Ravens and Writing Desks

by Meltha

Summary

Many years have passed since Alice first visited Wonderland. Now she returns one last time.

Notes

Written for the Yuletide 2004 ficathon (my first), responding to Fuschia’s request for Alice, the Mad Hatter, and something dark.

Characters based upon Lewis Carroll's books. No copyright infringement or monetary benefit intended.

Darkness has fallen on Wonderland. Alice remembers the way well enough, though she hasn’t walked through these lands since that day so many years ago when the world fell away beneath her and she landed somewhere deep inside the earth. Perhaps some part of her stayed here, always too big or too small, too mad or too sane. Regardless, her feet know the path they are on, though she doesn’t remember how she came to be here again. She does remember a noise, but she can’t place it.

The smooth, open, level lawn is as dark as the rest of the world, lit by the faint light of moon and stars. She thinks that the moon shouldn’t be able to shine inside the earth, but then perhaps there is more than one moon, after all. The light gleams on the edges of things: the handle of the teapot, spoons scattered over the dirty tablecloth, cups that are still filled with dregs of ages upon ages of teaparties without end. She sits in one mismatched chair, her hands resting on the frayed, torn upholstery of the arms, and waits for what must happen.
For a long time, she stares at the seat opposite her. It’s empty. The high-backed chair is perhaps brightly colored, but the night has stripped everything to black and gray. As she watches, unmoving, she sees the remembered shape begin to grow from the shadows, beginning with the wide brim of a hat and the dimly glowing white of a collar and cuffs. Slowly, the outline of a body forms, and then, last, two tiny pinpoints of light where a face should be, but no other features are visible.

“You’re early,” says the voice that she remembers.

“I thought I was late,” Alice replies.

“True enough. Both early and late,” he agrees. “Time still doesn’t matter here. He’s slow to forgive. He’s still angry from the quarrel, and I will remain trapped here until the Thursday after always.”

“What of the March Hare and the Dormouse?” she asked.

“They’ve gone to other parties,” the Mad Hatter said vaguely. “They will return, or they will not. One or the other must be true, I’m sure.”

The air had become strangely still, the calm before a storm unleashes itself on the world. It had never before occurred to Alice to wonder if it ever rained in Wonderland, save with her own tears. She briefly asked herself if a torrent of rain would be enough to make the Mad Hatter finally move his teaparty indoors, but in spite of the tension in the air, raindrops did not fall yet.

“Would you like one lump of sugar or two?” he asked, motioning towards her cup.

“I believe I shall have one,” she said uncertainly, but it would have seemed rude to refuse him, especially as she had once again invited herself to his party. However, as it was only a party of one, she wasn’t sure that it could be called a party at all.

“One is good,” the Hatter said, and the shape of his head nodded approvingly. “Two would have been most greedy, you know. Years have taught you good manners. You were a rude and impertinent child.”

The teacup before her was cold, and she noticed that the Hatter gave her no sugar.

“There is no sugar left, is there?” she said, knowing the answer.

“Not a granule,” he said offhandedly, stirring his tea with a finger. “There hasn’t been for ages hence.”

“I see,” she said, and again she heard a muffled noise in the background, dark and echoing but faraway. “What is that?”

“That?” the Hatter said, and she thought she saw the glint of teeth in the darkness. “That’s the Jabberwock. You remember him.”

“He is nothing but a story,” she said firmly.

“We’re all stories, little Alice,” the Hatter said, and there was a strange note in his voice, one of sympathy and bitterness combined.

“I hardly think you may call me ‘little’ anymore,” Alice said, sitting a bit straighter. “I’m quite taller than you.”

“Indeed you are,” the Hatter said, and she saw his shadow nod. “You’re nearly a mile high, I believe
“That’s nonsense,” Alice said as she dared to sip her tea. It had a strange, bitter taste to it that nearly made her gag.

“So tell me,” the Hatter said, his form leaning closer to her over the table. “Did you ever understand the riddle?”

“‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’” Alice remembered aloud. “It always seems to be just at the edge of my thoughts, that the answer must be something frightfully simple.”

“It is the simplest thing in the world,” the Hatter agreed, “which means that it is quite difficult, of course. Simple things usually are. Sit straighter, Alice. Slouching makes one feeble-minded.”

“I have never been feeble-minded,” she said indignantly, though she also took care to throw her shoulders back better. “I still do not know the answer to your riddle, though.”

The sounds around her grew louder, sounding like a storm to end all storms, flickering light across the sky and throwing the Hatter into grim relief. When she saw his face, her mouth fell open in surprise and fear. There was nothing there but a skull.

“Silly child,” the Hatter’s lipless mouth clacked, accompanied by louder and louder blasts of storm. “The answer is that there is no answer. Did you truly expect it to all make sense in the end? The White Rabbit knew the way of it. Late forevermore, and no hope of ever being on time.”

Alice tried to speak, but her voice refused to come. She stared at the Hatter, silent as death, until at last she was dragged into the darkness herself.

It was morning before the Red Cross was able to dig through the rubble of Old Miss Alice’s flat. She had lived there most of her life, and it was at last there that she died, as well. The Blitz during that night had been particularly intense, deafening in its volume. When she was taken to the morgue, the rescue crews found clasped in her hand a tiny teaspoon, held so tightly that it had made her palm bleed.

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