Finally Going Home

by 9r7g5h

Summary

It was time for her to finally go home.

Alice was old, she was tired, and she must have fallen asleep, for standing right before her was the Mad Hatter. Of course, this was nothing new, for the Hatter and the many other inhabitants of Underland had always been prominent in her dreams, for quite as long as she could remember. In all of her eighty years (had it truly been that long?), only her earliest had been void of that wonderful world, and those had been the years that she has still had her father, a fact that made it so she could not claim that she had been wronged. Sure that this was a dream, one last chance to see her oldest friend one last time before she died, Alice reached out and took his hand.

Strangely enough, he seemed curiously real.

“You’ve grown old, Alice,” the Hatter observed as he knelt beside her, his vibrantly green eyes uncharacteristically sad. Turning his head to glance around her small bedroom in her large house, his wild smile grew as he took in the many pictures that lined her walls, snapshots of precious moments that had made her long life grand. “You’ve grown old,” the Hatter reiterated, “but you’ve done many things with that oldness.”

“You still haven’t changed,” Alice replied, recognizing the Hatter’s complement in what others might have taken offense at. “From the moment I first saw you as a child, all those years ago, you are still exactly the same.” Squeezing his hand, a tired yawn broke through her own grin, reminding her of just how late it was outside of her dream. “Hatter,” Alice began, her voice suddenly soft as she thought of the inevitable fate that awaited her when she awoke, “Hatter, I’m afraid that I’m-“

“Interesting,” the Hatter interrupted, his eyes locking in a moment of seriousness onto her bedside
table, where a picture of her children sat so she could see it. “Very interesting. I see children, but no husband. You never married,” he asked with a curious twist of his head, a strange emotion that she could not quite place floating behind the seemingly permanent sadness in his eyes. Even stranger still, however, especially for one of her own dreams, was the relief that crossed his face when she shook her head in agreement.

“I never could find someone interesting enough,” Alice said with a shrug, “though I was lucky enough to find my children. They’ve always believed my stories about Underland, especially little Lewis. He even wrote them down for me.” Feeling once again that strange urgency to tell her apparition about her situation, Alice gently tugged on the Hatter’s arm until he was facing her once again, though his eyes continued to flicker across the room as he took in the many parts of her life that he had been exhibited there. “Hatter, I really must talk to you. You see, I’m—”

“Dying, yes, I know,” the Hatter interrupted once again, though by now his smile had faded into a wavering frown. “You have gotten old, Alice,” he said for a third time as he seated himself next to her on the bed, his long fingers intertwining with hers, “and the White Queen has sent me to bring you back to Underland.” Squeezing her hand, the look on his face softened as he finally looked her in the eyes, careful to hold his gaze steady as he continued. “I’ve finally come to take you home, Alice. And, perhaps, you’ll even stay this time.”

“That would be a wonderful gift, wouldn’t it,” Alice asked with a sigh, her free hand coming up to cup his cheek. “To be able to return one last time, even if it was only in a dream, would make this old woman very happy.”

For a long moment, confusion and anger battled across the Hatter’s face as he watched her, his thoughts unreadable. Finally settling upon a look of amused annoyance, the Hatter leaned forward until their foreheads were touching, the tips of their noses just barely brushing, sending a gust of warm, tea-scented breath across her face as he spoke. “Why is it, Alice,” he asked softly, his words barely audible even though the distance between them was minimal, “that every time I’m real, you insist on me being a dream?”

Her eyes widening ever so slightly from shock, the thumb of the hand that cupped his face traced his cheekbone, marveling in wonder at the softness of his skin. “You mean,” Alice asked shakily, her voice suddenly hoarse from all the tears she had shed in the past when she had realized that there truly was no way to return to Underland, “that I could really go back?”

“Yes, my dearest Alice. I’ve come to take you home.”

As quick as a gasp, Alice realized that she was no longer old, that she was no longer tired, and that she definitely was not sleeping, for standing right before her was her beloved Mad Hatter.

Gently pushing him away, Alice stood from the bed, amazed at the absent of the pain in her joints that had been plaguing her for the past few years. Glancing into the mirror that had hung over her vanity since she had first bought the house, she was unsurprised to find that the years had fallen away, leaving her once again the same age she had been the last time she had visited Underland. Turning with a broad grin to face the Hatter, her body froze as she caught a glimpse of the self she had once been, mere moments ago.

“I’ve died, haven’t I,” Alice asked calmly as she stared at the body that had once been hers, an old and familiar shell that was already sinking into a pale pallor.

“You could never have come back while you were alive,” the Hatter confirmed, placing a steadying hand upon her shoulder as he did so. “But dead in this world, ours can once again become yours.”
Nodding, as if she had always known the answer he had just given her and had only needed for it to be confirmed, Alice was quick to move to her dresser, a pen already in her hand as the other grabbed for the piece of parchment she had been reading earlier. Tearing off the corner, uncaring of its age or former value, she swiftly scribbled out a note, careful to choose her words wisely so as to comfort her children after she had gone. Placing it into what had once been her hand, it was only a moment later that she came to stand beside the Hatter, her face smiling up towards him as they linked their arms together.

“Are you ready to go home, Alice,” the Hatter asked softly, his own mouth quirked into a half smile as he waited for her answer. His smile growing as she silently nodded, it was only after a minute more of silence that he pulled her away, finally taking her home to Underland.

Little Lewis, as his mother still called him when she was with company, was not quite so little. A fully grown man, he had long since made his fortune as a writer, his tales beloved by almost all who read them, though some had the gall to believe he was crazy. Perhaps they were right, and he just had not realized it yet, but until the day he did, he was allowed to resent the comments and continue on with his life uninterrupted.

But even as an adult, Saturday afternoons had always been reserved for tea with his mother, during which she often regaled him with fascinating tales of her past, stories that still left him as wide-eyes and dreamy as they had left him as a boy. It was a wonderful tradition, one that, in a simple moment of foolishness, he had allowed himself to believe would continue on forever.

Sadly staring at his mother now, her eyes closed, her skin waxen, and her chest unmoving, it felt as if nothing could ever be quite right again.

Moving so that he was standing next to her, his mind swirling with thoughts on how he was to tell his sisters of their mothers’ end, it was with a slight jolt of surprise that he saw the note that was clasped in her hands, a message, he could not help but automatically think, that would lessen the pain of her passing. Gently prying it from her hand, it was only a moment later that a peal of laughter burst from his lips, the note being so very much like his mother that it set his mind at ease. Memorizing its words, little Lewis silently left his mothers’ house and left her to her final dream.

_Gone to Wonderland for tea. And quite possibly forever._

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