Hatter only caught the end of the conversation.

“Let bygones be bygones I say.” One arm was still slung over Jack’s shoulder, holding him close, and the other was in his pocket.

“I think there’s a little more than ‘bygones’ between you and mother don’t you?”

It was as Knave waved away his brother’s comment that Hatter noticed the ring on his finger.

“He’s got the ring!” Hatter shouted, springing down to catch them.

But Knave was a second quicker. The arm that had held him and Jack together in a close hug kept the prince from fleeing. The other hand whipped out a gun, raised it to Jack’s forehead, and fired.

Duchess screamed. Jack’s body crumpled and she followed it to the floor, shrieking at him to come back.

Hatter had reached the trio and lunged towards Knave’s gun. However Knave swung around and leveled the barrel at Hatter’s heart. Looking around for help, he realized that the suits in the hall had guns trained on him, Duchess, and a few stray suits who, he guessed, had not been replaced by Knaves forces.

“You’d think that Jackie would’ve hired better protection.” Knave smirked down at his brother and kicked the lifeless body, which made Duchess whimper. “Guess not.”

“Now what are you going to do your majesty?” Hatter was trying to think of different escape routes. His current plan involved talking until an idea popped into his head. Then go from there.

Knave just laughed. “Glad to see you finally respecting royalty.”

“No, actually, I don’t have any respect for you. Or for royalty. But I do have a healthy respect for your gun.” He tried to keep his tone light and carefree. The more he seemed unfazed, the more it would rattle Knave.
Or, it would have rattled the Knave Hatter remembered. The man in front of him seemed to have learned some control because he just kept on smiling. He even started laughing.

“If you’re going to keep laughing, please shoot me so I can stop listening.”

That only made Knave laugh harder.

Hatter was growing angry now. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because,” he said, his tongue rolling over the words as if they were candy, “I’m going to do more than shoot you.”

He moved his gun away from Hatter and toward the Looking Glass.

“I’m going to watch you suffer.”

Part of Hatter anguished when Knave pulled the trigger, but another part of him was happy. Without the Looking Glass, Knave couldn’t cross over into her world. Alice would be safe.

The entire hall held its breath after the shot rang out. Even Duchess, her dress stained with blood, let out a gasp. They all waited for the tinkling of glass, for the shards to ping against the floor as the portal came tumbling apart. Hatter waited too, his eyes now fixed on Knave.

Nothing happened. The bullet passed through with a sucking noise, like a rock being swallowed by a mudpit.

Knave blinked a few times, then turned to Hatter, then down to Duchess.

“What did you do?” he screamed at her, grabbing her hair and yanking her away from Jack. “What did you do!”

She shook her head as best she could and sobbed that she didn’t know.

Hatter, meanwhile, used the opportunity to make a dash towards the Looking Glass, his reflection vibrating as he drew closer and closer.

It was a good idea. Everyone else seemed preoccupied with their own hostages. He was the only one without a guard, now that Knave was focused on Duchess. He had the best opening for escape.

Sadly, the best opening in a bad situation usually isn’t a very good one.

Knave fired a shot just above his head, so close he felt it whistle by his ear.

“The Looking Glass doesn’t bleed Hatter. But you do.” With each word, he took a step closer to the platform, dragging Duchess behind him. “Take another step and we’ll paint the steps red with blood.”

He couldn’t stop himself. “Really? You’re going make a reference to that stupid children’s b—”

A small and white hot object burned its way through his calf and Hatter screamed.

“Yes I did,” Knave said quietly.

He was on the floor, clutching his leg, trying to staunch the bleeding as best he could. His face was so scrunched up in pain that he could barely see Knave.

“Not that you have any right to mention that little escapade.”
“She,” Hatter said between clenched teeth, “was just a child.”

“Exactly!” He was screaming again. “She had no right to take the board in the first place! She was a lost little girl!”

Hatter was panting now, quick shallow breaths that made it impossible to speak.

Knave turned, addressing the entire hall. “At this moment, the rest of my suits are laying siege to your little refugee camp. I am now your King. Anyone who strikes out against me dies here and now.” He paused and his face softened a little. “Join me, and your lives will be spared.”

Most of the unarmed suits relaxed and held up their hands in surrender. Not too surprising considering they accepted Jack’s reign so easily. They were a fickle bunch, loyal to whoever promised to ignore them.

Duchess clawed at Knave’s hand, which was still tangled in her hair, and Hatter managed to glare at him for a moment before wincing in pain.

Spinning in a slow circle, Knave surveyed the room with his trademark, predatory smile. A nod to his Suits had them scrambling over each other to herd their captives outside. Then he turned his full attention back to Hatter.

“So,” he clapped his hands together, “what will it be?”

Hatter grunted.

“Ah. No. I didn’t think so. Take him away.” He waved at two suits who had stayed behind to guard the doors.

They marched over to Hatter and hoisted him up by the armpits. Then, linking elbows, they escorted him down from the platform. Pain shot up his leg, but he managed to stay upright as he passed Knave.

He called, “Give him to the good Doctors,” as the two suits opened the doors.

Once outside, Hatter sagged forward, letting the suits take all of his weight. They hauled him towards a scarab, his feet dragging behind him useless. His calf was leaking blood everywhere, leaving a trail of red drops on the concrete. It wasn’t until they secured him inside that he realized he’d lost his hat.
They almost hadn’t bothered to cuff him—he looked completely helpless with his bleeding leg—but one of the suits remembered his famous right hand. The metal was irritating and cold against his skin. Hatter knew he could free himself from the restraints. If he broke out, a dozen suits would tackle him to the ground before he even thought about taking control of the scarab. No. Better not show him his strength just yet. Save it for the twins.

Besides, the flight gave Hatter a moment to process. This morning it had been simple: wake up, go through the Looking Glass, find Alice, the end. But now? Everything was tangled up again. Wonderland was back under the rule of a tyrant; Jack was dead; and he was headed off to some prison. Again.

Most of these events were quite familiar to him. The similarities were close enough that he almost chuckled. Almost. The only thing that was different this time was Alice. Hatter needed to keep her secret, safe. If Knave knew how Hatter felt about her, how much he would risk to get her back...Well, Hatter didn’t really want to think about what would happen.

Instead he thought about what would happen when he saw her again. It would be in her world, after he sorted out this mess. She would be wearing a blue dress—not the one that she wore for her last visit to Wonderland. Something softer and lighter. Her hair would be down and it would brush against his cheek when he whispered her name. She’d smile at him, and he would smile back. God why hadn’t he kissed her before she left? Why did he wait? All he wanted was to hold her again.

“Out.” A harsh voice interrupted his dream, or daydream. Hatter wasn’t sure if actually slipped into sleep. But the voice repeated the command, poking him with the butt of a gun.

Slowly, due to stiffness and his contrary nature, he rose and followed the Suit.

They were at a castle, one of the royal’s he guessed. It was more glitz and glam than actual palace. Unlike the Heart Casino and City above, this castle came straight from the past. The walls couldn’t be fortified well. The stone exterior was made of soft limestone, and everything was extremely colorful. Each of the towers sported a roof shaped as one of the four main suits—diamond, spade, club, and heart. Every window was intricate stained glass depicting Wonderland history. Artificial, fake, perfect to a fault. Their dungeon would probably function just fine. In fact, Hatter suspected it leaked more than prisons he was used to. Probably housed more vermin too.

A voice from inside halted the guards.

“Well, well. If it isn’t the little tart’s latest beau.” The Queen of Hearts descended the staircase regally, as if she still held Wonderland in her pocket.

“You’re looking well, your majesty,” Hatter said.

“And you’re not.” Her eyes had stopped on his calf.

“I’ve seen better days.”

She smiled slowly. “You’ll see worse.” With a wave, she let the Suits and Hatter continue down an adjoining staircase.

As suspected, the dungeon was superbly dank. If Hatter hadn’t felt giddy from blood loss and shock, he would have appreciated it more. As it was, he just wanted to roll around and laugh.
Dee and Dum were waiting for him, but when they saw his drunken smile and leg, they both frowned.

“Did no one bind his wound?” one asked.

The Suits looked at each other and shook their heads. Idiots.

The other twin approached Hatter, who was still supported by the two burliest bozos. He lifted one eyelid then the other.

“He’s too far gone to start anything,” he said to his brother. “Better patch him up for a day. Then we’ll start.”

One of the Suits holding Hatter bristled. “Knave didn’t pay for you play nurse.” As if to prove a point, he dropped Hatter’s arm so that he hung there lopsided, like a sack of potatoes. “He paid for extraction.”

“And he’ll get what he wants,” snapped a twin.

The other twin eased Hatter out of the other Suit and shooed them towards the door.

“Just let us do our job, and we’ll let you do yours.”

Hatter was dazed as the rest of the Suits left and he struggled to escape the twin’s grip, but the man held Hatter fast to his side, nearly smothering him with sweaty leather. He felt a needle prickle his skin, which made him struggle more.

“Stop squirming,” one of them commanded, but already his voice was fuzzy and so were the lights. Maybe the ground would be soft too.

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They started up as soon as he was deemed “appropriate.” The drugs they pumped into his system had worn off, but Hatter wasn’t sure how long they’d let him rest. Certainly not long enough.

Dee and Dum dragged him out of cell and into one much larger. It felt like the Truth Room except without the backdrop of psychosis. The walls resembled the rest of the dungeon’s—dark, dank, and leaky. Lights flickered around the ceiling, and old fashioned torture implements hung from the wall. At least, Hatter suspected they were for torture. Many of them were old and rusting and involved some sort of spike.

He tried to remain calm, to think his way out like he’d been taught, but this room was designed to induce fear and it was doing its job. When the twins led him to the room’s center, it took all of his control not to stumble. He wondered what would kill him first: the twins or a blood infection.

They’d chained his wrists heavily for the trip from one cell to another. Three loops of solid iron links bound his right hand to his waist. However, that also meant they’d have to take them off. That was his only hope at the moment, that he could somehow surprise them when they removed his restraints.

The twins, though, had learned from their last encounter and didn’t touch the chains when the positioned him in the metal chair. Leather straps secured his other wrist and ankles. A quick test revealed leather and the chair immoveable.

One of the twins spotted Hatter’s movements and grinned. “We learned from last time.”
There would be now heroic escape. Nothing but someone releasing his straps would allow him to move. If he hadn’t been preparing himself for the pain, he probably would’ve felt complemented that these two felt the need to take all these precautions.

“Now,” said Dee. Or was it Dum? “Where did we leave off last time?”

Hatter smiled. “You were going to tell me why a raven’s like a writing desk.”

Dum slapped him. “None of that. Where’s the Great Library?”

Of course they still wanted its location. While the resistance had little time to react to Knave’s coup, they still existed. The Great Library would allow them to mobilize quickly and efficiently to combat the new Heart regime.

Well he hadn’t given them up before. Why start now? Hatter yawned, making sure he counted to five before closing his mouth.

Dum slapped him again.

The other twin lowered his voice to a gentle whisper. “Telling us really would be in your best interest.”

“Really?” Hatter said. “Good cop, bad cop?” He fought to stay relaxed, in control. But slaps hurt—especially when your assailant knew where to strike.

A third slap. “Once more. The Library?”

This time Hatter didn’t give a response, just spat some blood onto the floor.

Dee shook his head. “Oh dear. This could take a while.”

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The days blurred together. Every morning, the doctors woke him, escorted him to their torture chamber, and kept him there until they felt tired or satisfied or whatever it was that made them want to stop. At first he kept track of the days by scratching tallies on the wall. He soon abandoned the practice. People who counted days did it because they wanted to keep time or keep hope. Hatter wanted neither. He didn’t want to know how long he’d been trapped and he certainly didn’t want anyone coming after him. Especially Alice.

He thought of her every time the twins shoved him into the chair, thought of her laugh and her smile and her fingers running through his hair. Knowing she was safe calmed him before the twins started. After that, all he thought of was how much he hurt.

Everyone talks about pain being a mental thing. That during torture sessions, the greatest heroes could “send their minds away” and ignore it all. Well, Hatter didn’t believe any of that. The pain was still there, always there. Even thoughts of love and warmth couldn’t make it vanish. He screamed and screamed and somehow, the pain always wanted more.

Hatter babbled nonsense just to stop himself from spilling secrets. If he kept his mouth moving, he couldn’t answer their questions. And, oh, he wanted to. Part of him wanted to tell them everything—anything—to make the pain stop.

But feelings like love and loyalty, those feelings that could never completely erase the pain, did keep him from falling to pieces. Such feelings left him spouting riddles instead of secrets. And afterwards,
they helped him recover, helped him pull himself back together and back from the edge just a little.

Hatter always dreamed of Alice. Sometimes they were happy and walking through an unfamiliar street. Sometimes they were lying on a grassy hill talking and talking about nothing. Sometimes they were kissing and she tasted so sweet. And then other times she stumbled into his reality. They were fighting back to back in the casino, they were dancing in the Knight’s castle, they were this cell, trapped together.

The last dream was always the worst, because a part of him wished she was here.

But even his dreams weren’t safe. Eventually the twins began poking around in his head. He wasn’t sure how they did it or what they found there, but they always finished with a smug smile. It felt weird when they were in his mind, like fingernails lightly digging into his scalp.

After a particularly nasty session, they decided to go deeper.

“Where’s the library?” Dee asked sweetly.

“Twinkle, twinkle little bat.” His voice crackled after the weeks of screams.

“Wrong,” said Dum.

They were digging in his head. Digging and digging. It was more violent this time, a child’s fingers plunging into fresh dirt, invasive and messy. Hatter strained against the chair, leather and iron cutting into his flesh, trying to escape the fingers as they burrowed into his head deeper and deeper and deeper.

The digging stopped. Hatter breathed heavily as the twins conferred with each other.

“Interesting,” Dum said while Dee nodded besides him.

Hatter was panting. “What?”

They both blinked at him, almost surprised he asked the question.

His heart clenched. “Did you find the Library?”

A low smile spread across Dum’s face.

“Did you find the Library?” His voice was panicked, but he couldn’t help himself.

Dee, wearing a smile identical to his brother's, shook his head.

“What did you see?”

They remained silent, but they exchanged eager looks.

Dread tickled Hatter’s spine.

They were done for the day and dragged him back to his cell. All the while he shouted at them, demanding to know what they uncovered in his head.
Chapter 4

Alice started walking the streets, searching for any sign of Wonderland. Her weekends were spent visiting antique shops and flea markets to search for something odd, something “off”, something that would lead her back. Whenever she found a mirror, her hands would trace its frame, as if touch could transform it into the Looking Glass. At home, neither of them mentioned Wonderland or the day Alice disappeared.

It wasn’t until weeks had passed that Alice’s mother voiced her worries.

“Honey,” her mother said, steering to the couch, “we need to talk about what happened.”

Alice was about to make her regular trip to the local pawn shop—just a routine check to see if the Looking Glass or ring popped up. “Nothing.” The answer was habit at this point.

“I’m just worried that you’re getting hung up on...whatever happened.”

Alice folded her arms. “I’m not hung up on it.”

“You aren’t working.” Her voice was soft, but there was an edge of worry in it.

“It was just a job mom. It’s not like I wanted a karate teaching career.”

“It was still work.”

“Do you think I’m mooching off you? Do you think I’m just moping about the city?” Alice tried to hide hurt she was. She knew nobody believed her, and that knowledge burned in her gut almost every day. But with her Mom, at home? At least that had felt safe and routine and normal. They both understood that Alice believed she went to Wonderland and her mother believed she passed out, but they never spoke those words. At least her mother never claimed that Wonderland and Hatter weren’t real.

“Please sit down sweetie.” Her mother raised her hands in a placating way. “I just want you to keep busy. The doctors said that you suffered a traumatic experience.”

“Don’t recite that pamphlet to me.” A week after they came back from the hospital, Alice had found pamphlets on the kitchen counter. She wasn’t surprised that hospitals provided information about coping with brain trauma and memory loss; she was just surprised that they would put it on a glossy tri-fold.

“Then why aren’t you following the steps? It said to keep busy, to go out and make new memories.”

“I’m doing stuff,” Alice muttered.

“A lot of people have a hard time moving on.”

Alice turned away. Tears pricked the corner of her eyes, and she didn’t want her mother to see.

“It’s normal.”

No, it wasn’t normal. Normal people didn’t visit other worlds. Normal people didn’t remember flying
on flamingos or tramping through a forest or caring for people who didn’t exist. Normal people just forgot.

“I’ve got to go,” said Alice as she headed out the door.

Her mother was right though, she did have trouble moving on. Once she resigned herself to the fact that it was all in her head, the city had been too much. It had been hard to remain in her old home when even the sidewalks oozed with memories. Here was the crack where she tripped into Jack’s arms; here was the alley where she’d lost his ring—for the ring had vanished; here was the café where she’d spent hours and hours thinking about her dad and Hatter. But of course, one of them had left her for good and one had never even existed.

She just had to get away from it all.

Alice offered to house sit for a friend in Forthington, Pennsylvania. Maybe distance—a long, long distance—would make accepting Wonderland’s unreality easier. Her mother was conflicted about the last-minute decision but agreed it was for the best. Melissa’s grant allowed her to spend time studying fungi in the South Pacific region, which meant Alice had Melissa’s house and Forthington to herself for four months.

The city was quiet, and the neighborhood pleasant. Melissa’s house was almost indistinguishable from the others on in the cul-de-sac. Its only unique features were a garden of mushrooms lining the path to the front door and gnomes grouped under a shrub. The air had the same muggy quality of Alice and her mother’s apartment, but it smelled cleaner somehow. Fresher.

The change of scenery should cure her of any memories—and feelings—left from Wonderland. She hoped.

Melissa had left the spare key under the front welcome mat and told Alice to make herself at home. Alice had planned for her arrival to mostly unnoticed. Melissa had failed to warn Alice about suburban lifestyle, how change is interesting and becomes instant gossip fodder.

A portly neighbor scuttled own her porch to watch Alice unload her car.

“Do you need a hand dearie?” The woman was older, and her smile warm. Alice doubted she’d be able to help with any of the heavy suitcases.

“I’m fine.”

Alice grabbed the larger of the two suitcases, leaving the other, still fairly large, one for a second trip. However, the old lady was spry despite her fragile appearance. She lugged the other suitcase after Alice and even managed the stairs with relative ease.

“Thanks,” Alice said. Just those few moments outside were enough to make her sweat. “I’d like to offer you a drink but…” She shrugged her shoulders at the mess.

The old woman flapped her hand. “Oh that’s not necessary—what’s your name?”

“Alice Hamilton. Didn’t Melissa tell you?”

“Oh, she said someone was staying here but she didn’t mention any name.” The old woman smiled and introduced herself as Deborah. “But everyone calls me Debbie.”

“Well, I appreciate the help.”
Again, Debbie waved away the comment. “You did most of it. Besides many hands make quicker the work.”

Alice gave a weak smile before turning to her belongings. She hadn’t brought much. Melissa said the kitchen was fully stocked and that Alice should make herself at home. So one suitcase contained clothes, toiletries, and her laptop stashed between socks and underwear. The other was packed with books, puzzles, crosswords, an eternity’s worth of distractions in case she needed them.

A few seconds later, she realized that the old woman had not left. Instead, Debbie just stood there, smiling at Alice’s hunched over figure.

“Can I get you anything?”

“Oh.” She looked surprised and a bit embarrassed. “I’m sorry. It’s just so nice to meet new people. We don’t get new people around here very often.

“I can tell,” muttered Alice.

“Me and Phil, that’s my husband, me and Phil we’re from Alabama. So we just love greeting people with a nice helping of southern hospitality.” She was smiling again, one that stretched ear to ear. Alice would have been a little disturbed if the woman hadn’t radiated cheeriness.

Lovely, she thought

She eventually persuaded Debbie to leave and finished unpacking. When she was done, she was exhausted. The bedroom was so far away and the couch looked just as comfy. Even without a blanket or pillows, she slid into sleep with ease.

###

Part of the reason Alice had said yes to Melissa was because she hadn’t been sleeping well. In the days right after she accepted Wonderland wasn’t real, she was plagued by insomnia. Every time she shut her eyes, Hatter stared back at her. He looked sad, his hat twisting in his hands. She’d tried to talk to him, to explain or say goodbye, but he never responded. Just stared, with a wan smile on his face, his hat spinning and spinning and spinning.

When she decided to move, those dreams stopped, but other nightmares took their place. Nightmares about the Looking Glass. Sometimes spiderweb cracks laced from the center, sometimes it remained as still-water smooth. But always it was at her fingertips, like all she had to do was step through and she’d be back. If she moved towards it, the mirror would retract down an invisible hallway. Some nights she chased her receding reflection, trying to catch herself like a child grabs for fireflies. Other nights, Hatter stood beyond the glass, and when she reached for him, he would hold her, his breath against her ear and his fingers skimming her skin, lingering on her forearm where the oyster tattoo used to be. When she woke up, she still felt him tracing the swirls.

She hoped Forthington would make the dreams stop. That first night on Melissa’s couch, however, proved that she was a long ways from that.

It was the Looking Glass dream again, but this time, shadows pursued her as she raced towards Hatter. First it was through the City Above then the forest then the Casino then through an unfamiliar room with slimy, stone walls that made each footstep echo. He turned his head to look back at her, his hat slipping to the side, and smiled.

Alice woke up, breathless and sweaty. The room was dark, the strange shapes gathered around her. Crickets buzzed instead of cars, and faint chimes echoed from the distance. Even the darkness felt
denser, more deep than usual.

Her palms began to sweat, and for a second, Alice thought she was back in Wonderland. The idea scared and excited her.

Then she remembered the drive to Melissa’s, helpful Debbie, and falling asleep on the couch.

She buried her face in her hands. It was too much. The dreams. She was trying to forget memories that never happened, but they haunted her every step.

Alice checked her phone to see how long until the sun rose. 3:00 am. Still feeling weary from travel and her dream, a shower sounded like the best remedy for the shaking. At least it would warm her up a little. Although it was summer, Melissa’s house was surprising cold.

Steam collected against the glass shower door. It took a few moments under the stream of water, but eventually her shoulders relaxed and hands stopped shaking. Her left hand unconsciously started tracing a pattern on her right forearm. Alice picked up the nervous habit right after the tattoo faded and hadn’t managed to stop yet. Even when she climbed into bed, she traced the pattern until she fell asleep.

Alice had assumed the next morning would be uneventful—that she’d make a cup of coffee and wander the town for a bit—but after one sip, someone rang the doorbell.

Still clad in pajamas, she opened the door to Debbie and a covered cake platter.

“Didn’t get a chance to give you your housewarming gift yesterday.”

“Thanks,” said Alice as she rubbed her eyes. Even covered, a delicious smell curled from Debbie’s hands. Cinnamon and brown sugar and a nutty tang. It was a nice gesture. A bit sudden but nice.

“Say,” once again, Debbie had remained when Alice thought she had left, “you haven’t seen the town have you?”

Warily, Alice shook her head. She wanted to explore the town, yet the thought of Debbie riding shotgun somewhat lessened her enthusiasm.

“Why don’t I give my grandson, Benny, a call? He’s about your age and he’d love to show you the sights.”

“No thanks.” Alice answered quickly, too quickly to be polite. It caused Debbie’s eyebrows to raise. “I want to go by myself first,” she amended.

“Oh, I see.” The old woman gave her a knowing look.

“It’s not that,” Alice said. “I’m not seeing anyone.”

Debbie looked surprised. “Why not hon? Not that it’s any of my business, of course.”

It wasn’t her business, but Alice was so used to lying about this part of her life that it came easily. “I don’t mind being by myself.”

“Well, you just let me know if you change your mind.” Debbie gave her one more curious look before heading back towards her house.
Once she had disappeared into her house, Alice leaned against the door with a sigh. She’d thought that suburbia would be relaxing, a nice change of pace from New York. She hadn’t factored in meddling neighbors or would-be romantic set-ups clogging her life. Those should be a welcome distraction, but Alice found no comfort in them.

She returned to the kitchen to put away the cake and told herself that she turned down Debbie because she wanted some privacy. Some alone time to sort out her new life. It was untrue of course, but Alice could still pretend her choice had nothing to do with Hatter or Wonderland. She needed to move on. She just...wasn’t ready for people at the moment. Especially people whose grandmothers were keen on setting up with the new girl in town.

###

Forthington was quaint, like Melissa described. So quaint, in fact, that Alice didn’t have to drive to most places. If the weather was nice, almost everything was in walking distance. It was easy enough to explore on foot.

Downtown was only a mile or so from Melissa’s house, so Alice headed there first. It consisted of small-owned businesses, each with its own awning and striped canopy. Outside the barbershop, an old-fashioned striped pole spun round and round and round in an endless spiral. The eternal swirls reminded her of things she’d rather forget.

She hadn’t realized she’d been still for so long until someone bumped into her, almost knocking her over. A strong hand caught her arm, right where she had imagined the oyster tattoo.

“You okay?” His eyes were a wintry blue.

“Fine,” she said as he pulled her to her feet.

“Sorry, about that.” He ran a hand through his hair.

Alice straightened her shirt. “It’s my fault.”

He turned to leave, then turned back. “I’m Benny by the way.”

Of course. “Alice. I think I met your grandmother last night.”

Benny’s eyes widened. “You’re the girl watching Melissa’s place?”

She nodded. Maybe Benny wasn’t so bad. He was definitely good looking, but his style was almost too slick, a practiced charm that rang false after too much use.

“I’m sorry if she bothered you.” He looked chagrined. “She doesn’t really understand personal space.

“That’s for sure,” agreed Alice, with a small laugh.

Both of them stood there, staring at each other, for longer than was necessary. Benny organized their evening before heading back to his work. When she was alone again, Alice would have sworn that their small, silent moment was straight out of a romantic comedy. Comfy, refreshing, pleasant. Nothing like running from suits through the woods or finding herself in his arms after swinging over a bottomless pit.

Almost half-heartedly, she reminded herself that none of those things happened. It was all in your head. It’s all in your head. All in your head. The words repeated with each step until she reached
Melissa’s house and locked the door behind her.

###

A pleasant week passed, with Alice lounging about the house during the day and meeting Benny at night. Often, he included her in his group of immediate friends so she wouldn’t feel uncomfortable, and she appreciated the gesture. They drove to the closest bars and clubs for a good time. Since it was summer, most places were crowded with overeager, overdrunk college students on break. The floors were sticky, and usually the group would stumble on a couple going at it. Nothing more unsavory than that. Even the towns surrounding Forthington were tame compared to New York’s night life.

The only strange thing happened at a club. Alice was dancing with Benny, bobbing to the beat and keeping a solid foot between their sweaty bodies. Black-lights illuminated the dancefloor so that the swaying bodies turned into an undulating purple mass, dotted with occasional neon shirts and dresses.

Alice raised her arms above her head, and out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw the oyster tattoo reappear on her arm. She kept on dancing though, suspecting that her buzz was to blame more than anything. However, Benny grabbed her arm and held it between them.

“What is this?” He had stopped dancing.

Alice stopped too. “I don’t know.” Her words slurred a little, always a danger sign. “I think I need to sit down.”

Benny led her away until they were seated in the normally lit dining area. When he turned her arm over again, the mark had vanished.

“It does that sometimes,” she replied to his quizzical look. “Haven’t seen it awhile actually.”

“What is it?” He ran his fingers over her forearm.

The gesture was too close to her nervous habit for Alice’s comfort. She yanked her arm away and draped it over his shoulder and hiccupped. “No idea.”

After that, Benny took her home, and she woke up the next morning with a headache and a small feeling of loss. Her fingers ran absentmindedly over her arm, feeling like something important had happened that she missed.

Alice enjoyed the routine of Benny. Regular late nights, afternoons spent walking around the small downtown shops, one trip to the antique store when Alice couldn’t resist. He was steady, worn down pair of jeans. Sometimes he even made her laugh, and after a few weeks they knew each other well enough for inside jokes and secrets. She shared Wonderland with him. It came in bits and pieces. Every time he listened, every time he didn’t call her crazy or weird or just dreaming, she shared a little bit more.

Benny was the only interesting thing about Forthington. The small town charm wore off after a month. The late night fun staled as they began to feel too identical. Alice felt herself growing restless, and that led to thoughts about finding Wonderland again. Forthington was helping her, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she should be looking for a way back.

Debbie must have sensed her mood because soon both her and Benny increasingly inserted themselves into Alice’s daily schedule. Debbie would ask her to garden or clean or go shopping in the morning while Benny occupied the afternoons however he could.
One night, she begged off Benny’s invitation to visit the antique shop again. Nothing would have changed since her last visit, but her nervous energy itched to be released. It wasn’t too late to walk.

The shop was over a mile away, which meant risking a run-in with Benny. But she couldn’t change course, not when a dozen what ifs crowded her mind. What if the Looking Glass appeared. What if the ring was buried among the dusty detris of other people’s lives. What if she missed it because someone else saw the stone and thought pretty.

The air was warm and muggy. A few young couples even dared the weather to enjoy each other’s company in the summer evening. Alice smiled at them. She wondered if she could have that someday, could have someone who turn those uncomfortable moments into pleasant ones.

Benny was nice, and he certainly liked her, but it was too soon. Despite weeks in Forthington, Hatter still haunted her thoughts. She remembered his smile, his laugh, the salty smell of his skin as they managed escape after escape. She remembered when he held out a hand and said don’t look down as she stared from a sidewalk in the sky. Somehow, they had built a deep trust that tethered her to Wonderland, an anchor that it all happened. Didn’t it?

Dating while she held such ghosts felt dishonest.

She was heading back towards the house when that sensation of being watched stole over her. It was like two needles pricking the skin between her shoulder blades. Alice chalked it up to paranoia at first, but when the sensation refused to go away, she broke into a light jog.

It wasn’t like she heard footsteps following her, more like she sensed them in some deep part of her body. Even when she made it back and retreated inside, the feeling persisted. That night she went to bed with the feeling of two needles pressed into her chest.

Much to Alice’s relief, it vanished in the morning, that wariness of the watched. She made her breakfast with a blanket of privacy. Which was interrupted by the doorbell once she took her first sip of coffee.

Benny’s inflated face stared back at her when she peeked through the peephole.

“Hey,” he said almost as soon as she opened the door. He didn’t seem to notice that she was still wearing her pajamas. Or rather, he noticed but didn’t seem to mind.

She smiled. “You’re here early.”

“Just checking up on you, per Mumsy’s request.”

Alice giggled at his pet name for Debbie and at his salute when his grandmother waved from her front porch. “No need to worry. Just felt under the weather. I feel much better now.”

“I can tell.” The was an edge in his voice.


“C’mon. Grab dinner with me?” It was hard to tell if it was a request or a demand.

“I’m not ready.”

“It won’t mean anything, I promise. Well,” he amended with a wink, “it won’t mean anything serious.”
She folded her arms and studied her toes. “It’s too soon.”

“Too soon? I think you’ve waited long enough.” His arm rested gently, almost protectively on her arm.

“Still. It’s too soon.” She felt terrible, but she couldn’t do this. Not yet.

“Alice,” he gave her arm a squeeze, “It’s okay. All I want to do is take you out to dinner. I want to be with you—just you—for a few hours.”

Her voice hardened. “I said I’m not ready.”

His gaze matched hers for steeliness and the grip on her arm tightened, almost a possessive gesture. “What aren’t you ready for? A date? We’ve been going on date-like things for awhile.”

“That shouldn’t matter. I said no and that should be enough.”

His expression filled with shock and hurt. “You’re still hung up on him aren’t you?”

Alice stiffened and stepped away from Benny’s grip. “Who?” Her voice was breathy and quiet.

“That guy from your hallucination.” He was pacing now, back and forth on the porch. “You’re still caught up in this whole Wonderland nonsense even though it’s not real. You’re still obsessed with what’s his name. Hatter?”

“I am not.” Her voice broke on the last word.

Benny snorted. “Sure seems like it.”

“I mean,” Alice floundered, “I’m trying.”

“Not hard enough. You ditched so you could wander around looking for that stupid mirror didn’t you?”

“Did you follow me?”

He laughed, deep and harsh and mean. “That’s it isn’t it? I was worried about you, but all you cared about was checking to see if that stupid mirror had reappeared. News flash: it won’t.”

Something tightened around her ribs. “Stop it.” She should be furious, but standing was hard. Breathing was hard.

“You know what? Have fun with your imaginary boyfriend. I’m done here.”

Alice turned and walked back inside, shutting the door in his face. She waited until she heard his car leave before she began to cry. Sobs shook her body and left her breathless. Her right hand clutched at her chest while her left thumb started tracing the pattern on the opposite forearm.

No matter where she went and what she did, Wonderland followed her like a dark secret. It took a long time for her to stop crying, even longer for her to stop tracing a tattoo that was no longer there. Maybe it was time to accept it had never really been there.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry this one was a bit long! And probably has a bit too much purple prose.
Someone gently nudged him awake. It was a surprise, considering the twins preferred cold water, shouts, or electric shocks for an alarm. Hatter, however, refused to move. He opened and closed his fingers on the cold stone floor and tried to hold onto his dream. There had been sun and warmth and he had been running his fingers through Alice’s hair…

The person nudged him with more force, enough for Hatter to tell it was a boot poking his ribs. Sighing he rolled over and looked at his captor, sarcasm ready at his lips. Except, instead of Dee or Dum standing over him, it was Knave. Dressed in a posh suit and tie, his polished wingtips continued to prod his chest even after Hatter clearly indicated he was awake.

Hatter smiled weakly. “Good morning sunshine.”

“You think you’re in a position to be making flippant comments?” Knave said.

“I’m always in a position to make flippant comments.”

Without warning—or maybe, there was a warning, he was just too tired to recognize it—Knave kicked Hatter in the stomach. Hard.

“You need to watch your mouth,” Knave said as Hatter curled into a small ball.

“And you need to watch your shoes,” he wheezed. “That’s not water you’re standing in.”

Knave aimed another kick that sent Hatter into a coughing fit. He flopped onto his back, hoping that would assist with his respiratory issues. It didn’t. It only gave him a nice view of the moldy ceiling, a butterfly stain forming in the corner where the cell bars met stone. Interesting.

“I didn’t come here for the conversation.” Knave paused to scrape his shoes on an exposed rock. “I brought you a visitor.”

“Did you bring March back for some quality family time?”

“No. You’ll actually enjoy having this person here.” Knave turned back towards the cell’s entrance and called, “Bring her in.”

Grunts and scuffling echoed from the hallway. The dim light morphed their shadows into an amorphous blob, although Hatter could tell someone was putting up a splendid fight. Maybe it was Dormouse. Or Owl. Those two wouldn’t come quietly.

It sounded like whoever Knave had brought in was putting up a fight. Hatter admired their gumption. Maybe it was Dormouse. Or Owl. Those two certainly wouldn’t come quietly.

“Let me go!” The voice was familiar, one he heard almost every night while he slept.

Hatter flinched. He wanted to crawl to the edge of the cell, catch the first glimpse of her as she came around the corner, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t let them see how important she was, how much he cared.

Dee and Dum finally came into view, hauling a bedraggled Alice between them. Her knees were
scraped and her hair mussed into a giant tangle. Dirt streaked her dress and her face as if she had crawled her way up from underground. She seemed unharmed, and he suspected she was the one who scratched the twins’ faces.

It was hard, very hard, for Hatter to remain calm, but any reaction out of him would make the situation worse. He thought he was doing pretty well into he glanced up at Knave. Knave, who studied Alice with a small smile on his lips, whose eyes wandered up and down while she struggled against the twins gripping her elbows.

As best he could, Hatter swept Knave’s legs, trying to knock him to the ground. A stupid decision, but all he wanted was to see Knave’s face pound into the disgusting prison floor. Even a chipped tooth or bloody nose would have brought some satisfaction. None of this happened. Knave braced himself against the wall before so much as a knee could hit the ground.

“Struck a nerve?” he asked, looking down.

“Leave her alone,” growled Hatter.

He straightened. “Don’t worry, old boy. I haven’t touched her. Yet.”

The twins chuckled, but Alice just seemed confused. She looked from her captors, to Hatter, then back again. After a few moments, she finally stopped to study him, he probably looked filthy and unrecognizable. His old self would have cared if she saw him like this, but right now all he could focus on was her.

Alice’s lips parted slightly, and she paused. “Hatter?” Even though it was a whisper, he still heard her voice catch.

He shouldn’t look at her, he shouldn’t. Anything more than a passing interest, friendly concern, would escalate the situation into dire territory. But he couldn’t help himself—he had to look at her. Her eyes were bright and fierce in spite of her rumpled appearance. When their gazes met, he felt like crying. The tenderness in her eyes when impossible to ignore. He wished he could tell her how he felt, wished they were sitting on a park bench, the smell of fresh grass breezing by, as he asked her if she cared for him the same way. The dungeon wasn’t the time or place for these sorts of things. He hoped they would have more time.

By Knave’s smile, Hatter knew he’d given too much away. “I thought you’d enjoy having your little girlfriend here.”

“Let her go,” Hatter said, trying to make his voice sound steely. Of course, it cracked in the middle, which detracted from his mustered authority.

“Maybe later.”

Knave slowly crossed to Alice, his eyes studying her up and down, that feral smile playing on his face. Slowly, very slowly, he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. When his lips met her skin, Alice closed her eyes. Hatter wanted to tear the man’s eyes out for touching her, for being near her. His rise to a standing position was slow, and through it all Knave remained close, too close, to Alice. He was so angry he almost missed Alice slip something from Knave’s pocket into hers.

Knave chuckled and pushed Alice firmly into the cell, the door automatically locking as the three men left. The Twins lingered outside the cell until Knave beckoned them to follow.

Only a few seconds passed before Alice rushed into Hatter’s arms. His bruised ribs ached as she hugged him. He didn’t mind. He was happy she was here, happy she was in his arms. He should feel
guilty that she was in danger, but he was too wrapped up in physical presence, her face buried in his neck, her sobs pounding her heart into his.

“You didn’t come,” she said between tears, “I thought--I thought--”

“Shhh.” His fingers cradled the back of her neck. “Shh.”

Alice looked up, her soft fingers brushing hair from his face. “What did they do to you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he whispered. His thumbs traced her face until soft smudges outlined her features like a charcoal sketch.

As Alice began to cry, Hatter’s mind raced into messy action. She couldn’t be here. Couldn’t. How had they found out about her? How had they found her? It was like one of his nightmares, but so much worse. Because Alice was real—he could feel her breath on his cheek as she crushed his head into her chest. Her hair was silky between his fingertips and her lips were so warm and tasted so sweet against his. It was so much better and so much worse all at the same time.

He leaned back. “We have to get you out of here.”

She nodded. Hatter stepped towards the door. Well, he tried to step towards the door. His legs were weak, and almost buckled beneath him. Alice managed to catch him.

“What did they do to you?” She asked the question again.

He shook his head. “We need to think of a way out.”

“Would this help?” Alice fished around in her pocket for a second and then pulled out a key.

“I didn’t know you were a pickpocket.”

She smiled. “I learned lots of new things while I was searching for you.”

“I’m so sorry.” He didn’t know how much time had passed in her world, but it must have been a long time. She said searched but was that because she wanted him there? How long had she looked for him? How long had she waited?

“Look at me.” She pulled him close until her forehead rested against his. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

Hatter gave her a weak smile before limping towards the door.

They made it halfway down the hallway before Alice suddenly stopped.

“Alice?”

She couldn’t hear him because she started to scream. The sound was horrible, tearing through him worse than anything the twins had in the past weeks. Her fingers dug into her scalp as she slid to the floor. Hatter followed her as fast as he could, his arms wrapping around her in a protective circle. Gently, he crooned soothing noises and eventually took her hands into his, afraid that she would hurt herself.

After a moment, she stopped but he felt tears when he pulled her close.
“Glad to see our experiment worked,” said Dee. He and his brother stood as tall sentinels, blocking their exit down the hall.

Dum chuckled. “Knave will be pleased.”

Hatter’s grip around Alice tightened.

The doctors were on them before he could blink. They yanked Alice away from him just as the screaming started again. Dee studied her closely while Dum pinned Hatter against the wall. He could do nothing but watch as Alice screamed and screamed and screamed. It seemed like an eternity before she stopped.

Lying on the floor, Alice took huge, rattling breaths. Her fingers twitched against the stone, and her eyes were shut tight.

Dee stepped over Alice like he would a puddle. “Tell us where the Great Library is.”

Hatter spat at him.

Dee nodded at his brother but Alice was already screaming again.

“Leave her alone!” Hatter yelled as he wrestled against Dum.

By sheer luck, he managed to wiggle his right hand free, immediately slamming his captor against the wall. Dee was on him the moment his brother hit the floor, but after a few moments of grappling, Hatter managed to knock the other twin out as well.

Alice whimpered, the pain having passed with the twins’ unconsciousness. She clutched her head, unaware of anything else.

Escape seemed impossible now. Hatter didn’t know if she could run, and he was too weak to carry her.

He hated to do it but he knelt down. “Alice, please get up.”

She shook her head at first, but when he asked again, she opened her eyes. He took one of her hands and squeezed. She gingerly got to her feet, testing out her limbs to make sure everything worked properly. Hatter walked a few feet before stumbling again. Alice shook her head and stepped under him to take some of his weight.

There was no sign of Knave in the dungeon. Hopefully, the coward had gone to bed, content that he trapped both Hatter and Alice. That was definitely something the old Knave would have done, but Hatter wasn’t sure about him anymore. The Knave who had returned to Wonderland seemed more careful, more clever than the one defeated by a lost, scared child.

Halting before the next corner, Hatter studied her face.

Tear tracks streaked the grim from her face. Her eyes were red from pain and crying but they studied the hallway for potential threats. With the corner of his shirt, he tried to wipe the dirt them away. Of course, this only made the spots worse. He laughed softly.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

She took a deep breath. “I think so.”

They remained silent and still for a moment before she laced her fingers through his. He studied their
entwined hands. Probably for longer than what was considered polite.

“Let’s go.” She stepped around the corner.

A loud bang echoed down the stone hallway. Hatter released Alice’s hand to cover his ears, hoping that would stop the ringing.

Alice sagged against Hatter as, across from them, Knave reloaded his gun. Alice clutched her stomach, blood seeping through her fingers. It rain down her dress until it stained the him. Red lines crisscrossed against her pale hands. She seemed shocked by the wound.

“Did you really think I’d give up that easily?” Knave asked as Hatter held Alice to his chest. “You know me Hatter. You should’ve known that I’d do whatever it takes to get what I want.” He was circling them now, like a buzzard waiting for death.

“Please,” said Hatter. “Save her.”

Knave tutted. “Only if you tell me where the Great Library is. You know how this works.”

Alice caught his gaze and shook her head very slightly. She knew it would kill him if he gave up the location. She understood.

But then she winced in pain, pushing her hand even farther into her stomach.

She didn’t realize that her loss would kill him too.

“East side of the city.” His voice broke as he said it. “Sixty-fourth floor. Hedgehog route, it’s the third grey door. Inside is a lift. Red button to go down, blue to go up.”

“Thank you Hatter.” Knave smiled but made no move to help Alice.

Alice was leaning on him heavily now, and he could no longer support her weight. Carefully, he sunk to the floor, still cradling Alice in his arms.

“Help her! You said you’d help her.”

“Ah. Yes. I did say that.” Knave turned around and headed away from them.

Frantically Hatter shredded the edge of his shirt and turned back to Alice. He lifted her hands, replacing them with his makeshift bandage. It didn’t last long and soon his hands took the place of the soaked fabric.

“Hold on. You’re going to get through this.”

Her breath shuddered. “No I won’t.” She said it so calmly. Didn’t she realize what she was doing to him?

“Don’t say that.” He gripped one of her hands as if he could physically hold her back from death. “You can’t say that.”

“I’ve been shot. You can’t help me any more.”

Tears ran down his bruised face. “You can’t say that.”

“It’s okay.” She managed a smile. “I can go happy. I got to see you one last time. That’s all I wanted. To see you again.” She let go of Hatter and reached up to stroke his face, her bloodied fingers tracing
soft patterns against his skin. “I love you, Hatter.”

When her hand started to fall, Hatter caught it and pressed it to his cheek. Her skin was still warm. It was almost like she was sleeping. He stayed like that for a long time, until her hand grew cold and stiff.

###

Hatter knew he had to move, that he should try to escape while he had the chance. But he couldn’t. He was cold everywhere and it hurt to breath. Moving—running—seemed an impossible feat. The blood had dried on Alice’s dress until it was crusty and as stiff as her fingers. Her chest had stopped moving a long time ago. But still he could not move.

He managed to sleep though, and when he woke, he was unsurprised to find himself back in his cell. Dee and Dum must have picked him up and dragged him back here once he passed out.

But what did they do with her?

The thought hit him suddenly, breaking through his cloud of exhaustion. He sprang to his feet and began pacing around the cell. His mind conjured up image after image of what the twisted pair were doing with Alice’s body. He grew so frantic that he began shaking the bars and calling out for Dee or Dum or even Knave to come down and answer him.

Eventually, he heard footsteps, and Knave rounded the corner. A grin split across his face when he saw Hatter.

“You rang?” he said in a sing-song voice, strolling up to Hatter’s cage.

“What did you do to her?”

“The doctors?” Knave raised an eyebrow. “Oh I just let them meddle with her mind a little bit. Actually, it’s an ingenious bit of torture. They—”

“No,” Hatter glared coldly. “What did you do with her?”

“Oh, you mean the body. Well, they cleaned up your mess naturally.”

“What did you do with her?” His voice bounced off the walls. He had forgotten how loud he could be.

Knave raised a placating hand. “Calm down. Nobody did anything to her. I have limits you know. Necrophilia is not something I like to endorse. Although you,” he eyed Hatter quizzically, “seemed to be fine with it before your little nap.”

“Shut up.”

“Still touchy, I see. I didn’t know you cared Hatter.”

Hatter looked away.

Leaning in close Knave whispered, “Did you love her? Truly?”

It didn’t matter anymore. There was no one to protect. Might as well be honest, if not with Alice then with himself.

“Yes.”
“Shame you let her die.”

Hatter’s head snapped up. “You let her die. You said you’d help her.”

“Wouldn’t have made much of a difference,” Knave said as he inspected his nails.

“You could have saved her.”

“Nope.” He stretched the word into two syllables, emphasis on the *puh*.

“You could have saved her!”

An eerie, dark grin spread across Knave’s face.

“You could have called an infirmary or—or—“

“It. Wouldn’t. Have. Mattered.” He punctuated each word. “She was never really here.”

What?

“What?” Hatter said.

Knave shrugged. “It was all in your head.”

Hatter’s hands went slack on the bars. “Impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible for the twins,” said Knave.

It didn’t happen. None of it happened. He lowered himself until he was seated on the floor. “Where is she?” He didn’t dare to hope that she was safe. The dream or hallucination or whatever contained details—so many details. Details that could have only come from knowing Alice herself. Right?

“Alice?” Hatter wished Knave would stop smiling. “She died quite some time ago actually.”

Hatter leaned his head back against the stone, closing his eyes, measuring his breaths in threes. *In*, two, three. *Out*, two, three. It was a waltz. He was breathing in time to a bloody waltz. If his heart didn’t hurt so much, he probably would have laughed.

Stone pressed into Hatter’s spine. You were supposed to cry when you lost someone you loved. You were supposed to swallow sobs that scratched at your throat until everything about you felt raw and dry. But Hatter was numb. Empty. Maybe something was wrong with him after all.

“Mumsy demanded retribution, so we collected her. And, well, you know mumsy,” Knave said. “Once Dee and Dum unearthed that *juicy* secret in your head, I had to improvise.”

*In*, two, three. *Out*, two, three. He pressed himself into the stone more, increasing the discomfort. Pain was better than nothing.

Knave waved goodbye to Hatter, heading down the hall. Over his shoulder he thanked Hatter for the information about the Great Library. “We never would’ve found it without you.”

Hatter made no move, even when Knave’s footsteps vanished. He didn’t punch the wall until blood laced his knuckles. He didn’t sob until he lost his voice. He didn’t dig his fingernails into his hands trying to save his rage for another day. He had no rage. He had nothing. Just a dull ache in his chest that would never leave.
Later—he wasn’t sure how much later, he just knew time had passed—the doctors came in and dragged him to his feet. He was limp in their arms at first, a rag doll, until they forced him to bear his own wait. After a moment he was shunted down the corridor and into their circular room.

The chair sat in the middle, but they didn’t bother to chain his hand. He was broken. There was no fight left in him, and they knew it. They didn’t care what he did now because they were about to be rid of him.

Hatter had never really believed in an afterlife, but now he found himself hoping that there was something. Somewhere he could see Alice again.

After strapping him into the chair, the doctors wheeled a machine in front of him. He had noticed it before, sitting on the edge of the room like all the other torture implements. Of course, that’s what he had suspected it was. He hadn’t realized it was something brought death along with pain.

One of them roughly yanked his hair, pulling his head up until it was level with machine. It looked strange, a bunch of lighted circles like a target, but where the bulls-eye should be, a needle protruded, one almost as long as forearm. The needle was lined up with the center of his forehead, and slowly, one of the twins eased it forward until the tip rested against his skin.

Hatter just realized that the twins were wearing dark tinted goggles. At least, the one that moved the needle had, so he supposed the other did as well.

A weird greenish light began to fill the room. Hatter was about to ask what was going on before he heard the machine buzzing like a hornet. The light was coming from the circles on the machine, each of them glowing a toxic shade of green. Tinged, perhaps, with an undertone of purple. He couldn’t be sure.

It grew too bright for him, and he started to wiggle in his seat. Or, he tried to wiggle. His arms and legs wouldn’t respond. He couldn’t even blink. His eyes were stuck open wide, gazing into that poisonous green light.

The buzzing grew louder and louder until it was not just one hornet, but thousands of them, buzzing around the room, in his ears. Then the buzzing stopped, and there was a moment of eerie silence before the machine emitted a strange snap. Pain ripped through his head, as if the long needle was being pushed through his skull. The needle hadn’t moved of course, nothing had changed except the sounds and the light, which continued to grow brighter and brighter.

All of sudden the pain stopped and the world went dark. Hatter felt himself fading away and tried to smile as he opened his arms to the void.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this came out a bit later than I meant to today! I was feeling under the weather this week and it took a while to muster up the energy to edit this chapter. I may go back and edit it later next week for typos.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 6

Large drops of rain splashed onto the pavement as Alice hurried towards her apartment. It was small, cozy, cramped. Up three flights of stairs, it was a more spacious pad than she had any right to own with her income. However, the landlord, Grant, knew her mother and cut her special deal.

Alice dropped her groceries off on the counter and surveyed her apartment—she still had trouble thinking of it as “home.” The living room area was sparse, barely decorated. Her mother was the creative one in the family; Alice usually just let her have control over the interior design elements of their homes. Of course, her mother was back in New York. Alice was in Philly.

She left Forthington a few days after her fight with Benny. He returned, of course, to apologize, but she wasn’t about to accept half-assed sorries. Besides, he wasn’t the real reason she was moving again. As time passed, an itch grew between her shoulder blades. Light buzzing filled her ears, and the feeling of being called from far away followed her to bed. After coordinating between Melissa and Debbie, Alice decided to find a more permanent home.

So she moved to Philadelphia. Colonial designed buildings and historic landmarks replaced steel skyscrapers. The streets were still crowded, but there was a different energy to these people. Tourists still followed each other like ants, congregating at the important sites. Cars crowded through narrow streets designed for slower transportation. Pedestrians aggressively crossed the street, daring cars to run them over and pay for medical expenses. The air smelled dirty, and every breath inhaled exhaust and grit. But the movements were longer, stretched out over a wider cityscape. The history was anchored in the past in a way that New York wasn’t, each monument trying to preserve the 1700s while apartment complexes and condos popped up around them.

She sighed as she began to unpack her groceries. It had been almost six months since she had “imagined” her trip to Wonderland. She was in a new city, a new house, had a new job, and still she could not forget. Pretending was getting easier, the details of Wonderland washing away like a chalk mural.

The dreams eased once she moved, but like in Forthington, the Looking Glass never truly left her. Tarnished gilt and old fashioned mirror glass surfaced when she slept. Butterflies around her head, shrunken rooms, a chessboard landscape. Wonderland became abstract, more of an idea than an actual place. And finally—finally—she found a place where she stopped dreaming of Hatter.

Maybe she could move on.

But although she stopped seeing Hatter when she slept, Alice never forgot him. After landing a job at a local bookstore, a coworker asked her for drinks. He was polite, nice. Maybe it could have gone somewhere. Remembering Benny, she forced herself to say yes, to at least try. They sipped beers at a sports bar while he rattled away about football and baseball and soccer until Alice started to daydream. She imagined Hatter was here, that as they talked about their adventure, he would put his hand on hers. He would flash a devil-may-care smile and lean in towards her. Under the dim lights of the bar, Alice could pretend the shadows reformed her oyster tattoo. The intricate swirls, the scaly sheen...she blinked her eyes, sure that the mark had reappeared.

“You alright?” the man asked.

It was gone. Like in the club with Benny, the tattoo was just some trick of light and alcohol. She assured her date that she was fine, ended the evening politely, and never spoke to him again.
Then there was the guy in her self-defense class. The situation felt so close to her own history with Jack that she stood in denial for the longest period of time. He took her to dinner, and with wine buzzing her head, she kept thinking about Hatter and his smile and his charm. This man was straightforward, blunt, and serious. Nothing like the man who helped her escape on flying flamingos, crazy torture twins, and save her father. Nothing like him at all. She didn’t contact him again either.

By her third attempt at dating, she realized she couldn’t stop comparing this guy to Hatter. No matter what she did, the man continued to creep into her mind.

Alice set the knife down, the tomato bleeding watery sluice along the cutting board. She wasn’t supposed to be thinking about Wonderland or Hatter. She was supposed to be moving on. She kept working and working for the day she would finally be able to move past whatever had happened, but something hooked into her spirit, refused to release her from this fantasy. Today, she stopped to check on a hobbling man, to see if Charlie had snuck into her world. And then, she paused when passing an antique shop, just to study the mirrors.

Even though it was raining, she grabbed her rain jacket and headed up to the roof. The height made her feel above the city without invoking her fear. City smells still stretched up here, but they felt far away. It was a nice place to think, to be alone without feeling caged in her own apartment. She studied the skyline, trying to plant its features over Wonderland and Charlie and Hatter. Focus on what was real instead of what was not. Sometimes, this trick made her feel anchored to the present and reality. But today, her thoughts kept slipping backwards.

Minutes passed before Alice heard the roof door creak. A glance over her shoulder revealed the landlord limping toward her. His cane crunched stray pebbles on the rooftop. The rain blurred his figure, transforming him from person to almost-shadow.

“Ms. Hamillton what are you doing up here?” he asked once he reached her.

“Just thinking.”

“Maybe you’d like to think somewhere more dry? Tenants not strictly supposed to be up here.” His breath smelled strange, like an unfamiliar drink that Alice couldn’t name. He wore his hair long and lank. Some would describe it as unkempt, but he always seemed to put together in a way Alice envied. His clothes were worn yet hung his form like they were tailored. All the tenants described him as weird. Alice found him endearing, something about his off-kilter demeanor always made her smile.

“Of course, Grant.” Alice sighed as she turned away from the scenic view. “I understand.”

“It’s just a liability thing.” He accepted the arm she offered a few unsteady steps. “Can’t have people near the edge and all.”

Again, she nodded, stepping inside and pulling the door shut behind her.

“If you mind me asking,” Grant said, “why do you come up here so much?”

“To think.”

He shook his head, strands of hair spraying droplets onto the walls. “Even when it’s raining?

Alice laughed. “Even then. Means no one comes to bother me.”

“Well sorry to take away your thinking spot, but rules are rules,” Grant said.
“It’s fine,” Alice said. Lies got easier and easier these days.

“Listen,” Grant pulled her to a stop, “I can show you another place to think if you need it. We can go after you eat.”

The request came out of nowhere, and Grant’s voice carried an urgency Alice had never heard before. With any other person, Alice would be scared. But Grant was harmless. Uncanny, a bit off? Yes. But he would never hurt her.

“Meet me downstairs.” His voice cracked a little and a cough escaped his lips.

“We can do it some other time, when the weather’s nicer.” Alice didn’t want him to get sick.

Grant shook his head. “It has to be today. Or you might forget.”

Alice barely ate her dinner. Pressure built in her head, like a thunderstorm gathering in the distance. What did Grant mean? Where was this coming from?

She didn’t need to worry though. Grant wasn’t downstairs when she headed down there. She waited for almost an hour before returning upstairs.

The whole day was upsetting. Alice needed to move—to go. As she laced her running shoes, she felt like there was something she was supposed to doing, something that she couldn’t recall no matter how hard she tried. The feeling persisted after her run and a good night’s rest. She woke in hurry, scrambling from bed to the kitchen back to the bathroom. She had no idea what she was rushing for, and her anxiety fed the feeling throughout the week.

###

The weekend stumbled on her, and Alice was surprised to find Grant waiting for her in the lobby. She was heading out to meet some friends for a quick drink before catching the latest movie. Anything but romance, one of her friends requested, and they all laughed. Alice was glad she didn’t have to make that request.

“How are you feeling?” she asked the landlord, checking her watch to make sure she wouldn’t be late. He looked worn around the edges, like someone took an eraser and smudged his outline. Even though they were a normal speaking distance, his breath rattled so loudly Alice could hear it. In fact, she was surprised other tenants weren’t stopping to check on them as they passed.

“Fine, just fine,” Grant said. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“To see my spot.”

“Actually, Grant, I made plans.” Alice felt bad—clearly something was happening to this man—but she had previous engagements. Besides, she had been hoping a drink would help her headache.

“We have to go now. You’ve already started to forget.” His voice creaked, his words somehow heavier than before.

Alice was growing concerned. There was only one thing she tried to forget regularly, but she told nobody here about it. Not after Benny.

“Forget what?” she asked.
Grant shook his head. “We have to hurry.”

Alice cast a final look towards the door before catching Grant by the shoulder. “Let me drive.”

They drove deeper into the city, closer to downtown where buildings crowded towards each other. People bustled along the street, laughed as their friends told some sort of joke. Alice wished she could be there, knew she should be. But the feeling that had nagged her all week was growing in her stomach, like she missed something important and needed to go with Grant to fix it.

He made her pull over by a small chapel squeezed between coffeeshop buildings and home-owned restaurants. It looked out of place in this part of Philadelphia. A steeple pointed towards the sky like a finger. Chipped and worn paint gave the building a camouflage aesthetic, one where the winter would hide it from even the keenest eye. Wooden steps were swollen from years of water and rot, and the metal cross spread rust against the door. The place felt old but inviting.

“Grant,” she said, unsure of this decision, “I’m not sure this is a great idea. I never went to church. I don’t know the difference between a Baptist and a Catholic.”

Grant tugged her inside gently, her words sliding off him like oil.

Her mouth went wide for a moment. The church’s interior was far fancier than the outside implied. There was a vaulted ceiling with small, brass-looking chandeliers dangling down, lit either by candles or candle-like lightbulbs, she couldn’t tell. Pillars lined each wall, Greek and Roman perhaps, embedded into the wall as decoration rather than structural support. The pews glowed, as freshly polished wood does, and although the only natural light came from a few small windows above, the entire room shone with a sort of unearthly light.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Grant, who had never seemed particularly religious, was staring around the room in reverence.

“It’s not what I suspected,” Alice said. Even though it was late and rain whispered against the roof, warm light painted the church with a late-fall gold.

They stood silently for a moment before Alice felt like she could speak again.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You seem lost. In more ways than one.” Grant lowered himself into a back pew, his eyes never leaving Alice.

She studied the room again. “I suppose you could say that.”

“This place has a way of drawing lost things together. That’s why I like it.”

Alice joined him on the bench, and the two sat in comfortable silence for some time. The place was warm, and although no one else was in the room with them, it seemed to hum with life. For the first time in six months, she felt soothed, like something was calming her mind and her spirit—both of which had been in turmoil ever since the imaginary incident. It was only then that she realized the itchy feeling between her shoulder blades had stopped.

“Feel free to stay here as long as you like.” Grant’s words interrupted her meditation. “I know the pastor won’t mind.”

“Thank you,” she said.
He rose stiffly. “Just don’t stay too long. You’ve got places to be, I believe.”

Again his words were cryptic, and Alice was left pondering them in the quiet, stillness of the church. Grant acted strangely when he was here, almost like a different person. His face, in this lighting, jogged a memory that she couldn’t quite place her finger on. His nose was straighter, and his hair a few shades darker. All of it was very strange.

When Alice rose to leave, a large shape caught her eye. Most of it was hidden under a dirty canvas sheet, but the lower left corner was left uncovered. She made out a fancy curlicue design, its gold color tarnished until it almost looked brown.

She picked her way over towards it, careful not to disturb anything else. Crouching, she rubbed her fingers over the design. It was familiar, very familiar. With shaking fingers, she yanked down on the sheet, like an artist revealing his latest masterpiece.

A dirty, grimy version of herself stared back at her. The glass wasn’t polished like it had been the last time she saw it, the edges near the frame were speckled with grey and something was off at about her reflection. It took her a moment, but she realized that her reflection still sported the oyster tattoo. She looked down at her arm, hoping that the mark had somehow reappeared, but the skin was pale and bare like it had been when she left her apartment.

Her fingers stretched, hovered above the grimy glass. She wanted to touch it, to cause ripples in her reflection. But she had tried so long to forget, to move on from Wonderland. No, she hadn’t forgotten entirely. She’d made progress though.

And what if this was just another hallucination? What if, when she had crossed the street, a car accidently hit her and she was lying in a hospital imagining all of this?

She took a deep breath and gently pressed her finger against the glass.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alice was falling, falling, falling. The glass absorbed her like puddle, and she almost laughed with happiness. Even though colors kaledioscoped around her, she kept her eyes open, memorizing every detail to make sure that this was all real. Sometimes it seemed like the colors formed a face--Hatter, Jack, Duchess, the queen, Charlie. But maybe that was just her brain trying to reason with her senses couldn’t. How much time had passed for them? Would they remember her?

Polished tile met her foot. She stumbled into the Looking Glass room, an almost identical picture of when she had left. Suits checked clipboards and hurried towards their next errand, their shoes echoing against the floor. Everything was bright and polished. The walls caught the final rays of sunset, and the architecture was a little off kilter like the rest of Wonderland.

Her arm itched. Alice scratched it with no second thought until a design caught her eye. The oyster mark swirled around her forearm, the green, scaly sheen just as fresh as when she left for home.

Alice started to cry.

She had gone unnoticed until then, but her tears gained attention from the rushing Suits. Conversations hushed, and everyone stopped, appraising her as a threat. Tension hummed through the room, and for the first time, Alice realized no one was smiling.

“Miss Hamilton!” A figure struggled through the crowd of Suits and greeted Alice with a warm handshake.

“Number Ten.” Alice never thought he would be the first to greet her.

His grip was too firm, and he glanced around the room. “So nice to have you back. How was your holiday?”

Alice raised an eyebrow. “How long was I gone?” “Long enough.”

Something was wrong. Number Ten was still squeezing her hand even as he led her towards the door. His palm grew sweaty in hers, and as they started to move, the Suits began to bristle.

“Where’s everyone? Where’s Hatter?” she asked. She knew she shouldn’t say anything, but she needed to know, needed to see him. It had been so long, and finally--finally--she was back, she could see him for real.

A number of Suits closed ranks, their hands on their guns, ready. Number Ten was on edge even as he tried to calm them down.

“She has clearance. She has clearance.” He rifled through his bag and pulled out a crumpled set of papers. He waved them around wildly. “She’s just been on holiday for the past two years.”

No one relaxed, but no one stopped them either. The suits let Alice and Number Ten pass, their hands stiff on their weapons. Through the glass, Alice could see they remained frozen even after the door closed. Alice tried to ask more questions, but Number Ten shushed her each time she opened her mouth.
“Not here. Too many,” he said, leading her downward, away from the streets lining the sky.

Random Suits stopped them, guns trained on Alice as they questioned Number Ten about where they going and why.

“Returned from Holiday, courtesy of the Queen. Their majesties have requested her presence immediately.” Suits would stare at them blankly or raise a finger to their ear pieces as if listening to feedback before waving them to continue. Whenever they were stopped, Alice pressed her arms to her side or folded them tight to her chest. She hoped no one noticed the Oyster tattoo.

Wonderland looked the same as when she left it. A mix of industrial cityscapes and woodlands piled on top of each other as if some manic child had planned the country. But that was the problem. It was just as she left it. People rarely wandered the streets or smiled. Those they did meet scurried with their heads down. Things should have changed. They should be better.

“What’s going on?” Alice asked.

Number Ten stopped at a seemingly random intersection. “We should be safe for a moment,” he said even as he glanced around for eavesdroppers.

“Well I should hope so. Otherwise I’ll kick Jack’s ass myself.”

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. Jack does not rule Wonderland. His younger brother usurped him.”

“His brother?”

Quickly, Number Ten explained the Knave’s loss at the hands of a young Alice of Legend. She managed to remove him and his supporters the board, an abstract sense of power controlling Wonderland, before returning to her own world. Jack became the Queen’s sole heir as she disowned Knave after his embarrassing defeat at the hands of a ten-year-old. The rest she knew from her own time in Wonderland.

“No one thought he could return after the original Alice of Legend’s kicked him off the board. Once you lose, you never return. But he did somehow.”

The resistance was reformed and worked to sabotage the brutal takeover. But then the Suits found the Great Library refuge and burned everything and everyone inside. Since then, resistance leaders were assassinated before the group could gain any strategic advantage.

“We need to fix this,” Alice said. “Where’s Jack? And Hatter.”

“Jack is dead.” Number Ten’s voice was blunt, as if he had delivered this news before.

“And Hatter?”

Number Ten laid a hand on her shoulder.

Alice’s stomach dropped. She knew she should feel sad. Jack had meant something to her. She
wasn’t sure what after Wonderland and the lying and Hatter. They had been friends at the very least. Hearing that he had died left her feeling confused and sad. But something had happened to Hatter. Something worse.

“Tell me,” she said.

A pair of Suits rounded the corner and motioned for them to stop. Number Ten shook his head again. “We have to keep moving. Please Alice.”

Moving where? If the resistance was gone, Jack gone, Hatter gone, where else could they go?

Their pace was brisk, and he led her through more twisting streets and more Suits. She tried to keep track of the lefts and the rights, but too much clouded her mind. If she kept moving, she wouldn’t have to think about Jack or Hatter. If she kept moving, she could pretend that none of it was real, that it hadn’t happened. The last few months meant she was good at that sort of pretending. Maybe she would have noticed someone tailing them if she hadn’t been so distracted.

Number Ten suddenly pulled her in the opposite direction, retracing their steps to avoid a trio Suits. Then he turned again when another set of Suits blocked the intersection ahead of them. His pace slowed as the Suits fanned out and circled around him. One of them cocked their gun at Number Ten with a sneer.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he said.

Number Ten glanced at the gun. “I’m taking Miss Hamilton to their Majesties.”

The Suits glared at him.

“She’s back from holiday. She has clearance,” he mumbled.

The one with his gun trained on Number Ten’s chest chuckled. He grabbed Alice’s arm and flipped it over to reveal her scaly tattoo.

“How’d she get this?”

Number Ten had no answer, and the circled Suits laughed again. They looked pleased with themselves, hunters who had successfully trapped their prey. Number Ten looked stunned, but Alice understood. The moment she stepped through the Looking Glass, the Suits knew who she was.

“Did you think we didn’t know what the Alice of Legend looked like?” The Suit jabbed Number Ten with his gun. “We wanted to see if you could lead us to any of your little friends. Then we got bored.”

Two Suits flanked Alice on either side, grabbing her elbows to keep her from escape. They marched her and Number Ten back the way they had come. As they walked, Number Ten kept trying to say something to Alice, but the guards stopped him from speaking. First with threats then with gut punches to keep him quiet.

“Where are you taking me?” Alice asked.

The lead Suit halted their progress and turned to face her. He leaned down until she could see her eyes reflected in his sunglasses. His breath smelled like fish and onions.

“The Queen has requested your presence.”
Suits loaded them into a Scarab where they stripped Number Ten of his hat and cloak. The man looked small and sad without his rounded tophat, his form skinny and unimpressive without the imposing cloak. The other Suits tossed the hat between them until one used it for target practice.

While they were distracted, Alice whispered to Number Ten, “What happened to Hatter?”

Number Ten turned to her with pity. “He was taken.”

“Is he alive?”

The Suits returned and demanded the prisoner’s silence before he could answer.

Alice had no idea where they were going. They flew over the City Above, its surrounding lake, and the rubble of the Heart’s Casino. Already, reconstruction was taking place. Large bulldozer-like machines pushed debris to the side. Workers laid out a new foundation, and scaffolding outlined the inverted pyramid that used to shadow the sky.

They flew over the Woodlands, and Alice struggled to see if the Knight’s Fortress remained intact. She wondered if Charlie had escaped or if the Knave had reached him as well.

The Scarab landed in front of a strange castle made of stone, metal, and glass. An amalgamation of medieval architecture and military bunkers, the place matched the weird mishmash aesthetics matched every other place she had encountered in Wonderland. A random spire twisted towards the sky. If she squinted, Alice could make out the outline of flamingo bikes atop its balcony.

The night air was dark and cool as they waited for the castle door to open. When it did, a man’s shadow stretched towards them, his background a rectangle of fluorescent light. He greeted the Suits with prim handshakes and congratulation, his bleached hair sprayed so slick that the breeze didn’t ruffle it. His ice blue eyes spent more time studying her than Number Ten. T

“So this is the Alice of Legend.” He knelt and gestured to the Suits holding her. They yanked her arm forward. He pressed his lips to her knuckles, flicked his tongue across her skin, before he waved them to release her. Alice wanted to hit him. “I am Knave, King and Sovereign of Wonderland.”

He paused as if waiting for something. The Suits kicked the back of Number Ten’s knees so that he fell into a bow.

Knave straightened his jacket. “Much better.” His attention returned to Alice.

His fingers gripped her chin and tried to make her head swivel. When she struggled, his nails bit into her skin.

“You’re every bit as beautiful as Hatter used to remember.”

A cold shiver worked its way up her spine. Used to remember. Used to.

“What did you do to him?” she said slowly, hoping Knave wouldn’t hear her voice shake. He did, and he smiled.

“Patience, patience.” He released her, the halfmoons of his fingernails tipped red from her blood. “All in good time. Mumsy comes first.”

Grabbing her gently by the hand, he led her through the doors. Only two Suits were charged with
restricting Number Ten. The rest closed in around her and Knave. If she hadn’t been distracted by fear and disgust, the number of guards allotted to her would have made Alice smile. Seems they remembered her black belt training.

He entered the throne room and swept into a bow. The walls sported the usual red, black, and white colors scheme. Geometrically patterned tapestries covered most of the walls, and a chandelier hung from the ceiling, crystal diamonds, hearts, spades, and clubs reflecting its central light. An oblong table stretched across the room, behind watch rested three thrones. The two smaller ones were embossed with hearts and curlicued J’s while the larger throne sported a profiled card queen, her eyes shrewd and unyielding.

When Alice didn’t follow Knave’s movements, he tugged her into a curtsy.

“How good it is to have you back, Alice.” The voice echoed from the highest throne, stretching the vowels into grand statements. The Queen of Hearts smiled beneath her throned, card-likeness.

“Do you like your present mumsy?” Knave patted Alice’s head like she was a child.

The Queen walked slowly towards them.

“Darling you never cease to amaze me.”

“And Duchess?”

Alice had failed to notice that one of the smaller thrones was occupied. Duchess was sitting stiffly next to an empty throne. Red silk wrapped around her body, and a small gold circlet wound through her deflated hair. Though shadows ringed her eyes and bruises peeked from her collarbones, her face remained stony. Her eyes told a different story. After months of barely holding herself together, Alice recognized the desperation in Duchess’s gaze.

“Wonderful darling,” she said with her lilting voice.

Knave kissed Alice’s cheek before slinking off to sit next to Duchess.

The Queen turned to Number Ten, her demeanor steely. Her mouth opened, but he interrupted her before she could proclaim her sentence.

“I know. I know. Off with my head.” He pitched his voice into a high falsetto for the final sentence.

The Suits behind him were stunned, unsure of whether to follow his order or the identical one the Queen would give in a few seconds.

She bristled but waved a hand in dismissal. “You heard the man.”

Number Ten was led away, and Alice hoped the Queen was forgetful as she used to be.

The Queen circled her, her beaded dress shushing with each step. Alice felt fear but not towards the Queen. She feared for the Duchess, for Number Ten, for Wonderland, and for Hatter. But she did not fear the Queen.

“Are you going to kill me too?” Alice asked.

“Your time will come, Alice dear,” the Queen said. “But your execution will be public.”

She adopted the royal we with a raised voice and Alice wondered when the pageantry would end.
“We have crushed the resistance, yet still there are those who would oppose us. Your death will be a lesson that those who rise up will be torn down quickly and without mercy.” She leaned in closer, her voice retreating to a whisper. “No one can save you this time. Not my son. Not even Hatter.”

“What have you done to him?” Alice said, panic finding its way into her words.

“It’s no concern of yours what we have chosen to do with him. Hatter was a very useful man who —”

“Would you please,” someone interrupted from a dark corner, “stop talking about me like I’m not here.”

Alice squinted into the shadows. There was a hard, icy edge to the voice. She shouldn’t hope it was him, but she couldn’t stop herself. When the person stepped into the light, it took so much control not to move towards him.

“So this is the great Alice of Legend,” Hatter said.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I didn't post for awhile! School caught up with me, and I was just struggling to make sure this chapter was okay. I'm not great with action stuff so it took me longer to polish it up!

I also might start posting on Fridays depending on how my schedule rolls.
Chapter 8

Hatter thought she was pretty. He didn’t want to think it because he would have to kill her soon, but the thought stuck in his brain like honey. She was crying—they always cried but this time felt different. She wasn’t begging for mercy or pleading for help. She smiled at him. She cried and she smiled and she reached for him as if she wanted to touch him.

She’d asked *what did you do to him*. As if she knew him. Something about the set of her eyes was familiar, but that was probably from the wanted posters plastered everywhere.

“I expected someone,” Hatter paused, “taller.”

The girl looked like he’d slapped her.

He held out his hands in placation. “No offense. You just don’t seem like an Alice of Legend.”

Knave was beside her again. “He’s changed hasn’t he?” he purred.

“Again, right here,” Hatter said.

Knave didn’t respond, he was distracted. He stroked the girl’s hair, her skin, her lips. He pulled her against him, whispered something in her ear. He moved towards her neck. She looked disgusted and shoved him. He let her push him a few inches away before his face returned to her skin.

Hatter coughed.

Knave smiled against the girl’s cheek.

He was disgusted. Sure, Hatter killed, but he didn’t play with his food. The way Knave toyed with his prisoners was revolting. He had always wanted to punch his king, but Knave’s grin against Alice’s face increased the temptation.

“What should we do with her Mumsy?” he said, his face much too close to the girl.

Hatter turned towards the thrones and saw Duchess twitch. Why? No love lost between the King and his reluctant wife, so why did she care if he touched Alice? He found this all very interesting.

A shriek drew his attention back to Knave and the girl, Alice. Knave was holding his lip, and the girl spat onto the ground. She had bitten him. Hatter guessed he went in for a kiss, and the girl finally decided to fight back. He liked the spunk.

The Knave retreated to his mother’s side. In hushed tones they exchanged options about the girl’s fate.

The Queen addressed Hatter, her smile that of a child with a new, ill-gotten toy. “Would you like to be the one who executed her?”

“I’m an assassin. Not an executioner.” This was boring. Executions were boring. Hours of sitting and waiting and doing nothing until someone demanded you kill. He worked on his terms. Always had, always will.

“Nevertheless, would you like to?” The Queen’s smile widened. “After all, she did kill your brother, March.”
The girl was surprised by that.

Hatter shrugged. “I suppose it couldn’t do any harm. Not sure how she killed him anyway.”

March was a beast—ruthless, volatile, insane. Partners when they were younger, they had drifted apart when the Queen started using Oysters and emotions as currency. Shame Hatter hadn’t been around when this Alice of Legend originally popped through. He and March had his differences, but there was no doubt that together, they were unstoppable.

“Please Hatter.” The girl sounded sad. Her voice cracked a little on his name.

He sat down, one leg propped on the table. Lazily, he spun his revolver around his finger. This was taking *so long*. It had started out fun—Alice of Legend knowing who he was, him wanting to punch Knave more than usual, Duchess’s weird compassion for Alice—but now the time dragged. He wanted his job done. Shame that it meant shooting the pretty Alice.

“Would you care to guard her until her trial?” the Queen said.

The revolver stopped spinning. “Do I look like a bloody babysitter to you?”

“Truth be told, you’re the only one we trust,” she said.

Hatter went back to spinning his revolver but paid closer attention. Being the only anything usually meant better pay. He liked that. Maybe they’d even start giving him more interesting jobs once he finished this one.

The Queen stepped closer to him. “Ten times your normal rate.”

“Twenty and you’ve got a deal Queenie.” Hatter raised his hand.

They shook on it. Her glare followed him and his newest prisoner until the doors shut behind them. He liked playing games. Just not Knave’s games. He needled the royals because he could, sometimes he let a random insurgent go because he felt like it. He was an agent of chaos, and the Queen’s brood happened to help further Wonderland’s discord.

###

He shooed their Suit escorts away as soon as they secured the girl in her cell. The ceiling was drippy and the stones a bit cold, but there were worse accommodations. The Heart’s castle had a relatively pleasant dungeon he thought.

She hadn’t said a word since they left the throne room. Sometimes he caught her staring at him through the bars. Other times she curled into a small ball in the corner. She cried a little. Not big heaving sobs. Tears streamed steady and quiet down her face. There seemed no end to them. Normally tears just made Hatter angry, but he wanted her to stop crying. He wanted her to smile.

“So,” he said, “you’re not as fierce as they tell me.” He was trying to distract her and himself. Who knows how long until the Queen had the public execution ready.

She didn’t respond. Her fingers slowly traced the tattoo on her forearm. From what he could tell, it was just a normal Oyster tattoo. Nothing special.

“That’s not going to come off,” he said.

She laughed. “So you told me.”
Hatter frowned. “It’s what I just said.”

“No,” the girl stood, “that’s what you told me when you we first met, when I was hauled into your office in exchange for emotion tea.”

Hatter sighed. Clearly this girl had never been to Wonderland. Yes, tea was distilled from Oyster emotions, liquified, and then sold to keep the economy running. It wasn’t called emotion tea though. Just tea. He opened his mouth, a sarcastic barb already loaded, when something flashed in front of him. The girl, Alice, her wet hair around her face in strings, water dripping from her fingertips, a hand wrapping her branded arm in a dark handkerchief.

They were back in the dungeon, the girl still staring at him, something bright in her eyes.

“Hatter, wake up. Please.” Her voice was quiet, and her hand stretched through the bars towards his own.

He pulled away. “Sweetheart, I’m already awake.”

He turned and faced the wall. So I can see when the Suits come he told himself. It’s not because he cared that she was crying. He didn’t.

###

A long time passed before the dungeon door creaked open. Hatter readied himself for the Suits, for his task of killing the Alice girl in front of hundreds of people. He regretted accepting this job. The payoff was great, but ever since they came down here, all her time was spent staring at the wall. He thought she was plotting her escape, but when he peeked, her gaze was blank, eyes red-rimmed from crying. She looked broken.

Hatter felt pity. Even as he tried to imagine the act, imagine his hand pulling the trigger—or chopping off her head if that’s what the Queen wanted—his brain couldn’t conjure it. His hands always stopped, and Alice’s voice whispered through him wake up, wake up, wake up.

He needed to get his head on straight. The quicker this job was done, the better.

Instead of a Suit squadron marching them to an execution block, Duchess appeared at the bottom of the steps. Her hands gently cradled a martini.

“What are you doing here?” He didn’t trust Duchess. No one did anymore. Not after the many espionage and murder attempts. For the past two years, she schemed against Heart power. Often she was caught and punished, but Hatter suspected she managed some small victories through it all.

She spoke softly, her voice rising and falling with musical cadence. “Alice is my friend. I want to talk to her.”

Hatter shook his head.

“I am Queen. You must follow my orders.”

“Only when they’re confirmed by the king,” he said. “You know the drill sweetheart. Surprised you don’t have your own set of escorts keeping you in check.”

Duchess snarled at him. Hatter took the opportunity to snag the martini glass from her hand.

“And thank you for this little gift.” He swirled the martini watching the liquid shift colors from clear
to red to a pale, pale pink. What was in this drink? Must be something new. And expensive. Hatter
didn’t usually mix work with tea, but this was an unusual case. Behind him, Duchess and the Alice-
girl prattled through inane topics that sounded more madmaking than his own set of riddles. There
was little danger at the moment. Besides he really needed to clear his head before the execution
summons. He still couldn’t imagine himself hurting the girl. Something must be wrong. Surely the
drink would right his brain.

End Notes

I’ll keep posting weekly for as long as I can. I have a couple chapters backlogged, but it may
get harder to keep a regular schedule once school starts and I catch up with what I currently
have.

Writing is hard sometimes ya know?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!